

Devil in the White City Discussion Questions

by Erik Larson

Author Bio:

Erik Larson (born January 1, 1954) lives in Seattle with his wife, three daughters, a Chinese fighting fish, a dwarf hamster, and a golden retriever named Molly. (Random House)

The **Devil in the White City** won the Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime in 2004. Larson has written 7 books, including his newest called *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania* out in 2015.

The film rights for **Devil in the White City** have been purchased by Leonardo DiCaprio.

Characters:

- **Daniel Burnham** – Chief architect behind the World's Columbian Exposition (also known as the Chicago World's Fair) in 1893. Business mind and people person of the Burnham and Root architectural firm. Wife's name is Margaret.
- **John Root** – Burnham's partner. Artistic mind of the Burnham and Root architectural firm.
- **Frederick Law Olmsted** – Landscape architect in charge of the World's Fair's landscape. Also the designer of New York City's Central Park.
- **Louis Sullivan** – Main Landscape architect behind the World's Fair. Worked for Olmsted.
- **Sol Bloom** – Hired to create the midway for the fair.
- **Charles B. Atwood** – Burnham's head of design after Root's death.
- **George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr.** – creator of the Ferris wheel.
- **Mayor Carter Harrison, Sr.** – Mayor of Chicago. Was assassinated on the last day of the fair.
- **Patrick Prendergast** - Assassin who killed Mayor Harrison over his delusional belief that he helped Harrison win re-election.
- **Dr. H. H. Holmes (Herman Webster Mudgett)** – a serial killer who used the fair to lure his victims to their deaths. Dr. Holmes had built his "World's Fair Hotel" complete with a gas chamber, dissection table, and a crematorium to dispose of the bodies. Holmes would remove the skeletons of his victims and sell them for medical and scientific study.
- **Clara A. Lovering** – Holmes's first wife
- **Myrta Z. Belknap** – Holmes's second wife. Has a daughter with Holmes named Lucy.
- **Ned Connor** – Employee of Holmes; husband of Julia Smythe. Father of Pearl. Both Pearl and Julia are murdered by Holmes.
- **Julia Smythe** – Holmes' employee and lover. Wife of Ned Connor. Mother of Pearl.
- **Emeline Cigrand** – Indiana native lured to Chicago by Holmes, who offers her a job and later proposes to her. Holmes kills Emeline before she leaves Chicago.

- **Minnie Williams** – A former acquaintance of Holmes who moves Chicago. Holmes marries her, cons her out of her inheritance, and murders her.
- **Anna Williams** – Minnie William's sister. Anna Williams accepts Holmes's invitation to Chicago, where he deceives her, manipulates her, and murders her.
- **Benjamin Pietzel** – Business associate (and murder victim) of Holmes.
- **Carrie Pietzel** – Wife of Benjamin Pietzel.
- **Howard, Nellie and Alice Pietzel** – Three of Benjamin and Carrie Pietzel's children.
- **Georgiana Yoke** – Holmes 3rd wife. Georgiana marries Holmes and travels around the country with him until he is arrested for insurance fraud.
- **Frank Geyer** – Detective in charge of finding Pietzel's children after Holmes was jailed for insurance fraud.
- **Thomas W. Barlow** – Assistant district attorney who prosecuted Holmes

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. How does Larson's description of the time period help set the mood for the story? Did any of the descriptions surprise you?
3. What narrative techniques does Larson use to create suspense in the book? How does he end sections and chapters of the book in a manner that makes' the reader anxious to find out what happens next?
4. You know who the serial killer is from the beginning of the book. Does this cause anticipation for the rest of the story or does it ruin it for you?
5. In the note "Evils Imminent," Erik Larson writes "Beneath the gore and smoke and loam, this book is about the evanescence of life, and why some men choose to fill their brief allotment of time engaging the impossible, others in the manufacture of sorrow." What does the book reveal about "conflict between good and evil"? What is the essential difference between men like Daniel Burnham and Henry H. Holmes? Are they alike in any way?
6. Do you think a fair of this size could happen in today's America? What advantages or disadvantages can you foresee with such a project?
7. At the end of *The Devil in the White City*, Larson writes "The thing that entranced me about Chicago in the Gilded Age was the city's willingness to take on the impossible in the name of civic honor, a concept so removed from the modern psyche that two wise readers of early drafts of this book wondered why Chicago was so avid to win the world's fair in the first place" [p. 393]. What motives, in addition to "civic honor," drove Chicago to build the Fair? In what ways might the desire to "out-Eiffel Eiffel" and to show New York that Chicago was more than a meat-packing backwater be seen as problematic?
8. Do you think anyone considered the negative impact having the fair in Chicago could have?
9. Who was more powerful – Burnham or Holmes?

10. 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?
11. What did you learn about architecture? What do you think the fair contributed to the architectural landscape in the United States?
12. 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?
13. Could this many murders and/or disappearances have gone undetected in a different city? What about today?
14. What ultimately led to Holmes' capture and the discovery of his crime? Was it inevitable? If Detective Geyer had been a little less persistent, do you think Holmes would have gotten away with murder?
15. 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?
16. How did the White City contrast with Chicago, the Black City?
17. 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?
18. Burnham, Olmsted, Ferris, and Holmes were all visionaries in their own ways. What drove each of these men? Were they ever truly satisfied? How did the fair affect the rest of their lives?
19. The White City is repeatedly referred to as a dream. The young poet Edgar Lee Masters called the Court of Honor "an inexhaustible dream of beauty" and columnist Teresa Dean found it "cruel . . . to let us dream and drift through heaven for six months, and then to take it out of our lives" [p. 335]. What accounts for the dreamlike quality of the White City? What are the positive and negative aspects of this dream?
20. In what ways does the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 change America? What lasting inventions and ideas did it introduce into American culture? What important figures were critically influenced by the Fair?
21. At the end of the book, Larson suggests that "Exactly what motivated Holmes may never be known" [p. 395]. What possible motives are exposed in *The Devil in the White City*? Why is it important to try to understand the motives of a person like Holmes?
22. After the Fair ended, Ray Stannard Baker noted "What a human downfall after the magnificence and prodigality of the World's Fair which has so recently closed its doors! Heights of splendor, pride, exaltation in one month: depths of wretchedness, suffering, hunger, cold, in the next" [p. 334]. What is the relationship between the opulence and grandeur of the Fair and the poverty and degradation that surrounded it? In what ways does the Fair bring into focus the extreme contrasts of the Gilded Age?
23. What does *The Devil in the White City* add to our knowledge about Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham? What are the most admirable traits of these two men? What are their most important aesthetic principles?

24. In his speech before his wheel took on its first passengers, George Ferris "happily assured the audience that the man condemned for having 'wheels in his head' had gotten them out of his head and into the heart of the Midway Plaisance" [p. 279]. In what way is the entire Fair an example of the power of human ingenuity and imagination?
25. How was Holmes able to exert such power over his victims? What weaknesses did he prey upon? Why wasn't he caught earlier? In what ways does his story "illustrate the end of the century" [p. 370] as the Chicago Times-Herald wrote?
26. What satisfaction can be derived from a nonfiction book like **The Devil in the White City** that cannot be found in novels? In what ways is the book like a novel?
27. What is the total picture of late nineteenth-century America that emerges from **The Devil in the White City**? How is that time both like and unlike contemporary America? What are the most significant differences? In what ways does that time mirror the present?
28. Will you read any other books by Eric Larson?

References:

- About.com - http://bestsellers.about.com/od/bookclubquestions/a/devil_city_q.htm
- Book Browse - https://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm/book_number/1185/the-devil-in-the-white-city
- Book Notes - <http://www.book-notes.org/Watch/178161-1/Erik+Larson.aspx>
- Cliffs Notes - <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/d/the-devil-in-the-white-city/book-summary>
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- Weddingbee - <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/book-club-discussion-devil-in-the-white-city-part-i/>
- Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Devil_in_the_White_City

If you liked **Devil in the White City**, try...

- Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil - John Berendt
- World's Fair - E. L. Doctorow
- Sister Carrie - Theodore Dreiser
- Serial Murderers and Their Victims - Eric W. Hickey
- Into Thin Air - Jon Krakauer
- The Jungle - Upton Sinclair
- The Gilded Age - Mark Twain
- The House of Mirth - Edith Wharton

A bigger version of The Great World Fair Chicago Map can be found at <http://content.randomhouse.com/assets/9781400076314/view.php?id=dev001>

An interview with Eric Larson on **The Devil in the White City** can be found at <http://www.book-notes.org/Watch/178161-1/Erik+Larson.aspx>.