A literary storm in the Windy City

Amid Chicago's skyscrapers lies a city steeped in books: Ulysses was first published here, Oscar Wilde and WB Yeats were visitors, and next year it will open a museum dedicated to the giants of American writing, founded by an Irishman
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 2013 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 literature 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, Trainpotting 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 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 presence such as the Bizarro Writers Association and Poet Mortem Press display their wares.

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.

He always loved the Dublin Writers 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 wrote Jaws.

The Windy City is, of course, just as well-known for its architecture, which grew in scale and stature with the city’s rapid industrialisation in the second half of the 19th century. Chicago grew into a big business centre when many of the world’s first skyscrapers were built here after the great fire of 1871.

A river cruise tour, organised 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 neo-gothic 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 city and the distinctive postcode 60606.

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 tiles.

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