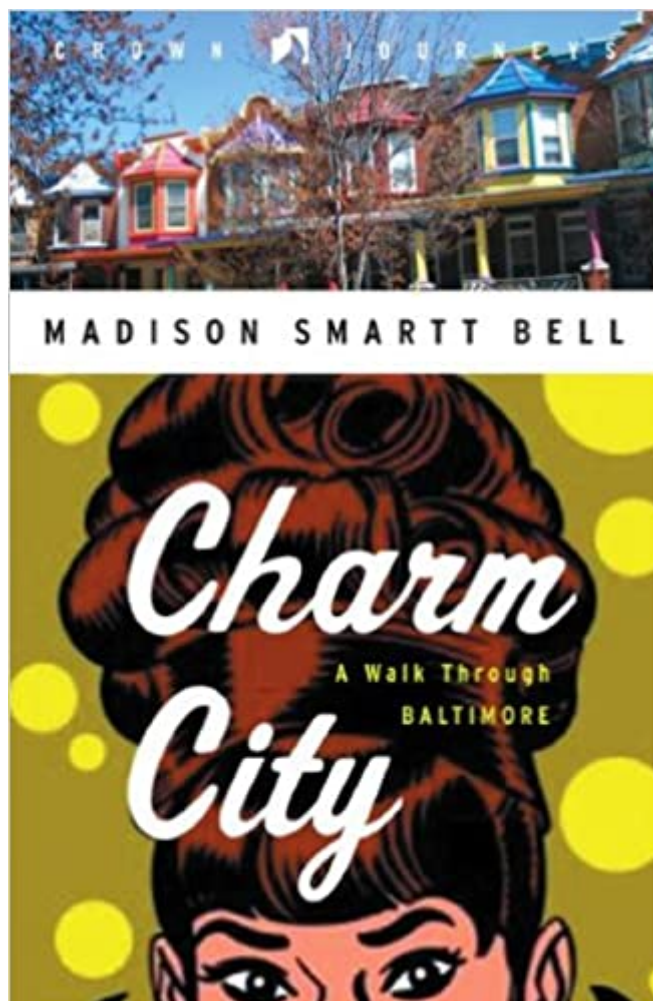


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Charm City: A Walk Through Baltimore (Crown Journeys)



Synopsis

With a writer's keen eye, a longtime resident's familiarity, and his own sly wit, acclaimed novelist Madison Smartt Bell leads us on a walk through his adopted hometown of Baltimore, a city where crab cakes, Edgar Allan Poe, hair extensions, and John Waters movies somehow coexist. From its founding before the Revolutionary War to its place in popular culture—thanks to seminal films like Barry Levinson's *Diner*, the television show *Homicide*, and bestselling books by George Pelecanos and Laura Lippman—Baltimore is America, and in *Charm City*, Bell brings its story to vivid life. First revealing how Baltimore received some of its nicknames—including “Charm City”—Bell sets off from his neighborhood of Cedarcroft and finds his way across the city's crossroads, joined periodically by a host of fellow Baltimoreans. Exploring Baltimore's prominent role in history (it was here that Washington planned the battle of Yorktown and Francis Scott Key witnessed the “bombs bursting in air”), Bell takes us to such notable spots as the Inner Harbor and Federal Hill, as well as many of the undiscovered corners that give Baltimore its distinctive character. All the while, Charm City sheds deserved light onto a sometimes overlooked, occasionally eccentric, but always charming place.

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Customer Reviews

MADISON SMARTT BELL has been a resident of Baltimore for more than two decades. The award-winning author of *All Souls Rising*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award,

Bell teaches at Goucher College, where he directs the Kratz Center for Creative Writing.

Greenmount Avenue
At four on a mid-October afternoon, I leave my house and start walking south. I live in Cedarcroft, a neighborhood tucked between two Baltimore arteries--Charles Street and York Road--and just inside the northern city limit. Most people who don't live here never heard of it--a feature I have always appreciated. It was all farmland, back in the day. At the close of the nineteenth century, the city of Baltimore was about an hour's ride from Cedarcroft by buggy or by the horse-drawn trolley cars that served the area since 1842--but, in truth, a world away. The farmers of this area were largely self-sufficient, and visited Baltimore, over the rolled stone roadways of York Road and Charles Street, for major purchases like furniture, farm machinery, and clothing. Today, the land lies just within the Baltimore city limits--just. Philip E. Lamb bought the first twenty-five acres of the farm he called Cedarcroft in 1885, adding another twenty acres shortly thereafter. The manor house of Cedarcroft Farm still stands a couple of blocks to my east--an enormous, rambling wooden affair with rooms added on rooms like cells of a honeycomb. The drive, which used to unfurl from the big house's portico a quarter mile east to York Road, is now another suburban-style street called Hollen Road. Lamb was a partner, twenty-five years after his first purchase in the area, in the Cedarcroft Land Company, created to subdivide the area. It was an early planned development, supervised by architect Edward L. Palmer. I live in a two-story stucco house, one of three in an almost identical row, built in the late 1920s, around the same time the sycamores that line these streets were planted, at my best guess. The trees are old now, tall enough to turn each street they shade into something stately, and shedding their leaves early in the drought that has parched the whole region the autumn of 2005. The neighborhood's changed, the last few years; a generational rollover is well under way. We've seen a lot of old folks die off or move to assisted living, new families with small children moving in. The shady streets are busy with joggers and strollers and dog walkers a good part of each day. There's more small-engine noise hereabout than there used to be, and my neighbor Jack Heyrman, who's been here much longer than I, has a theory that it goes with an influx of Republicans--that leaf blowers, for example, are a strictly Republican appurtenance. Call him paranoid if you will--but Maryland did, not too long ago, elect its first Republican governor since Spiro Agnew. The leaf-blowing demographic may be watching football now, for somehow it is unusually quiet this pleasant, sunny fall afternoon, with just enough crispness in the air for me to be wearing a light denim jacket. I walk through two quiet blocks of bungalows south of Lake Avenue and turn east in the shadow of the Northern Parkway ramp, where the muffled drone of traffic is almost as soothing as surf. Presently, the street I'm

walking on fizzes out, dead-ending at a small derelict park behind a bus stop shelter, which city road workers have fenced off to store their equipment in off hours. I come out into full sunlight, on the corner of Northern Parkway and York Road. Crossroads. Baltimore is, famously, a checkerboard town, a grid of small contiguous neighborhoods each with its own peculiar character and social constitution. Northwest of this corner is the neighborhood I just walked out of, mostly white, professional, upwardly mobile. Northeast, the other side of York Road, is Chinquapin Park--more modest, more ethnically mixed, with a social dynamic that's maybe more . . . sideways. Every which way. Or call it just impossible to pigeonhole. Southwest is Homeland, a prosperous enclave, notorious for the fastidiousness of its gardens and lawns. Southeast begins a series of lower-income neighborhoods--Govans, Woodbourne, Winston-Govans--with the population getting darker in skin tone the farther south you go. When I moved to Baltimore in the mid-eighties, I thought it would just be a stop on the way . . . if I thought about it at all. I'd just got married, and my wife was already living in Baltimore, and it seemed a more salubrious place for the two of us than the Brooklyn slum where I was living at the time. Now that we've been here twenty years, I can say that if I had chosen a place to settle instead of just drifting into one, it might have made sense to choose this place. I was born and raised on a farm in Middle Tennessee, and I went to college at Princeton, and moved to New York City for several years after that, and I came away from those experiences with an unconscious wish to live somewhere neither North nor South. Baltimore is a little of both. Some citizens have had a foothold here since John Smith first sailed up the Chesapeake Bay, and some migrated from Poland and Italy and Greece, and a lot of the white folks came from West Virginia, and black folks came from all over the Deep South--both of those last two groups to work in steel, when Baltimore had a steel industry. We're north of the Confederacy here, but south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Bang across the street is Jerry's Friendly Belvedere, a bar run by a Baltimore Sicilian family since 1978, when Pietro Rugolo bought the place from Jerry Dotterwhite. Dave Rugolo, Pietro's son, has a share in the family's house in the old country and spends a fair amount of time there, which gives him an international perspective, but he's also American to the bone, a sound patriot, and ready to talk politics with you across the bar any day of the week--including Saturdays, generally speaking, though for some reason he's not here today. When I once tried to call him a conservative, Dave pointed out that in fact he backs a good number of liberal causes; at the time, he is the kind of small businessman whom the American right is always claiming to serve and defend, and in fact he seems convinced that that's true. "My parents came here they had nothing," he's told me. His father had a third-grade education and "never dreamed in ten years he'd own his own business." Pietro Rugolo worked as a mechanic, and Dave's mother worked in a

sweatshop, and the family lived in a one-bedroom apartment until Dave was five years old (speaking Italian in the household, so that Dave is still fluent in that tongue). "When I came here the streets were paved with stone," Pietro Rugolo told his sons (Dave's brother, Nathaniel, runs another bar called the Crease in Towson). "Now they're paved with silver. For your generation, it should be gold." "You make that happen," Dave says now. He's got a decent amount of direct experience with class and economic stratification in other countries. "The beautiful thing about America," he says, "is that no one tells you you can't." Dave is a hardworking guy, I have seen, so I hope maybe he is getting a weekend off. Jerry's is catching a lull at this time of day on a weekend. Daytime and early evening it pulls a mostly blue-collar crowd--people come for the games on the TVs at either end of the long bar, or to eat when the time is right. There's a sit-down restaurant through the saloon doors in back of the bar, oysters in season and once in a while pit beef. Nothing too fancy, but the menu is concocted by the people who actually operate the place, instead of standardized at some corporate headquarters a couple of thousand miles away. Shellfish here is especially good; a guy named Francis brings it straight up the bay. In football season, there's a bull roast every Monday night, with two bushels of oysters and forty or fifty pounds of beef, which Dave and Pietro cook themselves, letting their kitchen staff go for the evening to protect the secret family recipe. By half time, the beef is always gone. Late nights, sometimes, the demo changes, and the place packs out with the college crowd, from Loyola and Notre Dame a little ways south, or maybe from Towson University farther up York Road. There are games for those customers down in the basement, but Jerry's never gets completely overrun by the college kids, "by design," as Dave puts it. There's long months of the year when the college crowd isn't even in town. "My bread and butter is my regulars," Dave says. "They're family, after you've been here so long." I'm not that much of a sports fan really (well, maybe during football play-offs), but Jerry's offers another show. If you sit in the L of the bar, you're looking across the counter into the liquor store component of the business, which is small but serious (and open on Sundays). It's hopping this afternoon, of course, since everybody has to stock up for Saturday night, and the clientele comes in all colors, shapes, and sizes. It is an excellent people parade, but I only watch it for the length of one beer, since I have still got quite a long ways to go. Outside, there's a swirl of traffic from Belvedere Square, a covered market with half a dozen high-end food stalls, anchored by a fancy Italian butcher and a spiffy new wine bar. The whole place went mysteriously vacant in the mid-1990s, until a Buddhist monk I knew as a tai chi instructor did a semisecret ceremony to propitiate the local deities--I know it sounds odd, but whatever it was it seems to have taken the curse off the place, and now Belvedere Square is booming again. Up the hill, the Senator Theatre is playing *In Her Shoes* (which features, among other delicacies, a dizzy

blond Cameron Diaz reading a poem by Elizabeth Bishop). The Senator's a gorgeous Art Deco building, with a lovely Palladian dome for its lobby, and the owners have staunchly kept it sailing as a single-screen theater, through waves of home video and multiplex construction, showing a mix of commercial pictures and art-house specials. It's a favorite venue to premiere movies with any local connections--for over a decade, most films by John Waters and Barry Levinson have opened with big festivities here, each commemorated with a flagstone of concrete out front, impressed with the key info and signatures in the style of the Hollywood Walk of Fame. There've been enough of these, I notice, that they are fixing to run out of room. Soon after Barry Levinson's Diner opened in Baltimore, a Pullman diner car materialized on a grassy vacant lot on the high berm across the street from the Senator. Some people said it was the diner from the movie, and some people said it wasn't. Most people expected that somebody would someday do something with it, but nobody ever did. It sat there, settling into its footprint, imperceptibly yielding to the forces of entropy until someone decided to reduce its capacity as an attractive nuisance by surrounding it with a chain-link fence . . . and then, one day, it was gone. A bit wistfully, I pass, on the next block, the storefront where Master Lee's tae kwon do school used to be. I finally earned my black belt there around 1990, after twenty years or so of intermittent study. I am more persevering than talented as a martial-arts student, it appears. Another student there was an elderly black man named Hunter, who I believed possessed the Rosicrucian secret to the perfect gumbo, which I had eaten once, when I was about nine years old, in a little backwater restaurant on the Mississippi Gulf coast called Mary's Kitchen, where the gumbo was thick black--the color and consistency of roofing tar, but possibly the best thing I have ever eaten, certainly the best gumbo I have ever eaten, and ever since I had been in slow but passionate pursuit of the right way to make a gumbo black and flavorful like that, and I had absorbed a lot of esoterica about okra, file powder, and how to make a roux; I had made and consumed some very good gumbos, but the ultimate Heart of Gumbo Darkness seemed always to slip beyond my grasp. Well, one afternoon as we were changing after practice, Hunter happened to mention that a lot of his family were coming from Louisiana to visit him for Thanksgiving, which was just a few days away . . . and that he was planning to make a big gumbo for them all. I asked him questions, and he was forthcoming--he didn't seem to withhold anything about his gumbo strategy, yet most of his moves were already known to me, except . . .". . . and then, I put in the obeah seasoning . . .," Hunter explained. My eyes lit up. My heart leaped. I had never before heard of obeah seasoning. Surely, the Gumbo Grail was almost in my hand. Tell me, Hunter, I implored, what exactly goes into that obeah seasoning. Hunter gave me a funny look. "It's just obeah seasoning." Okay, it wasn't going to come that easy. "Yes, but what goes in the obeah

seasoning?" Hunter looked at me like I was crazy. "It's just regular obeh seasoning." We took this around a couple more times until we both became discontented and frustrated, then finally I was made to understand (now, Hunter's Louisiana accent was perhaps no thicker than my Tennessee, but it was different anyway) that what he was saying was Old Bay Seasoning, a substance more common in Baltimore than salt. Well, never mind . . . Toward the top of the rise from the Senator is Govans Presbyterian Church, a gray stone pile, and venerable, locked down for Saturday night. The orange afternoon sunlight comes slanting through the pale old stones that have been settling in the wide graveyard behind the church for more than a century, some of them. The church itself has been standing there since 1844, and many grave markers go back to the mid-nineteenth century. Govans itself has been there much longer; it was at first a crossroads settlement when York Road was an Indian trail, and takes its name from William Govane, a Scot who acquired the tract of land from Frederick Calvert, Lord Baltimore, in the middle of the eighteenth century. York Road became a turnpike for carriage of produce and goods back and forth from the Port of Baltimore (which is more or less where I'm headed now) and the farms like Lamb's estate that rolled off to the north, back in those days, all the way into Pennsylvania. Finally, in 1818, the expansion of Baltimore City gobbled up old Govanstowne, and within a few years the pace of the development had turned the old turnpike into what was then called a "gasoline alley," a description that still works pretty well today.

nice wander through my beloved hometown. Author is great on the history of the city but misses some of the cultural nuance and the shocks of the 1960s and 1970s which added to the city's unique charm.

Not only gives you some creative ways to view the neighborhood but it also gives you some interesting background and history into Baltimore that I'm not sure you'd find elsewhere. I have shared with my guests and they've enjoyed it as well!

Hey, I am not only a Baltimorian, my doctor said I am a Baltimoron, same as he. We were crazy enough to live right in the heart of the City! I lived there 58 years, and to me it is home. I loved every word. When he wrote about Martick's...well, I loved that crazy place, one of the best and little known eateries in Baltimore...Needless to say I devoured the book as eagerly as I devoured the food at Martick's and the Broadway Market. This author was a terrific writer, and my Dad, was a printer who, before having his own printshop, worked at both the Sun and the News American. 'An Old Fell's Pointer...Norma Coffinl would suggest any Marylander would enjoy "Charm City".

Read this if you'd like a behind the scenes view of a highly educated psychologist/anthropologist wanna-be as they "walk" through the city and attempt to make up stories for population that rely heavily on stereotype. I was hoping this would be an interesting historical book with interesting bits of local flavor.

I love Baltimore. I've been in the city many times and I would say it's one of America's most interesting places. I've been a fan of Madison Smart Bell for years. This may be the 12th book written by him that I've read. I expected this to be a winning combination. Strangely it isn't. This is not a bad book. I must admit I expected more. Bell really doesn't have anything interesting to say about Baltimore. Or to put it another way, he's already said it in his novel *Ten Indians*. If Bell and Baltimore interest you, you'll want to read this book, but if only one of the two catches your interest, I'd pass.

As a native Marylander (Frederick) and Johns Hopkins alumnus, I have many pleasant memories of lovely old Baltimore. I love the city, because I can observe its admirable qualities from a distance, much like the author of this book does. This book is a light read, but Bell knows the heart of the city well. The reader really gets the feeling of the old neighborhoods and their traditions, mostly due to the author's keen eye and flowing narrative style. He reminds me a bit of Andrei Codrescu in *New Orleans*. Baltimore has a palpable eccentricity that is very much like New Orleans, and it is one of our most culturally rich cities. Not since the acerbic narrative of Mencken has a writer been able to capture the Baltimore spirit. Bell is partially successful. Bell's interest in architecture becomes obvious almost immediately, and this is entirely appropriate considering the marvelous ensemble of historic buildings in Baltimore. The author's selection of neighborhoods to explore is necessarily selective, for brevity and for safety. Charm City isn't the most hospitable place in the United States, but it reveals a proud history and a truly beautiful cityscape for one willing to dig around a bit. Bell has done just that. As the most under-appreciated city in our great country, the author brings an exceptionally difficult place to our attention. Trust your noodly master, Hon. I do.

Mr. Bell has captured the atmosphere of Baltimore, especially its unique combination of history and irreverence. When I was a kid (this goes back a few decades) one way people described Baltimore was as "the biggest small town in the world." This book captures the essence of that. Though Mr. Bell and his walking companions wander miles and miles they never seem far from the core of the place. This book is too much fun for any Baltimore reader to pass up.

I read the book, but it is not one I wanted to keep. Maybe someone who knows all the areas whether the author walked would feel differently

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