



The Old Neighborhood

Bill Hillmann

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"A raucous but soulful account of growing up on the mean streets of Chicago, and the choices kids are forced to make on a daily basis. This cool, incendiary rites of passage novel is the real deal."—Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting*

"Bill Hillmann's *The Old Neighborhood* is like a right hook to the chin with brass knuckles, crackling with both bravery and urgency. Brilliantly evoking Nelson Algren's *Neon Wilderness* and Richard Price's *The Wanderers*, the novel is unflinchingly honest in its depictions of class and race, a deft portrait of our sometimes-less-than-fair city."—Joe Meno, best-selling author of *Hairstyles of the Damned*

A bright and sensitive teen, Joe Walsh is the youngest in a big, mixed-race Chicago family. After Joe witnesses his heroin-addicted oldest brother commit a brutal gangland murder, his friends and loved ones systematically drag him deeper into a black pit of violence that reaches a bloody impasse when his eldest sister begins dating a rival gang member.

Bill Hillmann is an award-winning writer and storyteller from Chicago, Illinois. His writing has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newcity*, *Salon.com*, and has been broadcast on NPR. He's told stories around the world with his internationally acclaimed storytelling series the "Windy City Story Slam." Hillmann is a union construction laborer and a bull runner in Spain, who in the not-so-distant past was a feared street brawler, gang affiliate, drug dealer, convict, and Chicago Golden Glove Champion.

The Old Neighborhood Details

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From Reader Review The Old Neighborhood for online ebook

Tony Millspaugh says

Now, even though I'm only a quarter of a way through the novel, my personal bias already had me know well that I was going to love this book. You see, I met Hillmann in 2011, shortly after he had been profiled in the Chicago Tribune and his role as the founder of the short story slam and the influence Hemingway had on his life. I would now argue that one can see the Hemingway influence in not only some of the violence, but also in Hillmann's spare writing style.

My purpose in reaching out to Hillmann was to get him to tell the high school students I was teaching how Hemingway's writing and the running of the bulls in San Fermin in *The Sun Also Rises* had impacted his life. Bill agreed to visit my students and he brought amazing pictures of his involvement in the running of the bulls. His storytelling and the pictures he brought mesmerized the students. Already I was seeing his byline in the Reader and New City and I knew I was in the presence of one of the city's most talented writers at the moment of triumph. His humbleness in accepting compliment his genuine and with the publication of this novel, Bill Hillmann cements his reputation as a leading Chicago author. I am so pleased for him.

Now, I do still have much of the novel to read, but by the end of part one, this is what I find it's greatest strength. Writers that I favor are those whose place setting feels like an extension of plot. Dickens does it for London. Joyce, for Dublin. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Cather's Great Plains of Nebraska. Hillmann does that for Chicago's North side and I am so proud of him.

Jodi Sh. says

I heard Hillmann read an excerpt from this novel, and it left my mouth hanging open. He reminds me of Miguel Pinero, for those old school Lower East Siders who remember Miguel. I'm expecting a new *Down These Mean Streets*. We'll see.

Behnam Riahi says

The following review has been copied from <http://behnamriahi.tumblr.com>

The Old Neighborhood, written by Bill Hillmann and published by Curbside Splendor, is a fictitious memoir written from the point-of-view of Joe, a boy living in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood in an era of racially-motivated gang violence. Joe's older brother, Lil Pat, is one of the heads of the TJOs, the gang that runs the old neighborhood, and Joe's social circles are well on their way to joining the fight too, though Joe's other older brothers, Rich and Blake, manage to stay out of the way. Nonetheless, all of them are affected by the world they live in, including Joe's adoptive sisters, Jan and Rose, and it isn't long before violence grips every member of Joe's family during the coming storm. The worst blow of all comes when Lil Pat takes the thug life too far and heroin works its way into his lifestyle. The result? He's put away and the rest of the

TJOs look to Joe to step up. After all, Rich is too volatile for friends and Blake is trying to maintain a reasonable grade-point average to stay in a college he barely got into. But Joe's not alone—his crew steps up too: Ryan, the brother of another lead TJO, and Angel, a young playboy with a twisted sense of humor, both join Joe as they start selling marijuana and making stands against other north side gangs. But as Joe falls in love and discovers an interest in particle physics, he begins to realize that the thug life was not what Lil Pat wished for him after all.

I got this book courtesy of our friends at Curbside Splendor, though I've got history with Mr. Hillmann. The first literary reading I ever attended was hosted by Bill—the Windy City Story Slam, with guest reader Irvine Welsh, author of *Trainspotting*. It wasn't long before I got to hear all about their relationship—Hillmann, Irvine Welsh, and Don DeGrazia, author of *American Skin*, used to get into bar fights with cops, or so I heard. Who can tell with writers? Either way, while studying under DeGrazia and becoming a regular attendee at The Windy City Story Slam, I got to learn a lot about Bill and his escapades. It wasn't long before I stepped up to the plate and Bill put me on Windy City Story Slam's bill.

(Probably the first time I appeared on a poster.)

Andersonville, Edge Water, Bryn Mawr—whatever you want to call it—I lived there for 22 months, no doubt on the same block as Joe and other characters of this novel. The only difference is, while Joe is in the streets battling back rival gangs, I saw a lot of young professionals starting their first families and college youths still trying to get drunk off Pabst Blue Ribbon and two-dollar bottles of wine from Trader Joe's. Gentrification, I guess? It wasn't like the neighborhood was devoid of trouble—there were a couple of low-rent housing apartment buildings and homeless guys hanging around outside of the bodega trying to bogart my cigarettes. The experience I remember most is a neighbor in my own apartment building—his name was Don, a young chef, and we talked restaurants while we smoked cigarettes outside of the building. One afternoon, Don approached me with a twitch in his eye. He told me that he had a dream where the grim reaper followed him down the street and then, according to Don, raped him. But it only began as rape and became love-making. As uncomfortable as I felt, I didn't want to be a dick—so I asked him what the grim reaper looked like. He unlocked the door to the building and said, “You don't know?” The twitch in his eye strobed to a silent rhythm as he grinned with years of embedded hurt. Then he slammed the door in my face. Unsettling, sure, but I'd seen that behavior before. Back in college, I had a roommate who was a recovering heroin addict. The behavior, denoted by paranoia, social ineptitude, and broken motor functions was all too familiar. When I saw Don again, he apologized for slamming the door in my face, but made it clear that he didn't trust me. He pointed to a hoodie I wore, with the Legend of Zelda logo on the breast, and said that I wore symbols of the enemy. He said he and his friend built a time machine to fight the enemy, a time machine in their minds, and using their time machine, their whole community can fight the enemy. I decided then that I needed to move out. That's why I now live in Pilsen now.

(Edgewater, courtesy of choosechicago.com.)

Of course, Joe's interpretation of the neighborhood weighs heavily enough on himself, what with heroin coming into the neighborhood and danger lurking around every corner. Hillmann does a fantastic job of capturing Joe's fear as he runs around the neighborhood, dropping a new dread or trouble on Joe's lap with each new chapter. From problems as meager to cheating on his girlfriend to issues as dangerous as wondering why his sister's running with a rival gang to thoughts so profound as questioning the meaning of life through science, Joe's fears are all captured in the serious, gritty tone captured in the colloquial speech and world-building tangents. We closely follow Joe's thoughts because we're in his head, so we feel what he feels as Hillmann gives a physical description to the hurt of Joe's anxiety. It's these descriptions, paired with the ambiguity of what actually waits around the corner, that makes this novel a relentless bulldozer on the audience's emotions. Even Joe's nightmares distinguish this book among others in the way it continually

thrashes its main character—in these horror fantasies, the Assyrian (a young man that Joe watched die at his brother's hands) commands a monster composed of Joe's grotesque imagination that aims to hunt and devour everyone that Joe cares about—the monster, however, is the neighborhood and the Assyrian is the vengeful ghost of Joe's conscience and the neighborhood's victims. This personification comes in tandem with Joe's own physical ache resulting from his anxiety and not only compels the audience into Joe's emotional state, but the physical state that results. And no matter where Joe goes, a new torture awaits him.

Bill Hillmann, like myself, also worked for Criminal Class Press. He was the talent manager and, upon joining as an intern before becoming the publicist, I was given a very unusual request by Bill. Plaster-casting my cock, live and on stage. You see, I made quite a name for myself in the literary community by talking about my dick. Legendary, they said, though whether that's in reference to my audacity or the size of my wang, who knew? Either way, Bill caught wind of it and asked me to join the stage and be the first person to get a plaster-cast mold of his dick made before a live audience. If it's half-as-bad as I remember it, it's probably not worth recording here, but I never said no to a challenge—it was done by Jo-Jo Baby, a local artist who sculpts statues out of plaster-cast cock moldings, and I was given a bathrobe and a screen. While the molding happened, Bill set up a microphone so I could answer questions by the packed Viaduct Theater while Jo-Jo put a cool, thick lather on my joint. I only had one problem—stage fright. I could answer the questions just fine, but I couldn't get hard. One thing that I failed to mention in my stories is that I'm a "grower" and not a "show-er." The result was one, tiny penis sculpture—and though I still had fun, and Bill and I built our relationship, I believe I'll think twice before volunteering to do that again.

(Great fucking idea, Behnam.)

Like myself, Joe is on blast on the regular—though he's mostly trying to run under the radar, everyone seems to seek him out because of what he represents to the community and his group of friends. With a huge trove of characters, all of whom know Joe all too well, it's no surprise that he needs someplace to go. For relief, Hillmann invites us into Joe's memory—times spent with his grandfather on the pier or at the lake with his family. Water represents peace in Hillmann's piece and it's these flashbacks that allow us to rest through the chaos of Joe's dysfunctional community. These flashbacks aren't just moments of rest, but thematic too—they represent where the story begins and where it ends. Joe's dreams, like his nightmares, are surreal, and instill a sense of ease as much as his nightmares create one of unrest. Using water as Joe's safe-haven is especially poetic, considering that his nightmares are inspired by a neighborhood known specifically in the story as "Edgewater." It's this juxtaposition that gives the narrative a well-crafted beauty that's both subtle and deeply meaningful, painting meaning to the drama of Joe's life. In addition to adding an extra layer to the story, characterizing the neighborhood in Joe's nightmares as a monster and embodying water in Joe's dreams gives the reader clues as to what may happen next as he fights to overcome each new painful discovery that awaits him, while still raising the stakes because the allusions are both soft and hard, both scenic and destructive.

I worked with Bill a little while after the plaster-casting on both events for Criminal Class Press and for Windy City Story Slam. With Criminal Class, he and I toured the east coast together and, while I drove the company's car rental from Chicago to New York, he drove from New York back to Chicago. We split the stage on a number of occasions and sat in on a number of company meetings in an effort to make Criminal Class Press what it eventually became, prior to both of us quitting. After New York, I also did some publicity for Windy City Story Slam—but as the Story Slam faded behind Bill's own ambitions to become an author, my public relations career slowly ended with my desire to leave the literary community and focus exclusively on finding my own voice as an author. Still, in spite of it, I clutched on to the things Bill told me. He explained in depth that The Windy City Story Slam, his baby, happened as a result of constantly pushing. He explained to me how he could barely fill a small room for that first Story Slam and by the end, he had magnificent theaters packed. He described the importance for a budding author to promote themselves and overcoming fear to face the world through story—I think that's why I left the community. I just wanted to

bring something bigger to the table to promote, although you never know what it is that will draw you back in again.

(Hillmann and Welsh. There's a duo I wouldn't wish upon anyone.)

There are things that I took issue with in this novel too—it wasn't all just grit and poetic irony. In my opinion, the book needed another round of edits. Though mostly stylistic choices, the book uses a lot of sentences composed exclusively of capital letters and redundant punctuation in order to express an extension of volume or push an idea—however, it's hard to take stylistic decisions like that seriously. It brings too much levity to the dark, gloomy world that Hillmann is attempting to create. The use of colloquial conjunctions doesn't help either—gonna, wanna, etc. Nor does replacing words like “that” with “dat,” when writing the way Joe speaks as a child. Overall, a lot is lost in the creation of this world with this style and I think the story speaks loudly and clearly enough without manipulating type-face or tongue-and-cheek phonetics to capture the world that they live in. In spite of that though, the story is engaging as hell and if you can allow yourself to look past it, you'll find a rich, substantial world that both teaches you in great detail about the neighborhood you once called home and pushes you to the edge of your seat.

Though I've awaited this for a long time, Bill's publication with *Curbside Splendor* brings new life to his career. In all the years I hosted readings, publicized publications, edited manuscripts, or generally struggled in the literary industry, I've never met anyone who worked so hard and promoted himself with such enthusiasm to become an author as Bill Hillmann. Reading excerpts from this novel in *Criminal Class Review* were not enough to inform me about how grand of a novel that this would become and I consider myself privileged to have both worked with Bill and to have read this wonderful piece in its entirety. I look forward to his next work and, with any luck, I hope we get to see Joe and his fucked-up family again. All of the characters of this novel were so well-written and deeply moving that I've come to consider them regulars from my own neighborhood, even if I'm not living in Edgewater anymore.

Tess says

This is a phenomenal novel. I won an ARC copy of this book in a goodreads give away and at first I was reluctant to read it because this is not the type of book that I normally read. However, I am so glad that I read it and I will be recommending this novel to everyone. Prior to reading this book I didn't know much about Chicago or gangs, but this novel brought it all to life for me. This book kind of reminded me of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton except with much more profanity, drugs, sex and graphic violence. Also, the setting is completely different, but it captured that same angst and desire to fit in that all adolescents feel. I enjoyed it so much and I could hardly put it down. This is a truly great piece of literature.

J-kwon Stanley says

I originally heard about this book because the author, Bill Hillmann came into visit my creative writing class in Albany Park, Chicago (nearby where the book takes place). Being from the Chicagoland area, I have a soft spot for coming of age novels dealing with gang violence in Chicago.

Hillman read the first few pages of his book to our class and I was immediately interested. Not only was the plot intriguing, his prose was brilliant and engaging. It was the first book I picked up in a long time that I experienced great difficulty putting down.

However, I have to say that the book seemed to peter out some where in the middle. It felt like the book initially had a lot to say about violence and race but trickled into your average coming of age in the hood story. I still enjoyed the book, but I was more interested in the themes and history of Chicago than I was about the main character.

Some parts felt kind of cheesy, like the main character's love of physics, and the cliché bad-kid-who's-actually-smart routine. In addition to the slowing intensity of the middle, the end seemed to pick back up to 90. Even with this rockiness, I still greatly enjoyed the book, I just wish it had been more macro in scope. It kind of reads like a Boyz-N-Tha-Hood set in 90's Chicago with white gangs. I would still be interested in reading Hillman's book about running with the bulls, he seems like a really interesting and humble dude.

David says

The description in this book is intensely vivid. Joe is an intriguing mix of hardness and the capacity to feel. I don't come from the streets of Chicago so I can't vouch for the accuracy, but it sure feels real. The complications, the situation that presents itself to the characters, how there are choices but so few available are good ones, it's a hell of a book. Powerful, you can see the humanity behind even the worst of the characters, why they do even the appalling things they do. There's some real fire inside.

Tuck says

involving first novel of trying to grow up in mean places where morality race money crime but not much redemption greet you everyday. in the grand tradition of chester himes richard price and propulsive like charlie newton Start Shooting

this other great hard streets chicago novel goes with hillmann 47th Street Black: A Novel

Kyle Smucker says

When I began reading this novel, I was discouraged by the writing style. It seemed like a knock-off Bukowski with less of the visceral impact he had with simple, short sentences - instead, it just seemed simple. The novel starts off with a bang, which also discouraged me. It seemed to me that the author was compensating for not quite being Bukowski or Hemingway by adding a ton of graphic violence to "boost his ratings", so to speak. However, it became clear to me that this writing style was intentional as it is a fictitious memoir written by a character who is not well-read or a writer of any kind, nor does the character has a ghost writer or an editor - it's almost as though you are listening to Joe's life story while you're at lunch break with him on his construction site, years after the events of the book.

The result is that you slowly immerse yourself in Joe's perspective as you see snapshots of his life growing up in far north side Chicago. Bill Hillman eases you into Joe's shoes as the momentum towards gang life, nacoritics, racism and violence only increases with every page. You begin to see Joe's decisions as both those of a kid like any other who is coming of age socially and by the end of the book, I had a lot of empathy not only for Joe but for the other gang characters. Fear is the name of the game, and the choices the characters make are often brutal, ugly and wrong yet rational given their circumstance. What looks like pure chaos from

the outside begins to reveal itself as a social system with status, rules, customs and consequences - albeit deadly ones. Ultimately, we see how this system consumes all of those involved, one way or another. I would recommend to any Chicagoan and fans of The Wire and similar shows.

Victor Giron says

An awesome Chicago-land tale...

Curbside Splendor says

Um, yeah

Rick Orozco says

Have to say that this was one of the best books I've read in a long time.

Coming from Chicago and growing up in the neighborhoods and in the suburbs, I can relate to the characters in the book. The author does a great job in painting a picture of what its like to grow in a neighborhood like that. I highly recommend reading this book it can give you perspective.

Israel says

Every time I read a book about Chicago the city of Chicago plays a major role in the story whether the author wants it to or not. The Jungle, Native Son, The Devil in the White City, and now I'm ready to add The Old Neighborhood to the list of great Chicago stories. The Old Neighborhood follows a trio of young men through the mid to late 80s and early 90s. Joe, Angel, and Ryan are life long friends that grow up for better and worse amid the mean streets of Chicago's North Side. The main character Joe is surrounded by gangs and drugs as his older brother lives the gangster life that Joe strives, with the help of his friends Angel and Ryan, to emulate. Joe grows up emulating his brother while his brother deteriorates into heroin addiction, murder, and eventually prison. Joe has reservations about the gangster life but it's too late the city of Chicago has Joe, Angel, and Ryan in its clutches; the fight to break might just destroy everything Joe holds dear. Joe Walsh is a very dynamic character. The use of lucid dream sequences help foreshadow the character's development quite well and Joe's tendency to question ignorance and stay open-minded in the face of strong hatred helps create the internal struggle that allows Joe to develop very well as a believable character that you root for until the end.

Some of the The Old Neighborhood does come across a bit cliché. Joe Walsh comes from a large hard living Irish family and the way the story ended was very real and intense but at the same time I had seen the tragic gangster ending before. Such films come to mind like "Boyz in the Hood", "Menace to Society", and "Scarface" that had a similar feeling and very similar endings. In spite of this all of the characters are written very well and even though you might see the ending coming you are still very interested in these characters and this story that you can forgive the use of the tried and true tragic gangster ending. The city of Chicago is written in such a way that it overshadows everything in the story. The Sills where Joe, Ryan, and Angel

hang, the high school dynamic, the amount of racial overtones, and the hard-fought meager life are elements of this story that are very vivid and real and have a distinct Chicago feel.

I can tell that Bill Hillmann has plenty of street cred because he captured the teenage fascination with the flashy, dangerous to perfection. I have some personal experience with that fascination as well, although not to the degree portrayed, and I identified with this story immediately. I loved reading this book! The chapters weren't too long and each chapter had a strong arc that fostered a good balance between complete chapters and chapters that have cliffhanger endings. Fair warning, this is a violent, adult story and while the main characters are pre-teen boys I wouldn't recommend this book for that demographic. Adult readers will appreciate the vivid, intense story telling, Chicago style struggle, and deep internal struggle. Another great read and so far in my collection the best book of 2014!

John Hemingway says

This is an incredible first novel. I was sent an ARC copy of the book and I wrote this blurb: "Bill Hillmann's *The Old Neighborhood* is as good as it gets. The generosity, style and passion of his story gripped me from the beginning and convinced me as few other books have that here was a writer to be reckoned with. Chicago has a new literary star in its firmament. "

Brad says

Bill Hillman's book isn't a beach read, and it's not a story that goes down quickly. So when you pick up *The Old Neighborhood: A Novel*, be prepared to descend into the world of North Chicago neighborhoods.

The good: I'm a fan of complexity in storytelling. I've never enjoyed white hats versus black hats, and *The Old Neighborhood* doesn't serve that up. Instead, you're thrust into a bubbling caldron of desperation caused by the very things we see around us every day, e.g. poverty, crumbling education.

Don't be alarmed, though. The book isn't a social commentary. Instead, Hillman sets his characters loose within the gritty, working class world of Chicago neighborhoods.

Hillman also doesn't shy away from the deeply complex relationships that we have with race and class. Again, his characters come to their views in ways that give readers an understanding of why and how the tensions between groups have developed, particularly considering the pressures pushing on their families from all sides. Even as characters spew epithets at each other, you are given glimpses into the world where those were created.

You understand how those views came to be even if you don't condone them. That trick is particularly difficult to pull off.

The bad: The book's narrative isn't easy. Chicago and its neighborhoods are characters, which became a problem for a non-native Chicago reader. In the second act, new people and gangs appeared regularly, and I found myself unable to keep everyone's affiliation straight. That confusion made it difficult for me to understand when I was supposed to feel tension, and when I was supposed to relax.

There was also a rather unsatisfying *Deus ex machina* with the narrator and his father near the end of the book, which felt both forced and unnecessary to the overall story.

The unsettled: On occasion, Hillman's narrator breaks the fourth wall, and speaks directly to the reader from the future. These moments come during difficult moments within the narrative. During these times, the narrator speaks to us in a much more educated and emotionally evolved state.

While the narrative technique gives the reader some space to explore the darker issues happening in the novel (since they know the narrator turns out "okay"), it also undermines the thematic mood (which is that we don't know if it's going to turn out "okay"). That technique felt too neatly packaged for a story that was built upon chaotic, intra-neighborhood relationships.

The takeaway: Narratively, Hillman's book takes on some difficult subject matter, which makes it worth the read even if its sprawling nature is sometimes hard to follow. Technically, his choices sometimes pull the reader out of the story, but those choices appear to have been done with a specific outcome in mind, e.g. giving the reader some safety in exploring the characters.

You'll walk away from *The Old Neighborhood* a bit weary and tired, but you won't be disappointed.

Kristy says

I received my copy through Goodreads First Reads, and it was worth it. This book is no pretty picture of the North Side, or of Chicago in the 1970s-1980s. In the tradition of Nelson Algren and Studs Terkel, we are given life from the point of view of a rough-and-tumble Chicagoan with a large family and connections on the street. It minces no words about the racial divisions by street and gang affiliation. It's definitely worth reading.
