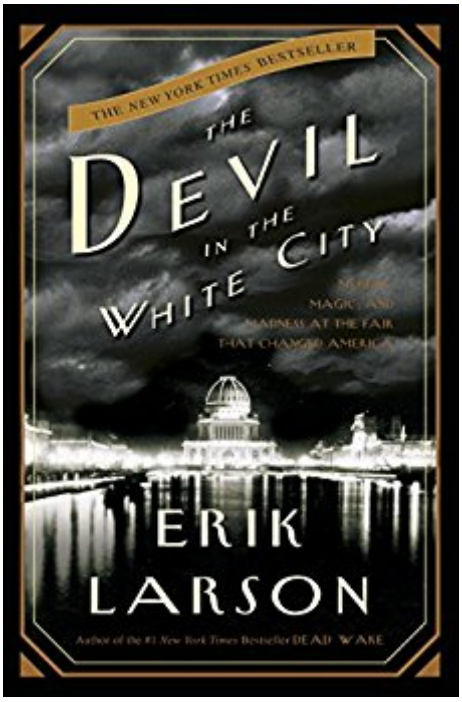
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The Devil In The White City: A Saga Of Magic And Murder At The Fair That Changed America



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Synopsis

In The Devil in the White City,Ã Â the smoke, romance, and mystery of the Gilded Age come alive as never before.Two men, each handsome and unusually adept at his chosen work, embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized AmericaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s rush toward the twentieth century. The architect was Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fairÃ¢â ¬â„¢s brilliant director of works and the builder of many of the countryÃ¢â ¬â„¢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 Ã¢â ¬Å“WorldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Fair HotelÃ¢â ¬Â• just west of the fairgroundsÃ¢â ¬â •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.Ã Â Erik LarsonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s gifts as a storyteller are magnificently displayed in this rich narrative of the master builder, the killer, and the great fair that obsessed them both. To find out more about this book, go to http://www.DevilInTheWhiteCity.com.

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Customer Reviews

Come for the serial killer, stay for the fair.I will be absolutely honest and admit that I purchased the book because I was interested in the weird story of H.H.Holmes, American con-man, psychopath and serial killer. In fact, I will add to my confession, and shame, by saying that my interest was sparked by watching the episode of Timeless - a series unlikely to be renewed - where our trio of intrepid time-travelers goes back to the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and have a misadventure in the "murder castle." I've never read anything by Erik Larsen before, but I know that he has a good number of books on the history section shelves and IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve seen this book in passing for years.I listened to this as an audiobook, and my initial reaction was that there was an awful lot about the 1893 WorldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Fair, especially the architecture of the WorldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Fair, than I was expecting or interested in. Frankly, my initial reaction was that all the detail about the planning of the Fair was getting in the way of the interesting bits about H.H. Holmes.However, about half-way through the book, I found my interest shifting as I was sucked into the world of the Fair and the strangeness of the world right on the cusp of becoming the world we know, with lights and Cracker Jacks and Ferris wheels, but still possessing the instincts and customs of a more genteel and trusting age. I found that people like Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham were becoming my heroes.Larsen structures his book as alternating narratives. One narrative follows the twisted path of Holmes; the other follows the life of the fair. There is no doubt that the HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ narrative starts out in the lead because of the natural human interest in evil, and Holmes was evil. Larsen describes Holmes as AmericaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s first serial killer in an age when the language did not have the term ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“serial killerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• to describe Holmes. Holmes was born Herman Webster Mudgett in 1861, studied medicine, married and abandoned his first wife, and, then, took the test for a pharmacy license under the name of H.H. Holmes and made his way to Chicago. In Chicago, he bought a pharmacy from a widow, who he probably conned, married a second wife,

deposited the wife and his child in a suburb of Chicago, and then came up with the idea of transforming land he had purchased into a hotel in time for the upcoming Fair.Listening to the HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ arc, two thoughts come to mind: first, he was psychopathic and, second, he didnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t seem to understand how ridiculous his ideas were. For example, after scamming a brother in law, his plan to avoid discovery was to push the brother in law off of a roof. Who today would think such a thing would not be immediately seen for what it was? Likewise, Holmes built a hotel with secret rooms and gas lines to those rooms so that he could gas patrons, kill them and rob them. Women were constantly disappearing from his hotel, leaving their things behind. When the widow he bought his first pharmacy from simply disappeared, Holmes explained that she was visiting California. He courted and wed multiple wives simultaneously. His method for making bodies disappear was to have the bodies rendered into skeletons and then he would sell the skeletons to medical colleges.Today, who could be so naive as to expect that any of this would not be discovered or noticed?And that is partly the point. The era was a moment of transition. In the small towns that most people had lived in prior to the 1890s, everyone was under everyoneÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s elseÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s supervision. In Chicago, however, the rules changed. People were anonymous and alone in a crowd. People were easy to lose in a world without phones or extensive police agencies. If someone went to California, it would take more than idle curiosity to locate them. It was a psychopathÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s utopia.Also, the casualness of death becomes apparent in LarsenÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s book. For example, BurnhamÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s partner plunges into the October night and dies of pneumonia within a week. Larsen also describes how the sister of one of HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ victims suddenly took sick and died within a week. She was probably poisoned, but in that age it was not hard to believe that a healthy woman in her twenties could die of a sickness so quickly. I was working on a train accident fatality lawsuit during the time I listened to this book, so this passage had some significance to me:// Anonymous death came early and often. Each of the thousand trains that entered and left the city did so at grade level. You could step from a curb and be killed by the Chicago Limited. Every day on average two people were destroyed at the cityÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s rail crossings. Their injuries were grotesque. Pedestrians retrieved severed heads. There were other hazards. Streetcars fell from drawbridges. Horses bolted and dragged carriages into crowds. Fires took a dozen lives a day. In describing the fire dead, the term the newspapers most liked to use was ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“roasted.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•//In Fresno County where I live, which is a mostly rural county with a large urban population, there are only two unprotected crossings ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ without signals ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ in the entire county. The three people killed in this one accident

was probably higher than the annual average for the last fifty years. Violent death was simply more common in the past.On the other hand, Larsen presents the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“White CityÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• of the Fair as the world that was dawning. The Fair brought millions of visitors to a location with lights and cultural diversity and sanitation and police protection. The idea that the architects are the heroes of the book seems strange since architects rarely play the role of hero, but Larsen manages to invest tension throughout the story arc about the Fair. Thus, there is tension in whether the architects will get the Fair built in time, and then there is tension about whether the Fair will turn a profit in the face of the economic depression gripping the country. There is also the heroism of George Washington Gale Ferris and his eccentric idea of building a huge wheel that would carry ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Pullman Car-sizedÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• boxes for passengers, although the most heroic act of the book, I thought, was the willingness of Mrs. Ferris to ride the thing on its maiden voyage as a rain of extra bolts cascaded down from the structure.I came to know and develop a liking for Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed New YorkÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Central Park. Burnham is forgotten today but contributed to many American cities.My first term paper in history was one I wrote as a Junior in High School about Eugene V. Debbs and the Pullman Strike of 1894, so it was something of a home-coming for me to read about the events that were occurring just before that strike, and to think that Debs and Darrow probably visited the Fair, maybe they ran across Holmes and Burnham. It occurs to me now that the Pullman Strike of 1894 was in 1894 because the closing of the Fair in 1893 exacerbated the economic crisis. Larsen writes:// Ten thousand construction workers also left the fairÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s employ and returned to a world without jobs, already crowded with unemployed men. Once the fair closed, many thousands more would join them on ChicagoÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s streets. The threat of violence was as palpable as the deepening cold of autumn. Mayor Harrison was sympathetic and did what he could. He hired thousands of men to clean streets and ordered police stations opened at night for men seeking a place to sleep. ChicagoÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Commercial and Financial Chronicle reported, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Never before has there been such a sudden and striking cessation of industrial activity.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Pig iron production fell by half, and new rail construction shrank almost to nothing. Demand for railcars to carry visitors to the exposition had spared the Pullman Works, but by the end of the fair George Pullman too began cutting wages and workers. He did not, however, reduce the rents in his company town. The White City had drawn men and protected them; the Black City now welcomed them back, on the eve of winter, with filth, starvation, and violence.//HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ story closes out with HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ finally getting tripped up in an insurance swindle and an intrepid Pinkerton detective following the clues to prove

that Holmes was a child-killer among his other sins. In that way, HolmesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ story arc concludes as a true crime story about a true crime story.Although I enjoyed and learned from this book, I would have to pick a nit with the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“fictionalizationÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• of some of the narrative. Larsen tells us that everything in his book is supported by documentary evidence, but he also acknowledges that he has made reasonable inferences about what happened at times. I think his inferences are reasonable, and I credit him for acknowledging what he has done, but I think that there are times when he offers his insights into what various people were thinking or feeling that he has gone too far and stepped outside of history proper into fiction. Obviously, this book is intended for the mass market and must keep reader interest. Also, we are a long way into non-fiction novels at this point, but there are moments when I as a history reader was woken up by Larsen describing what a character felt (when I would probably never have objected to the same information being couched as something the person ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“might have thought,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• so if you interpolate those words, the book is in the genre of history.)In sum, donÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t be confused; this is not a true crime story. It is a sociological history/novel about a particular time in American history. Your interest in this book will vary depending on whether you are buying it as ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“true crimeÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• or as history.

I probably should have read the description a little more closely. I thought this book would cover the World's Fair and H.H. Holmes in equal amounts. It does not. I will admit, the author thoroughly researched both topics, but it was clear to me his focus was on the architecture of the World's Fair. He is very detailed, but sometime it was almost too much detail. I am admittedly more interested in H.H. Holmes than architecture so that has something to do with my review.If you are reading this because you want to hear about H.H. Holmes, you may want to read a different book. However, if you are open to learning about the World's Fair, architecture, or Chicago history, this is worth the read.

Erik Larson has produced a prodigy of sentiment and documentation, an invaluable non-fiction testimony to the driving heart of the United States, against practically insurmountable odds of rivalry, envy, greed, talent and vision, the human qualities that in another context might defeat any project. What is a project but teamwork? But there must be a team and its components must be disposed to a common goal. The Columbia Fair of Chicago of 1893 was an intangible, it was a flight to the moon, and simply not possible, yet it was miraculously accomplished, despite crippling delays,

backbiting, financial obstacles, and was a towering success. Twenty-six million people saw it, and had it gotten off the ground earlier and better could have doubled that number. I first read this book when it initially appeared in 2003, and while recently reading a biography of Nikola Tesla was reminded of its scope and magic and ordered it in Kindle to read again. So pleased that I did. I relived the miracle of Chicago architecture, was reminded that Chicago is my favorite American city, was newly dazzled by the magnificence of the buildings and layout and the scintillating impression of the recent miracle of electricity, applied on a vast scale. The parallel story of an outrageous criminal lends additional suspense and excitement to this journalistic masterwork.

Mostly, I read fiction, and this book, a model of historical narrative, generally reads like a good historical novel. if it were a historical novel, I might suggest that it’s not easy to get through once I got into it. In places (such as the methods the "Devil" uses to murder his victims or the information dumps between some scenes), the author would do well to leave out some of his research in the interests of moving the story along.Altogether, though, this book is a tour de force of historical reporting, and the use of diary entries and letters to recreate dialogue between characters offers a fascinating look at what the architects thought of each other, and their professional and often antagonistic professional relationships. I’m well acquainted with the work of the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, and found the description of his struggle to achieve his vision for the landscape of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair fascinating.To sum up, The Devil in the White City is a keeper, one I read on my Kindle and intend to purchase in hardback.

A terrifying book. I had nightmares both times I read it. It offers a break from the gruesome depictions of killings and dead bodies with the chapters about the fair sprinkled in between. Well written. Provides quite a bit of history I would not have been aware of regarding inventors, architects, Chicago, and that time period in general. Really puts things in perspective.

A thoroughly researched story about the Chicago Columbian Exposition is a terrific read for those interested in Chicago at the end of the 19th C, the fair itself and how it was conceived and constructed. You learn about the creators’ visions and the struggle to actualize them. A parallel story of a mass murderer who operated near the siting adds a lot of spice. Well written.

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