

Discussion Questions, *Devil in the White City*

1. Erik Larson uses a framing technique for the novel where he alternates between narratives of the planning and construction of the Columbian Exposition and H.H. Holmes' deeds. Is this technique effective in advancing the narrative of the book? Why or why not? Was one narrative more compelling than the other?
2. H.H. Holmes contends that he could not help himself in committing his crimes. He also asserted that he was a demon. Does Larson make these claims plausible in the book? How does he do this? Do you believe that Holmes was delusional, or that he was actually unable to control his urges?
3. Was Larson's argument that the Exposition was a patriotic undertaking believable? What evidence from the book supports your position?
4. Was Burnham's motto "Make no small plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood," an effective summation of the planning that went into making the Columbian Exposition a success? Why or why not?
5. Larson describes Holmes as a psychopath, but writes on page 393 that he was unsure of the motives that led Holmes to pursue his acts. What do you believe was Holmes' primary motivation for the crimes he committed?
6. Mr. Olmsted constantly repeated that he wanted the landscape design of the fair to reflect a sense of "becomingness." What does he mean by "becomingness?"
7. Larson speculates that Walt Disney, whose father worked as a carpenter at the Columbian Exposition, used the Exposition as a template for the design of Disneyland/Disneyworld. Do you believe this assertion to be true? Why or why not?
8. On page 115, Larson reports that St. Gaudens, the leading sculptor of his day, was reported to say "I never expected to see such a moment. . . Look here, old fellow, do you realize this has been the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century?" Do you agree with St. Gaudens's assessment? Why or why not?
9. A number of notable events resulted from the Columbian Exposition, among them the first Ferris wheel, the first use of alternating current to power lightbulbs, the declaration of October 12th as Columbus Day, the drafting of the Pledge of Allegiance, the development of Jackson Park, and the establishment of Chicago as the mercantile and architectural center of the country. In your opinion, which of these developments was most important, and why?
10. Larson mentions that the illumination at the World's Fair was the first time many of the visitors to the fair experienced electricity. On page 254, one of the attendees later wrote "Having seen nothing but kerosene lamps for illumination, this was like getting a sudden vision of Heaven." Does Larson's narrative do a good job of conveying the wonder fair visitors experienced when they viewed the sights and scenes of the fair?