

Chicago's Fabulous Fountains

Greg Borzo (Author), Julia Thiel (Photographer)

Forward by Geoffrey Baer & Preface by Debra Shore

Published by Southern Illinois University Press (2017)

PREFACE

Fountains Celebrate Water

Until Greg Borzo asked me to write a preface for this book, I did not fancy fountains. But water? Well, that's another matter. I treasure water in all its forms—as the rocks over which to pour some Scotch, as the burbling river I hike beside, as the steam powering engines. Many of our faith traditions use water in sacraments and rituals. We begin and end our days with water. Water is fun, water is forceful, and water is certainly fickle.

Civilization can be viewed as humans' long struggle to tame, capture, and use water for their own purposes. It could be said that the manipulation of water—namely, the reversal of the Chicago River to protect the city's drinking water supply—defines Chicago. By digging a twenty-six-mile-long channel to convey sewage away from Lake Michigan and provide a route for commercial barge traffic between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River, Chicago launched one of the largest public works projects of all time. As a result, it became a great metropolis.

But we also control water through infrastructure for pleasure and public art. Fountains sit at the intersection of nature and culture, bringing to the surface what is mostly out of sight and out of mind: the rivers we have buried in concrete, the streams we have channeled and straightened. Free-flowing water carves grand canyons, bends into oxbows, and babbles over rocks. Conversely, water pressured into pipes and forced through the mouths of lions and over the backs of nymphs becomes a public display of nature dominated for our own wishes.

Fountains are playful and fantastical, utilitarian and sublime. Public fountains are truly democratic (lowercase *d*), inviting people from everywhere and anywhere to come, meet, talk, play, learn, reflect, wish, and find repose in the eternal sight and sound of splashing water. They are a means to record our history and to celebrate civic life. As public gathering places, they represent increasingly rare and endangered spaces in our atomized modern lives.

The Nicholas J. Melas Centennial Fountain on the north bank of the Chicago River acknowledges the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chicago Sanitary District, arguably the agency that has had the greatest effect on Chicago's waterways, both good and ill. Of course the agency, in seeking to mark its centennial, turned to water. Its fountain includes a popular water cannon that shoots an arc over the river every hour from May through October.

With this book, Borzo has undertaken a worthy project, and we are all in his debt. He invites us to dip into and learn about Chicago's history, neighborhoods, and character by getting to know better its outdoor public fountains, none of which charge an admission fee.

Chicago is the city in a garden—and gardens need water! Go forth, explore, enjoy, and celebrate water in our midst.

*Debra Shore, Commissioner
Metropolitan Water Reclamation
District of Greater Chicago*