

BOOKS

A hunt for Chicago treasures

Chicago Scavenger gives readers an adventure while they learn about obscure city sites.

BY TONY PEREGRIN

For Jessica Mlinaric it all started in her grandma's backyard.

"My cousin and I spent hours drawing scavenger hunts and treasure maps to the patch of trees between her lawn and a neighboring grocery store parking lot," writes Mlinaric in the introduction to her new book *Chicago Scavenger: The Ultimate Search for Chicago's Hidden Treasures*. The spiral-bound book, designed to jot down notes, features riddles to more than 342 hidden and overlooked works of public art, architectural oddities, and under-the-radar museums.

There is something a little bit *Goonies*, perhaps a little *Indiana Jones* about scavenger hunts—particularly in the case of Mlinaric's quests. *Chicago Scavenger* asks readers to decode poems and pore over photo fragments to locate sites across 17 Chicago neighborhoods.

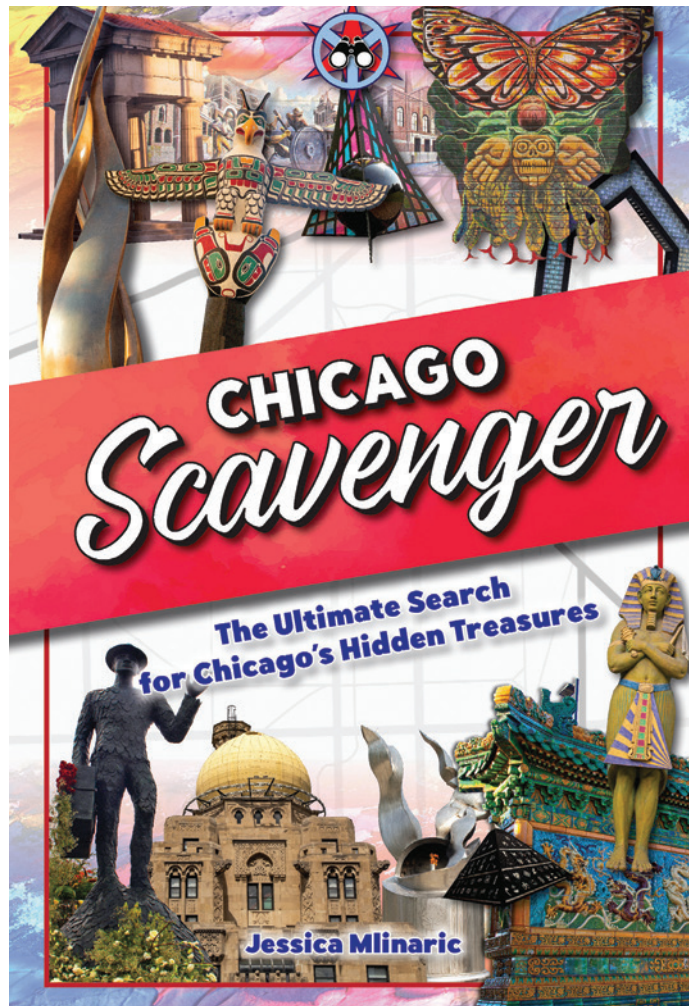
"I think that finding something surprising in your everyday surroundings gives you that thrill of discovery," says Mlinaric, a Chicago-based writer and photographer, and the founder of urbnexplorer.com, a blog featuring "travel insights for the culturally curious."

"I selected places that were historically important, visually interesting, or meaningful to the cultural fabric of the community," Mlinaric continues, "and I picked spots that are reasonably close together so that readers could explore a single neighborhood in an afternoon."

Considering the author's criteria for selecting spots in the book, does *Chicago Scavenger* adequately cover the full spectrum of the city's diverse cultures and neighborhoods?

"I was very intentional about making sure that I had a balanced representation of northern and south-side neighborhoods, and a few on the west side as well," says Mlinaric. "Exploring that richness of diversity is really important to me, and it is one of the things that I love best about living in Chicago."

Once sites were selected, Mlinaric set about



Jessica Mlinaric © COURTESY THE ARTIST

writing the clues—mini-poems that rhyme with a slightly Seussian cadence.

"I didn't read any Dr. Seuss to prepare to write the clues, but I was thinking about it," jokes Mlinaric. "It was my publisher who wanted to make them rhyme, and I was a little hesitant. I'm not a poet, I've not written in rhyme before. I took a day off work to see if I could even do this! And I actually had fun with it."

Mlinaric was hesitant to divulge which riddles she thinks might be the most challenging for readers to decode, but she admits Geoffrey Baer—a Chicago public television personality and local historian who works for WTTW—was impressed with the degree of difficulty of some of her clues.

"Geoffrey Baer was kind enough to write the blurb for my book. And he said he thought some of the riddles were challenging," says Mlinaric, sounding slightly incredulous. Mlinaric, whose first book *Secret Chicago: A*

Guide to the Weird, Wonderful, and Obscure was published in 2018, appeared on season one of Baer's WTTW program *The Great Chicago Quiz Show*.

CHICAGO SCAVENGER: THE ULTIMATE SEARCH FOR CHICAGO'S HIDDEN TREASURES BY JESSICA MLINARIC


Reedy Press, paperback, 192 pp., \$20.95, chicagoscavengerhunt.com

If you do get stumped by a clue, don't fret: Mlinaric encourages readers to email her via chicagoscavenger.com for additional hints.

Readers can solve the riddles solo or team up with friends and family as a way to engage with the city. There's no timetable for completing the scavenger hunt, but for the more competitive explorers eager to conquer all 17 neighborhood quests, the clues actually lead to a gem of a prize.

"Take a picture of each site, upload it to my

website, and you'll get points for correctly identifying each location in the book. I'll update the leaderboard regularly so that you can see where you stand," explains Mlinaric. "Winners will receive a custom poster by local illustrator Jason Swearingen that incorporates some of the places in the book. It's really beautiful—I'm really excited about it!"

Mlinaric started writing *Chicago Scavenger* early last year before COVID-19 vaccines were readily available and after a year in pandemic lockdown in her Wicker Park apartment. "As someone who really tries to get out and about in the city, it blew my mind to get back out in Chicago and have a reason to visit other neighborhoods and talk to people. I was just so in love with Chicago again after being stuck in the little bubble of my house. It was a very exciting time and it made my heart swell with pride to be a Chicagoan." 

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