



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

Erik Larson

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Bringing Chicago circa 1893 to vivid life, Erik Larson's spell-binding 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.

The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America Details

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From Reader Review *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* for online ebook

Seth T. says

Humour me and please allow the channeling an eighth grader for just a moment. OMG Squeee!!1 Teh best!! (Would an eighth grader say "teh best"?) And now we return you to our regularly scheduled review.

I'm not a huge fan of non-fiction. Scratch that. I'm a huge fan of non-fiction, but not so huge a fan of *reading* non-fiction. While I appreciate learning and broadening my understanding of the world around and as it once was, I find myself pretty quickly distracted from whatever non-fictional work I pick up. The fact is: most writers of non-fiction are more experts in their field of study than they are expert authors. They deliver the goods well, but aren't quite as adept at prettying them up for consumption.

Erik Larson, however, is a genius. Or something. I could not put this book down. (In the figurative sense—it actually took me about two weeks to read.) The entire length of my time in this book was marked with moments of in which I would stop reading, interrupt my wife from the depths of her studies, and remark *again* how good this book was.

(I'm sure that she would have been happier had Larson just been your average purveyor of non-fictionalizations.)

In *The Devil in the White City*, Larson chronicles chiefly a tale of two city-dwellers. Architect, Daniel Burnham and pharmacist, Henry Holmes. One would helm the creation of a wonderland of awe-striking beauty and refinement. The other would become one of America's earliest and most diabolical serial killers. All this against the backdrop of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (a.k.a. the Chicago World's Fair).

Daniel Burnham, the self-made architect, who designed the Rookery in Chicago would design the Flatiron Building in New York, assembled a team of the best American architects of the day for the task of crafting a World's Fair in Chicago that would be even more exquisite than the one held in Paris years earlier. The Paris Exposition had also unveiled Gustave Eiffel's incredible tower, so Burnham put a call out to American engineering: something grander would have to be proposed and built. National reputation was at stake as well as civic pride. Larson explores in exciting detail the glories and the tragedies of this great endeavor.

In contrast to this paean to human ingenuity and spirit, Larson focuses the other half of his narrative on a man as diligent in his chosen task as Burnham was in his. H.H. Holmes, the self-style pharmacist, who killed upwards of twenty-seven (mostly young women, fresh to the city), built for himself a hideous parody of the grand buildings that the world would soon celebrate. Bit by bit, he crafted what would later be known as his murder castle, a hotel whose ground floor hosted several businesses and whose other floors would boast far more sinister use. The second and third floors contained numerous rooms and hallways and secret compartments and switches. Airtight rooms with gas outlets. Walk-in vaults purpose not for keeping out but for keeping in. And a slicked chute to the basement where a kiln, acid, and limepits awaited. Holmes was handsome and charming in a way that made him irresistible to women. He was also a psychopath who would turn the American attention far too late.

Larson, as a chronicler, is top notch. He entertains even as he educates. And he leaves just enough narrative tension to compel the reader along his path. Larson knows how to keep enough information back to avoid rendering the latter half of his book naught but excruciating anti-climax. *The Devil in the White City* is certainly an accomplishment and I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it to anyone.

If forced to, I will admit* two quibbles with the book: 1) I was thirsty for more pictures and wanted desperately to see these buildings that Burnham and company were so busied upon; and 2) on the whole Larson keeps his voice clean of any emotive spots not merited by the characters themselves, but there were two moments when I was sure I was hearing Larson's voice beam through (it could have been worse—at least those two moments were funny).

*note: see what I did there? You didn't actually have to force me.

Jim Fonseca says

A fascinating book and an easy read. Chapter by chapter, in simple chronological order, the author juxtaposes preparations for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair with the doings of one of the country's first serial murders.

From the Fair's chapters we learned how Chicago's boosterism won it the fair from other competitors including Washington and New York. Construction was last-minute and in panic mode, but it got done. There's a lot about Frederick Law Olmstead who was in charge of park design but he was elderly, in poor health, and struggling to stay on top of the project. A lot of the focus is on the lead architect and fair planner, Daniel Burnham, and construction of the "White City," as the classical buildings came to be known.

The serial killer was H. H. Holmes, a pharmacist who capitalized on the World's Fair by building a hotel. It had special rooms in the basement to kill his victims and dispose of their bodies in a gas oven. Mostly his victims were young women but he was an equal opportunity killer, murdering some men and children as well – at least 20 victims but maybe many more. The author spares us most of the gory details. Once you get into it, it's hard to believe this story is NON-fiction as the author insists on telling us, but all the events really are from diaries, letters, newspapers and police reports. Fascinating, with a lot of local color of the Windy City in that era.

Dem says

Extremely well written and researched, unsettling, entertaining, educational and fascinating are all words that come to mind on finishing Eric Larson's book *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*

The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 was a remarkable achievement for the city of Chicago and its architect Daniel H. Burnham and while the city was celebrating and enjoying this new wonder of the world, another man by the name of H.H. Holmes, a handsome and charming doctor was luring victims to their deaths and becoming America's first Serial Killer. This is the incredible true account of two very different men and the different paths their lives would lead them.

This is my second Book by Eric Larson having read and loved *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania* previously I was looking forward to another book by this author. His books are extremely well researched and very detailed and he leaves no stone unturned when telling a story.

I loved learning about the Fair and the magnificent buildings, The World's first Ferris Wheel, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, electric boats, all the different elements that went into planning and organising such an

amazing event. I loved how this book crossed over with numerous other books I had read about this time, (especially the quote from the notorious Chicago Mayor who was born in Ireland only a few miles from my home and ended up becoming one of Chicago's most notorious Crooks of that time) I enjoyed the descriptions of families travelling long distances to the fair from small farms and towns and their amazement at witnessing these spectacular attractions and miracle of electricity for the first time. Eric Larson's descriptions are vivid and captivating and you actually imagine you are there at the centre of the city's excitement. Of course then you are brought back to reality with the murder and mayhem created by H.H. Holmes and wonder how a man like this could have murdered so many innocent people and nobody noticed or suspected him.

A word of warning *The Devil is in the detail* and Eric Larson book's are high on detail and facts which I loved but some may find a tad tedious as the story does drag slightly in places but the historical information and descriptions are excellent and I loved every minute spent with this book. I listened to this one on audio and the narration was excellent.

Jason says

This book is two, two, two books in one!

Sorry, that was annoying. But it's almost as if Erik Larson wrote two really short books—one about the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and another about the murder spree of Dr. H. H. Holmes—and then shoved them together to create a single story. The result isn't *bad*, and I think Larson is successful at maintaining clean seams between the two narratives, but it's hard to argue these two occurrences are anything but abstractedly related. Yes, Holmes lived in Chicago at the time of the fair and lured a bunch of people to his murder castle (he be snatchin' yo' people *up!*), but the events didn't weigh heavily on the fair itself or on the atmosphere surrounding it. No alarm bells went off anywhere in Chicago as a result of his, um, unsavory indiscretions.

Still, there is a lot of interesting stuff here, information specific to the world's fair, and it is fun to learn new things. For example, the Chicago Columbian Exposition exudes a long list of firsts: it saw the invention of the world's first ferris wheel, it led the nation in its first public observance of the Pledge of Allegiance, and it helped to establish alternating current as the industry standard for electricity distribution. Even that awful snake charmer song has its origins in the Chicago World's Fair.

While writing this review, I've come to learn that Leonardo DiCaprio, that beautiful man with the screaming cherry tomato head on a toothpick body, is producing the film adaptation, and will also play the role of serial killer H. H. Holmes. For this I am pleased.

Lobstergirl says

Larson could be the worst nonfiction writer working in America today. When he notes that "[Frederick Law] Olmsted was no literary stylist. Sentences wandered through the report like morning glory through the pickets of a fence" he might as well be describing himself. It's painful to make your way through his books. The melodrama is over the top. He'll go on for several pages about some unnamed person, attempting to

heighten the "mystery," and anyone who graduated second grade will quickly realize he's talking about the inventor of the Ferris Wheel. But only several chapters later - in the manner of Nancy Drew abruptly tumbling to the bottom of a dark well - he'll have the mystery man dramatically sign his name to a letter: George Washington Gale Ferris. George Washington Gale *Ferris* !!!!!!! *I did not see that coming.*

His narrative is peppered with the most insignificant, totally unrelated factoids, I suppose because they amused him and he couldn't stand the thought of leaving them out. He loves nothing more than to set a scene - so and so in a Pullman car or a fine dining club, this and that person on an ocean liner, attempting to send a cable to someone on the *Titanic* - merely in order to convey some piece of information totally unrelated to the wholly gratuitous scene. As to historical accuracy, doubtless there's a fair bit; he does have lots of end notes, and he consulted many historical sources. But he also embellishes novelistically in a way that no real historian would ever allow himself to do. It's shameful, and shameless. He asserts in the text that such and such happened, but if you check the endnotes, it didn't really happen - but *it could have*, he says. It was likely, he felt. After reading *Isaac's Storm*, which was also heavily embellished and the endnotes similarly acknowledging such, I don't trust anything this man writes. I wash my hands of him.

jessica says

in 1893, chicago took the world by storm when it hosted the world fair and created the marvel that was '*the white city.*' and the man behind it all was architect, daniel burnham. not far down the street from the fair grounds, there was another man by the name of dr. henry holmes who took advantage of those visiting the city by luring women to his hotel and killing them. he is considered americas first serial killer.

so what do these two men have in common? other than being in the same city at the same time, absolutely nothing. although this book will try to convince you otherwise. there honestly isnt anything connecting the two, so i am confused as to why there is so much focus on them both in this. i can understand a book about the history and creation of the chicago world fair, and i also get writing a book about the crimes of dr. holmes, but putting the two together did not make any sense to me.

while reading about the building and design of the fair was interesting, its very dense compared to how holmes' story is written. its almost like an information overload compared to the true crime chapters surrounding dr. holmes (which is what i was more interested in). it almost felt like the murders of dr. homes were just a fun little fact that was sprinkled throughout a history book about the 1893 world fair. so i think the synopsis and title are a little misleading with regard to the focus of this story.

overall, this is quite an educational book. its not quite as entertaining as i thought it would be, but very informative nonetheless. the gilded age and importance of the world fair isnt something i knew much about, so it was neat to learn about it. although, i might try to find another book about dr. holmes, as this didnt quite satisfy my interest in him.

? 3.5 stars

Miranda Reads says

Overwhelmingly underwhelming

1893 was a year to remember - the World's Fair came to Chicago and H. H. Holmes (one of America's most

famous serial killers) took full advantage. He stalked the streets and murdered whomever he pleased.

I really liked the idea of this one - to take one of America's greatest triumphs and splicing his story along with one of the greatest horrors. However. There's too high of a disconnect between these two sides

This reads like **two separate books** thrown together at inopportune moments - as soon one half got the least bit exciting, we'd swap. It was **frustrating and ultimately exasperating** to read.

The World Fair section was interesting in its own right, but it **paled so much in comparison** to the serial killer that it became something to **slog through**.

For the **World's Fair** - we see the entirety of its creation and eventual destruction. Ample page space was given to dissecting every. single. mind-numbing. detail.

Roughly half the book was wasted on **petty squabbles** about the building paint, boats in the harbor and the landscaping. (*I finally understand how my mother can fall asleep while reading.*)

Then, once I nodded off between 2-3 times, we'd jump to the insane murderer. But, there was a huge disconnect regarding page space.

The longer the book went on, the shorter those H. H. Holmes sections would be - towards the end, we'd only get **we'd get 1 to 10 pages from H. H. Holmes' perspective** for every couple chapters of building plans. Fabulous.

The two main stories weren't entirely separate - they did tangentially intersect - notably H. H. Holmes managed to lure so many people into his hotel *because* of the fair and he *did* take one of his victims to the fair but those connections did not seem strong enough for a joint book.

While I appreciate the time and effort it took to research such a complete account of 1893, I had a hard time enjoying the novel. It felt like more of a mess than anything.

Popsugar 2018 Reading Challenge: A book you meant to read in 2017 but didn't get to

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James says

Heard the one about the architect and the serial killer? It's not a bad joke, but it is a great book. The architect was Daniel Burnham, the driving force behind the Chicago World's Fair of 1893; the killer was H.H. Holmes, a Svengali-type figure who lured young women to his hotel and did the most gruesome things, the least shocking of which was murder. The two men never met, but *The Devil in the White City* brings their stories together, and although it reads like a novel, everything is thoroughly researched fact.

The book

The Great Columbian Exhibition of 1893 was Chicago's big chance to shake off its old image as a hog-slaughtering, dirty and dangerous town and to take its place as America's second city. Although the fair's theme gave a backward nod to the 400th anniversary of Columbus bumping into the Americas on his way to India, its vision was futuristic: for the first time, electric lighting, clean water, and planned green spaces could be experienced on a massive scale. Innovations - the Ferris Wheel, the hamburger, an elevated railway,

Juicy Fruit gum, the zip fastener and shredded wheat among them - enhanced the feeling that the next century would belong to America. The buildings were monumental, the exhibits eclectic (one example: a map of the USA made entirely of pickles) and the visitors were awestruck. They called it the White City, from the colour of main buildings that were imposing by day, dazzling by night.

Much of this was down to Daniel Burnham. His can-do reputation for building skyscrapers made him a natural choice as project manager. But we're frequently reminded that he had to push himself to the limit and step on quite a few toes to ensure the Fair's success, a job made all the more difficult by economic recession, bickering architects, striking workers, pompous politicians and Chicago's notorious weather.

As if all this weren't enough to occupy the reader, a parallel story takes us inside the grim world of H.H. Holmes. Capitalising on the advent of the Fair, Holmes built his own hotel to attract single young women who were streaming into the city from across America in search of work, independence and a new life in the big city. One such unfortunate believed she was on the threshold of marriage to this enchanting gentleman; in reality, she was destined for a gas chamber in the hotel basement. She was not to be the last to fall for his charms, but even in death there was no rest. Holmes literally picked over the bones of his victims, selling their remains to medical students eager to examine recently deceased corpses - no questions asked. At first, the benefit for Holmes was financial, but as time passed, the chase, the kill, the post mortem had become ends in themselves. A single-minded detective and a stroke of luck brought Holmes to justice, but even when he realised the game was up, he managed to keep his unsettling cool.

My thoughts

I had a strong feeling that I would take to this book, and from start to finish I was never disappointed. It fairly zings along, both stories proving absorbing, while casting out facts like frisbees.

Although Burnham and Holmes are the book's dominant characters, there are walk-on parts for numerous figures who made their own mark on the White City. Buffalo Bill, Thomas Edison, and Scott Joplin are among the famous names, and the description of George Ferris's efforts to debut his eponymous wheel is a story in itself. But the lesser-known characters are also worthy of note. I pitied poor Frederick Olmsted's attempts to landscape the exhibition in the midst of an enormous, muddy construction site and a fit of depression. But I can see how ahead of his time he really was, insisting on natural greenery instead of a regimented collection of flower beds. Then there was Patrick Prendergast, whose descent into madness was to have a shocking impact on the Fair's final days; it's here that Larson's descriptive powers really come into their own.

As for the serial killer, the author doesn't dwell on the sensationalist aspects of his more grisly activities, but what he leaves to the imagination is far more powerful. Extracts from letters written by a child kidnapped by Holmes are among the most upsetting words I've ever read - a reminder that the worst of human nature may not only be found in our own times.

But my lasting impression from this book is one of optimism, of Burnham straining every nerve and sinew to achieve the impossible, and the ordinary folk of Chicago bursting with pride at what had been achieved.

The U.S. edition of the book has the subtitle "the fair that changed America" - and that's certainly true, right down to the Pledge of Allegiance which can trace its origins to the exhibition's opening day. Beyond that, the Chicago Fair of 1893 not only showed America how it could be, but how it would be - better living and working conditions, convenience foods, domestic appliances, gadgets and more time for fun. In short, it heralded the prospect of a decent day's pay for a full day's work, a clean, safe environment, and of course the God-given right to eat shredded wheat.

Who would like this book?

I enjoyed it because of an interest in cities and architecture. But it would equally appeal to readers who are into engineering, politics, social history, horticulture, true crimes: does that leave anyone out?

Carol says

This is **really** a great read **filled** with meticulously researched historical facts and notable people of the time. Even Helen Keller made an appearance at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair! Alternating chapters educate the reader about the enormous undertaking and time constraints of building "*The White City*" combined with the daily bloodthirsty activities of serial killer Herman Webster Mudgett aka Dr. H. H. Holmes.

Reading about B. H. Burnham's construction of the fair during a time of deadly diseases, grotesque environmental conditions and bank failures was certainly enlightening, but most intriguing for me was erection of the monstrous "Ferris" Wheel with enclosed glassed-in seats. (*googled some amazing photos*)

And this dude Dr. HHH.....Picture a young, handsome prosperous man with mesmerizing big blue eyes who is in fact an evil psychopath, sniveling cheat and conniving polygamist. This devil incarnate killed on a whim and caused turmoil in so many families with his slithering knack of preying on the weak and vulnerable; and while I wasn't too surprised at the naivety of the young women, the men falling for his sleazy schemes *really* shocked me.

This work of non-fiction is jam-packed with interesting facts, faces and descriptive details that are too numerous to even begin to mention here, but now, whenever I see Cracker Jack, I'll sure remember where it originated.

Mizuki says

Pre-review:

"I was born with the devil in me," [Holmes] wrote. "I could not help the fact that I was a murderer, no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing."

Damn, it is exactly my type of thing! *jumps to read*

(Link: <https://giphy.com/gifs/ursula-lecture...>)

Actual review starts here:

Note: Buddy-read with DayDreamer .

Rating: one of the best books in my 2017 reading list 20 sparkling stars: when you open this book, please be ready for the *unimaginable* from both the good and the evil! Be prepared to be seduced by the

magic and wonders of the glorious Chicago's World Fair (or the so-called 'White City') *and* the twisted, gruesome but intriguing Murder Castle!

Let us all DREAM BIG together with Daniel Burnham and his merry band of American architects! Let follow them to go through all the dramatic twists and turns that created the World's Columbian Exposition/Chicago's World Fair! There are so many dramas you couldn't have imagined but actually took place during the construction of this massive event!

Let's just THINK BIG! If you wanted to kill lot of people for your own pleasure and you also want to make a profit out of your activities, then why not build an entire building for the sole purpose of...murdering people just for the hell of it!? *evil grins*

“His weakness was his belief that evil had boundaries.”

Plus, meanwhile in London, **Jack the Ripper!**

Still, I have to admit the parts of the book about the infamous H. H. Holmes is a bit flat comparing with what had been written for Daniel Burnham and his merry band of architects, Holmes's tale reads like a dry true crime story. Don't get me wrong, Holmes' many deeds and his gruesome Murder Castle are still highly intriguing to read about, still I want more from his story even after I was finished with it.

Documentary for H. H. Holmes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPvOT...>

Documentary: Slaughtered At The Murder Hotel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyMeT...>

Murder Castle Explained: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drfRQ...>

PS: and there seems to be a movie adaptation with Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio in it! Isn't it wonderful?

Chinese review (short):

????????????????????????????????1891????? ???

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????????? ?????????????

Henry Avila says

The White City rises above the lake, like a fantasy from another time that never existed, but the eyes do not deceive, this image is real, bright lights glow at night, millions of respectful , quiet , mesmerized people look and walk by, the moon shines and reflects on the gigantic white buildings and glittering waters, magic drapes all...The Chicago World's Fair of 1893, arguably the greatest one in history, the citizens of this metropolis, the second city of the nation need to show everyone that they are more than hog killers, with speeding trains and prosperous businessmen , this is a sophisticated town, particularly to arch rival New York . In a short while after winning the contest to hold this extravaganza, beating St. Louis, Washington and the big enemy New York City for the honor, from Congress, the next step , yes committees , Americans love them, they multiply like rabbits but get in the way of progress. At long last, emerging from countless delays, officially

named the "World's Columbian Exposition", to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, in 1492, but its six months run will start a year later in 1893. A leading Chicago architect Mr. Daniel Burnham and his partner John Root, are chosen for the enormous job to build it, but also residing in the overcrowded, fast growing, violent, dirty city, Dr. Herman Webster Mudgett, alias (one of many) H.H.(Henry) Holmes, America's first well known serial killer. The two will never meet but their stories will make headlines around the globe. Mr. Burnham's task seems impossible, made worse when his closest friend in business and in private life dies, John Root, the committees don't and can't make decisions, days pass still nothing is being accomplished, at last the authority is granted him to be the boss, Burnham, ("Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood") slowly things begin to appear, on a grand-scale, the white, (all the same color) huge, electrified buildings soaring into the sky, the scary, new Ferris Wheel will take you there, if it is ever built, lagoons are made, islands formed, canals dug, the waters come from sparkling Lake Michigan, boats follow, the ugly, empty Jackson Park begins to fill, something special even at this early stage is felt...Dr.Holmes likes pretty, young women, just off farms and small towns, the feelings are mutual, he pays attention to their every word, looks into their eyes, touches them gently, the handsome, soft, well spoken con man, has plenty of charm, few are not enamored, wealthy too, owner of the strange, rather gloomy, with mysterious odors, the World's Fair Hotel, nicknamed "The Castle", he keeps marrying the women, a real lady killer...but will murder men too. This nonfiction book is very entertaining, and always informative, you can imagine yourself back to the spectacular, enormously successful, thrilling, magical fair, the numerous attractions, in hundreds of buildings, from the very popular, exotic, belly dancers, to the unsuitable Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, he made a fortune, just outside, the exposition grounds, they don't make this kind anymore..

David - proud Gleeman in Branwen's adventuring party says

For me, reviewing this book is similar to trying to review any Nicolas Cage movie from the past 20 years, in that if I was asked if Cage's over-the-top performance was the best thing or the worst thing about the movie, I could only answer...

"Yes!"

(Pictured - one of Nicolas Cage's more subdued performances; Not pictured - sanity)

If you were to ask me my favorite thing about this book, I would immediately answer, "Erik Larson's writing style!"

This book is mostly talked about for the portions pertaining to one of America's first serial killers, Dr. H. H. Holmes. In fact, when the greenlit movie adaptation by Martin Scorsese was recently announced, it focused primarily on the casting of Holmes. Yet, more time is spent in the book detailing the history of the 1893 World's Fair, particularly architect Daniel Burnham's struggles in trying to get everything finished in time for the Fair's opening. I'm actually not much of a history buff, so I feared the "true crimeless" segments of the book wouldn't hold my interest, but I'm happy to announce that I was wrong. Larson's wit made even some of the dryer parts of the novel entertaining, and he even manages to build suspense when he's raising questions we may already know the answer to, like what engineering marvel would the Fair's organizer's decide on to hopefully rival the Eiffel Tower unveiled at France's world fair?

As for the segments detailing Dr. H. H. Holmes and his grotesque crimes, this is where Larson's writing really shines. Instead of treating this strictly as a historical account (*"and then this happened, and then this happened..."*), Larson actually writes these moments in the style of a thriller. He gets into Holmes' head with the same prowess that Thomas Harris used to make Hannibal Lecter continue to chill our bones long after we had put the book down. There were times I almost forgot I was even reading a nonfiction book, as in these

moments Larson's novel read more like something we'd expect to find in the horror section.

Which is why if you were to ask me what my least-favorite thing about this book was, I would immediately answer, "Erik Larson's writing style!"

Bet you didn't see that coming, eh? That was a twist right out of an M. Night Shyamalan movie!

(This clip is from "Robot Chicken" and led to "What A Twist" becoming a running joke on the show. If you already knew that, you are officially as cool as me. Whether you take that as a compliment or a reason to start sobbing is completely up to you!)

While Larson's writing during the Holmes segments was undeniably gripping, I felt he went a little overboard with his speculative approach. He describes what was going through the victims' heads moments before Holmes murdered them, things Larson has no way of knowing were actually true. This did take me out of the book quite a few times, as when I'm reading nonfiction and the author keeps adding details that can't actually be confirmed, it make me begin to wonder how true this true crime novel really is!

I did enjoy reading "Devil in the White City", although I would say it's more a book for history enthusiasts than true crime fans, as the 1893 World's Fair is clearly the novel's main event, while Dr. Holmes is more of a sideshow freak. Whether you're here for the Fair or the murder castle, Erik Larson's skills as a writer makes this an interesting read, as long as you don't mind getting some ~~chocolate in your peanut butter~~ speculative fiction in your true crime.

(2-and-a-half-hours of fighting over chocolate in peanut butter... still a better movie than "Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice"!)

Jonathan Ashleigh says

I was genuinely excited to get back into this story every time I picked it up. At times, this jumble of factual events felt like a tale I would contrive while wandering aimlessly around Wikipedia (even though Erik Larson says he did not get information from the internet because, apparently all, data found on the internet is questionable).

Most of the dramatic facts this book will tell you show up near the top of the internet, and many are proclaimed at a bars when someone lets everyone know where Pabst won their blue ribbon and follows with, "A young man by the name of George Farris went to that same fair in Chicago, 1893 — and he built himself a wheel."

The best story and the reason why I wanted more was the story of Holmes, who murdered dozens while becoming America's first serial killer. I didn't really care for the ten plus pages describing where the fair would go and then what park in said city it would be in. Some of these details were distracting and took too long. As the reader, I just wanted to get to the gruesome parts.

People like to say that non-fiction, "reads like fiction," when they think it is good but that doesn't make much sense to me. Books without dialogue generally feel to me like Wikipedia, and they're good when I am able to stay interested.

Danielle says

So, no offense to those that liked this book, but I'm throwing in the towel after 75 pages. It's just not holding my interest. Part of the reason for this is that Larson's writing style is way too speculative for my taste in non-fiction. I just finished reading the *Path Between Seas* by David McCullough, and he does such an amazing job of making complicated, historical events interesting, without fabricating scenes that "could have" happened. Even that wouldn't have bothered me that much if Larson had said something more like, "It's likely he did this, since we know this about his personality" or whatever, rather than "He reached out and touched her hand as he spoke to her." There was no clear distinction between what definitely happened, and what maybe could have happened. That got bothersome.

I could have just ignored the non-fiction aspect and enjoyed the story, if not for Larson's habit of getting bogged down in inconsequential details. He seemed to throw facts (or conjectured facts) in whenever the fancy struck him, rather than keeping the story moving.

And finally, I got annoyed with the jumping back and forth between Holmes's story and the architecture/Worlds Fair story. Just when I'd get into one, we'd switch to the other. He could have done a better job of interweaving those.

So, since my curiosity is piqued, but not enough to continue reading this book, I'm just going to do some Wikipedia reading and call it good.

Madeline says

Poor Erik Larson.

He wanted to write an extensive, in-depth look at the 1893 World's Fair, which was a collaboration of some of the greatest creative minds in the country (including the guy who designed the Flatiron building in New York and Walt Disney's dad) and gave us, among other things, the Ferris Wheel, the zipper, shredded wheat, and Columbus Day. The entire venture was almost a disaster, with delays, petty fighting, bad weather, and more delays, but it was ultimately a massive success and helped make the city of Chicago what it is today.

Here's what it must have looked like when Larson pitched his idea for the book:

Larson: "And the fair didn't go flawlessly - towards the end of the fair, the mayor of Chicago was assassinated by a crazy guy, and there were tons of disappearances over the course of the fair, and a lot of them were probably the work of this serial killer who had opened a hotel near the fairgrounds -

Editor: "Wait, serial killer? And it's connected to the fair? Cool, let's try to include that in the book. Also the crazy assassin sounds good, too."

Larson: "No, the killer - H.H. Holmes - really wasn't connected to the fair at all. I mean, he used the fair as a way to collect victims, but he would have killed tons of people even without it. In fact, after the fair he moved on and kept murdering people, so the fair really didn't have any effect on his methods..."

Editor: "Doesn't matter! How about you alternate between chapters about the fair and chapters about Holmes killing people?"

Larson: "But I don't really know much about that. Nobody does - Holmes never admitted to killing all those people, even after the police found human remains in his basement. I don't really know any actual details about the killings."

Editor: "That's okay, you can just make it up. I'll give you some trashy crime novels to read, that'll give you some ideas. Now tell me more about the assassination."

Larson: "He was just some mentally unbalanced person who thought he deserved a position in the mayor's office and shot the guy when he realized it wasn't going to happen. But the death cast a pall over the entire closing ceremony of the fair, and it - "

Editor: "Good, let's sprinkle in some bits about the crazy guy throughout the book, too. Now, back to Holmes: did he maybe kill somebody at the fair, or did they find a body on the grounds or something?"

Larson: "No, the Chicago police didn't even notice anything was happening. It wasn't until he left Chicago that a detective from another state tracked him down."

Editor: "Okay, so we'll make the end of the book about the manhunt for Holmes and his capture."

Larson: "What does any of this have to do with the World's Fair?"

Editor: "Hell if I know. You're the writer, not me - you figure it out. Here's a check. Now go make me a bestseller!"

Four stars for the World's Fair stuff, two stars for the pulpy unrelated bullshit.
