

Devil in the white city essay



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Devil in the White City written by Erik Larson is a true story based on the building of the most important fair in the United States of America, the 1893 Columbian Exposition World's Fair in Chicago. Erik Larson also told the story of the psychopathic murderer; H. H. Holmes used his World's Fair Hotel as an evil castle to lure in young women who came to see the fair. The story starts off with Larson describing that Chicago won the Congressional vote to host the World's Fair and beat out its competition New York City. In only two short years, the White City was built.

The fair brought in an estimated 40 million visitors in the only six months it was open. Daniel Burnham was the chief architect of the World's Fair. Burnham had the staggering task of hiring the best of the best engineers, architects and designers in the country. No one thought the task of building the World's Fair in the Black City of Chicago would be accomplished given the amount of time of two years they had to build it. The successful result of the White City, the World's Fair, changed people's perceptions of their own cities, architects, and designers. Erik Larson and many newspaper businesses referred to Chicago as the Black City.

Chicago was known as the city where many people, mostly young women, disappeared. With the reputation of being a city as " a gigantic peepshow of utter horror, but extraordinarily to the point," (Larson 2003, 28), many citizens did not think highly of the city. Chicago was shown as a city that was affected by many different " devils. " With a murderer on the loose during the time of the World's Fair, unemployment rates rising, filth in the form of rats and dirt on the streets, these " devils" transformed Chicago as a city going toward the darkness. Many people visited the city of Chicago.

The perception most citizens took from their experiences either awed them or terrified them, but it did not change their views that "...Chicago was a secondary city that preferred butchered hogs to Beethoven," (Larson 2003, 16). People were killed in railroad crossings, trampled by horses in massive crowds, killed in fires and died of diseases like influenza, typhus, diphtheria and cholera. Once immigrants started to arrive in the city, Chicago started to grow upwards. " It got bigger, taller, and richer; but it also grew dirtier, darker, and more dangerous," (Larson 2003, 27).

Chicago had everything to gain by hosting the most important fair in the United States. At the end of the book in Erik Larson's notes, he explained that " 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," (Larson 2003, 393). Civic Honor was the most powerful force found throughout Chicago. Having the World's Fair in Chicago was a way for Chicago to create a new identity for itself that was not given to them by the eastern states and cities.

If Chicago could finish the fair successfully, it " would dispel at last the eastern perception that Chicago was nothing more than a greedy, hog-slaughtering backwater," (Larson 2003, 13). If Chicago failed to create the World's Fair, in time " failure would bring humiliation from which the city would not soon recover, given how heartily its leading men had boasted that Chicago would prevail," (Larson 2003, 14). The most memorable recovery in the United States was when Chicago was able to rebuild the city from nothing after the Great Fire of 1871.

Chicago was able to transform itself into one of the nation's leaders in manufacturing, architecture, and commerce. Burnham had the overwhelming task to rebuild the "Black City" of Chicago into the beautiful "White City" of the World's Fair in Chicago. If Chicago could beat France's Eiffel Tower and their Exposition Universelle, it would prove to the whole world that the United States was a force to be reckoned with. Daniel Burnham was made the Chief of Construction for the World's Fair by the Exposition board on October 30th.

Many of the people that came in contact with Burnham "liked his strength, his steady blue gaze, and the confidence with which he conducted the conversation," (Larson 2003, 20). Burnham and his partner John Root were Chicago's leading architects. Daniel Burnham had experience in designing buildings that had never been attempted. Despite the soil conditions, Burnham and Root built the very first skyscraper, The Montauk. Burnham had extraordinary managerial and organizational skills. Burnham and Root together were able to build their firm to be one of the best in Chicago.

They continued to do many challenging projects such as the Rookery and the Monadnock. Daniel Burnham handled many difficult times before he made a positive name for himself. Burnham was also very good to all his employees, "He installed a gym. During lunch hour employees played handball.

Burnham gave fencing lessons. Root played impromptu recitals on a rented piano," (Larson 2003, 27). In 1885, a fire had destroyed the Grannis Block that was Burnham and Root's flagship structure. In 1888, "a hotel they had designed in Kansas City collapsed during construction, injuring several men and killing one" (Larson 2003, 9). With all the verbal attacks on Burnham's

career over both of the incidences, he remained very calm, but he was still very heartbroken.

Daniel Burnham had to overcome many manmade and natural obstacles in building the World's Fair. The most important obstacle Burnham had to overcome was time. He was only given three years to build the World's Fair. Daniel Burnham hired four architects from New York and Kansas; Chicago architects felt very betrayed that Burnham asked for New York architects instead. John Root's death was a huge surprise to the entire world. Outsiders wondered if Root's death might mean the death of the exposition.

The newspapers were full of interviews in which the city's leading men described Root as the guiding force behind the fair, that without him the city could not hope to realize its dreams," (Larson 2003, 108). There were many union strikes against the immigrant workers, long workdays, and wages. " Two nights later the city's union met with officers of the fair to demand that they limit the workday to eight hours, pay union-scale wages, and hire union workers before all others" (Larson 2003, 119).

Weather was a natural obstacle that was constant throughout the building of the World's Fair. Because of the excessive amount of rain, the soil the World's Fair was built on became very unstable and felt like gumbo. Based on the short amount of time given to build the fair, the workers would not have enough time to build the structures out of stone, steel or bricks. Instead, " They [Burnham and the architects] voted to clad their buildings in ' staff' a resilient mixture of plaster and jute that could be molded into

columns and statuary and spread over wood frames to provide the illusion of stone" (Larson 2003, 120).

H. H. Holmes was diagnosed as a psychopath. Many people did not fully understand exactly what a psychopath was. He killed for his own pleasure. Holmes had stated, " I was born with the devil in me. I could not help the fact that I was a murderer, no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing," (Larson 2003, 109). Once Holmes graduated from college, he moved to Illinois and changed his name from Herman Webster Mudgett to H. H. Holmes and started his life of deception and murder. In order for Holmes to lure in his victims, " he broke prevailing rules of casual intimacy.

He stood too close, stared too hard, touched too much and long and women adored him for it" (Larson 2003, 36). Women felt comfortable around him; they could not help but smile whenever he was in the room. Because of how cunning his personality was, Holmes was able to receive anything he wanted or needed with little or no cost to himself. Holmes also decided to marry two different women. He married his first wife, Mrs. Herman Webster Mudgett, when he still had his birth name. Holmes " filed a petition in the Supreme Court of Cook Country, Illinois, to divorce Lovering [Mrs. Herman Webster Mudgett]," (Larson 2003, 63).

Under the false name H. S. Campbell, Holmes bought the land across the street from the pharmacy he owned. Although Holmes was a bad architect, he never consulted with other certified architects. The World's Fair Hotel had three floors. The first floor had retail shops and a restaurant. The second and third floors were apartments for the visitors coming to see the World's Fair.

Holmes had put in a wooden chute from the second floor all the way to the basement. There was a large walk-in vault with airtight seams and a closet with a gas jet installed in the corner.

Many of the rooms on the second and third floors had gas jets connected into the vents. In order to keep his workers from finding out what the hotel was actually for, he would fire them, saying they were doing a horrible job. He never had to pay the workers any money. None of the workers ever went to the police, so Holmes decided to continue his plan of firing every worker. Most of Holmes' victims were young and vulnerable women. Holmes did not just limit himself to young women; whenever the opportunity presented itself, he killed men and young boys for his own personal and pleasurable gain. He was a psychopath with no moral core.

Holmes was able to charm women into working at his retail stores and restaurants and rent them apartments on the second and third floors while they visited Chicago for the World's Fair. Holmes was able to seduce and mesmerize every one of his victims. He killed his victims by locking them in an airtight vault and gassing them with poisonous fumes, or dissecting the bodies and selling the skeleton to medical schools, or smothering their faces with ether-soaked rags. The World's Fair was held in Jackson Park, Chicago, Illinois.

There were hundreds of buildings which were occupied by exhibits and restaurants. One of the delights of the fair was never knowing who might turn up beside you at the chocolate Venus de Milo or at the hearse exhibit or under the barrel of Krupp's monster," (Larson 2003, 284). The World's Fair

was called the White City because it was considered a magical place.

Chicago was able to change its name from “ Black City” to the “ White City”.

The World’s Fair became one of the cleanest places in Chicago: “ here in the White City of the fair visitors found clean public bathrooms, pure water, an ambulance service, electric streetlights, and a sewage-processing system that yielded acres of manure for farmers.

There was a daycare [center] for the children of the visitors” (Larson 2003, 247). Some of the most important people in the late nineteenth century arrived at the fair, among them were Thomas Edison, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Clarence Darrow, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Buffalo Bill, and Helen Keller. The White City was a turning point from the old era to the more technological, cultural, and political era. There were many different inventions that debuted at the World’s Fair. The Ferris wheel was the most important and most popular invention.

The Ferris wheel was designed by George Ferris specifically for the World’s Fair. The wheel was made to make Mr. Eiffel and France’s Eiffel Tower look diminutive. The World’s Fair also showed its visitors “ the first ever all-electric kitchen, which introduced an automatic dishwasher and a box purporting to contain everything a cook would need to make pancakes, under the brand name Aunt Jemima’s” (Larson 2003, 247). The fair also had samples of a new gum called Juicy Fruit, a camel-coated popcorn called Cracker Jack, a new Cereal called Shredded Wheat, and a new beer called Pabst Blue Ribbon.

Many visitors were able to see the first moving pictures on Edison's Kinetoscope, as well as eating "omelets made from ostrich eggs, though in fact the eggs came from domestic chickens" (Larson 2003, 236). The White City of the World's Fair caught the eye of anyone who was able to have their once-in-a-lifetime chance at seeing beautiful architectural buildings and a diverse amount of people such as belly dancers and real Native American Indians. The World's Fair also introduced the Pledge of Allegiance and Columbus Day.

The World's Fair was Chicago's redemption. Cities began to see it [World's Fair] as a prize to be coveted, mainly for stature it would confer, stature being a powerful lure in this age, when pride of place ranked second only to pride of blood," (Larson 2003, 16). Chicago was able to transform a part of its Black City into a beautiful majestic White City. The White City was able to show America how beautiful, safe, and clean the city could become. It taught young men and women that cities did not have to be dark and unsafe. With just some work, a city such as Chicago could become beautiful. "The Fair's greatest impact lay in how it changed the way

Americans perceived their cities and their architects. It primed the whole of America- not just a few rich architectural patrons- to think of cities in a way they never had before," (Larson 2003, 373). The Fair's success opened up many doors for writers; William Stead wrote *If Christ Came to Chicago*, a book based on the contrast between the Black City and the White City. *If Christ Came to Chicago*, by William Stead helped "[launch] the City Beautiful movement, which sought to elevate American cities to the level of the great cities of Europe," (Larson 2003, 374).

The World's Fair helped America to transform into a more modern, technological, political era. In order for people to see the fair, they had to travel one way or another; the railroad stations started getting more business. In the late nineteenth century, many people did not try to accomplish tasks that they thought could not be done. When Daniel Burnham successfully finished the World's Fair, the people had changed their perceptions of their architects from a negative attitude to a positive attitude.

Many cities, such as New York, wanted to have magnificent structures in order to grow in population and financially. During the nineteenth century, there were many labor problems; during the building of the White City, Burnham hired over twenty thousand employees. Erik Larson successfully portrayed the true story based on the building of the most important fair in the United States of America. Daniel Burnham was the chief architect of the World's Fair; he had to hire thousands of engineers, architects, and designers in the country.

With no one giving Daniel Burnham any support, no one expected the World's Fair to be finished in the only two years. The successful result of the White City, the World's Fair, changed people's perceptions of their own cities as well as their designers and architects. In the six months the White City was open, the fair brought in an estimated forty million visitors and hundreds of thousands of dollars. The White City also had a dark secret; there was a psychopathic murderer on the loose who lured in young women who came to see the fair by using H. H. Holmes World's Fair Hotel as an evil torture chamber.