

Dead Wake: the Last Crossing of the Lusitania by Erik Larson

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.)

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.*)

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.*)

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