

The Devil in the White City
Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America
by Erik Larson

About the Book

Bringing Chicago circa 1893 to vivid life, Erik Larson's spellbinding bestseller intertwines the true tale of two men — the brilliant architect behind the legendary 1893 World's Fair, striving to secure America's place in the world; and the cunning serial killer who used the fair to lure his victims to their death. Combining meticulous research with nail-biting storytelling, Erik Larson has crafted a narrative with all the wonder of newly discovered history and the thrills of the best fiction.

Praise for the Book

“As absorbing a piece of popular history as one will ever hope to find.”

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“A dynamic, enveloping book. . . . Relentlessly fuses history and entertainment to give this nonfiction book the dramatic effect of a novel. . . . It doesn't hurt that this truth is stranger than fiction.”

— *The New York Times*

“So good, you find yourself asking how you could not know this already.”

— *Esquire*

“Another successful exploration of American history. . . . Larson skillfully balances the grisly details with the far-reaching implications of the World's Fair.”

— *USA Today*

“Engrossing . . . exceedingly well documented . . . utterly fascinating.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

“Paints a dazzling picture of the Gilded Age and prefigures the American century to come.”

— *Entertainment Weekly*

“A wonderfully unexpected book. . . . Larson is a historian . . . with a novelist's soul.”

— *Chicago Sun-Times*

Courtesy of Vintage

About the Author

Erik Larson

1954-

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Birth Place: Brooklyn, New York

Personal Information: Born January 1, 1954, in Brooklyn, NY; married; wife's name Christine (a doctor); children: three daughters.

Education: University of Pennsylvania, B.A., 1976; Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, M.S., 1978.

Addresses: Home: Seattle, WA. Agent: David Black, David Black Literary Agency, 156 Fifth Ave., Suite 608, New York, NY 10010-7002.

Career: Author, journalist, and teacher. *Time*, New York City, senior writer. Previously feature writer, *Wall Street Journal*; Has taught nonfiction writing San Francisco State University, Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and University of Oregon; lecturer.

Awards: Nominated for the National Book Award for nonfiction, 2003, and Edgar Allan Poe Award, 2004, both for *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair that Changed America*.

WRITINGS

- *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities*, Holt (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis*, Crown (New York, NY), 1994, reprinted as *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun*, Vintage (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History*, Crown (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, Crown (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Thunderstruck*, Crown (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to publications, including *Atlantic* and *Harper's*.

Media Adaptations: *Isaac's Storm*, abridged sound recording, narrated by Edward Herrman, Random House, 1999; research for *The Naked Consumer* became the subject of NOVA documentary, *We Know Where You Live*, broadcast on PBS.

“Sidelights”

Erik Larson is a journalist and author. His *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities* is an investigation of how American consumers have become the victims of consumer espionage, wherein the details of their lives have become readily accessible to marketers who use such details to choose their targets. Larson tells how data can be gleaned from

the U.S. Census Bureau, communications services, banks, medical records, deeds, lists, drivers' licenses, and electronic and human spies. With these facts, marketers create profiles based on income, credit, health, status, ethnicity, and spending habits. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that the data "then serves as the indispensable basis for insidious commercial appeals that exploit consumers' fears, vanity, and greed." Alexander Star wrote in *New Republic* that Larson's "most arresting pages detail the development and possible convergence of two devices — the 'passive audience meter' and the supermarket scanner. . . . Larson expects the passive meter to become a standard feature of the Nielsen household within a few years. Unlike the old Nielsen box, the meter can break down audience preferences by the second." Larson objects to the Universal Product Code, or bar code, that appears on nearly everything consumers buy. He writes that marketing companies match up what viewers watch on television with what they buy and plan advertising accordingly. Larson shows how easily privacy abuse and manipulation are carried out by advertising agencies. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor opined that Larson "offers strong ammunition against an enemy so insidious that most people don't even know it's there."

John Carroll wrote in *Technology Review* that "marketers know when we're expecting a baby, when we've purchased a house, when we've bought the farm. Like youngsters with their stacks of trading cards, businesses flip us and swap us and bundle us into neat little piles." Carroll said that "by fostering what Larson calls the Culture of the Second Guess, marketers have come to concentrate their efforts on refining their selling techniques rather than their products. Ironically, they may have become too smart for their own good. Because of their targeted promotions and hell-bent couponing, companies have in effect reduced brand loyalty and blurred product distinctions. Relative performance has been overshadowed by relative price. Larson contends that this game reduces creativity in the marketplace. . . . As a result, today's manufacturers and marketers substitute pandering and short-term focus for the inspiration of new ideas."

Larson wrote a series about the gun culture in America for the *Wall Street Journal* and studied the subject in his book, *Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis*, reprinted as *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun*. His interest in the subject began in 1980 when his Maryland neighborhood experienced a series of drive-by shootings. He wanted to find out how kids were getting guns, and began with a crime that occurred in 1988, when sixteen-year-old Nicholas Elliot took a Cobray M-11/9 to his Virginia Beach school, where he killed one teacher, injured another, and terrorized students. The semi-automatic handgun jammed, preventing Elliot from inflicting further injury. "Larson's journey discloses a commercial system shot through with venality, social irresponsibility, and ingrained bad habits of skirting legality," wrote Ray Olson in *Booklist*.

After he found that the gun had been purchased by Elliot's uncle at a gun show, Larson applied for and easily obtained a federal gun dealer's license. *Playboy* reviewer Digby Diehl wrote that "as a licensed dealer, Larson also became privy to the secret world of gun sales. His thorough investigative report is the most shocking documentation yet of America's gun epidemic, which includes more than 200 million weapons." Larson proposes a five-part omnibus law called the Life and Liberty Preservation Act, which he says would close most of the loopholes in current legislation. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *Lethal Passage* a "valiant, innovative, effective, and timely study." An *Economist* contributor said "Mr. Larson's purpose is to expose, in plain

unvarnished prose, the awful laxity of America's gun industry. He does it as well as it could and should be done."

Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History is Larson's study of the greatest natural disaster in United States history, the storm that hit Galveston, Texas, on September 8, 1900, resulting in the loss of between 6,000 and 8,000 lives. *Booklist* reviewer Gilbert Taylor said that "although the subject is grim, this telling is a deftly told fable of folly and fate." Larson focuses on the hurricane and on Isaac Cline, chief of the U.S. Weather Bureau's Galveston station, who said in 1891 that "the opinion . . . that Galveston will at some time be seriously damaged by some such disturbance, is simply an absurd delusion." *New York Times Book Review* contributor W. Jeffrey Bolster noted that the Weather Bureau "took its cues from its chief, Willis L. Moore, whose insecurity matched his pomposity. Moore wanted his staff to look confident, soothing and precise; he forbade use of alarming words like 'hurricane' unless authorized from Washington. His pettiness trumped his judgment when, at the peak of the 1900 hurricane season, he halted all telegraphed weather communications from Cuba. He would not admit that men he regarded as excitable Latins might have an edge on his Weather Bureau, even though Havana's Belen Observatory had been systematically studying hurricanes for thirty years."

A Cuban meteorologist predicted that the hurricane would hit central Texas, but Cline and Moore said it would move up the Atlantic coast. "Erik Larson is a very skilled storyteller," wrote Steve Horstmeyer and Jack Williams in *Weatherwise*, "and the images his writing creates are so vivid the reader will come as close to experiencing this historic storm as is possible 100 years after the fact." When the storm hit with gusts of 200 miles an hour, it destroyed one third of the city. A tidal wave decimated Fort Jacinto and carried a steamship two miles inland. A month after it was over, corpses were still being recovered from the debris and burned on pyres. "Larson expertly captures the power of the storm itself and the ironic, often catastrophic consequences of the unpredictable intersection of natural force and human choice," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. *Library Journal* reviewer Trisha Stevenson called *Isaac's Storm* an "unforgettable work."

While in the early stages of research for *Isaac's Storm*, Larson came across mentions of an obscure, late-nineteenth-century serial killer named Henry H. Holmes. Although Larson did not want to write a crime story at the time, he came back to the subject for *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, which received a National Book Award nomination in 2003. What changed Larson's mind about taking on Holmes's story was the gradual realization that the psychopathic killer operated in striking parallel to architect Daniel Burnham, who was struggling to complete construction for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. While Burnham fought tight budgets, equipment failure, and political obstacles to organize the ultimately successful "White City," Holmes built the nearby Fair Hotel that housed inescapable rooms, hidden chutes, and a crematorium in which at least nine and possibly 200 young women were murdered. Larson alternates between the two men's stories: "I couldn't really tell one . . . without telling the other," he told Alden Mudge in a *Bookpage* interview. Mudge deemed this "frankly, a brilliant decision." Writing in *World and I*, Randy Boyagoda, extolled Larson's presentation of a "rich feast of details related to the fair." In his

Newsweek review, Malcolm Jones criticized Larson for making up some of the more compelling details about Holmes's killings and placing higher priority on telling an exciting tale than keeping to hard facts. Nonetheless, Jones pronounced *The Devil in the White City* "enchanting."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, October 15, 1992, Mary Carroll, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 387; January 15, 1994, Ray Olson, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 875; June 1, 1999, Gilbert Taylor, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 1739; February 15, 2003, review of *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, p. 1022.
- *Bookpage*, February 2003, Alden Mudge, "The Devil is in the Details," interview with Erik Larson.
- *Business Week*, March 14, 1994, Paul Magnusson, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 16.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, August 19, 1999, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 21.
- *Dallas Morning News*, February 24, 2003, Chris Tucker, review of *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair that Changed America*.
- *Economist*, April 30, 1994, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 100.
- *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, spring, 1994, Mary J. Culnan, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 175.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 1992, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 1109; February 1, 1994, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 119; July 1, 1999, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 1022; November 15, 2002, review of *The Devil in the White City*, p. 1676.
- *Kliatt*, May, 1995, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 32.
- *Library Journal*, October 1, 1992, Sue McKimm, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 100; February 15, 1994, Jim Burns, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 174; July, 1999, Trisha Stevenson, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 127.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, February 20, 1994, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 9; March 13, 1994, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 2.
- *New Republic*, February 15, 1993, Alexander Star, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 42.
- *Newsweek*, February 10, 2003, Malcolm Jones, "Back to the Future: The Columbian Exposition of 1893 — Complete with a Mass Murderer — Foretold the Fate of American Cities," p. 67.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 24, 1993, Scott Huler, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 16; March 20, 1994, Clifford Krauss, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 11; February 5, 1995, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 28; September 12, 1999, W. Jeffrey Bolster, "Wall of Water," p. 46.
- *Playboy*, April, 1994, Digby Diehl, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 32; September, 1999, Joshua Green, "Stormy Weather," p. 30.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 17, 1992, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 481; November 22, 1993, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 61; January 31, 1994, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 68; December 12, 1994, review of *Lethal Passage*, p. 60; June 14, 1999, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 56; December 16, 2002, review of *The Devil in the White City*, p. 57.

- *Technology Review*, July, 1993, John Carroll, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 68.
- *Time*, July 24, 1995, "To Our Readers," p. 4.
- *Washington Post Book World*, March 13, 1994, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 12; September 5, 1999, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 6; September 19, 1999, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 1.
- *Weatherwise*, September, 1999, Steve Horstmeyer, Jack Williams, review of *Isaac's Storm*, p. 56.
- *Whole Earth Review*, winter, 1994, review of *The Naked Consumer*, p. 97.
- *World and I*, March 2004, Randy Boyagoda, "City of Gods and Monsters," p. 221.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q. What drew you to this story?

Erik Larson: I first came across the killer Dr. H. H. Holmes during the early phase of my search for *Isaac's Storm*. I found his story immediately compelling, but only when I began reading about the glories of the World's Columbian Exposition did the story take on the larger resonance that I look for in a book. Taken together, the stories of how Daniel Burnham built the fair and how Dr. Holmes used it for murder formed an entirety that was far greater than the story of either man alone would have been. I found it extraordinary that during this period of nearly miraculous creativity there should also exist a serial killer of such appetite and industry. The juxtaposition of the architect and the murderer seemed to open a window on the forces shaping the American soul at the dawn of the 20th century. The fair drew so many of history's brightest lights, from Buffalo Bill to Susan B. Anthony, that doing my research was like crashing a very classy Gilded Age party.

Q. *The Devil in the White City* is rich with detail. How did you do your research?

EL: First I should say that I always work alone. No researchers, no assistants. I need first-hand contact with my sources — for example, I found it infinitely valuable to be able to touch the original postcards on which Patrick Prendergast revealed his insane delusion, one that would bring the fair to such a tragic end. The obvious pressure he placed on his pencil as he wrote brought his part of the story vividly to life. I love a good archive. Call me boring, but to me every book is a detective story, every archive a misty alley full of intrigue and desire. Tracking Daniel Burnham was relatively straightforward, as Chicago has several marvelous archives full of fair material; tracking Holmes proved far more difficult. I pieced his story together from bits of evidence in far-flung places, much as a prosecuting attorney forges an iron-clad case out of bits of forensic evidence. One high point was coming across the actual death decree for Holmes in the files of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, complete with its ribbon and gold seal. Another occurred when I paid a visit to Holy Cross Cemetery outside Philadelphia and saw the original entry for Holmes's plot in the cemetery's death registry. As I stepped onto the grass in the vicinity of his unmarked grave, under dark clouds, a thunder-clap boomed through the sky. It was a little too spooky, actually, given the Holmes curse. I left soon afterward.

Q. Why was the Columbian Exposition (the Chicago World's Fair of 1893) so important to our country at the time?

EL: In the Gilded Age, America was a prideful place, aware of its growing strength as a world power. The fair became an expression of that pride, and a vehicle for redressing the nation's earlier humiliation at the hands of the French at the Exposition Universel of 1889, which gave Paris the Eiffel Tower and showed off France's self-proclaimed superiority in art, manufacturing, science, and engineering. The creators of the Chicago fair resolved from the start that no matter what the cost, they would build a fair bigger and more glamorous than the Paris exposition. That

they succeeded, against amazing odds, is one of American history's great forgotten miracles. But the fair also was Chicago's redemption. The city had long felt itself to be lacking the refinement of New York — a condition New York flogged at every opportunity. Part of what drove Daniel Burnham to build so grand a fair was his own, and Chicago's, yearning to show the world that the city could do much more than butcher cattle and hogs.

Q. What lasting impact did this fair have on Chicago and on America?

EL: In the hands of Daniel Burnham, the fair became a dream city, so lovely it was immediately nicknamed the White City. It showed how beautiful and safe and clean a city could be, and in so doing caused millions of Americans to reevaluate the aesthetics of their own local worlds. Suddenly every municipality wanted a building that evoked the miracle of the White City — much to the dismay of architect Louis Sullivan, who believed the fair had killed an emerging, uniquely American brand of architecture. That the fair did cause a shift back to classical styles is beyond argument, but in the end this shift opened the national psyche to the power of architecture and in so doing may well have paved the way for the work of the greatest 20th century architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Because of Burnham's success in building the White City, many cities, including Cleveland, Washington, Manila, San Francisco, and Chicago, asked him to create citywide plans. One result is Chicago's open, appealing lakefront and its glorious "Miracle Mile." It was Burnham, by the way, who persuaded a railroad tycoon to remove his tracks and depot from the heart of what is now the lovely unobstructed expanse of grass and reflecting pools that stretches from the U.S. Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. His fame gave him important later commissions, such as the Flatiron Building in New York and Washington's Union Station.

Q. Why do you find Daniel Burnham and Dr. H. H. Holmes so fascinating?

EL: I find each compelling in his own right, but especially compelling when taken together as cultural antipodes that each embodied some element of the forces then propelling America toward the 20th century. Burnham designed buildings that previously had never been attempted—with his partner John Root, his firm built the first structure ever to be called a skyscraper, despite soil conditions that should have made the task impossible. I find it nothing short of miraculous that he was able to lead the fair to completion in so short a time, against obstacles that would have stymied a lesser man. Meanwhile, here was Holmes, himself something of an architect, building a hotel that was a parody of everything architects held dear — yet that in its own way was equally, if darkly, miraculous: a building designed for murder. I found it so marvelously strange that both these men should be operating at the same time in history, within blocks of each other, both creating powerful legacies, one of brilliance and energy, the other of sorrow and darkness. What better metaphor for the forces that would shape the 20th century into a time of monumental technical achievement and unfathomable evil?

Courtesy of Random House

Discussion Questions

1. In the note “Evils Imminent,” Erik Larson writes “Beneath the gore and smoke and loam, this book is about the evanescence of life, and why some men choose to fill their brief allotment of time engaging the impossible, others in the manufacture of sorrow” [xi]. What does the book reveal about “the ineluctable conflict between good and evil”? What is the essential difference between men like Daniel Burnham and Henry H. Holmes? Are they alike in any way?
2. At the end of *The Devil in the White City*, in Notes and Sources, Larson writes “The thing that entranced me about Chicago in the Gilded Age was the city’s willingness to take on the impossible in the name of civic honor, a concept so removed from the modern psyche that two wise readers of early drafts of this book wondered why Chicago was so avid to win the world’s fair in the first place” [p. 393]. What motives, in addition to “civic honor,” drove Chicago to build the Fair? In what ways might the desire to “out-Eiffel Eiffel” and to show New York that Chicago was more than a meat-packing backwater be seen as problematic?
3. The White City is repeatedly referred to as a dream. The young poet Edgar Lee Masters called the Court of Honor “an inexhaustible dream of beauty” [p. 252]; Dora Root wrote “I think I should never willingly cease drifting in that dreamland” [p. 253]; Theodore Dreiser said he had been swept “into a dream from which I did not recover for months” [p. 306]; and columnist Teresa Dean found it “cruel . . . to let us dream and drift through heaven for six months, and then to take it out of our lives” [p. 335]. What accounts for the dreamlike quality of the White City? What are the positive and negative aspects of this dream?
4. In what ways does the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 change America? What lasting inventions and ideas did it introduce into American culture? What important figures were critically influenced by the Fair?
5. At the end of the book, Larson suggests that “Exactly what motivated Holmes may never be known” [p. 395]. What possible motives are exposed in *The Devil in the White City*? Why is it important to try to understand the motives of a person like Holmes?
6. After the Fair ended, Ray Stannard Baker noted “What a human downfall after the magnificence and prodigality of the World’s Fair which has so recently closed its doors! Heights of splendor, pride, exaltation in one month: depths of wretchedness, suffering, hunger, cold, in the next” [p. 334]. What is the relationship between the opulence and grandeur of the Fair and the poverty and degradation that surrounded it? In what ways does the Fair bring into focus the extreme contrasts of the Gilded Age? What narrative techniques does Larson use to create suspense in the book? How does he end sections and chapters of the book in a manner that makes the reader anxious to find out what happens next?

7. Larson writes, “The juxtaposition of pride and unfathomed evil struck me as offering powerful insights into the nature of men and their ambitions” [p. 393]. What such insights does the book offer? What more recent stories of pride, ambition, and evil parallel those described in *The Devil in the White City*?
8. What does *The Devil in the White City* add to our knowledge about Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham? What are the most admirable traits of these two men? What are their most important aesthetic principles?
9. In his speech before his wheel took on its first passengers, George Ferris “happily assured the audience that the man condemned for having ‘wheels in his head’ had gotten them out of his head and into the heart of the Midway Plaisance” [p. 279]. In what way is the entire Fair an example of the power of human ingenuity, of the ability to realize the dreams of imagination?
10. How was Holmes able to exert such power over his victims? What weaknesses did he prey upon? Why wasn’t he caught earlier? In what ways does his story “illustrate the end of the century” [p. 370] as the Chicago Times-Herald wrote?
11. What satisfaction can be derived from a nonfiction book like *The Devil in the White City* that cannot be found in novels? In what ways is the book like a novel?
12. In describing the collapse of the roof of Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building, Larson writes “In a great blur of snow and silvery glass the building’s roof — that marvel of late nineteenth-century hubris, enclosing the greatest volume of unobstructed space in history — collapsed to the floor below” [p. 196–97]. Was the entire Fair, in its extravagant size and cost, an exhibition of arrogance? Do such creative acts automatically engender a darker, destructive parallel? Can Holmes be seen as the natural darker side of the Fair’s glory?
13. What is the total picture of late nineteenth-century America that emerges from *The Devil in the White City*? How is that time both like and unlike contemporary America? What are the most significant differences? In what ways does that time mirror the present?

Courtesy of Vintage