



9-1-2020

Rotella, Carlo. 2019. The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

John Lepley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview>

Recommended Citation

Lepley, John (2020) "Rotella, Carlo. 2019. The World Is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.," *The North Meridian Review*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview/vol1/iss1/18>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The North Meridian Review by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Rotella, Carlo. 2019. *The World is Always Coming to an End: Pulling Together and Apart in a Chicago Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 284 pp. \$27.50 (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-226-62403-7

Reviewed by John Lepley

Between 1960 and 1980, Chicago's South Shore neighborhood demographically transformed from 90 percent white to 95 percent black. Some white residents fled; others were indifferent. In 1968, a writer to the *Chicago Daily News* suggested that new arrivals might interpret South Shore residents' earnest preoccupation "with family and career" as unwelcoming, but denied the influence of racism (a revealing gesture in and of itself) (p. 39). The following year, a longtime South Shore property owner wryly recalled the successive waves of English, Irish, and Jewish immigrants who settled into the neighborhood, each time hearing, "The world is always coming to an end" (p. 9).

Carlo Rotella was a toddler in the late 1960s and left South Shore forty years ago, but the neighborhood remains part of him. In *The World Is Always Coming to an End* he explores the notion of community in a place he envisions most other American cities will look like "when we're done reversing the postwar expansion of the middle class" (p. 13). The author's family lived in two South Shore houses between 1967 and 1982. While writing this book, he envisioned passing through "three distinct worlds" walking between the first house and the second (p. 1). His grasp of history, journalism, memoir, and sociology keep this homecoming story free from cliché.

“How do cities change, and how do we live [with] the consequences,” Rotella asks (p. 22). The first chapters explore how residents connect with each other. Rotella writes about local groups confronting the ills that trouble South Shore: drugs, violence, poverty, and unemployment. Touring the old neighborhood, chatting with residents, he notes that signs abound that “collective efficacy” (how a community works together to address problems) is weak. The middle class is shrinking, and activists are at odds over issues charitably described as a “generation gap.” Ava St. Claire, a marketing director, sees a plain line separating different generations of activists: “It’s people protecting their interest. I hate to say it, but we totally have to wait for them to die” (p. 51).

Chicago has spawned giants of literature, journalism, and social science, and Rotella’s work reflects these roots. His analysis of class, race, and space, for example, recalls Sophonisba Breckenridge’s and Lorraine Hansberry’s contributions to social work and playwriting, respectively. *The World Is Always Coming to an End* also features a cast of memorable informants, including David Lemieux and Gerald Hamilton, who are retired African American police officers who belonged to street gangs before going into law enforcement. As Lemieux tells it, the arrival of crack cocaine in the 1980s turned everything upside down. Certainly, these characters inhabit the same irresistible dirty, beautiful cityscape as Nelson Algren and Studs Terkel.

Rotella is alarmed by anemic civil society in South Shore, which Hamilton describes. While discussing the University of Chicago’s developments in nearby Westlawn, “[Hamilton] found it galling that there was no institution like the university to mobilize a similar combination of investment capital and policing in South Shore” (p. 93). It is astonishing that a retired police officer names the University of Chicago as the only institution that can revive a neighborhood—especially one with every reason to distrust government—but is Rotella questioning the university’s exercise of power?

Readers can forgive Rotella for not pursuing the laurels and barbs of the University of Chicago. His parents earned graduate degrees there, and he attended its Laboratory School (and the University

of Chicago Press published this monograph). Thus, *The World Is Always Coming to an End* is about Rotella as much as about South Shore. He conveys these experiences in five brief chapters. Family history, childhood books, pickup basketball, role models, and music: the “equipment for living” that has helped him through life. These chapters evoke another author with Chicago roots, John Dos Passos, and the “camera eye” technique he used in the *U.S.A* trilogy of books (published between 1932 and 1936). The stream-of-consciousness passages, which are partly autobiographical, provide a sharp contrast to the historical “newsreels” and character narratives in the Popular Front magnum opus. Rotella writes in simple prose, but his narrative style evokes the literature that fired his young imagination.

In the latter chapters, Rotella reframes his perspective to South Shore’s spatial dimensions, or what he calls the “neighborhood as container” (p. 21). Homeowners and residents of public housing do not mix, regardless of race, which perpetuates neighborhood divisions. When South Shore began to integrate in the 1960s, a University of Chicago doctoral student, Morris Janowitz, developed the idea of “limited liability” to argue that “sociology should allow for a more partial, optional, multiple, and contingent kind of community” (p. 189). Thus, whites who fled to other parts of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s may have felt attachments to the area, but those ties were not strong enough to overcome the threats they perceived from the blacks who were moving in. South Shore residents won some fights in the 1970s—such as preventing a community bank from joining the white exodus—but the campaigns emphasized middle-class concerns instead of racial solidarity.

The World Is Always Coming to an End ends at one of the homes Rotella grew up in, now occupied by a couple he has befriended for many years. The Obama Presidential Center, slated for construction in neighboring Jackson Park, has raised hopes it will bring investment to the region. Rotella chats with a classmate from the University of Chicago Laboratory School, Arne Duncan, who is a booster for the project. It is ironic that the former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and a secretary

of education appears in *The World Is Always Coming to an End*. Duncan championed charter schools, even though their record of student achievement is dubious. There is reason for hope, though. On October 31, 2019, the Chicago Teachers Union concluded a successful two-week strike that wrested significant concessions from the city.

The World Is Always Coming to an End is an enjoyable read, and Rotella is a journeyman writer. However, only time will tell if his concerns come to pass or he is proven wrong. Let us hope it is the latter.

John Lepley is a union activist in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.