

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## Devil in the White City by Eric Larson

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- What surprised you most about this book?
- How successful would the fair have been in New York, Washington or St. Louis?
- If you had a young daughter in the late 1800s, how would you have felt about her traveling alone or moving to Chicago?
- Before reading this book, what did you think the expression “The Windy City” meant?
- Why was it so important to have the Fair in Chicago? Do you think anyone considered the negative impact it could have?
- Is there much difference between Chicago politics then and now? (considering the delay in the site selection for the Fair)
- Why did some things seem acceptable in “this new world of Chicago” (as opposed to in the visitors’ home towns) and just another adventure on which these women embarked? And, what good was an adventure if it did not feel a little dangerous? – p. 245
- Could this many murders and/or disappearances have gone undetected in a different city?
- Even though they anticipated criminals at the Fair, why wasn’t the Chicago Police Department more effective?
- Why didn’t anyone go to the police with their suspicions despite some people being convinced of his wrongdoing? – page 189.
- In what ways did the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 change America?
  - Lasting inventions, ideas, food introduced to American culture?
  - Important figures critically influenced by the Fair?
  - PLETHORA of NEW THINGS – p. 247, p.248 and on p. 267
  - Live music transmission, moving pictures – Kinetoscope, vertical file – Melvil Dewey, zippers, automatic dishwasher, instant pancake mix – Aunt Jemima’s, Juicy Fruit, Cracker Jack, Shredded Wheat, Pabst’s Blue Ribbon Beer, electric chair, Dictaphone, spray paint)
- How would you compare the use of the telegraph in the late 1800s to the use of the internet today?
- On page 136, there was mention of product placement / advertising – was this a revolutionary concept or commonplace for this era?
- Who was more powerful – Burnham or Holmes?
  - Were they alike in any way?
- Why do you think Holmes changed his name (from Herman Webster Mudgett) after he arrived in Chicago?
- How was Holmes able to change his identity so easily / often?
- What attracted him to the name “H. H. Holmes” after Arthur Conan Doyle introduced the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes in July 1886?
- Why is there such animosity among the architects?



**Skokie Public Library**

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- How successful would the fair have been without Burnham at the helm?
- Do you think Holmes was born with an evil inclination or were there events that drove him to evil?
- How was Holmes able to exert such power over his victims?
- What motivated Holmes?
- What did Holmes look for in women and why?
- Why did Holmes' interest in Julia begin to dissipate after her divorce became final?
- Why did Holmes take the children? "testing his power to bend the lives of people - page 355.
- How much would it cost to create a comparable Fair today? Could it be done? (\$22 million to build the fair - \$660 million in today's money - p. 293)
- How did their drive to "out-Eiffel" the Eiffel Tower impact the Fair?
- On page 62, Holmes suggests that "women as a class were so wonderfully vulnerable". To what extent, if any, does this hold true today?
- What did it mean to be a doctor or a pharmacist in this era?
- Why do you think Erik Larson chose to write this book as two stories in tandem instead of two separate books? (difference between good and evil?)
- There are two different producers that have optioned this for a movie - who do you think will be cast as the main characters? Producers: Tom Cruise and Leonardo DeCaprio