



Ramapo Catskill Library System Book Discussion Leader's Guide

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

by Erik Larson (Vintage Publishers, 2003)

Target Audience: Adults and young adults who enjoy reading about historical events in a less dense format than traditional history.

Synopsis: This is a true story of two men who left their marks on Chicago in the late nineteenth century--Daniel Burnham, Director of Works for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, and H.H. Holmes, a serial killer who lured women to his "World's Fair Hotel."

Author Biography: Erik Larson, author of *Isaac's Storm: A Man, A Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* and *Thunderstruck*, has written for Harper's, The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and Time, where he is a contributing writer. He is a former staff writer for The Wall Street Journal. He lives in Seattle with his wife, three daughters, and assorted pets, including a golden retriever named Molly. For *Devil in the White City* he was nominated for a National Book Award.

Reviews:

Publishers Weekly

"Not long after Jack the Ripper haunted the ill-lit streets of 1888 London, H.H. Holmes (born Herman Webster Mudgett) dispatched somewhere between 27 and 200 people, mostly single young women, in the churning new metropolis of Chicago; many of the murders occurred during (and exploited) the city's finest moment, the World's Fair of 1893. Larson's breathtaking new history is a novelistic yet wholly factual account of the fair and the mass murderer who lurked within it. Bestselling author Larson (*Isaac's Storm*) strikes a fine balance between the planning and execution of the vast fair and Holmes's relentless, ghastly activities. The passages about Holmes are compelling and aptly claustrophobic; readers will be glad for the frequent escapes to the relative sanity of Holmes's co-star, architect and fair overseer Daniel Hudson Burnham, who managed the thousands of workers and engineers who pulled the sprawling fair together on an astonishingly tight two-year schedule. A natural charlatan, Holmes exploited the inability of authorities to coordinate, creating a small commercial empire entirely on unpaid debts and constructing a personal cadaver-disposal system. This is, in effect, the nonfiction

Alienist, or a sort of companion, which might be called Homicide, to Emile Durkheim's Suicide. However, rather than anomie, Larson is most interested in industriousness and the new opportunities for mayhem afforded by the advent of widespread public anonymity. This book is everything popular history should be, meticulously recreating a rich, pre-automobile America on the cusp of modernity, in which the sale of "articulated" corpses was a semi-respectable trade and serial killers could go well-nigh unnoticed."

Booklist

"Larson's ambitious, engrossing tale of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 focuses primarily on two men: Daniel H. Burnham, the architect who was the driving force behind the fair, and Henry H. Holmes, a sadistic serial killer working under the cover of the busy fair. After the 1889 French Exposition Universel wowed the world with the Eiffel Tower and high attendance numbers, interest began to grow in the U.S. for a similar fair. Chicago and New York were the top contenders for the location, and in February 1890, Chicagoans were overjoyed to hear they had won the honor. Burnham and his partner, John Root, the leading architects in Chicago, were tapped for the job, and they in turn called on Frederick Law Olmstead, Louis Sullivan, and Richard M. Hunt to help them build the world's greatest fair. They faced overwhelming obstacles: inhospitable weather, bureaucracy, illness, and even death. Unbeknownst to any of them, Holmes, a charismatic, handsome doctor, had arrived in the city and built a complex with apartments, a drugstore, and a vault, which he used to trap his victims until they suffocated. When the White City opened for business in May 1893, hundreds of thousands of people flocked to it, although a plummeting economy and several accidents did nothing to help business. A shocking murder concludes the ultimately successful fair, and that's before Holmes claims his final victims in the cruelest act of his career. A magnificent book. Kristine Huntley (American Library Association)"

The New York Times

"A dynamic and enveloping book filled with haunting, closely annotated information ... this truth really is stranger than fiction."

Other Reviews:

Chicago Tribune

"Engrossing . . . exceedingly well documented . . . utterly fascinating."

Esquire

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

USA Today

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

Kirkus Reviews

"Gripping drama, captured with a reporter's nose for a good story and a novelist's flair for telling it...Superb."

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do you think Erik Larson chose to tell Burnham and Holmes' stories together? How did the juxtaposition affect the narrative? Do you think they worked well together or would you have preferred to read about just Holmes or just Burnham?
2. What did you learn about architecture? What do you think the fair contributed to the architectural landscape in the United States?
3. How did the Chicago World's Fair change Chicago? America? The world? Discuss some of the inventions and ideas that were introduced at the fair that still impact life today.
4. How was Holmes able to get away with so many murders without becoming suspect? Were you surprised by how easy it was for him to commit crimes without being caught?
5. What ultimately led to Holmes' capture and the discovery of his crime? Was this inevitable?
6. How did Holmes' hotel contrast with the buildings of the World's Fair? Can architecture reflect goodness or evil, or are buildings neutral until used?
7. How did the White City contrast with Chicago, the Black City?
8. What do you think of Holmes' claim that he was the devil? Can people be inherently evil? How would you explain his strange allure and cold-hearted behavior?
9. Burnham, Olmsted, Ferris and Holmes were all visionaries in their own ways. Discuss what drove each of these men, whether they were ever truly satisfied, and how their lives ultimately ended.

**Compiled by Benita Auge, Cornwall Public Library Date September 2008
Ramapo Catskill Library System Adult Services Advisory Council**