



Georgetown Township Public Library
Book Discussion Guide
In the Garden of Beasts
 Erik Larson (2011)

About This Book

Erik Larson has been widely acclaimed as a master of narrative non-fiction, and in his new book, the bestselling 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 Göring 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 readable 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. (*From the publisher.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

About the Author

- Birth—January 01, 1954
- Where—Brooklyn, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Pennsylvania; M.S., Columbia University
- Awards—Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime, 2004

Erik Larson lives in Seattle with his wife, three daughters, a Chinese fighting fish, a dwarf hamster, and a golden retriever named Molly. He has written several books including *The Devil in the White City*, *Isaac's Storm*, and *Thunderstruck*.

From: <http://www.litlovers.com> and readinggroupguides.com

Discussion Questions

1. William Dodd went to Germany believing that Hitler would have a positive influence on Germany. Why were so many at first enamored of Nazism and willing "to give Hitler everything he wants"?
2. How would you describe German society at the time of the Dodd Family's arrival in Berlin? Talk about the ways in which Germany appeared to be a modern, civilized society...and, of course, the way in which that appearance was at odds with reality.
3. What was it that made Dodd begin to suspect the rumors he had been hearing about Nazi brutality were true?
4. Why did Dodd's—and numerous others'—warnings about Hitler fall on indifferent ears in the US? What was the primary concern of the US in its relationship with Germany? Was the US stance one of purposeful ignorance...or of sheer disbelief?
5. Did America's own anti-Semitism play any role in dismissing the growing chorus of concern ?
6. What do you think of William Dodd? What about him do you find admirable? Were you mildly amused or impressed by his sense of frugality?
7. What was Dodd's reputation among the "old hands" at the State Department? What role does class play in how he was viewed by his diplomatic peers?
8. What about Martha? What do you find in her character to admire...or not? Did she purposely allow herself to be blinded by Udet and Rudolf Diels...or was she truly dazzled by their charms? Her promiscuity could have made her a serious liability. Were you surprised that her parents seemed untroubled by her multiple love affairs, or that they didn't try to reign in her behavior?
9. How does Erik Larson portray Hitler in his book? Does he humanize him...or present him as a monster? How does he depict Goebbels and Goering...and other higher-ups in the Nazi party?
10. How does the fact that you know the eventual outcome of Nazi Germany affect the way you experience the book? Does foreknowledge heighten...or lessen the story's suspense. Either way...why?
11. What were events/episodes you find most chilling in Larson's account of the rise of Nazism?
12. What have learned about the period leading up the World War II that you hadn't known? What surprised you? What confirmed things you already knew?
13. Is this a good read? If you've read other books by Larson, how does this compare?

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From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

Resources for additional information about book discussion choices and authors:

Books & Authors (Access through links to MeL Databases on Library's webpage.)
<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/>

LitLovers.com
www.litlovers.com

Overbooked.com
<http://www.overbooked.com>

Penguin.com (USA)
<http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/bookclubs/index.html>

Reading Group Center
<http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com>

Reading Group Guides
<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

Suggested print resources:

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
Diana Loevy
374.22 Loevy 2006

The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group
Ellen Slezak (editor)
374.22 Book 2000

Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers
Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens
374.22 Moore 2004

Read It and Eat: A Month-by-Month Guide to Scintillating Book Club Selections and Mouthwatering Menus
Sarah Gardner
028.9 Gardner 2005

The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions
Rachel W. Jacobsohn
374.22 Jacobsohn 1994

What Do I Read Next? (Multi-volume set, annual editions)
Gale Research Inc.
R 016.813 What