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Erik Larson

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Erik Larson : By Larson, Erik The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America Unabridged Edition Audio CD before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised By Larson, Erik The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America Unabridged Edition Audio CD:

87 of 90 people found the following review helpful. Come for the serial killer; stay for the fair.By Peter S. BradleyCome for the serial killer, stay for the fair.I will be absolutely honest and admit that I purchased the book because I was interested in the weird story of H.H.Holmes, American con-man, psychopath and serial killer. In fact, I will add to my confession, and shame, by saying that my interest was sparked by watching the episode of Timeless - a series unlikely to be renewed - where our trio of intrepid time-travelers goes back to the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition and have a misadventure in the "murder castle." I've never read anything by Erik Larsen before, but I know that he has a good number of books on the history section shelves and Ive seen this book in passing for years.I listened to this as an audiobook, and my initial reaction was that there was an awful lot about the 1893 Worlds Fair, especially the architecture of the Worlds Fair, than I was expecting or interested in. Frankly, my initial reaction was that all the detail about the planning of the Fair was getting in the way of the interesting bits about H.H. Holmes.However, about

half-way through the book, I found my interest shifting as I was sucked into the world of the Fair and the strangeness of the world right on the cusp of becoming the world we know, with lights and Cracker Jacks and Ferris wheels, but still possessing the instincts and customs of a more genteel and trusting age. I found that people like Frederick Law Olmsted and Daniel Burnham were becoming my heroes. Larsen structures his book as alternating narratives. One narrative follows the twisted path of Holmes; the other follows the life of the fair. There is no doubt that the Holmes narrative starts out in the lead because of the natural human interest in evil, and Holmes was evil. Larsen describes Holmes as America's first serial killer in an age when the language did not have the term serial killer to describe Holmes. Holmes was born Herman Webster Mudgett in 1861, studied medicine, married and abandoned his first wife, and, then, took the test for a pharmacy license under the name of H.H. Holmes and made his way to Chicago. In Chicago, he bought a pharmacy from a widow, who he probably conned, married a second wife, deposited the wife and his child in a suburb of Chicago, and then came up with the idea of transforming land he had purchased into a hotel in time for the upcoming Fair. Listening to the Holmes arc, two thoughts come to mind: first, he was psychopathic and, second, he didn't seem to understand how ridiculous his ideas were. For example, after scamming a brother-in-law, his plan to avoid discovery was to push the brother-in-law off of a roof. Who today would think such a thing would not be immediately seen for what it was? Likewise, Holmes built a hotel with secret rooms and gas lines to those rooms so that he could gas patrons, kill them and rob them. Women were constantly disappearing from his hotel, leaving their things behind. When the widow he bought his first pharmacy from simply disappeared, Holmes explained that she was visiting California. He courted and wed multiple wives simultaneously. His method for making bodies disappear was to have the bodies rendered into skeletons and then he would sell the skeletons to medical colleges. Today, who could be so naive as to expect that any of this would not be discovered or noticed? And that is partly the point. The era was a moment of transition. In the small towns that most people had lived in prior to the 1890s, everyone was under everyone else's supervision. In Chicago, however, the rules changed. People were anonymous and alone in a crowd. People were easy to lose in a world without phones or extensive police agencies. If someone went to California, it would take more than idle curiosity to locate them. It was a psychopath's utopia. Also, the casualness of death becomes apparent in Larsen's book. For example, Burnham's partner plunges into the October night and dies of pneumonia within a week. Larsen also describes how the sister of one of Holmes' victims suddenly took sick and died within a week. She was probably poisoned, but in that age it was not hard to believe that a healthy woman in her twenties could die of a sickness so quickly. I was working on a train accident fatality lawsuit during the time I listened to this book, so this passage had some significance to me: Anonymous death came early and often. Each of the thousand trains that entered and left the city did so at grade level. You could step from a curb and be killed by the Chicago Limited. Every day on average two people were destroyed at the city's rail crossings. Their injuries were grotesque. Pedestrians retrieved severed heads. There were other hazards. Streetcars fell from drawbridges. Horses bolted and dragged carriages into crowds. Fires took a dozen lives a day. In describing the fire dead, the term the newspapers most liked to use was roasted. In Fresno County where I live, which is a mostly rural county with a large urban population, there are only two unprotected crossings without signals in the entire county. The three people killed in this one accident was probably higher than the annual average for the last fifty years. Violent death was simply more common in the past. On the other hand, Larsen presents the White City of the Fair as the world that was dawning. The Fair brought millions of visitors to a location with lights and cultural diversity and sanitation and police protection. The idea that the architects are the heroes of the book seems strange since architects rarely play the role of hero, but Larsen manages to invest tension throughout the story arc about the Fair. Thus, there is tension in whether the architects will get the Fair built in time, and then there is tension about whether the Fair will turn a profit in the face of the economic depression gripping the country. There is also the heroism of George Washington Gale Ferris and his eccentric idea of building a huge wheel that would carry Pullman Car-sized boxes for passengers, although the most heroic act of the book, I thought, was the willingness of Mrs. Ferris to ride the thing on its maiden voyage as a rain of extra bolts cascaded down from the structure. I came to know and develop a liking for Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed New York's Central Park. Burnham is forgotten today but contributed to many American cities. My first term paper in history was one I wrote as a Junior in High School about Eugene V. Debs and the Pullman Strike of 1894, so it was something of a home-coming for me to read about the events that were occurring just before that strike, and to think that Debs and Darrow probably visited the Fair, maybe they ran across Holmes and Burnham. It occurs to me now that the Pullman Strike of 1894 was in 1894 because the closing of the Fair in 1893 exacerbated the economic crisis. Larsen writes: Ten thousand construction workers also left the fair's employ and returned to a world without jobs, already crowded with unemployed men. Once the fair closed, many thousands more would join them on Chicago's streets. The threat of violence was as palpable as the deepening cold of autumn. Mayor Harrison was sympathetic and did what he could. He hired thousands of men to clean streets and ordered police stations opened at night for men seeking a place to sleep. Chicago's Commercial and Financial Chronicle reported, Never before has there been such a sudden and striking cessation of industrial activity. Pig iron production fell by half, and new rail construction shrank almost to nothing. Demand for railcars to carry visitors to the exposition had spared the Pullman Works, but by the end of the fair George Pullman too began cutting wages and workers. He did not, however, reduce

the rents in his company town. The White City had drawn men and protected them; the Black City now welcomed them back, on the eve of winter, with filth, starvation, and violence.//Holmes story closes out with Holmes finally getting tripped up in an insurance swindle and an intrepid Pinkerton detective following the clues to prove that Holmes was a child-killer among his other sins. In that way, Holmes story arc concludes as a true crime story about a true crime story. Although I enjoyed and learned from this book, I would have to pick a nit with the fictionalization of some of the narrative. Larsen tells us that everything in his book is supported by documentary evidence, but he also acknowledges that he has made reasonable inferences about what happened at times. I think his inferences are reasonable, and I credit him for acknowledging what he has done, but I think that there are times when he offers his insights into what various people were thinking or feeling that he has gone too far and stepped outside of history proper into fiction. Obviously, this book is intended for the mass market and must keep reader interest. Also, we are a long way into non-fiction novels at this point, but there are moments when I as a history reader was woken up by Larsen describing what a character felt (when I would probably never have objected to the same information being couched as something the person might have thought, so if you interpolate those words, the book is in the genre of history.) In sum, don't be confused; this is not a true crime story. It is a sociological history/novel about a particular time in American history. Your interest in this book will vary depending on whether you are buying it as true crime or as history. 119 of 127 people found the following review helpful. Not exactly what I expected but still a good read. By L. Tison I probably should have read the description a little more closely. I thought this book would cover the World's Fair and H.H. Holmes in equal amounts. It does not. I will admit, the author thoroughly researched both topics, but it was clear to me his focus was on the architecture of the World's Fair. He is very detailed, but sometime it was almost too much detail. I am admittedly more interested in H.H. Holmes than architecture so that has something to do with my review. If you are reading this because you want to hear about H.H. Holmes, you may want to read a different book. However, if you are open to learning about the World's Fair, architecture, or Chicago history, this is worth the read. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Interesting Read With Too Much Bait and Switch By Lionel S. Taylor I thought that as far as it goes this was a good book on the Chicago Worlds Fair and an ok book on H.H. Holmes. I had not idea that so much effort had gone into the worlds fair and I thought that the author did an excellent job capturing the spirit and excitement of the times as well as the hard work and reputations put on the line to make it success. I would say that for anyone interested in the history of Chicago or the fair this is a must read book. If, however, you are wanting to learn much on the crimes committed H.H. Holmes then you will probable be disappointed. I realize that much of this is due to the fact that there is not a plethora of source material out there on Holmes and the author does make a strong case that the attention given to the Fair and the amount of out of towners and other people coming into town made it easier for him to commit his crimes by giving him a steady source of victims but it seems like the whole Holmes angle was a kinda tacked on to give the book just a little more sensationalism in order to sell copies. It would be as if I wrote a book about the post industrial decline of the Milwaukee metro area in the early 90's and threw in some accounts of the Jeffrey Dhalmer murders to increase sales. What make it especially disappointing about this book is that it was totally unnecessary. The main story about the Fair and all of the scandal and intrigue that went into it was interesting enough without what felt like a kinda tacked on murder story. This book either need to be a little shorter (without the murder story) or a little longer (with more of the murder story) by trying to split the difference it distracted from one story and did not do justice to the other.

Two men, each handsome and unusually adept at his chosen work, embodied an element of the great dynamic that characterized America's rush toward the twentieth century. The architect was Daniel Hudson Burnham, the fair's brilliant director of works and the builder of many of the country's most important structures, including the Flatiron Building in New York and Union Station in Washington, D.C. The murderer was Henry H. Holmes, a young doctor who, in a malign parody of the White City, built his "World's Fair Hotel" just west of the fairgrounds—a torture palace complete with dissection table, gas chamber, and 3,000-degree crematorium. Burnham overcame tremendous obstacles and tragedies as he organized the talents of Frederick Law Olmsted, Charles McKim, Louis Sullivan, and others to transform swampy Jackson Park into the White City, while Holmes used the attraction of the great fair and his own satanic charms to lure scores of young women to their deaths. What makes the story all the more chilling is that Holmes really lived, walking the grounds of that dream city by the lake. 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. In this book the smoke, romance, and mystery of the Gilded Age come alive as never before. Erik Larson's gifts as a storyteller are magnificently displayed in this rich narrative of the master builder, the killer, and the great fair that obsessed them both. To find out more about this book, go to <http://www.DevilInTheWhiteCity.com>.