



Texas Anderson

Thoroughly Professional  
Professionally Thorough

Greenwood·King  
PROPERTIES

524-0888

texas@greenwoodking.com

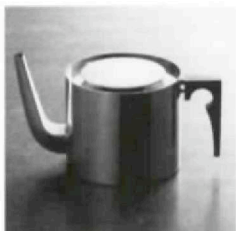
Carolyn Brewer's

SUNSET  
SETTINGS

1714 Sunset Boulevard  
Houston, Texas 77005  
713-522-7661

Classic Contemporary  
Furniture and Accessories  
Bridal Registry Available

Stelton  
Design: Arne Jacobsen



Coming in

Cite

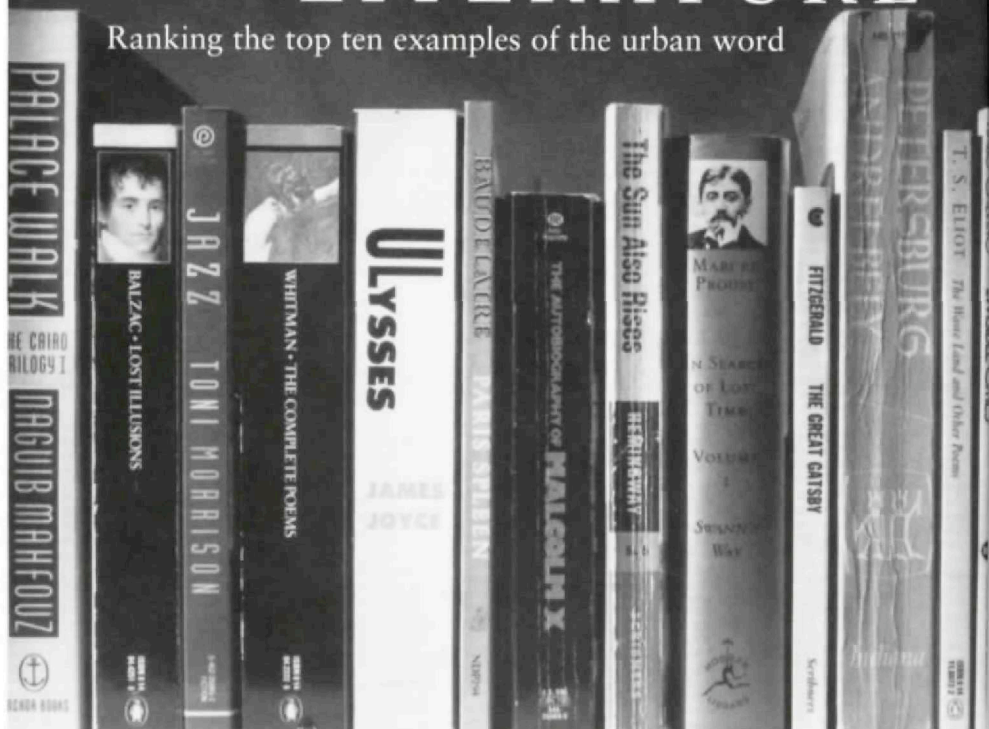
Mark Wamble digs through  
John Fahey's Garden.

Joel Warren Barna checks into  
2000 hotels.

And Michael Berryhill  
takes the pulse of the  
Medical Center.

## THE CITY IN LITERATURE

Ranking the top ten examples of the urban word



When Samuel Johnson said, at the end of the 18th century, that anyone who is tired of London is tired of life, he was suggesting that modern humanity's deepest resources are not to be found in the timeless ideals of nature, but in the urban orders we have made for ourselves.

Modern literature has been telling this story ever since. The novel grew up with urban culture; the city's power and the novel's success created an urban form of poetry. And modern autobiography has been an inevitable response of the individual to the pressure of the crowd.

As the year 2000 approaches, we have been assessing the accomplishments of the current millennium by making lists of our best novels, movies, and TV shows. A list of the best writing about the city, therefore, seemed like a good idea: to review not only the ways our urban environment has affected our literature, but the ways our literature has also explained our cities.

A good list should provide some surprises, and I have surprised myself with some of the books that didn't make it to mine — *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, for instance, books that I teach all the time. So I offer this as a very personal, highly elastic top ten, aware already that it is not *your* list, and therefore deeply flawed.

•*Bleak House* — The first sentence of Charles Dickens' novel is "London." The other sentences run to 935 pages in the Penguin edition and contain, apparently, the city's entire population. *Bleak House* has everything: characters high and low, rich and poor, weak and strong; two narrators; "a young man of the name of Guppy"; outrageous coincidences; and the most famous legal case in literature.

When Jarndyce v. Jarndyce is finally settled in Chancery Court, the estate's assets have all been exhausted by the legal process. This is Dickens' metaphor for the British social system, and his general narrator is a scalding critic of its self-consumption. The other narrator is an orphan, Esther Summerson, who records the city in her autobiography as the scene of her sentimental education. By contrasting these two narrators against each other, Dickens is measuring the significance a single individual's life can have against the city's whole — which is still the question of every individual life in any city. Between these two narrators, asking different questions, is another quintessential figure of city literature, the detective, Inspector Bucket. London is huge, dark, pestilential. Signs and wonders abound. Its center is a cemetery.

•*Song of Myself* — Most of us probably don't think of Walt Whitman as an urban poet because a song of myself could be sung almost anywhere. But he is, and he calls himself "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." Whitman was a newspaperman who cruised New York City as Dickens roamed the wilds of London. Only in such a densely populous environment could Whitman find the full range of human diversity he wanted to envelop in his democratic embrace, and only there could he experiment with all the fluent possibilities of the self that he virtually invented for modern life. He *was* large, and he *did* contain multitudes. And in New York City the opera was available all the time. Whitman's poem may be "epic," but this long emotional line is operatic. And he is a lot sexier than Dickens. "Who goes there?" Whitman asks, "hankering, gross, mystical, nude?" Not Esther Summerson.

•*Paris Spleen* — Charles Baudelaire is

## BY TERRENCE DOODY

*House* is Dickens' England, *Ulysses* is the whole world as literary history. Freud once referred to consciousness itself as the Eternal City, and this metaphor is an epitome of what Joyce has given us in his novel.

•*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* – This is my favorite example of the archetypal story of the Young Man from the Provinces, a phrase Stendhal first uses of Julien Sorel in *Red and Black*. Balzac wrote at least two versions of the Young Man's story in *Old Goriot* and *Lost Illusions*; *Great Expectations*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Jazz* are also stories of urbanization and its discontents. Of them all, I prefer Malcolm's nonfiction version. As he moves from rural Michigan to black Boston and then to Harlem, the signs of style he acquires – a conk, a zoot suit, the language of jazz musicians – are all signs of the freedom to change yourself that the city always bestows. Moreover, the provincial young men of the 19th century are all pale and feckless failures, and Malcolm is none of these. He embraces all the possibilities of his life with heroic intensity, and his final urban transformation takes place in the holy city of Mecca, where he becomes a player on the world stage.

•*The Ambassadors* – In Henry James' novel, Lambert Strether returns to Paris in late middle-age and realizes how much he has lost by spending his life in the neighborhood of Victorian Boston. For Strether and for James, Paris was what Walter Benjamin called it: the capital of the 19th century, the epitome of everything that was great in European culture. This is the Paris Proust writes of in *Remembrance of Things Past* during the Belle Epoque before the cataclysm of World War I. After the war, in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Paris has none of its earlier magic. Not everyone feels this way, but Jake Barnes' despondency, his eagerness to leave the city and go fishing in Spain, marks a big change in the modern novel's attitude toward the city's promise.

•*Petersburg* – Vladimir Nabokov thought Andrei Bely the equal of Joyce, Proust, and Kafka. And like *Ulysses*, Bely's *Petersburg* is an encyclopedia of its literary tradition. Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Tolstoy, at least, are unmistakably present in this story of a half-hearted young radical who is trapped into blowing up his father, an important bureaucrat. The city of St. Petersburg itself, with all its rationalist

rectilinearity and enduring symbolism, is as unmistakably there as Dickens's London, but in prose that is much more difficult. If good fences can make good neighbors, great cities can make hard books. And the greatest, like *Petersburg*, are often literary experiments of considerable ambition. The city as an idea is as complex as consciousness itself.

•*Palace Walk* – This is the first volume of Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo trilogy. No one does the differences between imprisoning domestic interiors and the freedom of the streets so well – not even Edith Wharton writing about Old New York. And Cairo is exotic, without any of the imported Orientalism of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Salman Rushdie's Bombay is also exotic, but it is so hip that it is in another category altogether. *Palace Walk* is not hip. It's sober and spellbinding.

•*Invisible Cities* – In Italo Calvino's exemplary postmodernist novel, Marco Polo and Kubla Khan, two utter strangers, learn to talk to each other and go on to discuss the cities Polo has seen on his travels, the city's ideals, and ideal cities that they construct out of the language they now share. Even in translation, this is a very beautiful, very elegant book that no American writer could ever have written. America simply does not have hundreds of thousand-year-old cities like Aix, Parma, or Fiesole. And Calvino's message seems suitably traditional, despite his postmodernism: the culture of the city, he suggests, is a long conversation that makes many foreign things familiar.

•*The Ladies' Paradise* – Emile Zola belongs on any list of city writers, and this is his most enjoyable book. It is a perfect counterpart to Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame of Paris*, which was written 50 years earlier, because it places at the center of the city not a great cathedral but a department store. Zola's heroine is a Young Woman from the Provinces, but more important, she is the only thing in the store that can't be bought. She stands sentimentally incorruptible as around her Paris is being completely rebuilt by Napoleon III and his prime mover, the Baron Haussmann, who under a transparent pseudonym makes a cameo appearance as himself. The city has always been about change, Zola implies, and in modern life, change is always related to money. That was worth knowing as we entered the 20th century, and it remains worth knowing as we welcome the 21st. ■

the very essence of the flaneur, urban life's inspector general, strolling the city and taking its tone. And in *Paris Spleen*, Baudelaire defines so much that is central to 19th-century literature and urban experience: the harsh impact of the crowd on individual identity, the failure of Romantic idealism in the face of the city's poverty and random violence, the displacement of spirit in a materialist system, the boredom that comes from the energy that has no place or purpose – which is spleen itself. If my French were better, I might prefer these indispensable prose poems to Whitman's *Song*. On the other hand, Baudelaire's decadence and diabolism seem dated now – or too downtown. I prefer Whitman's affirmative exuberance. But this is a tough call, and together Whitman's line and Baudelaire's despair give us *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot, which is the great urban poem of the 20th century.

•*Ulysses* – Until now, *Ulysses* has always been first on any list I've ever made, and I'm picking it over New York in the World Series. James Joyce boasted his rendering of Dublin was so complete that the city could be reconstructed from the details in *Ulysses'* text. His hero, Bloom, does cover a lot of ground. We see him at the butcher's and the post office, the pharmacy and the bookseller's, in the graveyard and at the maternity hospital, working at the newspaper and playing on the beach, visiting the museum, three pubs, and a brothel. Chapter seven, set in a newspaper office, is filled with all the unauthored language that marks public space with headlines, ads, and notices; chapter eight is a long tracking shot and a structuralist theory of urban development; chapter ten gives us a bird's-eye view of the city as a grid; chapter 15 is the city apocalyptic. If *Bleak*

## Cite

The Architecture and Design  
Review of Houston

## Subscription

One year: \$15 Two years: \$25

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Check for \$ \_\_\_\_\_ enclosed.

Gift subscription

## The Rice Design Alliance

The Rice Design Alliance, established in 1973, is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of architecture, urban design, and the built environment in the Houston region through educational programs; the publication of *Cite*, a quarterly review of architecture and design; and active programs to initiate physical improvements. Membership in the RDA is open to the general public.

## Individual Membership \$35

Ticket discounts for RDA programs  
Free subscription to *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*  
Invitations to "members only" events  
Discounts on selected titles from the Brazos Bookstore  
Participation in the annual membership meeting and event

## Student Membership \$15

All of the above benefits

## Family Membership \$50

All of the above benefits for your family

## Sponsor Membership \$125

All of the benefits accorded to Family Members  
Courtesy tickets to two selected RDA programs

## Patron Membership \$250

All of the benefits accorded to Sponsor Members  
Courtesy tickets to three selected RDA programs

## Sustaining Membership \$500

All of the benefits accorded to Patron Members  
Courtesy tickets to all RDA programs

## Corporate Membership \$1000

All of the benefits accorded to Sustaining Members  
Recognition in the RDA journal *Cite* and at special events

## Membership Application

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Category \_\_\_\_\_

Amount enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Checks should be sent to Rice University,  
Rice Design Alliance – MS 51,  
PO Box 1892  
Houston, Texas 77251-1892.  
Telephone: 713.527.4876