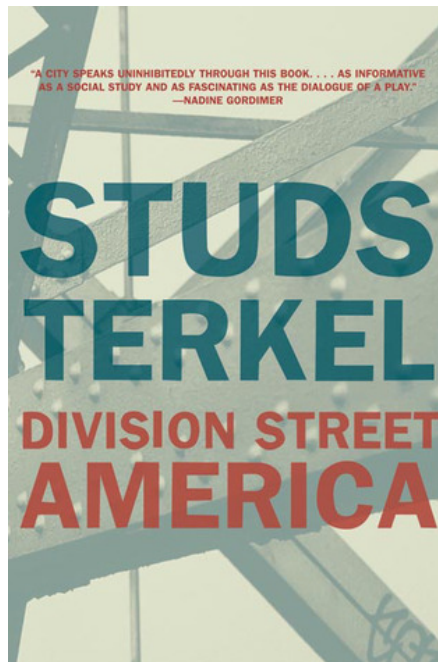




Division Street: America

Studs Terkel , Alex Kotlowitz (Introduction)

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Division Street, Studs Terkel's first book of oral history, established his reputation as America's foremost oral historian and as "one of those rare thinkers who is actually willing to go out and talk to the incredible people of this country" (in the words of Tom Wolfe).

Viewing the inhabitants of a single city, Chicago, as a microcosm of the nation at large, *Division Street* chronicles the thoughts and feelings of some seventy people from widely varying backgrounds in terms of class, race, and personal history. From a mother and son who migrated from Appalachia to a Native American boilerman, from a streetwise ex-gang leader to a liberal police officer, from the poorest African Americans to the richest socialites, these unique and often intimate first-person accounts form a multifaceted collage that defies any simple stereotype of America.

As Terkel himself put it: "I was on the prowl for a cross-section of urban thought, using no one method or technique. . . I guess I was seeking some balance in the wildlife of the city as Rachel Carson sought it in nature. Revealing aspects of people's lives that are normally invisible to most of us, *Division Street* is a fascinating survey of a city, and a society, at a pivotal moment of the twentieth century.

Division Street: America Details

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From Reader Review Division Street: America for online ebook

Kimberlyluisi says

We desperately need a Studs of today.

This books is just him interviewing people in Chicago about their lives and their perspectives.

Adam says

The battered original paperback. I've dutifully moved it from college dorm rooms to various apartments. It was one of those books I "should" read, and for that reason, almost resented it and nearly didn't. But when I opened Studs' biographic Talking to Myself almost by chance, and got sucked in, I decided to finally come around to Division Street. How strange, then, it was to not particularly enjoy it, or even finish it.

Blasphemous, I realize, given that the interview of the everyman is the trademark of Terkel. But the numerous interviews feel relentless. The inherent lack of continuity give a feeling akin to reading the encyclopedia. Fascinating entries to be sure, but not enjoyable to read in sequence in a single sitting.

Alger says

A total mixed bag for me.

First, I grew up listening to Studs on WFMT and this was a forceful reminder of why the man was such an institution in my home city. He always captured the voice and essence of *My Chicago* better than anyone else ever did. Between his casual interview style and apparent willingness to listen to anyone, for as long as it took for them to say their piece, he brought out people's innermost thoughts and worries and often got them to think things through on air. I imagine with an open-ended schedule and a less practiced crowd of subjects the Studs interview experience would have brought out amazing results. But...

Second, on this read I am more prone to notice the editorial decisions and framing that went into the construction of this book. I grew up surrounded by the people in this book, and I can tell you that not one thing they say in the book is "wrong" or out of step with the people that I knew, but none of them ever spoke so consistently or extensively about race, Vietnam, or the threat of the bomb because those were hot-button topics. What we aren't seeing in the book is what these people would have wanted to talk about around the kitchen table, or in a bar, or with anyone with whom they had not first already come to some understanding or agreement. These people are Midwesterners, we don't like to offend, we don't like to disagree, we don't like to make our passions other people's concerns. What we are not seeing in this book is what brought nearly everyone interviewed to talk so candidly about race and Civil Rights (especially when he interviews Black subjects), how Studs got them to that point. But...

Third, what is said about "the negro" throughout this book is absolutely dead on for this time and place. Also, because concern with the race question was uppermost on everyone's mind at the time it is a valid subject for a book, and the part that rings most true is how, in Chicago among the White residents, the race question was almost entirely framed around property values. This is a neat rhetorical trick, where people who may hold prejudices can appear to be equality minded and vocally sympathetic to Civil Rights, but can you blame a man for being against the Negro when his HOME is under threat of devaluation? It's not the Black

man that is the problem, it's that some Blacks have bad habits that ensure that no one with money enough to live elsewhere will live near a Negro (society is to blame). I cannot count how often that elegant piece of sophistry is trotted out, and by reporting this bit of common wisdom so consistently and often Studs reveals it for the lie that it is. Not one of those men will commit to living with Blacks on an equal basis, despite their protests. So despite some editorial work to make it so, *Division Street* is a valuable document recording the insanity, hypocrisy, fear, anger, and paternalism pervading race relations in the mid-1960s.

Call me slow, but it was only during this reading that it finally dawned on me why the book is named *Division Street*. Maybe it was because I first read this book back in the Cold War and the repeating themes of race and class and radioactive death were pretty much my obsessions too and so the natural subjects of every book. This time though, I picked up on how Studs was shading the inhabitants of Chicago into one group or another; and of course Studs (being the very embodiment of egalitarianism) would make division the theme of his portrait of his beloved city.

A vibrant and faithful --yet selective-- portrait of a city tearing itself to pieces with such dedicated energy that it still hasn't fully recovered fifty years later.

Leonard says

A Terkel classic.

Bob Schnell says

A truly interesting slice of American thought in a specific place at a specific time. Dozens of everyday people are interviewed in 1965 Chicago for their thoughts on racism, Vietnam, the Bomb, Chicago society and anything else that comes to mind. The author tries to incorporate views from every level, skid row to high society, teen-ager to senior citizen. The author draws no conclusions but lets the reader decide what the takeaway should be. I kept wondering if it would have been more or less fascinating to read it when it was first published.

Mara says

It's so interesting to read this book and realize there are still so many similarities between Chicagoans from the 1960s and now. A book full of people's honest opinions about their lives, passions, struggles, and how they make it in the city they call home. I think this book is an excellent reminder that no matter the generation, we will all experience similar obstacles that we must tackle to make the world a better place - in our own ways, of course. At first, this book made me feel as though very little progress has been made between the first interview and me reading it in 2017. I came to understand that in the process of improvement, we find new faults we must battle. By the end of the book I did honestly feel inspired by whom many would just consider "average" citizens. A great read for Chicagoans, and honestly all Americans, of what real life is like and the many different ways you can face it.

Eric says

Quite good collection of interviews in the tried and true Studs Terkel style. I think the folks in this one are slightly less gripping than in *Working*, or *Hard Times*, but it's still excellent and should be read by everyone.

Russell says

Studs Terkel lets the citizens of 1965 (I think) Chicago gripe, confess, and rhapsodize about their lives.

The zeitgeist of the time and place is captured with a fresh first person clarity. Most interestingly, there is a unknowing foreshadowing of what bodes for America. A concern with the changing social mores, de-industrialization, and most of all, race.

This frank medium of "average joe off the street" is so great. I don't know why it isn't used more.

Katie says

This book is a must read for anyone interested in social history and, of course, for Chicagoans. This is a book of amazing conversations with all sorts of people from throughout Chicago about civil rights, Vietnam, urban renewal, poverty, religion, the future, youth, work, politics, and the list goes on. Terkel somehow allowed and invited these people to truly open up about themselves and the world they live in. This is a pretty long book and I often had to put it down between conversations to give myself time to think about it all. The people are both of their time and totally timeless. Thought-provoking. This one sticks with me below the surface. I find myself wondering what happened to these people afterwards...

Nate says

Should be required reading for all Chicagoans. Very interesting slice of life personal histories from across Chicago taken during the 70s. Great insights and perspectives from many different angles. The introduction by Studs Terkel is very well written.

This is the only book by Studs Terkel that I have read and given the nature of the book (interviews with people from across Chicago) it does not include a lot of his writing. However, the introduction, which Studs wrote, shows why he is such an honored storyteller. His writing is fresh and colloquial and very easy to enjoy.

m_miriam says

Well, it's Studs Terkel, so this book is simply grand. What I most appreciated about this title are the unexpected cultural and historical insights into subjects like Hull House, Viola Liuzzo, and Marshelltown, Iowa (where my folks live). That said, I do wish I could hear the interview tapes; Terkel and his subjects have more resonance when you can hear their inflection, conversation, and laughter.

Erik Graff says

I grew up hearing Studs Terkel's interviews on "Chicago's fine arts station", WFMT. That was Dad's influence. A classical music fan, he played WFMT from the time he arose until going to bed on a daily basis. Studs' interviews, some of them with folks of interest to my generation, people like Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, were one of the highlights of their non-musical programming.

Dad is now 93 and in a convalescent center. As he is unlikely to come home again his wife has been passing on his possessions to members of the family, piece by piece. This inscribed volume was in the most recent collection of books, bringing to mind those winter days in high school when I read the thing.

Matt says

If not for some of the anachronistic language, this book could've been written today. The issues Terkel raises--race, class, poverty, inequality, war--are as relevant as ever, and the opinions held by each of his interview subjects are nearly unchanged today. Essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the social dynamics of America, in the 1960s or today.

Billy says

Studs Terkel does a wonderful job extracting great moments, thoughts and feelings from his interview subjects without interjecting or interfering. Profound and prophetic, that the interviews were conducted in the sixties does not limit the relevance nor truth of the perspectives presented. At the same time, a flavor for the era is developed touching on topics including Richard J. Daley's time as mayor, growth of the now failed housing projects, use of ADC.

I do wonder if maybe a bit more editing/paring down may have helped. At times, with so many different voices in rapid succession, thoughts and distinctions can be lost. Parts, as one may expect from natural speech, can ramble or transitions can be abrupt. Some topics, the bomb in particular, seemed to be forced resulting in trite or non-memorable passing thoughts.

I did like it though I slogged through it. I would recommend Slim's Table by Mitchell Duneier as an alternative to "true voices" though the scope is more limited. I think that helps.

Joel says

This book was somewhat of a revelation to me. The story of a time and place - Chicago in the early 60's- as told by people who actually lived then and there. It is not a dry, academic analysis of the famous and infamous decade of the 60's, but an intimate and personal look at the lives and thoughts and fears and hopes of the people who were there amidst the tumult of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Bomb, and the cultural revolution. It was really fascinating to me, especially some of the insights that Terkel was able to unveil. My favorite was the prediction about the state of the city - "I think in Chicago it's going to the

very poor and the very wealthy, from the way it's going now. You put all these big buildings along the North Shore and you the put the wealthy people in. And your middle class or upper middle class are all moving out to the suburbs, but the poorer classes can't afford it so they're staying here. You're gonna have the two extremes eventually" (Harriet Behrens, p. 25).

So, I highly recommend this book, especially for any denizens of Chicago.

ps. Megan, who is your grandmother?
