

“Nonfiction That Reads Like Fiction”

Would you like to be entertained, captivated, and learn something about pivotal world events all at the same time? Erik Larson has some page-turners that I highly recommend.

The most recent Larson addition to our library is “In the Garden of Beasts” which is owned in several formats. When one reads about the era of Nazi Germany, it always seems to be the era surrounding the 3rd Reich’s peak of power. “In the Garden of Beasts” begins before many outside of Germany had even heard of Adolf Hitler.

The “story” is told through the eyes of an American family who moved to Germany in 1933. Charles Dodd was appointed as U.S. Ambassador during this critical time in history. Daughter Martha, like many at the time, admired the Nazis at first. Eventually she sees the reality and is no longer captivated by her romantic ideas of the Reich. Like Martha, many people at the time did not believe certain things were happening or to what extent they’d spread.

Interesting to the story, but perhaps less interesting to history, are Martha’s affairs, and with whom. Such promiscuity in the context of the age and her father’s position was unexpected. Also engaging were various prominent figures’ opinions on whether Dodd was suited to be an ambassador and why.

“Devil in The White City” takes place closer to home. This book runs two stories side by side. One is that of a serial killer operating in Chicago at the time of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. The other story is that of having the World’s Fair in America’s Midwest.

During the huge expansion of workers and visitors numerous people went missing. Many were later linked to charming killer H. H. Holmes. Larsen depicts how this happened victim by known victim, mostly young women, in his hotel of horrors specially constructed for the purpose of murder and disposal of bodies.

The reader also learns about people who were inspired by the Fair such as Mr. Ferris (inventor of the Ferris wheel) and Mr. Disney (well, you know!). Other now recognizable personages with a part in the story include Frank Lloyd Wright, Susan B. Anthony, Buffalo Bill, Thomas Edison, Harry Houdini, Teddy Roosevelt, Helen Keller, and even some European royalty, to name a few.

There were many obstacles to “winning” the honor of having the Exposition in Chicago. And once awarded, there were many more obstacles to overcome to get it off the ground. When reading the book, one realizes what a gargantuan undertaking this was for the amount of time the committee had to work within. Inside the time constraints were creative and personality differences, deaths, fires, transportation and location problems, and of course – will it pay for itself? ‘Make or break’ was a daily worry, and the reputation of Chicago and the United States was on the line as the world looked on.

It is important to note that Larson only uses primary sources. He goes straight to original diaries, letters, and other archives, and does not rely on secondary sources. This means the reader is as close to the truth as possible from this distance of time. Larson's oft-quoted goal of bringing the past alive has certainly been met in the two books of his I've read so far. Readers are not working through dry history; one gets a feel for the place and time.

Next on my reading list is Larson's "Isaac's Storm" about the "deadliest hurricane in history." Fiction isn't the only means to transport readers to another place and time. Join me in exploring some stories that really happened – you'll be glad you did.