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Always one to enjoy a little true crime, I had this book highly recommended to me by a very close friend. Erik Larson explores not only the electric sentiment surrounding the World’s Fair in Chicago, but also a sinister character hiding in the shadows, piling up a number of bodies while no one took much notice. The year is 1890 and Chicago is vying to win the right to host the World’s Fair. Set to take place in 1893, the fair has been promised to the United States, allowing a proper quadricenten Always one to enjoy a little true crime, I had this book highly recommended to me by a very close friend. Erik Larson explores not only the electric sentiment surrounding the World’s Fair in Chicago, but also a sinister character hiding in the shadows, piling up a number of bodies while no one took much notice. The year is 1890 and Chicago is vying to win the right to host the World’s Fair. Set to take place in 1893, the fair has been promised to the United States, allowing a proper quadricentennial celebration of Christopher Columbus’ arrival in the New World. After a gruelling vote by Congress, Chicago won the bid and preparations began. Headed by Daniel H. Burnham, the ‘World’s Columbian Exposition’ started its planning stages, seeking the best land, the greatest buildings, and the most elaborate set-up possible to impress the world. With a limited timetable, everything had to move at lightning speed, something that Burnham would soon realise turned out to be a snail’s pace. In the background, one Herman W. Mudgett, who goes by H. H. Holmes, arrived in the area and settled in Chicago. Professing a medical background, Holmes sought to invest in local businesses and lay down some roots. His innovative ideas caught the attention of many, which was paired with his magnetic personality. However, deep within him lurked a man who was infused with the devil’s own magic, or so he believed. Larson discusses early in the book about how Holmes laid the groundwork for numerous cases of insurance fraud, having people obtain life insurance policies and name him (sometimes using more pseudonyms) as the sole beneficiary. Holmes was also known to use his eyes of the deepest blue to lock onto a woman and decide how he might have her as his own. Larson offers up a wonderful narrative as to how Holmes subtly lured a certain young woman away from her husband, all while having the man invest deeper into a business venture. Once the woman had left her husband, he courted her and promised all the riches he could offer. He let nothing stand in his way, even a pregnancy that he sought to abort, removing all hurdles to his plans. Holmes brought the woman to his suite on Christmas Eve and killed her, though never allowed a single drop of blood to flow from her, thereby hiding much of the forensic evidence. A killer was born, at least in Chicago, though through some fast talking, Holmes convinced everyone that the victim had left to visit family, while selling her body to a local medical school once it had been disarticulated.With the fair set to open before too long, Burnham had yet to find his piece de resistance; something that would rival the Eiffel Tower in Paris from the fair not five years before. After a number of options proved too underwhelming and M. Eiffel’s attempt to create something new seemed to be a slap in the face, Burnham accepted an idea by a Mr. Ferris to create a massive wheel that would allow fair-goers to see the grounds and much of Chicago from a contained pod. With all the other preparations, Burnham left Ferris to create his masterpiece, hoping that it would be ready for the May 1,1893 opening. He set about making sure everything was running smoothly, while also being feted in the most extravagant ways (Larson includes the menus, which had my mouth watering). By the time the World’s Columbian Exposition opened, the Ferris Wheel was well behind schedule and fair-goers could only gawk at it, hoping that it might be up and running before too long. Burnham seethed in the background, as gate admissions proved to be troubling and the bankers were ready to call in their debts. Meanwhile, Holmes found a new woman to woo, choosing to present himself with a pseudonym so that no one would get suspicious. His plans grew as he had her help him prepare his hotel for the fair-goers, but would wait for things to really kick off before disappearing with more bodies attributable to his sinister work. Holmes surely had a taste for death, though his was far less gruesome than Jack the Ripper, the latest serial killer whose name had been splashed all across the tabloids only a few years before.In the culminating section of the book, Erik Larson offers the reader a glimpse not only into the wonders that the fair brought, but the intensity of Holmes and his killing spree. While the world was introduced to Juicy Fruit chewing gum, they were oblivious to the missing women who fell at the hands of a folded cloth of chloroform. Aunt Jemima instant pancake mix might have wooed households (more so than the new cereal, Shredded Wheat), Cracker Jacks offered up a new and sweet popcorn-based snack, and new technologies for communication and inter-personal socialisation. All the while, H. H. Holmes plotted horrible ways by which he could kill and feed his ever-growing need for power. In an interesting parallel, while the end of the exposition came, Holmes was also seeking to pack up and depart Chicago. Larson discusses some of the macabre events that saw the end of the exposition look blacker than Chicago had hoped. Holmes’ departure brought him to the attention of the authorities and a massive insurance fraud opened the door to some questions about the whereabouts of some who had gone missing. Larson shows how quickly things went from calm to chaotic and what led authorities to capture a serial killer no one even knew existed. A piece that will surely stay with me for years to come, as I make sure to find more books by Erik Larson to feed my appetite for this sort of writing. Recommended to those who love a chilling piece of true crime, as well as the reader whose love of history and late 19th century America remains high.Erik Larson offers readers a sensational piece of true crime, though it is so much more. His subtle telling of the murders committed by H. H. Holmes proves to add to the eerie nature of the entire experience, as he layers the narrative with the development and launching of the World’s Columbian Exposition. Featuring so much detail in the slow and methodical planning of the event, Larson pulls the reader into the middle of it all, as though they were there with Daniel H. Burnham through trial and tribulation. Equally as stunning is the means by which Larson told of the plotting Holmes undertook for each of his victims, making sure to fit himself into the community and win over the hearts of neighbours before causing the odd (and intricate) disappearance. Larson could not have added more detail, as it truly feels to the reader as though they are right there, down to the ‘large ice fangs that covered the trains one January night as the engines travelled along the tracks’. It is this depiction that turns this from a book of true crime to one in which the reader can almost sense what is lurking in the shadows. Some may wish to bolt their doors, others might not want to go out after dark, and still others may be left wondering about their neighbours and acquaintances, such is the depth to which Larson makes the reader feel a part of the action. The book is broken into four parts, with vignettes that serve as chapters. Larson balances the narrative between the exposition and Holmes’ activities advancing both as the timeline requires. This is surely one of those books that will keep the reader wondering what to expect, especially those who are not familiar with the murders. With so much to see and do throughout the book, the reader is sure to get lost amongst all the action and the numerous characters. Erik Larson does his best to keep it straight and provides the reader with the ride of their life... and I am not even referring to the Ferris Wheel.Kudos, Mr. Larson, for a sensational depiction of a period of time meant to be celebratory, with a definite pall of darkness clouding over it. I will be checking out more of your work to see what else I might learn. Love/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at: Book for All Seasons, a different sort of Book Challenge... ..more The No. 1 New York Times bestseller about the architect who led the construction of the great Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, and the prolific serial killer who used the fair as a lure. Just blocks from the fairgrounds, the killer built a hotel of horrors equipped with an acid vat, dissection table and crematorium. The book won an Edgar Award for best fact-crime writing, and was a finalist for a National Book Award. In November 2010, Leonardo DiCaprio acquired the rights to make a feature film based on Devil, and has stated he plans to play the role of the killer, Dr. H. H. Holmes. “[Larson] relentlessly fuses history and entertainment to give this nonfiction book the dramatic effect of a novel. Mr. Larson has written a dynamic, enveloping book....It doesn’t hurt that this truth is stranger than fiction.”—The New York Times “A hugely engrossing chronicle of events public and private. Exceedingly well-documented, exhaustive without being excessive, and utterly fascinating. Its joined tales of an urban utopia with a sensational understory of the torture of innocents deserves to be hugely popular.”—Chicago Tribune “As absorbing a piece of popular history as one will ever hope to find.”—San Francisco Chronicle “A wonderfully unexpected book. . . . Larson is a historian . . . with a novelist’s soul.”—Chicago Sun-Times Review “So good, you find yourself asking how you could not know this already.”—Esquire “Another successful exploration of American history. . . . Larson skillfully balances the grisly details with the far-reaching implications of the Worlds Fair.”—USA Today “A great story, recounted with authority, entertainment, and insight...Larson writes with marvelous confidence, enthusiasm, polish, and scholarship.”—New York Daily News “[A] vivid history of the glittering Chicago World’s Fair and its dark side.”—New York magazine, best pick of the week “An irresistible page-turner that reads like the most compelling, sleep-defying fiction.”—Time Out New York “This is, in effect, the nonfiction Alienist [and] everything popular history should be.”—Publishers Weekly (starred review) “Gripping drama, captured with a reporter’s nose for a good story and a novelist’s flair for telling it...Superb.”—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

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