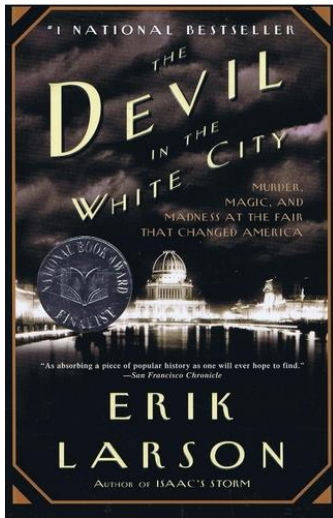


Devil in the White City

By Erik Larson



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Two men, each handsome and unusually adept at his chosen work, embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized America's rush toward the twentieth century. The architect was Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fair's brilliant director of works and the builder of many of the country's most important structures, including the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C.

The murderer was Henry H. Holmes, a young doctor who, in a malign parody of the White City, built his "World's Fair Hotel" just west of the fairgrounds—a torture palace complete with dissection table, gas chamber, and 3,000-degree crematorium. Burnham overcame tremendous obstacles and tragedies as he organized the talents of Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles McKim, Louis Sullivan, and others to transform swampy Jackson Park into the White City, while Holmes used the attraction of the great fair and his own satanic charms to lure scores of young women to their deaths. What makes the story all the more chilling is that Holmes really lived, walking the grounds of that dream city by the lake."

The Devil in the White City draws the reader into a time of magic and majesty, made all the more appealing by a supporting cast of real-life characters, including Buffalo Bill, Theodore Dreiser, Susan B. Anthony, Thomas Edison, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, and others. In this book the smoke, romance, and mystery of the Gilded Age come alive as never before. *(From the publisher.)*

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?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

Interview with Erik Larson

Random House

What drew you to this story?

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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

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.

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

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?