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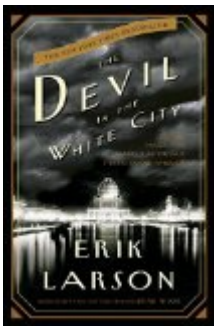

Erik Larson. *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America.* New York: Crown Publishers, 2003. xi + 447 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-609-60844-9.

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Published on H-USA (November, 2004)

The characteristic components of so-called "popular" American history--the foregrounding of (often melodramatic) plot, a heavy use of foreshadowing, vivid characterization, and inventive guesswork--are for all intents and purposes identical to those of a great deal of narrative fiction. And it is precisely because of popular history's heavy reliance on literary devices that it has long been regarded by academic historians as dangerously liable to misrepresent the past. Since the enormous critical success, however, of *In Cold Blood* (1966), Truman Capote's highly speculative account of the 1959 Clutter murders, the popular historian's embrace of imaginative story-telling has steadily gained credibility in the academy. Indeed, a newly respectable genre, the so-called "nonfiction novel," has even been invented to accommodate it. Over the last decade or so, moreover, prominent scholars have explored the grey area between fact and fiction for themselves, emphasizing vivid story-telling and characterization, and allowing much greater leeway for imagination--and even downright fabrication--in their works. In *Dead Certainties* (1992), for example, Simon Schama constructs a multitude of invented scenarios around the known facts of a celebrated murder case to emphasize the pervasive ambiguity that lies beneath and the vast terrain of the unknown that lies beyond historical inquiry. John Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive* (1994), an account of the capture, captivity, and subsequent refusal to return home of a Puritan woman, includes many imagined episodes (which are, at least, clearly identified as such) to suggest that reliance on the facts alone might limit the historian's sense of the past.

In the light of such experiments, and despite a great deal of scholarly resistance, the line of demarcation between academic and popular history (and, indeed, fiction) has become more permeable, allowing for the emergence of a newly reputable, if imprecisely defined, interdisciplinary ground. Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City*, a fact-based page-turner with aspirations to significant historical insight, belongs somewhere in this unsettled (and, for many, unsettling) zone. Combining comprehensive research with often fanciful conjecture, it tells the fascinating parallel tales of two remarkable men, each of whom pur-

sued an extraordinary undertaking that was linked to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Larson's framing narrative is the story of Daniel Burnham, the main architect, lead organizer, and day-to-day manager of the massive event. It was Burnham who brought together and directed an enormous cadre of architects, engineers, businessmen, laborers, and exhibitors, secured millions in congressional funding, and who in a scant eighteen months transformed a bleak wasteland on the shores of Lake Michigan into the monumental "White City." Larson's account of his desperate race against time and deft negotiation of a seemingly endless series of economic, logistical and bureaucratic hurdles is colorfully, if somewhat breathlessly, told. Its episodic chapters alternate with those of an equally suspenseful tale of ingenious ambition. A few blocks from the fair's grounds lived and worked Henry H. Holmes, a charming young confidence man and amateur architect. In his odd-looking but cleverly practical World's Fair Hotel, Holmes built a secret lair, complete with built-in crematorium and custom-designed gas vents, in which he murdered between nine and twenty-seven people. Most of his victims were young women, often new to the city, and it was in the magical and seductive atmosphere of the fair itself, Larson speculates, that Holmes lured them into his psychopathic grasp.

Fast-paced and abundantly anecdotal, ***The Devil in the White City*** reads first and foremost as a fascinating and speculative story (it has had an impressive run as a ***New York Times*** bestseller). In a special introductory "note," however, the author is careful to point out that "this is not a work of fiction" (even as he casts forward to "the action"). Highlighting his practice of distinguishing speculation from fact by putting only extracts from letters, memoirs, and other documents in quotation marks, Larson makes clear that his project should be understood as a serious historical inquiry into the nature of "the great dynamic that characterized the rush of America toward the twentieth century" (p. xi). As an interpretive analysis, however, the book he has produced is ultimately far less than satisfactory. The historian can forgive Larson's minimal engagement with scholarship (he is not, after all, an academic), but will still be disappointed to find little here in the way of original or nuanced argument. The analytical framework Larson relies on throughout is a too-neat dichotomy between Burnham's "White City," the gleaming neoclassical embodiment of civic optimism, and Holmes's "Black City," the hellish manifestation of urban despair. At almost every pause for reflection or narrative transition, his deployment of this reductive trope actually gets in the way of a more sensitive understanding of the two men, their projects, and the society that made them possible. In Larson's simplistic binary formulation, the White City was "the perfect city of Daniel Burnham's dreams," a vision shared by all progress-minded Chicagoans of everything their Black City should and could be (p. 255). "The exposition was Chicago's conscience," he declares, "the city it wanted to become" (p. 210).

Larson provides little in the way of actual evidence, however, to show that the Exposition was in fact understood by its masses of visitors (in letters, postcards, or the popular press, for example) as the visionary "conscience" of the city. It is quite plausible, of course, that the Fair presented many visitors with an attractive image--even, perhaps, what may have seemed like a practicable vision--of their city's future. With its cornucopia of consumer products and new inventions, its provision of the civic amenities and services that were so pitifully lacking outside of its gates, not to mention the Pullman Company's model worker town, the fair was certainly designed to celebrate corporate-sponsored progress. But Larson's account of the fair's origins makes it clear that this was no democratically generated ideal, or expression of popular "conscience," nor even the handiwork of a particular class, but rather the project of a tiny governmental, corporate, and professional elite. In fact, the entire Exposition was, to an amazingly large extent, the conception of a single individual;

and it is Larson's breathless admiration of the sheer scale and beauty of Daniel Burnham's achievement that leads him to conflate one man's vision with the "conscience" of the city itself.

Having established Burnham's fair as the "white" conscience of the squalor and chaos that was "black" Chicago, Larson is loathe to criticize it, opting instead for the popular historian's emphasis on colorful anecdote and suspense. His chronicle of Burnham's enthusiasms--for monochrome (a creamy white) monumentalism, neoclassicism, engineering marvels, strict regulations, merchandising, executive power, and ruthless efficiency--is strangely shy of interpretive analysis, as if to explain their cultural meaning and social significance would be to detract from the "magic" of their realization. Larson does point out that in the end the Exposition "proved unable to hold the Black City at bay for very long," once the Panic of 1893 and subsequent depression took hold (p. 334). But, again, he does not explain why or how the White City might have served to hold the realities of crisis and unrest at bay, and what or whose purposes it might have served in so doing.

With Burnham and Holmes as his representative men, Larson understands his material as, in the end, a timeless morality play that illustrates "the ineluctable conflict between good and evil, daylight and darkness, the White City and the Black" (p. xi). It is this core assumption of the ageless verities of an unchanging human nature that ultimately explains this author's weak sense of historical contingency. When Larson does turn his attention to contextual explanation, moreover, his language becomes frustratingly abstract. To explain why the projects of Burnham's fair and Holmes's hotel were possible in this particular time and place, he weakly invokes "the forces of change that during this time convulsed Chicago," offering no further clarification (p. 6). He provides his reader with little sense of what exactly those "forces" were (one must assume, of course, that they were dichotomous) beyond vague allusions to a "savage" quest for wealth and power.

It is his devotion to the Black City/White City dichotomy that prevents Larson from paying close enough attention to significant similarities and parallels between the worlds and personalities of Burnham and Holmes. If the fair was in any way Chicago's "conscience," then much of the material that Larson presents suggests that it was not so much an ***alternate*** moral reality to the marketeering, industrializing city and the values that drove it, but rather a spiffed up, sanitized version of them. After all, as Larson himself points out, if the Exposition was a magic kingdom, it was one where the "sense of ownership was everywhere" and whose heart lay in the unprecedented degree to which it commodified experience (p. 288). In each of their ventures, moreover, Burnham and Holmes proceeded along remarkably ***similar*** lines. Each of them was an efficient manager, drawing profitably on a large pool of young, newly mobile, unemployed workers and maintaining tight control over his project by promoting a high turnover rate and a rigorous division of labor. Burnham's inventive schemes to promote merchandizing and profits were matched by Holmes's wily retail frauds, from sham drugs to bicycles resold without paying off the initial purchase to the dissection and selling of the bodies of his victims as cadavers. And technological innovation--enthusiastically pursued by both men--manifested its capacity for the cheapening of life not only in the fair's display of the first electric chair, but also in Holmes's deathly efficient vault and kiln.

Larson does note that Burnham and Holmes shared personality traits that served them well in their careers. Both men were enormously ambitious, intelligent, resourceful, and energetic; both had humble origins, and both were what today we would call upwardly mobile. And the psychopathic Holmes in particular, Larson observes, "fit the prevailing ideal of the self-made man who through hard work and invention pulled himself

rung by rung into the upper strata of society" (p. 64). Such insights beg for interpretive unpacking, but Larson is content to leave them be as suggestive speculations rather than starting points for historical inquiry.

Larson concludes his story/study with the same formulation with which he begins it; the schematic observation that late-nineteenth-century urban despair was "twinned" with civic "optimism" and thereby illustrates the timeless and "ineluctable" struggle between good and evil. What has eluded him entirely, however, is a much more complex and ambiguous moral and aesthetic (and psychological) reality, central to which (it can be argued) was Burnham's and Holmes's most telling characteristic; their respective projects' fundamental ***inauthenticity***. Holmes's World's Fair Hotel was, of course, a façade and a fake, just as Holmes himself was a relentless fraudster (even the name, Holmes, was his invention). Burnham's White City, too, despite the enormous expense and effort that went into it, was ultimately a temporary ***imitation*** of civic grandeur and progress, more the appearance than the reality of monumental urbanism (what appeared to be its massive marble and stone facades were in fact whitewashed staff). Noting that alienists diagnosed Holmes as a mere mimic of the human personality (William Stead's ***Pall Mall Gazette*** announced flatly that "he is not real"), Larson does observe that, in many ways, the psychopath's new personality type fit the profile of the ideal Gilded Age Chicagoan, the self-invented, self-made man, and that in this sense the serial killer was "truly a man of the age" (p. 100). Yet he entirely overlooks the fact that, in his eminently sane ambition and dedication to advancement, Daniel Burnham was even in his own time also seen as a fake. Certainly, the great harbinger of American architectural modernism, Louis Sullivan, regarded Burnham as the mimic of a dead neo-classical vernacular whose White City presented America with an entirely fraudulent image of itself. Larson is finally unimpressed by such high-stakes moral and aesthetic perspectives and their implications, however, preferring to entertain his reader with his Black and White melodrama. In the end, the contest in the nonfiction novel between invention and truth is in this case pretty much one-sided. In ***The Devil in the White City***, a novelistic and formulaic popular history consistently wins out over the investigative seriousness of history.

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Citation: Colin Morris. Review of Larson, Erik. *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America.* H-USA, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.

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