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Sister Carrie---Theodore Dreiser, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1900

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Sister Carrie begins with a pretty young woman on a train to Chicago and ends with a middle-aged man killing himself. They were lovers.

Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945) wrote in a new idiom for a new century. Published in 1900, Sister Carrie led the way for American naturalist fiction that left Victorian fussiness and morality behind. The first edition sold just over five hundred copies, which constituted only half of its print run. Many attributed the book’s commercial failure to its relatively frank view of sex. Carrie Meeber, the main character, becomes the mistress of not one but two men and in the main does not suffer the consequences. This is Dreiser’s point, that modern urban life increasingly freed the burgeoning middle class from old restraints.

Dreiser was not a man of letters, a child of privilege or learning, or an inheritor of the nineteenth century’s “genteel tradition.” He arrived in Chicago from Indiana at age fifteen, took a series of jobs, and ended up as a journalist. Like Carrie, Dreiser followed in the footsteps of tens of thousands of Americans, migrants from heartland states seeking work, prosperity, and excitement in the booming midwestern metropolis.

The novel opens in August 1889 with Carrie—carrying only a small satchel, ticket, bag lunch, and big dreams—on a train bound from Columbia City, Wisconsin, for Chicago. Onboard she meets Charles Drouet, a traveling salesman, the very symbol of mobility, of freedom from conventional constraints of family and community. He speaks glowingly of the city that Carrie will call home.

While Chicago enchants Carrie, she struggles there. On the brink of returning to Wisconsin, she reencounters Drouet, who helps her buy new clothes and takes her to fine restaurants. “The waiter returned with an immense tray, bearing . . . hot savory dishes. . . . Drouet fairly shone in the matter of serving. He appeared to great advantage behind the white napery and silver platters of the table. . . . His new suit creaked as he stretched to reach the plates, break the bread, and pour the coffee.”

Dreiser wanted readers to feel the material weight of Chicago’s explosive growth and newfound wealth. Goods, luxury items, and status symbols all motivate his characters, who are pulled together and apart by where they live, whom they consort with, what they buy. Carrie becomes “the victim of the city’s hypnotic influence,” of the culture of consumption, of thousands of people on the streets, in stores, in theaters, in the act of seeing and being seen.

The more Drouet helps Carrie acquire the accoutrements of beauty, the more desirable she becomes. Not long after she moves in with him, she meets his friend George Hurstwood, who manages an elegant downtown saloon. Carrie is deeply impressed by Hurstwood’s refined manners and expensive cloth-
ing, and he becomes infatuated with her. His eventual downfall—in order to be with Carrie, he steals from his employers, deserts his family, runs away with her to New York, and ends up alone and penniless—is shattering.

Dreiser looked with a jaundiced eye on turn-of-the-century Chicago, but in this amoral world it is Carrie who survives. She discovers that she possesses great stage presence and goes on to a notable theater career. Nonetheless, she is never satisfied: “She longed, and longed, and longed.” And desire, finally, is at the heart of Dreiser’s vision: for better and worse, the culture of the modern city freed individuals to crave things of the material world, and these yearnings overshadowed the life of the mind and spirit.