

**TOP BILLING**Tom Hollander's guide to Colombia

6010mbla **P24** 



t is "poetry slam" night at the Green Mill jazz club in uptown Chicago. In the half-light at the back of the stage there is a man on grand piano, another on the double bass and a percussionist. As each competing poet steps up, they call out the style of music they want the band to play. José, from Mexico, has just taken to the stage . "Play some kind of dramatic love affair. Just follow me and I'll start soft," he says.

Jose is about 28, with tattoos on his neck. He starts loud and fast, sounding at first like a rapper. With a voice full of passion, he recalls, in rhyming verse, how a certain woman made him feel alive. After the audience cheers and applauds, the judges give him  $24^{1/2}$  points out of a possible 30.

The Green Mill club dates back to 1907, and it was a speakeasy during the Prohibition era, part-owned by the mob with regulars such as Al Capone. Order a whiskey cocktail and slide into a wooden booth in the art deco interior and you could be back in the 1940s.

It is a Sunday night and the club is packed for the show, which combines poetry with music, and sometimes dance. The average age of the audience is late 20s or early 30s — couples and groups of friends. Of the six poets who perform, three go into a final and the winner gets \$11.

Marc Smith, the host, started the poetry slam in 1986 and it has inspired spin-offs and "story slams", in which the audience shares stories, around the globe.

"It has forced the established poetry world to do better at reading their work," Smith says. "It's the art of performance remarried to the art of writing poetry."

Chicago has always had a reputation for nurturing literary talent. As the city's skyscrapers went up and its social, political and economic life developed, writers were drawn here to record the new urban reality in what was fast becoming the literary capital of America. Chicago is also the birthplace of sciencefiction author Philip K Dick, playwright David Mamet and writer Ernest Hemingway, who grew up in its suburbs. Saul Bellow, the writer, lived here

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from the age of nine. It was in Chicago, and not Paris, where readers first clapped eyes on James Joyce's Ulysses, when it was serialised in The Little Review magazine in 1918-20.

Irish writers published in Poetry magazine, which was founded in Chicago in 1912, include WB Yeats, Oscar Wilde, JM Synge, Samuel Beckett, Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon. The magazine celebrated young Irish poets in its September 2015 issue.

The city shows no sign of losing its love affair with literature. NewCity, a local magazine, reports how writing is "exploding across Chicago"

"In all corners, any night of the week, there are salons, readings, book launches and live lit performances. Chicago writers wrestle with questions about humanity, gods, tyrants, relationships, sex, violence, segregation, vaccinations, party politics, this city and the world," it says in the report, which lists the city's 50 most popular writers, including Stuart Dybek, Trainspotting author Irvine Welsh and Gone Girl author Gillian Flynn.

Lovers of literature are spoilt for choice in Chicago, where events range from open-mic poetry nights to story slams at a wine bar where your entry fee gets you





He always loved the Dublin Writers

a taster flight of wines, each with a different tale. A quick browse on literarychicago.com brings up nearly 50 different storytelling events.

The Printers Row Lit Fest, a free book festival held over two days in June that attracts 150,000 visitors, is buzzing in the city's former bookmaking centre just south of the Loop (the downtown area). A row of outdoor stalls where publishers and authors display new and old books stretches for five blocks while writers of all genres discuss their work on stages.

At a table inside one tent, a tall woman in a vintage dress is waving her arms, discussing Henry VIII. At another, a young woman is asking a publisher what historical romances are coming out on the 6th of next month — her neighbour has written one under a pseudonym but won't tell her which one. At other tables, curious literary presences such as the Bizarro Writers Association and Post Mortem Press display their

Someone who understands the joy of a good book is Malcolm O'Hagan, an engineer by trade but an avid bookworm and the president of the American Writers Museum, which opens next March. O'Hagan was born in Sligo and moved to America in 1968 after studying at UCD. High and mighty Green Mill cocktail ounge, right, was nce the haunt of

left, Printers Row Lit Fest; bottom right, the bean-like Cloud Gate sculpture

wrote Jaws. The Windy City is, of course, just as well-known for its architecture, which grew in rapid industrialisation in the second half of the 19th Lake Michigan century. Chicago grew into a big business centre when

> by the Chicago Architecture Foundation, is a great way to appreciate the cityscape and stretches such as the Magnificent Mile, where the white Wrigley Building and the neogothic Tribune Tower sprouted up during the building boom of the 1920s. Some buildings are so large they require their own zip code or postcode, including Willis Tower (formerly Sears Tower), the world's tallest building for nearly 25 years, which has a viewing deck over the

In the Loop, the landmark Chicago Cultural Centre, formerly the Chicago Public library, is free to visit and is worth it even if only to admire the ornate walls and its stained-glass Tiffany dome. On the walls, writers' names and literary quotes are set into the mosaic

The Cliff Dwellers Club, on South Michigan Avenue, was established in 1907 for artists, writers and architects. Irish writers

who visited

Museum and was surprised there was not an equivalent in the US. He chose to base his museum in Chicago because of its central location and its literary

history."The museum will be an intimate two-hour interaction with the great American writers," says O'Hagan. The 1,115 sq metre space will contain

writers and readers' halls, and a children's literature gallery with audio-visual and interactive exhibits. American writers from all genres and periods will be celebrated, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Steinbeck, JD Salinger, Herman Melville and F Scott Fitzgerald, as well as figures such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of Little House on the Prairie, and Peter Benchley, who

> scale and stature with the city's many of the world's first skyscrapers were built here after the great fire of 1871. A river cruise tour, organised

city and the distinctive postcode 60606.

## The lowdown

Getting there Aer Lingus has two flights daily from Dublin to Chicago, with returns costing €490 including a 23kg bag (aerlingus.com). Where to stay Doubles at the Drake hotel, including breakfast and taxes, start at £170 (drake.hilton.com). The brief The Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill Jazz Club is on Sundays from 7pm to 10pm; entry is €6.50 (greenmilljazz.com). The Chicago Architecture Foundation river cruise takes 90 minutes and has several daily departures; tickets cost €40 (cruisechicago.com). The American Writers Museum is due to open in March (americanwritersmuseum.org) For more information about the city, see choosechicago.com.

the club include Lady Gregory and WB Yeats, who was honoured with a special banquet here in 1914, hosted by Poetry magazine. Louis Sullivan, the architect credited with creating the first skyscraper and whose father was born in Ireland, wrote his memoir in the club.

The building has a bird's-eye view over Lake Michigan and the Loop, where the main tourist attractions are within walking distance of each other. The 22nd-floor terrace looks down on the Art Institute of Chicago and over Grant Park, which houses Millennium Park and the mirrored Cloud Gate sculpture known as the Bean. From this vantage point tourists are reduced to moving dots, with many running in

and out of the cooling waters of the Crown Fountain. You don't have to be in lofty

heights to experience the city's refreshing culture, however. Chicago is a city you can explore through music, theatre, art, comedy, food or

architecture - or all six.Trace the footsteps of Yeats, Wilde and Hemingway, connect with the great American writers of the past and present, hear a funny story or poem, or dare to perform one of

