

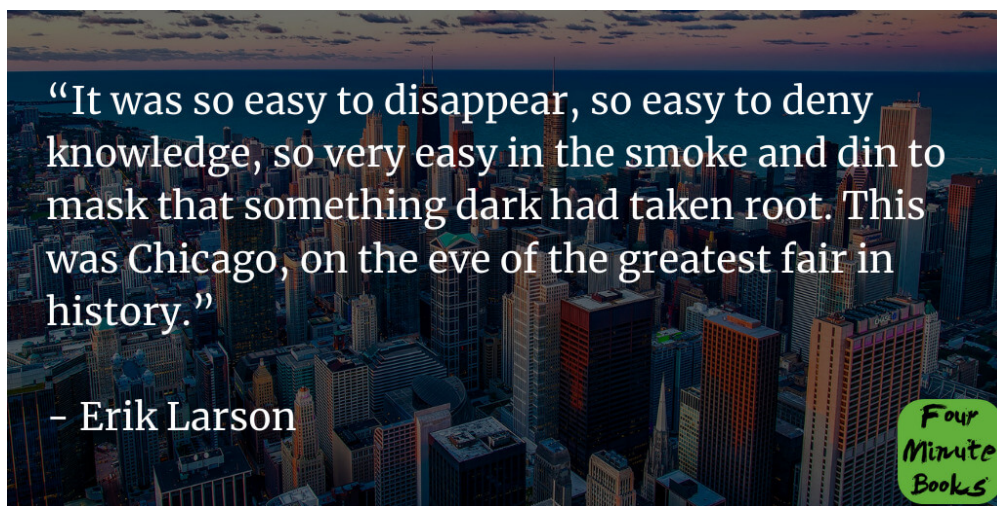
# The Devil In The White City Summary

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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *The Devil In The White City* tells the story of Chicago in the late 1800s and how it had a chance to rise above terrible crime and social unrest when it won the bid to host the World's Fair but instead ended up contributing to the creation of the world's first known serial killer.

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



As the third-biggest city in the United States, Chicago has a reputation for many things. People from all over the world come to see the impressive architecture, go to museums, experience the nightlife, and try culinary specialties such as the deep dish pizza. It is also a place known for street violence. Have you ever wondered how this once-sleepy midwest town rose to such a reputation?

The so-called Windy City owes much of this notoriety to an event that it hosted at the turn of the century known as the World's Columbian Exposition. This huge fair was attended by millions of people from all over the world. While the fair was a massive success felt for generations, the violence there was far from over.

In Erik Larson's historical nonfiction book *The Devil In the White City*, he tells the gripping untold story of the events surrounding the fair. Larson intertwines the story of the architect put in charge of the monumental task of building the fair in chaotic Chicago and the world's first known serial killer who used the fair to lure innocent people to their deaths. The result is a thrilling true-crime drama based on real events.

Here's the book summarized in just 3 lessons:

1. Chicago was full of vice and violence at the end of the 1800s.
2. Even though its beginnings were messy, head architect Daniel Burnham managed to open the fair and it was a huge success.
3. The combination of the fair and the violence of Chicago gave birth to the first known serial killer.

Want to know the fascinating history of Chicago? Let's go!

## **Lesson 1: At the end of the 1800s Chicago was full of vice and violence.**

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As the turn of the century approached, Chicago was a place full of violence and crime. Death was a common occurrence. On average, two people died by trains every day. People also often died in fires because the wooden shanty homes went in flames all too easily, trapping people inside.

Another killer was the water supply, which was rife with germs like typhus and cholera. The trash-lined streets were full of flies, rats, and animal corpses, and there were no organized groups with the duty to collect them.

**Perhaps scariest of all though was that the murder rates were some of the highest in North America, and the police were too understaffed and undertrained to handle the violent city.** The city averaged about four murders daily. When doctor H. H. Holmes stepped off the train in Chicago, he knew he had found the perfect place to hide dark acts.

Though it was full of unrest, Chicago was also going through much-needed social change. Women were beginning to work, and this allowed young, single women to build lives for themselves for the first time. Industry was booming and Chicago was home to the biggest meatpacking district in the country. Real estate was booming, and soon modern skyscrapers were rising all over.

## **Lesson 2: Burnham had to face many obstacles, but miraculously pulled everything together in time to hold the fair.**

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At the turn of the century, the United States was eager to show the world its unique culture. People felt it lagged behind European rivals in terms of cultural charm. In 1889, France hosted the Exposition Universelle, which was a huge and glamorous world's fair.

A world's fair was a huge public event that took place in a mini-city within a large city. World fairs invited other countries to come and host exhibits and also displayed modern innovations for everyone to marvel at. After their embarrassing jumbled booths at France's fair, the United States knew it needed to host their own to repair their reputation.

So they threw the World's Columbian Exposition to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus. There were many cities in the running to host the event, but in part due to Chicago residents' proud boasts about their city, Chicago won the bid to host the event.

Though residents were ecstatic about what this could do for their city, officials knew it was going to be a huge undertaking considering the crime and corruption. So Chicago chose the perfect man to head the job-architect Daniel Burnham. He was full of charisma and a natural leader. However, he soon found out how complex the job would be. The economy was struggling, and Chicago was beginning to experience class conflict.

**Between a looming recession, labor unrest, arguing authoritative figures, and bad weather, it is problem after problem for Burnham.** But against the odds, the fair opened on time in 1893 with beautiful, grand buildings painted in beautiful white, giving it the nickname The White City. The fair appeared to be a massive success for Chicago.

### **Lesson 3: Although the fair went well, putting such a big event in violent Chicago created the world's first known serial killer.**

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The fair was a huge hit, going for six months and bringing in millions. It showcased impressive inventions such as the first zipper, the first all-electric kitchen including a dishwasher, caramel popcorn, and the first Ferris Wheel. Inventors Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla were honored at the fair, and Americans said the first Pledge of Allegiance.

But behind all of the spectacle and celebration, the dark side of Chicago still lived on. **Some people, like the first known serial killer Henry H. Holmes used the event to their sinister advantage.** Holmes and his associate Benjamin Pitezel ran a hotel that housed guests of the fair, and his charm and the convenient location made it a popular place.

What the guests staying here didn't know is that it was a death trap. Holmes set up gas pipes in the rooms that would asphyxiate his guests and also hanged them and suffocated them in his soundproof basement vault.

After murdering the victims, he dissected them and removed the skin and organs. He then sold the skeletons to universities and hospitals. It would take an entire decade before authorities finally caught Holmes, but it was for insurance fraud of all things. After entering his apartment and discovering body parts, police knew they had found a serial killer.

Authorities believed Holmes had murdered somewhere from 20 to 200 people. In 1895, he was tried and found guilty of murder and a huge media frenzy followed the proceedings. Soon after he got the death sentence for his crimes.

### **The Devil In The White City Review**

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What a wild story, I had no idea any of this happened! Chicago seems like an interesting place but I've never been. Although maybe after discovering *The Devil In The White City* I might go there someday.

### **Who would I recommend The Devil In The White City summary to?**

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The 41-year-old mom who likes true crime stories, the 74-year-old history buff, and anyone that's curious to know where the idea of the serial killer began.