

Dead Wake (Larson)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)

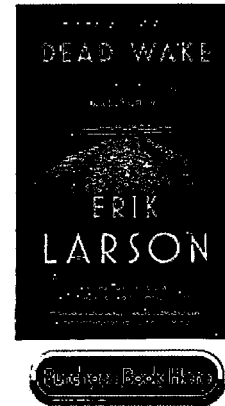
Dead Wake: *The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*

Erik Larson, 2015

Crown/Archetype

480 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780307408860



Summary

The enthralling story of the sinking of the Lusitania

With his remarkable new work of nonfiction *Dead Wake*, Erik Larson ushers us aboard the *Lusitania* as it begins its tragic and final crossing. It is a timely trip, as 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the disaster.

Setting sail on May 1, 1915, from New York, the *Lusitania* was a monument to the hubris and ingenuity of the age. It was immense and luxurious, the fastest civilian ship then in service, and carried a full roster of passengers, including a record number of infants and children.

The passengers were surprisingly at ease, even though that morning a German notice had appeared in the city's newspapers warning that travelers sailing on British ships "do so at their own risk." Though the notice didn't name a particular vessel, it was widely interpreted as being aimed at the *Lusitania*. The idea that a German submarine could sink the ship struck many passengers as preposterous, a sentiment echoed in Cunard's official response to the warning: "The truth is that the *Lusitania* is the safest boat on the sea. She is too fast for any submarine. No German war vessel can get her or near her."

German U-boat captain Walther Schwieger—known to rescue dachshund puppies, but to let the crews of torpedoed ships drown—thought differently. *Dead Wake* switches between hunter and hunted, allowing readers to experience the crossing, and the disaster itself, as it unfolds.

Along the way, Larson paints a portrait of America at the height of the Progressive Era, and brings to life a broad cast of characters, including President Woodrow Wilson, awash in grief after the loss of his wife, awakening with the blush of new love; famed Boston bookseller Charles Lauriat, a passenger carrying an irreplaceable literary treasure; Captain William Thomas Turner, who took the safety of his passengers very seriously, but secretly thought of them as "bloody monkeys"; and Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, whose ultra-secret spy group

failed to convey crucial naval intelligence that might have saved the Lusitania and its passengers.

Like his monumental *In the Garden of Beasts*, the result is a captivating book that is rich in atmosphere. Thrillingly told and full of surprises, *Dead Wake* captures the sheer drama and emotional power of a disaster whose intimate details and true meaning have long been obscured in the mists of history. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—January 3, 1954
- Where—Brooklyn, New York, USA
- Raised—Freeport (Long Island), New York
- Education—B.A., University of Pennsylvania; M.S., Columbia University
- Awards—Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime, 2004
- Currently—lives in New York City and Seattle, Washington

Erik Larson is an American journalist and nonfiction author. Although he has written several books, he is particularly well-known for three: *The Devil in the White City* (2003), a history of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and serial killer H. H. Holmes, *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and An American Family in Hitler's Berlin* (2011), a portrayal of William E. Dodd, the first American ambassador to Nazi Germany, and his daughter Martha, and *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania* (2015).

Early life

Born in Brooklyn, Larson grew up in Freeport, Long Island, New York. He studied Russian history at the University of Pennsylvania and graduated summa cum laude in 1976. After a year off, he attended the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, graduating in 1978.

Journalism

Larson's first newspaper job was with the *Bucks County Courier Times* in Levittown, Pennsylvania, where he wrote about murder, witches, environmental poisons, and other "equally pleasant" things. He later became a features writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time* magazine, where he is still a contributing writer. His magazine stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and other publications.

Books

Larson has also written a number of books, beginning with *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities* (1992), followed by *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun* (1995). Larson's next books were *Isaac's Storm* (1999), about the experiences of Isaac Cline during the Galveston Hurricane of 1900, and *The Devil in the White City* (2003), about the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and a series of murders by H. H. Holmes that were committed in the city

around the time of the Fair.

The Devil in the White City won the 2004 Edgar Award in the Best Fact Crime category. Next, Larson published *Thunderstruck* (2006), which intersperses the story of Hawley Harvey Crippen with that of Guglielmo Marconi and the invention of radio. His next book, *In the Garden of Beasts* (2011), concerns William E. Dodd, the first American ambassador to Nazi Germany and his daughter. *Dead Wake*, published in 2015, is an account of the sinking of the Lusitania, which led to America's intervention in World War I.

Teaching and public speaking

Larson has taught non-fiction writing at San Francisco State University, the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and the University of Oregon, and he has spoken to audiences from coast to coast.

Personal

Larson and his wife have three daughters. They reside in New York City, but maintain a home in Seattle, Washington. (*From Wikipedia. Retrieved 2/17/2015.*)

Book Reviews

Few tales in history are more haunting, more tangled with investigatory mazes or more fraught with toxic secrets than that of the final voyage of the Lusitania..... Erik Larson is one of the modern masters of popular narrative nonfiction. In book after book, he's proved adept at rescuing weird and wonderful gothic tales from the shadows of history. Larson is both a resourceful reporter and a subtle stylist.... Erik Larson and the sinking of the Lusitania would seem to be an ideal pairing. The mighty ocean liner was the paragon of civilization, big and fast, strong and sleek, tricked out with every kind of innovation, a White City on the high seas. And hunting it was an ever sly and furtive machine of the deep, a nautical sociopath with an unquenchable thirst for bringing down tonnage. When it comes to the story of the sociopath, the Larson magic is very much on display in *Dead Wake*.

Hampton Sides - New York Times Book Review

[A] riveting account of one of the most tragic events of WWI.... Larson crafts the story as historical suspense by weaving information about the war and the development of submarine technology with an interesting cast of characters.... [B]y the end, we care about the individual passengers we've come to know.

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Using archives on both sides of the Atlantic, Larson describes the Lusitania's ominous delayed departure and its distressing reduced speed. He vividly illustrates how these foreboding factors led to terror, tragedy, and ultimately the Great War. VERDICT Once again, Larson transforms a complex event into a thrilling human interest story. —*Stephanie Sendaula*

Library Journal

(Starred review.) Factual and personal to a high degree, the narrative reads like a grade-A thriller.

Booklist

[Larson] has always shown a brilliant ability to unearth the telling details of a story and has the narrative chops to bring a historical moment vividly alive. But in his new book, Larson simply outdoes himself... What is most compelling about *Dead Wake* is that, through astonishing research, Larson gives us a strong sense of the individuals—passengers and crew—aboard the *Lusitania*, heightening our sense of anxiety as we realize that some of the people we have come to know will go down with the ship. A story full of ironies and "what-ifs," *Dead Wake* is a tour de force of narrative history (*Top Pick*).

BookPage

(Starred review.) Larson once again demonstrates his expert researching skills and writing abilities, this time shedding light on nagging questions about the sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915.... An intriguing, entirely engrossing investigation into a legendary disaster. Compared to Greg King and Penny Wilson's *Lusitania* (2014)..., Larson's is the superior account.

Kirkus Reviews**Discussion Questions**

1. In his Note to Readers, Erik Larson writes that before researching *Dead Wake*, he thought he knew "everything there was to know" about the sinking of the *Lusitania*, but soon realized "how wrong [he] was." What did you know about the *Lusitania* before reading the book? Did any of Larson's revelations surprise you?
2. After reading *Dead Wake*, what was your impression of Captain Turner? Was he cautious enough? How did you react to the Admiralty's attempts to place the blame for the *Lusitania's* sinking squarely on his shoulders?
3. Erik Larson deftly weaves accounts of glamorous first-class passengers such as Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt with compelling images of middle-class families and of the ship's crew. Whose personal story resonated the most with you?
4. Charles Lauriat went to extraordinary measures to protect his Thackeray drawings and his rare edition of *A Christmas Carol*, but eventually both were lost. In Lauriat's position, which possessions would you have tried to save? Why does Larson write in such great detail about the objects people brought aboard the *Lusitania*?
5. Edith Galt Wilson would come to play a significant role in the White House after

Woodrow Wilson suffered a massive stroke in 1919. What made her a good match for Wilson? What other aspects of Wilson's personal life did you find intriguing?

6. Why was Wilson so insistent on maintaining neutrality even as German U-boat attacks claimed American lives? Was his reluctance to go to war justified?

7. How did you respond to the many what-ifs that Larson raises about U.S. involvement in the Great War? Would Wilson have abandoned his isolationist stance without the *Lusitania* tragedy? Could Germany and Mexico have succeeded in conquering the American Southwest?

8. By attacking civilian ships, were Captain Schwieger and his U-20 crew committing acts of terrorism? Does it matter that Germany ran advertisements declaring the waters around Great Britain to be a war zone?

9. How did Captain Schwieger's leadership style compare with that of Captain Turner? Did you feel sympathy for Schwieger and his crew?

10. Though the British Navy was tracking U-20's location, it didn't alert the *Lusitania*, nor did it provide a military escort. Why not? Do you consider Churchill and Room 40 partly to blame for the sinking? How should countries balance the integrity of their intelligence operations with their duty to protect civilians?

11. Some have argued that Churchill deliberately chose not to protect the *Lusitania* in hopes that the sinking of such a prominent ship would draw the United States into the war. After reading Larson's account, what do you think of this theory?

12. While Germany's advertisement scared away some would-be *Lusitania* passengers, most placed their faith in the British Navy to protect the ship, and some laughed off the risk altogether. In their position, would you have cancelled your ticket?

13. What lessons does the sinking of the *Lusitania* have for us in the twenty-first century?

(Questions issued by the publisher.)

top of page (summary)

About the Author

**Full text biography:****Erik Larson****Birth Date :** 1954**Place of Birth :** United States, New York, New York**Nationality:** American**Occupation :** Writer**Table of Contents:****Awards****Personal Information****Career****Writings****Media Adaptions****Sidelights****Related Information****Awards:**

National Book Award for nonfiction nomination, 2003, and Edgar Allan Poe Award, 2004, both for *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair That Changed America*; Best History & Biography Prize, Goodreads Choice Awards, 2015, for *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*.

Personal Information:

Born January 1, 1954, in Brooklyn, NY; married; wife's name Christine (a doctor); children: three daughters. **Education:** University of Pennsylvania, B.A. (summa cum laude), 1976; Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, M.S., 1978. **Addresses:** Home: Seattle, WA; New York, NY. Agent: David Black, David Black Literary Agency, 335 Adams St., Ste. 2710, Brooklyn, NY 11201. **E-mail:** erik@eriklarsonbooks.com.

Career Information:

Author, journalist, and teacher. *Bucks County Courier Times*, Levittown, PA, former reporter; *Wall Street Journal*, New York, NY, former feature writer; *Time*, New York, senior writer. Has taught nonfiction writing at San Francisco State University, Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and University of Oregon.

Writings:

- *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities*, Holt (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis*, Crown (New York, NY), 1994, reprinted as *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun*, Vintage (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History*, Crown (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, Crown (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Thunderstruck*, Crown (New York, NY), 2006.
- *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*, Crown (New York, NY), 2011.
- *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, Crown (New York, NY), 2014.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*.

Media Adaptions:

Isaac's Storm, abridged sound recording, narrated by Edward Herrman, Random House, 1999; research for *The Naked Consumer* became the subject of Nova documentary, *We Know Where You Live*, broadcast on PBS; *The Devil in the White City* was optioned for film, 2010; *In the Garden of Beasts* was optioned for film, 2011.

Sidelights:

Erik Larson is a journalist and author. His first book, *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities*, is an investigation of how American consumers have become the victims of consumer espionage, wherein the details of their lives have become readily accessible to marketers who use such details to choose their targets. Larson tells how data can be gleaned from the U.S. Census Bureau, communications services, banks, medical records, deeds, lists, drivers' licenses, and electronic and human spies. With these facts, marketers create profiles based on income, credit, health, status, ethnicity, and spending habits. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that the data "then serves as the indispensable basis for insidious commercial appeals that exploit consumers' fears, vanity, and greed." Alexander Star wrote in *New Republic* that Larson's "most arresting pages detail the development and possible convergence of two devices—the 'passive audience meter' and the supermarket scanner. ... Larson expects the passive meter to become a standard feature of the Nielsen household within a few years. Unlike the old Nielsen box, the meter can break down audience preferences by the second." Larson objects to the Universal Product Code, or bar code, that appears on nearly everything consumers buy. He writes that marketing companies match up what viewers watch on television with what they buy and plan advertising accordingly. Larson shows how easily privacy abuse and manipulation are carried out by advertising agencies. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor opined that Larson "offers strong ammunition against an enemy so insidious that most people don't even know it's there."

John Carroll wrote in *Technology Review* that "marketers know when we're expecting a baby, when we've purchased a house, when we've bought the farm. Like youngsters with their stacks of trading cards, businesses flip us and swap us and bundle us into neat little piles." Carroll said that "by fostering what Larson calls the Culture of the Second Guess, marketers have come to concentrate their efforts on refining their selling techniques rather than their products. Ironically, they may have become too smart for their own good. Because of their targeted promotions and hell-bent couponing, companies have in effect reduced brand loyalty and blurred product distinctions. Relative performance has been overshadowed by relative price. Larson contends that this game reduces creativity in the marketplace. ... As a result, today's manufacturers and marketers substitute pandering and short-term focus for the inspiration of new ideas."

Larson wrote a series about the gun culture in America for the *Wall Street Journal* and studies the subject in his book *Lethal Passage: How the Travels of a Single Handgun Expose the Roots of America's Gun Crisis*, reprinted as *Lethal Passage: The Story of a Gun*. His interest in the subject began in 1980 when his Maryland neighborhood experienced a series of drive-by shootings. He wanted to find out how kids were getting guns and began with a crime that occurred in 1988, when sixteen-year-old Nicholas Elliot took a Cobray M-11/9 to his Virginia Beach school, where he killed one teacher, injured another, and terrorized students. The semiautomatic handgun jammed, preventing Elliot from inflicting further injury. "Larson's journey discloses a commercial system shot through with venality, social irresponsibility, and ingrained bad habits of skirting legality," wrote Ray Olson in *Booklist*.

After he found that the gun had been purchased by Elliot's uncle at a gun show, Larson applied for and easily obtained a federal gun dealer's license. *Playboy* reviewer Digby Diehl wrote that "as a licensed dealer, Larson also became privy to the secret world of gun sales. His thorough investigative report is the most shocking documentation yet of America's gun epidemic, which includes more than 200 million weapons." Larson proposes a five-part omnibus law called the Life and Liberty Preservation Act, which he says would close most of the loopholes in current legislation. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called *Lethal Passage* a "valiant, innovative, effective, and timely study." An *Economist* contributor said: "Mr. Larson's purpose is to expose, in plain unvarnished prose, the awful laxity of America's gun industry. He does it as well as it could and should be done."

Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time, and the Deadliest Hurricane in History, published in 1999, is Larson's study of the greatest natural disaster in U.S. history to date, the storm that hit Galveston, Texas, on September 8, 1900, resulting in

the loss of between 6,000 and 8,000 lives. *Booklist* reviewer Gilbert Taylor said that "although the subject is grim, this telling is a deftly told fable of folly and fate." Larson focuses on the hurricane and on Isaac Cline, chief of the U.S. Weather Bureau's Galveston station, who said in 1891 that "the opinion ... that Galveston will at some time be seriously damaged by some such disturbance, is simply an absurd delusion." *New York Times Book Review* contributor W. Jeffrey Bolster noted that the Weather Bureau "took its cues from its chief, Willis L. Moore, whose insecurity matched his pomposity. Moore wanted his staff to look confident, soothing and precise; he forbade use of alarming words like 'hurricane' unless authorized from Washington. His pettiness trumped his judgment when, at the peak of the 1900 hurricane season, he halted all telegraphed weather communications from Cuba. He would not admit that men he regarded as excitable Latins might have an edge on his Weather Bureau, even though Havana's Belen Observatory had been systematically studying hurricanes for thirty years."

A Cuban meteorologist predicted that the hurricane would hit central Texas, but Cline and Moore said it would move up the Atlantic coast. "Erik Larson is a very skilled storyteller," wrote Steve Horstmeier and Jack Williams in *Weatherwise*, "and the images his writing creates are so vivid the reader will come as close to experiencing this historic storm as is possible 100 years after the fact." When the storm hit with gusts of 200 miles an hour, it destroyed one third of the city. A tidal wave decimated Fort Jacinto and carried a steamship two miles inland. A month after it was over, corpses were still being recovered from the debris and burned on pyres. "Larson expertly captures the power of the storm itself and the ironic, often catastrophic consequences of the unpredictable intersection of natural force and human choice," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. *Library Journal* reviewer Trisha Stevenson called *Isaac's Storm* an "unforgettable work."

While in the early stages of research for *Isaac's Storm*, Larson came across mentions of an obscure, late-nineteenth-century serial killer named Henry H. Holmes. Although Larson did not want to write a crime story at the time, he came back to the subject for *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and the Madness at the Fair That Changed America*, which received a National Book Award nomination in 2003. What changed Larson's mind about taking on Holmes's story was the gradual realization that the psychopathic killer operated in striking parallel to architect Daniel Burnham, who was struggling to complete construction for the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. While Burnham fought tight budgets, equipment failure, and political obstacles to organize the ultimately successful "White City," Holmes built the nearby Fair Hotel that housed inescapable rooms, hidden chutes, and a crematorium in which at least nine and possibly 200 young women were murdered. Larson alternates between the two men's stories: "I couldn't really tell one ... without telling the other," he told Alden Mudge in a *Bookpage* interview. Mudge deemed this "frankly, a brilliant decision."

Writing in *World and I*, Randy Boyagoda extolled Larson's presentation of a "rich feast of details related to the fair." In his *Newsweek* review, Malcolm Jones criticized Larson for making up some of the more compelling details about Holmes's killings and placing higher priority on telling an exciting tale than keeping to hard facts. Nonetheless, Jones pronounced *The Devil in the White City* "enchanting."

In his book *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*, Larson explores the experiences of William E. Dodd and his daughter, Martha. Dodd was the U.S. ambassador to Germany. He arrived there in 1933, just as Adolf Hitler was rising to power. In a *Christian Science Monitor* interview, Larson told Randy Dotinga that he was inspired to learn more about 1930s Germany while reading "William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. About a third of the way through, I suddenly finally caught up to the fact that Shirer had been there in Berlin, from 1934 on, and was finally kicked out when the U.S. entered the war." Larson added: "He had met all these people, Hitler and Goebbels and all those we know to be absolute monsters, before they became monsters. I began to wonder what that would have been like to be in Berlin, early in Hitler's reign, and to have met these people. What would you have thought if you hadn't known how things would have turned out?"

These questions led Larson to discover Dodd and his family. Dodd's daughter was initially excited by the revolution that had reinvigorated Germany, and she carried on affairs with several high-ranking Third Reich officers. However, Dodd became increasingly concerned with the persecution of Jews and the censorship of the press, although the U.S. State Department was somewhat indifferent. As the seeming promise of the Third Reich turns to violence and totalitarianism, Larson traces the Dodds' increasingly precarious position. The resulting tale "is rich with incident, populated by