

Larson, Erik  
THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY [pointer]  
Crown (436 pp.)  
\$25.95  
February 2003  
ISBN 0-609-60844-4

A vivid account of the tragedies and triumphs of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and the concurrent depravities of America's first serial killer.

Larson, a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, is the author of other nonfiction works, including the best-selling *Isaac's Storm*. In roughly alternating chapters, he here tells the stories of Daniel H. Burnham, chief planner and architect of Chicago's late 19th century World's Fair, and Dr. Henry Howard Holmes, whose rambling World's Fair Hotel, just a short streetcar ride from the exposition, housed windowless rooms, a gas chamber, secret chutes, and a basement crematory, of which the author remarks, "Only Poe could have dreamed the rest." The contrast in these accomplishments of determined human endeavor could not be more stark—or chilling. Burnham assembled what a contemporary called "the greatest meeting of artists since the 15th century" to turn the wasteland of Chicago's swampy Jackson Park into the ephemeral White City that enthralled nearly 28 million visitors in a single summer. The entire U.S. population at the time was 65 million. Overcoming gargantuan obstacles—politically-entangled delays, labor unrest, an economic panic, and a fierce Chicago winter—to say nothing of the architectural challenges, Burnham and his colleagues, including the designer of New York's Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted, produced their marvel in just over two years. Not only was the fair a city unto itself, it was the first to make wide-scale use of alternating current to illuminate its 200,000 incandescent bulbs. Spectacular engineering feats included Ferris' gigantic wheel, intended to "out-Eiffel Eiffel," and, ominously, the latest example of Krupp's artillery, "breathing of blood and carnage." Dr. Holmes, a frequent visitor to the fair, was the consummate swindler and lady-killer who secured his victims' trust through "courteous, audacious rascality." Most were comely young women, and estimates of their total ranged from the nine whose bodies, or parts thereof, were recovered, to nearly 200. Larson does a superb job outlining this "ineluctable conflict between good and evil, daylight and darkness, the White City and the Black."

Bringing both his reporter's nose for story and a novelist's flair for its telling, Larson delivers a gripping account of events that shaped America in the twentieth century and beyond. [6 black-and-white photos, 1 map, not seen]