

The Demons in “The Devil in the White City”

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By Patrick T. Reardon

When Erik Larson introduces Sol Bloom in his best-selling book “The Devil in the White City,” Bloom is a young man on the make --- a 21-year-old entrepreneur who, two years earlier, had bought the rights to an Algerian village he saw on display at the Paris Exposition of 1889.

Bloom was, as Larson describes him, a go-getter who got stuff done and a born salesman. It appears that those were the qualities that led Mike De Young to hire him to oversee the concessions for the Midway Plaisance at the World’s Columbian Exposition, to open two years later in 1893 in Chicago.

Recounting a story from Bloom’s autobiography, Larson writes that, when De Young offered Bloom the job, the young man really didn’t want it. So he demanded the extraordinary salary of \$1,000 a week -- - the same pay as the President of the United States --- only to be surprised when he got it.

In Chicago, Bloom earned his pay, bringing great energy and order to his task and a kind of promotional genius.

Larson writes that the Harvard professor who’d originally had the job saw the Midway as a means “to provide an education about alien cultures.” Bloom, though, had other ideas: “The Midway,” Larson writes, “was to be fun, a great pleasure garden...It would thrill, titillate, and if all went well perhaps even shock.” It would also be a setting where Bloom could find a gig for the Algerian village he’d purchased in Paris.

Bloom was so successful at promoting the Midway that officials came to him for aid in publicizing the fair itself, such as helping explain to reporters how gargantuan the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building would be.

In his autobiography, Bloom wrote, “I could tell they weren’t in the least interested in the number of acres or tons of steel so I said, ‘Look at it this way --- it’s going to be big enough to hold the entire standing army of Russia.’ “

What an image! The entire standing army of Russia! It was a description that was repeated and repeated and repeated in that time and down to our own day.

Yet, Larson writes, “Bloom had no idea whether Russia even had a standing army, let alone how many soldiers it might include and how many square feet they would cover. Nonetheless, the fact became gospel throughout America. Readers of Rand, McNally’s exposition guidebooks eventually found themselves thrilling to the vision of millions of fur-hatted men squeezed onto the building’s 32-acre floor. Bloom felt no remorse.”

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I am here tonight to suggest that “The Devil in the White City” is Erik Larson’s “standing army of Russia.”

To suggest that what Sol Bloom did in promoting the fair is what Larson does over and over again in telling the dual stories of Daniel Burnham, director of the fair (also called the White City), and H. H. Holmes, the serial killer who preyed on young women near the fair site during the same period.

When asked about the Manufacturers building, Bloom made up an answer. Often, that's Larson's strategy, too.

And it's been a successful one. "The Devil in the White City" has sold more than a million copies since hitting bookstores three years ago. (This fall, he published "Thunderstruck," a similarly-told dual account of a killer and a public figure from that same era --- and another best-seller.)

Critics have praised Larson's story-telling skills, his ability to evoke the sights, sounds and feel of a long-gone age. And, no question, "The Devil in the White City" is a page-turner. It's filled with piquant details and a you-are-there momentum. It's the antithesis of the stereotypical dry, clunky accounts that academic historians are routinely accused of producing.

I like a good story. And I don't mind writers making stuff up --- when they're writing fiction. Even fiction about historical events. To my mind, one of the best descriptions of the Battle of Gettysburg from the Civil War is "Killer Angels," the 1974 novel by Michael Shaara. And Larson writes that an important model for him was Truman Capote's 1965 "In Cold Blood," about the real-life killing of a family in Kansas, which was marketed as a novel, albeit as a "non-fiction novel."

But, in a note in the front of his book, Larson insists that "The Devil in the White City" is no novel.

He writes: "However strange or macabre some of the following incidents may seem, this is *not* a work of fiction. Anything between quotation marks comes from a letter, memoir, or other written document."

His publishers have sold the book as a work of history. If you go to a bookstore, you'll find it in the non-fiction section. And that's how it's entered our culture --- as a book of fact. It's now being used as a source of historical accuracy by academic scholars, such as Carl Smith who lists "The Devil in the White City" in the bibliographical essay for his fine recently published monograph "The Plan of Chicago."

Yet, even as he stands by all the quotations in the book, Larson acknowledges that key parts of "The Devil in the White City" are made up.

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I read footnotes. Not a lot of people do. But, when I'm reading a work of history and come across an interesting fact, I like to look at the footnotes --- whether they're at the bottom of the page, or the end of the chapter, or the back of the book --- to see where the information came from. Sometimes, the footnote will elaborate on the text with interesting additional facts. And, sometimes, I'll be moved to track down the book or article cited for further reading.

As a newspaper reporter, I know how hard it is to nail down facts --- and that's when my sources are living, breathing and a phone call away. I'm filled with admiration for historians who, like detectives, are able to piece together an event from the distant past using records, statistics, newspapers and memoirs.

That's what Larson is attempting to do.

Near the end of "The Devil in the White City," Chicago Mayor Carter Harrison is shot in his home, and he tells a neighbor who comes to help that he's been shot over the heart. The neighbor doesn't believe him because there isn't much blood.

"They argued," Larson writes.

When I see a passage like that --- with its image of two men, one a gunshot victim, in such an insane debate --- I can't help but look to the note at the back of the book. And, in this case, when I did, I found references to two newspaper stories, both of which, I would expect, describe the aftermath of the shooting in detail.

That's what I did, too, after I read Larson's description of the murder of Julia Conner --- I looked at the footnote.

Here's the scene: Julia, seduced by Holmes, tells him she's pregnant. Larson writes, "Holmes reacted to her news with calm and warmth. He held her, stroked her hair, and with moist eyes assured her that she had nothing to worry about, certainly he would marry her, as he had long promised."

But, first, she would have to undergo an abortion. On the night of the operation, Christmas Eve, Larson writes, "Holmes offered Julia a cheerful 'Merry Christmas' and gave her a hug, then took her hand and led her to a room on the second floor that he had readied for the operation."

Larson describes the room and operating table, and then Holmes:

"He wore a white apron and had rolled back his cuffs. Possibly he wore his hat, a bowler. He had not washed his hands, nor did he wear a mask. There was no need.

"She reached for his hand. There would be no pain, he assured her. She would awaken as healthy as she was now but without the encumbrance she bore within."

Then, in the course of two long paragraphs, Holmes kills Julia with an overdose of chloroform.

Finally, Larson writes, "One of her wrists sagged to the table, followed shortly by the other. Her eyelids stuttered, then closed. Holmes did not think her so clever as to feign coma, but he held tight just the same. After a few moments he reached for her wrist and felt her pulse fade to nothing, like the rumble of a receding train."

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Wow! This is great stuff. Anyone who writes non-fiction --- whether in newspapers or history books --- knows how difficult it is to find details like this. They're just so vibrant. They make it possible for us readers to feel ourselves in the middle of the action.

To be able to say that Holmes hugged his victim before killing her --- what a telling moment. To know that, when Holmes promised to marry Julia, he held her and stroked her hair --- ah, the irony!

If I'm writing a newspaper story about Mayor Richard M. Daley deciding to run for re-election, my account would be immensely richer if I had such details to describe how the decision was made. If I could say that, one morning, Daley, in his pajamas, sat at the breakfast table with his wife Maggie, and, together, the two of them went down a handwritten list of pros and cons. And if I could say that, after they'd decided that he should run again, Daley walked over to Maggie and gave her a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

But Daley isn't about to tell me, particularly to such depth, how he came to make his decision, and, so, I don't have access to details like that.

But, then, neither did Larson.

That didn't stop him, though. He made them up.

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In the “Notes and Sources” section in the back of his book, Larson writes, “Clearly no one other than Holmes was present during his murders --- no one, that is, who survived --- yet in my book I re-create two of his killings...To build my murder scenes, I used threads of known detail to weave a plausible account, as would a prosecutor in his closing arguments to a jury.”

In a note specifically about the killing of Julia Conner, Larson writes, “Holmes left no firsthand account of the method he used to kill Julia and Pearl Conner; nor did he describe how he managed to subdue both victims, although he did at one point state that Julia had died of a ‘criminal operation,’ meaning an abortion. I constructed the murder scenes in this chapter using a combination of sources: [1] fragments of known evidence (for example, the fact that he possessed two cases of surgical instruments, equipped his building with dissection tables, and favored chloroform as a weapon and bought large quantities of it); [2] the detective work of other investigators of the Holmes saga...; [3] statements made by Holmes after the murders; [4] psychiatric research into the character, motives, and needs of criminal psychopaths; and [5] testimony at Holmes’ trial as to how a person would react to an overdose of chloroform.”

Note that Larson doesn’t say he made up the details in these accounts. He writes that he “constructed” and “built” the murder scenes. He writes that he “re-created” the killings. He writes that his goal was to “weave a plausible account.”

In other words, Larson gathered together all the facts and insights he could and figured out what might have happened or --- possibly he’d say --- what must have happened. He speculated.

Nothing wrong with that. Indeed, that’s the job of an historian --- to weigh evidence, to make judgments, to see or, even, guess at connections that aren’t on the surface.

For example, Mayor Daley is an avid bike rider. If Daley announces a plan to fix the pot holes on a certain bike path along the lakefront, I might be tempted to write that he might have gotten the idea for the improvements while riding his bike down the path. Or, if I had a lot of circumstantial evidence pointing in this direction, I might be tempted to write that he must have gotten the idea then.

However, if, based on those few circumstantial facts or inferences, I “constructed” a scene in which Daley, on a sunny day, is riding down the path, crashes, skins his nose and says to his bodyguard that something has to be done and, goldarn, he’s going to do it --- well, if I did that in a story in the Tribune, I’d be fired.

From Larson’s perspective, however, the use of words such as “might” and “must” would have slowed down the flow of the story.

He could have written that Julia might have told Holmes she was pregnant, and he might have promised to marry her, and he might have told her that, first, she had to have an abortion, and he might have been the one to do it, and he might have used chloroform. That would have been really bulky.

Or he could have written in the text --- right there for the reader to see --- that no one knows how the murder took place, but here’s one way it might have happened.

Now, Larson or one of his fans might argue that that’s what he did. I don’t agree.

Larson writes the account of the murder with the same omniscient narrative voice and perspective that he uses throughout the book to describe well-established facts, such as the size of the grounds of the World’s Fair. Unless readers are constantly interrupting their reading to go to the notes in the back --- and, I suspect, few do --- they’re never told when Larson is recounting well-established facts and when he’s speculating.

Well, that's not exactly true. In describing the murder, Larson writes that Holmes wore a white apron and had rolled back his cuffs. Then, he writes, "Possibly he wore his hat, a bowler."

This is a clever writerly technique. The word "possibly" is a signal to the reader that Larson is speculating. Oh, maybe Holmes did, maybe Holmes didn't wear his hat.

But, since it's the only hint of speculation in the three pages on Julia's murder, it implies that nothing else is speculative --- that all of it is as factual as the number of acres in the World's Fair grounds.

A close reading of Larson's note for this section indicates that he seems to have had something of a basis for imagining that Holmes killed Julia with chloroform during what she thought would be an abortion.

But what's the basis for Larson's description of how Holmes held Julia and stroked her hair, or of him wishing her a "Merry Christmas" right before the surgery, or of Julia reaching for his hand as she lay on the operating table? From the notes, I can't see any.

In other words, like a novelist, Larson imagined the murder with the sort of human details that give the account such deep resonance.

However, unlike a novelist, Larson is selling these details as facts.

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Larson does this throughout the book, not just for the murders which, of their nature, were conducted in secret. For instance, he frequently goes into the heads of people and tells the reader what they're thinking and feeling.

Early in the book, he describes a meeting of East Coast and Chicago architects in January, 1891, at which one of the Easterners, Richard M. Hunt, interrupts Burnham's introductory remarks with the demand "Let's get to work."

Larson writes, "Hunt's interjection startled Burnham. It brought back in a rush the hurt of the great dual snub by the East, his rejection by Harvard and Yale; but the remark and the obvious support it garnered in the room also caused Burnham to shift focus to the work at hand."

There are no indications in the notes that Burnham ever wrote or told anyone that Hunt's remark "brought back in a rush the hurt of the great dual snub by the East" for him.

Larson, I suspect, might say, "Of course, Burnham felt that. How could he have felt anything else?" Well, maybe. But maybe Burnham was cheered that Hunt had bought into the concept of the fair, or maybe he had arranged this with Hunt as a way to get the meeting started, or maybe Burnham was distracted at this moment and didn't quite hear Hunt's remark.

Human beings aren't machines. We do quirky things, for no apparent reason.

On weekdays, I almost always drive to the Granville stop on the Red Line and take the el to Grand Avenue and walk from there to the Tribune. So, a writer wanting to bring color to an account of an important day in my life might write, "That morning, Reardon got into his Previa van, drove the mile east to Broadway where he parked on a side street, and then walked to the Granville el stop." Yeah, that's likely.

But every once in a while, as a change of pace, I'll take the Clark Street bus all the way to work. And, sometimes, I take my car. So, a writer would risk error by simply assuming I drove to the el on any particular day.

This sort of attempt at colorful writing can result in dumb errors.

One apparent mistake by Larson is his description of society leader Bertha Palmer on the morning of the opening day ceremonies for the fair. He writes that her "diamonds radiated an almost palpable heat."

As sources for his account of these opening festivities, he lists several books and an article published in the the next day's Tribune. When it comes to Palmer, that article appears to be the most pertinent of the sources.

Yet, the article notes that, for the morning ceremonies, Palmer wore a long black cloak that, it would seem, had obscured any view of her clothing. Later in the day, when the reporter could see what Palmer was wearing, there's no reference to diamonds at all.

According to the reporter, the socialite leader "wore a becoming costume of heliotrope and black crepon, trimmed half way up the skirt with a broad band of gold passementerie, studded with jet nail-heads." I had to look up a number of those words. "Gold passementerie" is an ornamental gold braid. "Crepon" is a kind of crepe. "Heliotrope" is a kind of purple.

No mention of diamonds. And no mention of them in the further details the reporter gives about Palmer's bodice, large sleeves and bonnet.

It's possible, of course, that the Tribune reporter's account is incomplete. And maybe the diamonds are described in one of the six books Larson lists. I was only able to check two of them, and neither mentioned diamonds.

My suspicion is that Larson figured that Palmer was a rich woman who couldn't help but wear diamonds to a major public function. So he just assumed --- and wrote --- that she did. That's my speculation.

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And then there's Walt Disney.

Walt wasn't born until December, 1901 --- more than eight years after the closing of the World's Fair. But his father Elias had done some work at the exposition.

So, on page 153, Larson writes, "In all, the workforce in the park numbered 4,000. The ranks included a carpenter and furniture-maker named Elias Disney, who in coming years would tell many stories about the construction of this magical realm beside the lake. His son Walt would take note."

What Larson's implying is that Walt heard all these stories from his father and was inspired to create Disneyland and Walt Disney World a half century later. More than 200 pages later, he makes this implication explicit while also tossing in a qualifier. He writes, "Walt Disney's father, Elias, helped build the White City; Walt's Magic Kingdom may well be a descendant."

Well, it's a cute thought. But it doesn't appear to have any basis in fact.

In writing that Elias told lots of stories about working at the fair and that Walt listened, Larson cites the biography of Daniel Burnham by Thomas S. Hines. But Hines simply writes: "It was appropriate and prophetic that one of the common laborers who silently worked to build the fantasy [he means the fair] was a man named Elias Disney, the father of Walt."

Larson includes two other biographies of Disney --- one by Richard Schickel and another by Leonard Mosley --- in his bibliography. But neither of those indicates that Walt got the idea for Disneyland from the 1893 World's Fair, nor does the most recent and most exhaustive Disney biography, just published by Neal Gabler.

For one thing, these books make clear that Elias Disney was something of a brooding, penny-pinching tyrant who terrorized his son. He wasn't likely to try to regale his family with stories of his short tenure working at the Fair. And Walt wasn't likely to listen.

Besides, these authors make clear that Main Street, the heart and soul of Disneyland and Walt Disney World, is patterned on Marceline, the idyllic Missouri village where a young Walt joyfully herded pigs, skinny dipped in Yellow Creek and rode an old horse named Charley. It was small-town America, the polar opposite of the Fair and its monumental buildings.

Despite this, Larson's heavy-handed suggestion that Disney got the idea for his theme parks from the World's Fair has begun to work its way toward becoming an accepted fact.

First, there was Larson's publisher, Crown, which stated in its publicity for the book that "many looked to the fair as a source of inspiration, from Walt Disney, whose father, Elias, helped build the White City, to L. Frank Baum [author of "The Wizard of Oz"]."

Then, there were newspaper reviewers who made the connection definite. One, writing in the New York Daily News, listed many big names who make an appearance in "The Devil in the White City," including "Elias Disney, a carpenter whose son Walt found inspiration for his theme parks at the fair his father helped build." (Note that this reviewer puts Walt at the fair eight years before he was born.)

Now, the idea is popping up here and there on the Internet. One customer review of the book at Amazon.com states that "Elias Disney, Walt's father, helped building the 'White City' and was a primary inspiration for DisneyWorld." Another says that among the innovations to come out of the fair was "Walt Disney's Vision of Disneyland."

And anyone looking up the article on Elias Disney at wikipedia.org, the popular although controversial "people's encyclopedia," will find that Elias worked at the fair, "an event which author Erik Larson cites as a likely source of inspiration for his son Walt and the Disney kingdom he would eventually create."

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Okay. So Larson stretches things. What's the harm?

Here's the harm. This is a copy of "500 Great Books for Teens" by Anita Silvey. This is one of those perfect reference works for parents, teachers and librarians. Silvey, an expert on children's literature, has provided a road map of entertaining and informative reading for teenagers. Her book is a great big stamp of approval to these works --- an endorsement that, you can be sure, will be included in future promotional materials for each of them.

Silvey includes "The Devil in the White City" among the 500, but she doesn't list it in the "Fantasy" chapter or in the "Historical Fiction" chapter. She puts it in the non-fiction chapter she calls "Information."

She calls Larson's book a "well-researched, fact-filled account." And she writes, "In a work of nonfiction that reads like a mystery novel, Larson keeps these two story lines [about Daniel Burnham and H.H. Holmes] running, building tension and pulling the reader along. Hence the book has made its

way into high school history curriculums and has become a favorite of mystery readers --- a testament to this multifaceted and intriguing book.”

I find this terribly disheartening.

Consider the high school history course that includes “The Devil in the White City.” The students who read the book will come away thinking that this is what to expect from a work of history --- that history is a story that can read like a mystery novel, that history is a story that puts you inside the heads of the kings, judges and common people, that history is a story with no loose ends.

Now, great writers, great historians, can make a gripping story out of history, people like David McCullough and Robert Caro. They can bring to vivid life such historical figures as Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson --- but they don’t take shortcuts. They don’t make stuff up.

Even so --- even with such top-tier writers and historians --- the books don’t read like mystery novels. They can’t. They’re rooted in facts, and those facts have to be marshaled and examined. Accounts of events, often at odds in minor or major ways, have to be considered and evaluated. Sure, historians want to capture the human aspects of the historical drama --- how someone acted, what was said, the way a face looked in response to surprising news. But there’s no room for cotton-candy descriptions of hugs, hair-stroking and moist eyes, made up out of the air.

So history books read like....history books. They’re rooted in facts, and rooted in ideas. Speculation is called speculation, and that’s as far as it goes. As a reading experience, they may not always flow so smoothly --- but neither does life.

But let’s say some of these high school history students start thinking about the way “The Devil in the White City” is written. Let’s say some of them actually take the time to look at and ponder the footnotes.

What they’ll find is that this book --- recommended for them by experts, librarians and teachers --- is built on “constructed” scenes, on “re-created” scenes, on “plausible” scenes. In other words, it’s built on imagination.

And what message does that send them about history? The message is that history can be anything you want it to be. History can be whatever “must” have happened. If there are gaps, fill them in. Don’t fill them in in a tentative way; don’t say, “It may have happened this way.” No, go whole hog. Say, “This is how it happened.”

Whether that’s true or not.

I know there are people who will tell me to lighten up. In “The Devil in the White City,” Larson gets the broad outlines of the story correct, and he’s got documentation for many of the details he trots out. It really doesn’t matter --- does it? --- if he embellishes things a bit by saying that, at a certain moment, H.H. Holmes had “moist eyes” and stroked the hair of the woman he was to kill.

Well, it does.

Earlier this year, I had occasion to call Samuel G. Freedman, a former colleague of mine who’s now a journalism professor at Columbia University in New York.

We were talking about writers who engage in what’s often called “creative non-fiction.” The idea of creative non-fiction is to use a novelist’s techniques to bring to life a story that’s true and accurate --- to make it a real yarn. The problem is that, with such writing, there’s often a lot less truth and accuracy than one would like to expect.

“These writers,” Sam said, “want the power of non-fiction --- saying to the reader, ‘This is true’ --- but they also want the ability to invent.”

That hits the nail on the head. A book that’s marketed as non-fiction is selling truth. It’s saying, “This happened. This is real.” That’s why people buy history books and biographies and memoirs --- to find out about real life.

Any interesting fact in a non-fiction book --- for example, that, in New Salem, young Abraham Lincoln could throw a cannon ball farther than anyone else --- is all the more interesting because it’s true. It has meaning. If it were in a novel, it would have much less weight in terms of interest and import. After all, it could simply be the product of the writer’s imagination.

The reason Sam and I were talking was the controversy that had erupted around James Frey’s memoir “A Million Little Pieces,” a bestseller that had been boosted to the stratosphere by its selection by Oprah Winfrey for her book club.

In the book, published in 2003, Frey describes himself as an alcoholic, addict and criminal wanted in three states. Novel-like, it features crisp, clipped dialogue, intense descriptions and self-conscious literary pyrotechnics.

However, early last January, the Smoking Gun website published a lengthy article which detailed fabrications and extreme embellishments in the book. For instance, Frey claimed in the book to have helped a high school friend sneak out with her boyfriend on the night she died in a car wreck. But police reports and the girl’s family told the Smoking Gun that he had nothing to do with the tragedy.

Later that month, under questioning by Oprah on live television, Frey revealed that Lilly, a central character in the book, didn’t commit suicide by hanging, but instead slashed her wrists. Her studio audience gasped at the revelation, and Oprah appeared near tears, saying, “Why do you have to lie about that?”

Moments earlier, she’d told Frey, “It is difficult for me to talk to you because I really feel duped. More importantly, I feel you betrayed millions of readers...As I sit here today, I don’t know what is true, and I don’t know what isn’t.”

That’s why it matters what’s in a history book.

Once you start inserting imagined scenes into a work of history, it stops being a work of history.

Once you start doing that --- as Larson has done in “The Devil in the White City” --- the reader has no way of knowing what’s true.

And what isn’t.

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