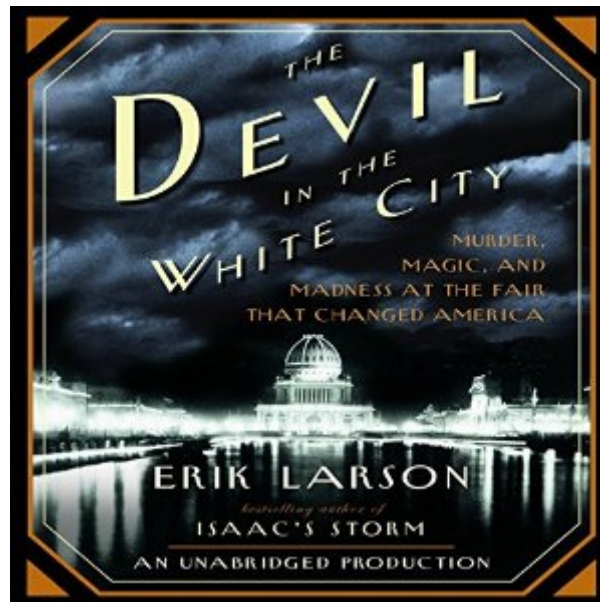


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The Devil In The White City



Synopsis

The story of two men's obsessions with the Chicago World's Fair, one its architect, the other a murderer. 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. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Erik Larson does a bang-up job of conveying what life must have been like in the "Second City" as the 19th century drew to its fitful conclusion. Bristling at the constant reminder of New York City's superiority in so many areas, Chicago's city fathers rallied the troops and went all out in proving to New Yorkers, to the nation and to the world that Chicago was equal to the great challenge of mounting a World Exposition of truly monumental stature. Larson's descriptions of the Herculean effort put forth by numerous architects, builders, politicians, etc. lead the reader to a true appreciation of these "can do," spirited individuals. Yet beneath the teeming activity and a short distance away from the gleaming white Pleasure Palaces of the Fair, there stood a building of a different sort entirely, inhabited by one of the most vicious, truly evil creatures the young nation ever produced. Larson does an adequate, but not great job of telling the darker story surrounding H H Holmes, the mesmeric Svengali whose brilliant blue eyes and engaging charm seduced at least a score (one estimate was up to 200, which the author disputes) unfortunate women. Unlike Jack the

Ripper, to whom he was later likened, he didn't limit himself to female victims. Business partners who had outworn their usefulness and several children were amongst his prey, as well. He just had a penchant for murder.

This is an easy and enticing read, full of gritty and gossipy details that are presented in a style that keeps the reader interested. I was intrigued by the astounding feat of effort that it took to prepare and present the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 and Larson does a good job of introducing us to the men who made it happen -- all led by the talented and tireless architect Daniel Burnham. The cast of characters with whom Burnham worked reads like a Who's Who of culture and design in the 19th Century. The reader also comes to learn a good deal about the city of Chicago at that time -- how it so desperately wanted to refine its image from that of a grimy city known primarily as a hog-slaughterer into a cultural oasis and how it self-consciously but determinedly sought world-class status, competing with New York and Paris to make the Big Time. The enormous success of the White City was due in large part to that gutsy determination and much hard work. And this book explains that very well. At the same time, it really piqued my interest to the extent that I have done some additional research into this World's Fair. Larson parallels Burnham's story with that of Herman Mudgett, alias Dr. H.H. Holmes, the first notorious serial killer in the United States. Holmes, a charming, fast-talking and handsome con artist, was able to swindle, steal and lie his way into and out of many schemes that a less clever person could have never even imagined, much less succeeded at. He was also a cold-blooded killer who had no qualms about killing women and children as well as men. He ran a hotel and apartments in Chicago during the Fair and attracted tenants and victims there with the Fair's help. Holmes' story is chilling but also fascinating. Again, he is someone I'd like to know more about.

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