

David Mamet's *Chicago* is Everything You Do and Do Not Expect

Erika Crawford

Chicago, David Mamet's latest novel, is a refreshingly smart and dramatic piece that refuses to sacrifice plot for prose, or vice versa. It is an excellent display of craft that still manages to keep the reader on the edge of his or her seat; a mix of history and romance, humor and mystery, and boozed-up intellectual pontificating that brings something for all readers.

The story follows Mike Hodge, former WWI airman, now reporter for the *Tribune*, through his journey to solve the murder of his young Irish love and exact his own revenge. He wrestles with conflicting feelings of love and desire, guilt and vengeance. Hodge is not naïve to Al Capone and the Italians who run the South Side, nor to Dion O'Banion and the Irish who run the North Side, and he treads lightly when it comes to reporting on the crime and corruption in the windy city.

However, despite his best efforts to remain neutral and out of the fire, Hodge quickly finds himself deeply involved in the inter- and intra-mob violence that claims the lives of not only his Annie Walsh, but of other (not-so) innocents throughout the city. His investigation and desire for revenge take him from funerals and florists to brothels and speakeasies.

At some point, the lines between reporter, detective, and vigilante become irrevocably blurred. Hodge resorts to dealing with his own life in the only manner he knows: investigating his story like a hot news piece. He follows the formula of investigative reporting that has been instilled into him by his boss and his partner to crack open the story that is his own tragic tale. "Write the police report," he tells himself. "What were the further facts... What was the outlier?"

The pace of the novel quickens almost unrecognizably until you realize, about three-fourths of the way through, that your mind is sprinting to keep up. As a reader who admittedly thirsts for plot, I could not get enough.

Interspersed between the prohibition-era binge drinking, prostitution, and dramatic close encounters with gang members and their corrupt affiliates, there are scenes where Hodge and his partner, Parlow, are joking about grammar and discussing good writing practice. There is something *smart* about the whole novel. Hodge is smart, his coworkers and confidants occasionally even smarter.

Perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the novel is the rapid-fire dialogue, which, according to those more well-versed in Mamet's other works, is quite typical. Decades ago, Mamet found his niche in capturing the feel (or at least what we, the twenty-first century readers romanticizing about the past, *think* should be the feel) of the 1920s mob scene, and this novel further solidifies his creative monopoly on this type of period piece.

As a young person, whose encounters with Mamet's work have, until now, not extended beyond a brief reading of *Glengarry Glenn Ross* in high school and renting *The Untouchables* on DVD, I found the dialogue style to be fun and interesting. However, it would be unfair to assign any objectively qualitative value to Mamet's dialogue style. Enjoyment of the dialogue-heavy novel really boils down to a simple matter of preference: If you, the reader, can follow the chopped,

staccato style, then you will be entranced in the conversations of the 1920s mobsters and war vets; if you can't, you won't.

For a taste, consider a single statement uttered by one of Hodge's confidants: "'The *Jews*,' O'Malley said, 'who would sell you the shirt off your back, who wholesaled Our Savior, who run the pawnshops, and who are in league, in the main, with the North Side, where, I believe, the middlemen, who were, on speculation, hawking the trench broom, or tommy gun, to the police forces of the Middle West.'"

If you followed that without back-tracking at least once, *Chicago* will be a breeze. If you, like me, had to reread the passage three or more times, then I hope you're up for the challenge.

This is an understandable turnoff for some – not every reader enjoys sifting through seven layers of dependent and relative clauses to figure out what a character is saying. That being said, the style does lend an authentic feel to the dialogue, if not solely because it is different from the way we speak today.

Shifting slightly from craft to content, it was nice to read a different type of post-war perspective than that which we are typically indoctrinated. When I think of reading a novel in which the main protagonist is a recent war veteran, I think of post-traumatic stress disorder. I think of staggering flashbacks to scenes of gore, of immobilizing fear at the sound of a gunshot, or of crippling depression. I know that I am not alone in this reaction, because these are the veteran stereotypes that popular media has instilled into the minds of Americans.

However, Hodge is not a bloodied veteran. He was an air force pilot. He had only killed one person at close range during the war, and he carries the weight of it with him every day, but he carries more prominently in his mind the lessons he learned during the war about flying, about loyalty, about different cultures, and about human nature.

Chicago incorporates all of the authentic racial politics, religious stereotyping, misogyny, and homophobia that would be expected in a piece focusing primarily on WWI veterans and gang members in early-twentieth-century America, but without losing taste. You will read nearly all of the imaginable slurs, but it's believable. In this day and age, it is impossible to create a literary work without it being examined critically and politically. It can be argued that it is "safe" or "easy" to write about a time period when political correctness was not at the forefront of the societal mind, and in fact it would feel strange to read a novel set in the first half of the twentieth century where the characters were culturally sensitive. You can't blame the author if it is just truly how people felt and spoke, right?

However, I believe it is important to take note of a novel set in this time period that has *more* to say than "this is just how things were back then." Mamet provides a different spin on an arguably exhausted plot, providing foils for and pushing back against the cultural mindset of the early twentieth century in ways so subtle they might be missed.

In contrast to the zealous Irish Catholics, there are proud Protestants and agnostics who reject the forced abstinence and feigned self-righteousness. As a reader, you find yourself on the same moral side as the prostitutes and mistresses, not the devout fathers and church-going husbands.

In contrast to the obvious prevalence of the white male power and prominence, there are strong black women. Peekaboo, a Madame and a fierce entrepreneur, is one of Hodge's most trustworthy confidants. She offers wisdom and comradery, and aside from Parlow, is arguably Hodge's best friend.

In contrast to the war-hardened reporters, there is Mike Hodge, the all-around good guy and closet romantic. He is occasionally mocked for his soft edges, but he makes for one of the most easily sympathized protagonists.

These subtle-but-significant stereotype adjustments and attitudes are particularly interesting when placed in context with Mamet's own career and political ideologies. Mamet has not published a novel in nearly two decades, and his career has followed a different, Broadway-focused trajectory since 2008 when he declared his separation from liberal politics in favor of a more conservative outlook (or "reformed liberalism"). For an artist – a widely-known, successful artist – to make this type of announcement inevitably led to considerable backlash and it cost Mamet quite a bit of popularity. As is the nature of the literary world, the negative criticism spread from Mamet's personal views to his current and previous work.

It is this background that makes *Chicago* so interesting. There has been arguably no shift, positive or negative, in Mamet's ability to write dramatic prose and captivate an audience since his last critically-acclaimed novel in 2000. It is almost as if his personal and political views *don't* dictate the merit of his work. Besides, who better to portray the attitudes of conservative white men in the 1920s than a conservative white man in 2018?