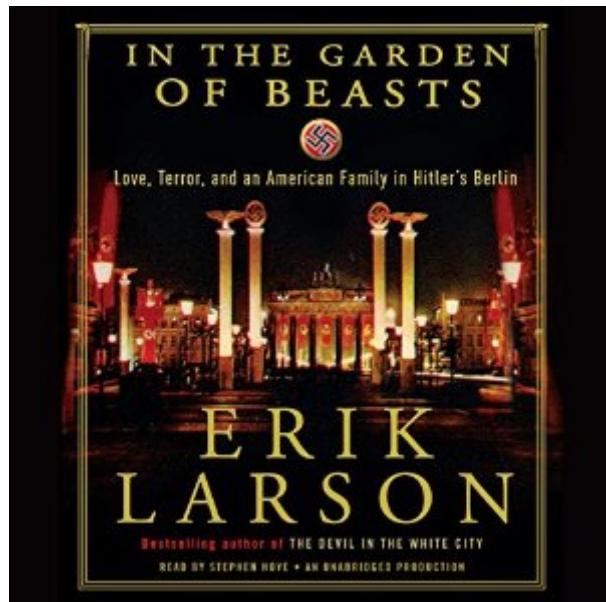


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In The Garden Of Beasts: Love, Terror, And An American Family In Hitler's Berlin



Synopsis

Erik Larson has been widely acclaimed as a master of narrative non-fiction, and in his new book, the best-selling author of Devil in the White City turns his hand to a remarkable story set during Hitler's rise to power. The time is 1933, the place, Berlin, when William E. Dodd becomes America's first ambassador to Hitler's Germany in a year that proved to be a turning point in history. A mild-mannered professor from Chicago, Dodd brings along his wife, son, and flamboyant daughter, Martha. At first, Martha is entranced by the parties and pomp, and the handsome young men of the Third Reich with their infectious enthusiasm for restoring Germany to a position of world prominence. Enamored of the "New Germany", she has one affair after another, including with the surprisingly honorable first chief of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels. But as evidence of Jewish persecution mounts, confirmed by chilling first-person testimony, her father telegraphs his concerns to a largely indifferent State Department back home. Dodd watches with alarm as Jews are attacked, the press is censored, and drafts of frightening new laws begin to circulate. As that first year unfolds and the shadows deepen, the Dodds experience days full of excitement, intrigue, romance - and ultimately, horror, when a climactic spasm of violence and murder reveals Hitler's true character and ruthless ambition. Suffused with the tense atmosphere of the period, and with unforgettable portraits of the bizarre GÃ¶ring and the expectedly charming - yet wholly sinister - Goebbels, In the Garden of Beasts lends a stunning, eyewitness perspective on events as they unfold in real time, revealing an era of surprising nuance and complexity. The result is a dazzling, addictively listenable work that speaks volumes about why the world did not recognize the grave threat posed by Hitler until Berlin, and Europe, were awash in blood and terror.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It has been observed that for evil to win all that needs happen is for good men to do nothing. That was what the United States government did, at least officially, for much of the lead-up to World War II. Too often chances to speak out and try to stop the madness that was engulfing Germany were ignored. Too frequently the atrocities were overlooked. Too many times our response to the crisis over there was nothing, nothing, nothing...But there were exceptions. George Messersmith, who worked at the Berlin embassy, was one of those who tried, often in vain, to bring about some change in the US policies, though he was often ignored as having too vivid of an imagination. So, too, were various Jewish groups in the USA, though they were often ignored for being Jewish. And, eventually, so did William Dodd, the United States ambassador to Germany, though he was ignored because, frankly, too many people didn't want to believe any of what was happening in Berlin. Before reading this book I had a slightly better than average knowledge of the history of World War II and what led up to it. But even for me there were things to learn. I'd never heard of Dodd or Messersmith. Never heard of Rudolph Diels, or Ernst Hanfstaengl. I knew, at least a bit, about the Night of Long Knives and some what lead up to it, including Ernst Rohm's penchant for pretty young men, but I didn't really grasp much of what was going on that led up to it. Now, thanks to Erik Larson's latest work, I know these people and I have a much, much improved understanding of what was going on in Germany from 1933 to 1938. Larson gives you a great "on the ground" view of what was really happening, what people thought was happening, what everyone said was happening and why the differences between these things matter.

This is the fourth book written by Erik Larson that I have read. In my view, this quartet is a pretty powerful body of work: The Devil in the White City, Thunderstruck, and Isaac's Storm)--and now In the Garden of Beasts. As with Larson's other works, there are several layers to this work. Larson begins by noting that (Page xiv): "This is a work of nonfiction." At one level, this is a portrayal of a family. Key characters are William Dodd, an academic desperate to write a book on the South who finds himself oddly enough tapped to become the American Ambassador to Germany in the very early years of Hitler's rule of the country. There is also considerable detail given to Dodd's daughter, Martha. She was coming off a failed marriage and she (and her brother and William's wife) accompanied Dodd in his service in Germany. At another level, the book is about the gathering horror of the Third Reich. Sometimes, Germany seems like a modern, civilized country. At other

times, though, the darkness of Nazism manifests itself. One small vignette: H. V. Kaltenborn's advocacy of Germany--and his family's terror at a Hitler demonstration where they were frightened by thugs for not carrying out the German salute with the arm. Other small incidents that portend what is to come pop up over the course of the work, providing a dark backdrop to the surface story. We see Dodd's interaction with key leaders such as Goebbels and Goring. We read of him trying to protect American interests while becoming concerned about what was happening in Germany. And seeing how his superiors did not want to hear negative reports from him. His daughter?

Erik Larson is not a novelist but his books on historical subjects are as beautifully written as if a novelist had written them. He has written about Chicago and the 1893 World's Fair, a terrible hurricane in Galveston, Texas, and a doctor/murderer in London. In all his books, he juxtaposes two events or characters and flits between the two. In this book, "In the Garden of Beasts", he presents the Dodd family of four in 1933 and the growing menace of Hitler and the Nazi party. It's brilliant writing at its best. William Dodd was a professor at the University of Chicago and a product of a southern upbringing. He was mild-mannered and subtle, but fairly ambitious, career-wise. As a self-described "Jeffersonian Democrat", Dodd had come to the attention of newly-inaugurated Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 when Roosevelt and his State Department were looking for a new US ambassador to Germany. Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany at about the same time as Roosevelt in the United States. Both faced Depression-wracked countries and both set about helping to heal the economic woes. Hitler's plans were much more ambitious at that point; getting out of the Versailles Treaty restrictions and cleansing Germany of her Jewish population were also on the agenda. Roosevelt's appointment of William Dodd as the United States Ambassador to Germany brought many questions from old diplomatic "hands" at the State Department as well as among Roosevelt's aides. Was Dodd "tough" enough to deal with Hitler? And, what WAS "tough enough" in dealing with Hitler and the growing German menace? And, what WAS the "growing German menace"? Lots of questions in 1933 wouldn't be answered until later; later, after "The Night of Long Knives", "Krystelnach", and the whole bloody butchery of WW2.

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