What makes Chicago such an evocative setting for crime fiction? Barbara D’Amato, author of two Chicago-set series (see The Booklist Interview, p. 1522), believes the city’s history as a rail center helped generate the remarkable ethnic diversity that has defined Chicago for nearly two centuries. And that ethnic mix, in turn, produces both the conflict and the energy necessary to breed great crime novels.

History helps in other ways, too. Yes, there are several fine historical series set in the city—Max Allan Collins’ Nate Heller novels, in particular—that draw specifically on the Golden Age of Chicago crime (Capone, Nitti, Ness, et al.), but even the contemporary series profit from the echoes of all that rat-tat-tatting that went on in the past. It’s also helpful for a crime-fiction setting to draw on a history of corruption, and nobody does corruption better than Chicago. A powerful, intransigent local government can’t hurt either, and Chicago, the city that works, works its political machine best of all. But even the best machines grind their gears now and then, and in that grinding, crime novels are born.

Finally, let’s not forget the El. Chicago is the last city in the U.S. to have a functioning elevated-train system in the heart of town, and there’s probably never been a Chicago crime novelist who hasn’t used the El at some point as a crime scene or, at least, as a way to get the hero from place to place in an atmospheric way. Think about it: underneath those elevated tracks lurks everything a crime novelist could want—shadows, rust, garbage, darkness, and, of course, the unmistakable whiff of urine. Add a driving, icy rain, and you’ll never again wonder what noir really means.

The crime series listed below exploit all these aspects of Chicago and a good many more besides. They range from historical to contemporary, from South Side to North Side, from mean streets to magnificent miles, but they all profit from that big-shouldered jolt of energy that comes with the words (or word, if pronounced in the run-on manner of the current Mayor Daley) “city-a-Chicagah.”

Many of the individual titles discussed below are currently out of print. Mysteries stay in print these days about as long as it takes a murder victim to develop rigor mortis, but fortunately, Internet access to used book dealers means that it’s now relatively easy for both libraries and individuals to acquire o.p. titles.

North Side

  The prolific Kaminsky, author of four ongoing series, relocated from Chicago to Florida some years ago, but his Abe Lieberman novels remain firmly rooted on the North Side’s community. In this episode, the long-suffering, sixtyish Chicago PD detective Lieberman and partner Bill Hanrahan stick close to Lieberman’s neighborhood—Rogers Park, home to a constantly changing ethnic stir-fry of people and beliefs. Lieberman’s temple has been vandalized and its Torah stolen, possibly by skinheads; a Korean gang has threatened Abe’s wife and grandchildren, and his daughter is preparing to marry a black Gentile. And, of course, through it all, Abe’s cholesterol continues to soar.

  The fourth in D’Amato’s series starring journalist Marsala finds the determined reporter researching a TV essay on the lives of Chicago hookers. When one of her interview subjects turns up on Cat’s doorstep, bruised and battered, Cat’s story turns personal. One of the most likable of all Chicago sleuths, Cat combines street smarts and a social conscience with an irrepressible sense of humor. And D’Amato never misses the chance for walking tours of the city, as when a crime reporter takes Cat for a stroll down Michigan Avenue, pointing out well-dressed hookers on every block between Water Tower Place and the Chicago River.

  Monroe’s gritty, atmospheric first novel about the events preceding a heavyweight fight in 1957 Chicago makes noir heroes out of the backroom types—bookies and promoters—who are usually the bad guys in boxing novels. Less a mystery than a slice of underworld life, the novel is full of details on how to run a sports book, the dialogue crackles with authenticity, and the mood exudes Chicago in the Rat Pack era—crap games in the back rooms of dives on Rush Street, fighters training at the Tam O’Shanter Country Club on the far North Side, jam sessions at the Club Alabam off Chicago Avenue. Monroe followed this one with ‘46 Chicago, less successful but equally moody.

  Granger wrote the first three volumes in this series (including the Edgar-winning Public Man’s) under the pseudonym Joe Gash. All are out of print but well worth digging up from used booksellers. Granger takes an almost documentary-like approach to describing street crime, and the controlled precision of his prose makes the seemingly serendipitous violence all the more shocking. The opening chapters, recounting a series of rapes, robberies, and murders on the Howard Street El line, will send chills down the spine of anyone who has ever heard steps on stairs while waiting at a deserted subway station.

  Cab driver and Vietnam vet Cooper MacLeish lives in Rogers Park, but he roams the city in his hack. The main story line in this series opener concerns MacLeish tracking down the bad guys intent on killing a teenager who might be his son, but it’s when he’s behind the wheel of his cab that the book captures the city in all its urban squalor. Think Travis Bickle in Taxi Driver but without the psychotic edge. MacLeish, like Travis,
Jeremy Ransom and Emily Charters series, by Fred Hunter. Representative title: The Criminalists. 1998. Avon, o.p. This posthumously published novel (see sidebar, p. 1516) could have been the debut of a great series. Homicide detective DiGrazia is one of Izz’s best characters: an anti-authoritarian who refuses promotions that would take him further from the day-to-day investigation of crimes. He has a doozy on his hands here: the brutal murder and butchering of a young prostitute—found in an alley on Chicago Avenue, between Wabash and State—in a manner that links the crime to a similar and unsolved 20-year-old case. Izzi’s signature themes are all here—tough cops, corrupt cops, dirty politics, and a powerful sense of inevitability—as is his sledgehammer style and uncompromising view of Chicago’s underbelly.

Ed and Am Hunter series, by Fredric Brown. Representative title: The Fabulous Clipjoint. Collected in The Hunter and the Hunted. 2002. Stewart Masters, $29.95 (0-9718185-0-9). Pulp novelist Brown’s Ed and Am Hunter novels were written in the late 1940s and early 1950s and star a nephew (Ed) and uncle (Am) who begin as amateur sleuths but eventually become professional detectives. Clipjoint, the first and best of the series, finds 18-year-old Ed helping his uncle solve the murder of Ed’s father. Brown captures postwar Chicago in all of its hallmark seediness. Like Dashiel Hammett, Brown relishes specificity of place as he tracks Ed and Am’s peregrinations across the city’s North Side slum (now the trendy River North district). Brown’s streets are mean, but his characters are amiable and his prose is almost jaunty. In many ways, Brown anticipated the hordes of contemporary detective writers who combine grit with wit.

Jeremy Ransom and Emily Charters series, by Fred Hunter. Representative title: The Mummy’s Ransom. 2002. St. Martin’s/Minotaur, $23.95 (0-312-27123-9). This series starring police detective Ransom and his grandmotherly helper Charters, who always manages to find a way to participate in his investigations, is a bit of an anomaly on the Chicago mystery scene. Yes, it’s set in Chicago and delivers plenty of recognizable Windy City detail, but somehow it reads more like a village cozy, possibly due to Charters’ charm in the grandmother role. This time the action revolves around an exhibit of mummies brought to the city by a real-estate tycoon who allegedly kidnapped the power broker’s son. Even with Vic behind bars, Vic’s attempt to determine how the body got there lands her first in a squabble with a power-broking businesswoman and, second, in prison for allegedly kidnapping the power broker’s son. Even with Vic behind bars for a chunk of the novel, there’s plenty of Chicago ambience here, as well as a double dose of Paretsky’s appealing supporting cast, including cantankerous but loyal neighbor, Mr. Contreras.

SLEUTHS IN CHICAGO

- Marti MacAlister
- Cooper MacLeish
- Abe Lieberman
- Paul Whelan
- Mickey Rawlings
- Jeremy Ransom and Emily Charters
- V. I. Warshawski
- Dominick DiGrazia
- Ed and Am Hunter
- Cat Marsala
- Wild Onion, Ltd.
- Nathan Heller
- Jake Phillips
- Suze Figueroa and Norm Bennis
- Larry Cole
- Jimmy Flannery
- Nick Travers
- Harding
- Cassandra Lisle
- Smokey Dalton
- Cassidy McCabe

Paul Whelan series, by Michael Raleigh. Representative title: Killer on Argyle Street. 1995. St. Martin’s, o.p. Private eye Whelan is to his profession what Chicago’s Uptown district is to Lincoln Park: decidedly down market and more than a little scruffy. The Whelan series moves about the city (A Body in Belmont Harbor, The Maxwell Street Blues), but this time it stays in the detective’s own Uptown neighborhood: Argyle Street, home to the city’s growing Vietnamese community. Tracking down a runaway teenager as a favor to an elderly woman, Whelan wanders from seedy bar to greasy diner, losing the trail more often than he finds it but soaking up atmosphere wherever he goes. Raleigh sticks to formula, but he runs the changes with a sure hand, thriving on neighborhood detail.

V. I. Warshawski series, by Sara Paretsky. Representative title: Hard Time. 1999. Delacorte, $24.95 (0-385-31362-2). When most mystery readers think of Chicago, they think first of V. I. “Vic” Warshawski, Paretsky’s fast-talking private investigator and star of 10 novels. And well they should. V. I. was not only one of the first hard-boiled female detectives, she also played a key role in the revival of Chicago as a mystery setting. Like so many Chicago sleuths, Vic, whose office is in Wicker Park, isn’t limited to any one part of the city. This episode, one of the most hard-hitting in the series, begins on Broadway in Uptown, where Vic almost runs over a woman’s body in the street. Vic’s attempt to determine how the body got there lands her first in a squabble with a power-broking businessman and, second, in prison for allegedly kidnapping the power broker’s son. Even with Vic behind bars for a chunk of the novel, there’s plenty of Chicago ambience here, as well as a double dose of Paretsky’s appealing supporting cast, including cantankerous but loyal neighbor, Mr. Contreras.
“This little patch of Chicago, four acres of battlefield nestled in the juncture of Addison and North Clark streets, was a baseball oasis—a green cathedral in a blue-collar neighborhood.”
—Wrigley Field in 1918, from Murder at Wrigley Field, by Troy Soos

“Chicago rammed your soul like a fist. Made you feel tough, bigger. . . . A meeting of the decades in a mishmash of architecture that loomed over the avenues like walls of a canyon.”
—from Leavin’ Trunk Blues, by Ace Atkins

“His room was on the south side of the Wacker Hotel. I went over and looked out. Mostly ugly old brick buildings hiding ugly lives.”
—from The Fabulous Clipjoint, by Fredric Brown

“Argyle Street was still a Northside secret, still a tiny undiscovered pocket of foreign-born humanity. . . . this little three-block stretch was a street lifted whole from South Vietnam and dropped with all its parts into Chicago.”
—from Killer on Argyle Street, by Michael Raleigh

“A southbound train was coming in, metal wheels shrieking on the metal track, brakes starting to catch, making the whole platform vibrate.”
—from Hard Women, by Barbara D’Amato

Photos by Keir Graff
LATE ON THE MORNING OF SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1996, A DOCTOR LOOKED OUT HIS WINDOW while treating a patient and saw a man hanging against the side of a neighboring building. He called 911. Firefighters broke into office #1418 at 6 N. Michigan Avenue and hauled up the body. The man was wearing a bulletproof vest, and in his pockets were brass knuckles, a Mace-like spray, three computer disks, threatening notes, and $481 in cash. He had been hanged with a rough hemp rope tied to a desk leg, wound four times around his neck and secured with a slipknot. He was 43-year-old crime writer Eugene Izzi, “Guy” to his friends.

Izzi, who also wrote under the pen name Nick Gaitano, was blue-collar, a high-school dropout who’d served in the army, toiled in steel mills, then beat back a drinking problem and churned out seven novels before he found a publisher for The Tale in 1988. He was prolific but uneven, his 1992 Tribal Secrets received a huge prepublicity push only to founder on terrible reviews. He was also known as a man who’d gone to great lengths in the name of research, spending time among the homeless and—allegedly—infiltrating an Indiana militia group.

The first news reports suggested Izzi was murdered, and family, friends, and colleagues believed it. With a wife and two kids, and another big book about to come out, he seemed to have everything to live for. Privately, police detectives wondered if Izzi had staged suicide to look like murder. When the computer disks’ password was cracked, they revealed a secret, mammoth novel in which a writer nearly identical to Izzi infiltrated a militia group, was unmasked, then surprised at his office and hanged from the window—although in the fictional version, the writer pulled himself back up the rope. A third theory emerged. Did Izzi accidentally fall over the edge while doing some unorthodox research?

Time revealed a fuller portrait of Izzi, a complicated, depressed man who may not have had the stamina to outrun his inner demons. In January, the Cook County Medical Examiner’s office judged Izzi’s death a suicide. Later that year, Philip Caputo wrote in Esquire that Izzi had been “terrified . . . his hopes were up again and his fear that he would suffer another failure became greater than his fear of death.”

Izzi is remembered as a raw and passionate writer whose pulp novels pulse with a heartbeat of social conscience, and also as a quick worker who disdained second drafts. Although it can be argued that no suicide is thinking clearly, it may have been that impulsive nature that caused his final scenario to be so quickly debunked.

DEATH OF A CRIME WRITER

by Keir Graff

Cook County series, by Charlotte Carter
Representative title: Jackson Park Aug. 2003. Ballantine, paper, $12.95 (0-345-44782-4)

Like Nelscott’s Snake-Filled Rooms (see below), this series debut takes place in the tumultuous late 1960s and showcases the African American community on Chicago’s South Side. It’s a family affair as college-student Cassandra Lisle, her great-aunt Ivy, and great-uncle Woody investigate the disappearance of a young woman from their old neighborhood in Jackson Park. Set in the tense weeks following the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the action swirls from Jackson Park to Hyde Park to a radicalized college campus in the Loop, with Carter using the city streets almost as visual emblems for characters’ inner lives. (See full review on p. 1536.)

Harding series, by John Wessel

Izzi, who also wrote under the pen name Nick Gaitano, was a 33-year veteran of the Chicago Police Department. His Larry Cole series offers an odd but entertaining mix of realistic procedural and over-the-top James Bond extravaganza. In this episode, Cole tracks an archetypal mad scientist—definitely a Bondian villain—whom schemes include the destruction of the city’s venerable Field Museum of Natural History. Black magic, ray guns, poisonous snakes, and a Native American medicine man all play roles in this bizarre high-concept thriller.

Hyde Park series, by Robert Campbell

Like Nelscott’s Smoke-Filled Rooms (see below), this series debut takes place in the tumultuous late 1960s and showcases the African American community on Chicago’s South Side. It’s a family affair as college-student Cassandra Lisle, her great-aunt Ivy, and great-uncle Woody investigate the disappearance of a young woman from their old neighborhood in Jackson Park. Set in the tense weeks following the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the action swirls from Jackson Park to Hyde Park to a radicalized college campus in the Loop, with Carter using the city streets almost as visual emblems for characters’ inner lives. (See full review on p. 1536.)

Jake Phillips series, by Nick Gaitano

Izzi did some of his best writing in his three pseudonymous Nick Gaitano novels. Detective Sergeant Jake Phillips appears in two of the three, but the real series heroes are the members of the elite Special Victims unit. This time the unit tackles the murder of a second-rate thief whose body is found on the edge of Grant Park just as the Taste of Chicago festival is about to begin. Phillips is a cop on the edge, drinking heavily after his wife abandoned him and taking payoffs from two dirty cops connected to organized crime. Izzi did Chicago corruption better than anyone, and his grasp of the city’s underside was unparalleled.

Jimmy Flannery series, by Robert Campbell

Harding quickly finds himself up to his L. L. Bean-clad armpits in trouble. For Hyde Park and U of C loyalists, there’s local color aplenty here along with an amusing supporting cast of fringe campus types, including the obligatory radical computer nerd. Wessel does a fair imitation of Raymond Chandler, and Harding makes a decent Marlowe, although he’s a little too easy on all the rip-for-parody U of C types.

Jim Travers series, by Ace Atkins
Representative title: Learin’ Trunk Blues. 2000. St. Martin’s/Thomas Dunne, $22.95 (0-312-24212-3); paper, $6.50 (0-312-97718-2)

New Orleans blues historian, harmonica player, and sometime sleuth Nick Travers travels to Chicago to see if he can prove the innocence of
Suburbs

- **Suze Figueroa and Norm Bennis series, by Barbara D'Amato.**
  Several of D'Amato's non–Cat Marsala novels feature Chicago cops, with Figueroa and Bennis turning up in a handful. This one is particularly rich around the El near police headquarters at Eleventh and State; another focuses on Figueroa and Bennis tracking pickpockets working North Michigan Avenue, and, finally, Figueroa's creamy Victorian house northwest of the Loop is under siege from a stranger hiding in the attic. D'Amato's attention to city details pays off in terms of a heightened sense of place that, in turn, helps ratchet up the suspense.

- **Wild Onion, Ltd. series, by David J. Walker.**
  The Smokey Dalton series began in Memphis, where the African American PI took 10-year-old Jimmy under his wing after the boy witnessed the Martin Luther King Jr assassination and knows that James Earl Ray wasn't the shooter. Dodging the FBI, Smokey and Jimmy escape to Chicago, where this episode is set during the 1968 Democratic Convention. Government agents in Chicago to police the convention spot Smokey at the Conrad Hilton Hotel and decide to finish their unfinished business with Jimmy. Nelscott does a fine job in this series of using a familiar historical moment to dramatize an intimate human drama, as Smokey and Jimmy struggle to avoid becoming anonymous casualties lost behind the headlines.

- **Dugan and Kirsten series, by John Pape.**
  Dugan and Kirsten are a husband-and-wife team—they're a lawyer, she's a PI—and together they run Wild Onion, Ltd., located in Chicago's Loop, at Wabash and Washington. Their case involves protecting a priest from a stalker, but it quickly becomes more sinister, with ties to the priest's brother, the chief of police, with whom Kirsten, and her cop father have a relationship but even more Kenzie and Gennaro from the Dennis Lehane series. You can get, and Walker, a former priest himself, exposes plenty of them in this jaunty yet hard-hitting novel.

Suburbs

- **Marti MacAlister series, by Eleanor Taylor Bland.**
  Representative title: *Ser No Evil* 1998. St. Martin's, paper. $5.99 (0-312-96818-3).
  Bland sets her Marti MacAlister series, starring one of the genre's best African American female detectives, in fictional Lincoln Prairie, Illinois, modeled on Bland's hometown of Waukegan. This episode, perhaps the best in the series, uses dramatic irony superbly: the reader knows what MacAlister doesn't—that an unnamed killer is secretly visiting Marti's home during the day, plotting to kill the entire family. As the story jumps back and forth between the killer's preparations and Marti's investigation of a young female drug addict, we agonize over our inability to warn the heroine to look in her own backyard. Great suspense and a fine portrait of the not-so-safe streets of one Chicago suburb.

- **Cassidy McCabe series, by Alex Matthews.**
  Representative title: *Vendetta's Victim* 1998. Intrigue. $22.95 (0-9643161-9-6), paper, $5.95 (1-8907-6814-6).
  McCabe is an Oak Park psychotherapist, Zach Moran, her partner, is a Chicago reporter. Together, they do as much sleuthing as they do counseling and writing. Despite the urban setting—Oak Park, though an affluent suburb, is adjacent to Chicago's high-crime West Side—the series has a cozy feel, possibly because of the presence of lots of cuddly cats. The feline frolicking never turns smarmy, however, perhaps because it's always juxtaposed against plenty of gritty reality. In this third episode in the series, in which an unknown man refers to Cassidy two women who are HIV infected, we are forced to confront almost every modern urban fear: AIDS, organized crime, drive-by shootings, and stalkers. The plotting sometimes eaks a bit, but the tension between suburban dailiness and inner-city horror makes it work.

**Mystery Travel by Brad Hooper**

Here is a selection of out-of-the-ordinary travel guides for the mystery-reading visitor to the Windy City. See also the mystery walking tour described on The Back Page.

- **Clearfield, Dylan.** *Chicagooland Ghosts.* Thunder Bay, paper, $12.95 (1-882376-41-2).
  Chicago, its suburbs, and the surrounding area certainly offer a treasure trove of ghost stories. The ones gathered here, from John Dillinger's apparition appearing outside the Biograph Theater, where he was gunned down by the FBI, to the Lady of the Woods, who appears on a remote stretch of road in Porter County, Indiana, are guaranteed by the author to be "true ghostly accounts."

- **Dale, Steve.** *Dogged Chicago.* Contemporary, paper, $14.95 (0-8092-9481-8).
  This unique guide directs dog owners to canine-friendly places around the city and, concomitantly, the rules governing dogs in public places. Sites covered include parks where Roughie and Rover can run off leash, and regulations concerning bars and restaurants are discussed.

  The world-class city that Chicago is means that it can boast of a large array of cultural institutions. Of course, the "big three" are covered here: the Art Institute, the Field Museum of Natural History, and the Museum of Science and Industry. But also featured are such interesting places as the DuSable Museum of African American History, the Oak Park Conservatory, and the Peace Museum. The run-down on each institution or facility includes address and hours, and most entries have a black-and-white illustration.

  Color plates are matched with vivid textual descriptions in this stunning guide to the absolute wealth of murals in Chicago, the suburbs, and outlying areas.

- **Holden, Greg.** *Literary Chicago: A Book Lover's Tour of the Windy City.* Lake Claremont, paper, $15.95 (1-893121-01-1).
  The first part of this warm, friendly guide is a presentation of various literary tours of the city, with good detail about each site and a clear map to ensure there will be no getting lost. The second half of the book is a directory to such relevant topics as Chicago literary events and literary street names.

  A review of Chicago restaurants from every angle imaginable: arrangement is by ethnic group, by neighborhood, by time of day (late night dining or early morning places), and "extra ordinary dining" (which includes garden restaurants and all-you-can-eat establishments).

  Arrangement of information in this very informative guidebook is in chapters according to ethnic or nationality group, including Polish, Irish, Jewish, Czech and Slovak, African American, Asian, and Latino. Each chapter contains a narrative history of that particular group's settlement in Chicago, followed by one- to several-paragraph rundowns on attractions for tourists to seek out, including cultural institutions, annual events and celebrations, shopping, and restaurants.

- **Pape, John.** *Walking Chicago.* Globe Pequot/Falcon, paper, $12.95 (1-56044-874-1).
  All great cities are—or should be, by any traveler's standards—great cities in which to walk. Chicago is no exception to the rule. Seventeen eye-opening walking tours are plotted in this guidebook, which is concise but not short on detail, well illustrated, compact to carry, and easy to use on foot.