

A PAINTER WITH WORDS: WITH LAVISH DETAIL, ERIK LARSON WRITES BOOKS THAT BRING HISTORY TO LIFE

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On most mornings, best-selling author Erik Larson sits down at his desk in his Manhattan apartment at 5:30 and begins to write, fortified by a cup of black coffee and at least one Oreo cookie. On bad days, he allows himself two.

This year, in spite of a global pandemic, Larson has had his share of good days. *The Splendid and the Vile*, his account of the German blitz of London and how it shaped the destiny of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his family, dominated the best seller list during the early weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown. The story of stiff-upper-lip Londoners weathering a profound crisis inspired many Americans as they faced uncertain times. “People came to it as a political elixir,” Larson told *Forum*. “People seem to be coming to the book for comfort.”

Larson’s apartment is on the fourth floor, and there are ten floors above him. He enjoys his big windows, which afford a view of the street life below. “In the morning I love watching people setting off to walk their dogs in the park,” Larson told readers in an essay on his website. “The outbound dogs tug ahead with anticipation; the golden retrievers among them look as though they are trying their best to be good dogs, but inside are screaming, ‘come on please can we pick up the pace.’”

Larson’s take on the ebb and flow of a Gotham day is the same kind of view he’s brought to his books. It’s a vantage just high enough to give him and his readers a sweep of the narrative, yet close enough to the ground to yield lively detail.

That way of seeing is irresistible to Larson’s legion of fans. Most of his books have been literary blockbusters, including

The Devil in the White City, about a serial killer loose during the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893; *In the Garden of Beasts*, which chronicles an American ambassador’s struggles during the rise of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich; and *Dead Wake*, the story of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, which brought the United States into World War I.

Larson, who’s 66, grew up in Freeport, Long Island, a New York City suburb. As a teen, he dreamed of being a cartoonist, his hopes dashed after *The New Yorker* rejected his frequent submissions. His books, though, retain a deeply visual sensibility. Paragraphs shimmer with hundreds of little particulars that, like layers of brushstrokes, add luminous depth to the pictures he creates on the page.

A passage from *The Splendid and the Vile* about London shortly before a Nazi air assault illustrates his technique:

The day was warm and still, the sky above a rising haze. Temperatures by afternoon were in the nineties, odd for London. People thronged Hyde Park and lounged on chairs set out beside the Serpentine. Shoppers jammed the stores of Oxford Street and Piccadilly. The giant barrage balloons overhead cast lumbering shadows on the streets below. After the August air raid when bombs first fell on London proper, the city had retreated back into a dream of invulnerability, punctuated now and then by false alerts whose once-terrifying novelty was muted by the failure of bombers to appear. The late-summer heat imparted an air of languid complacency.

Larson’s storytelling style has been compared to the methods of fiction, but he learned how to write while working as a newspaperman. He studied Russian at the

University of Pennsylvania and got a graduate degree in journalism at Columbia University, eventually ending up at *The Wall Street Journal*. The paper's Page One features – short, crisply written color stories that are meant to entertain as well as edify – gave him a crash course in how to engage a popular audience.

A *Wall Street Journal* editor, Bernard Wysocki, snipped up a paper draft of one of Larson's articles, taping it back together with passages rearranged to better tell the story. "He sort of unfurled it," Larson recalled. The reworked draft was brightened as Wysocki held it up to the light. "It had a kind of translucent, gossamer feel," Larson said. On a deeper level, the text was even more illuminating. With scissors and tape, Wysocki was teaching Larson how to build a narrative.

Many years later, Larson still uses scissors and tape to rework paper drafts of his work, preferring his method to digital editing. He likes to place a physical copy of his draft on the floor so that he can see how all the pieces of the story fit together. "There's nothing like being able to stand there from a promontory and being able to see it that way . . . It's a foolproof way of being able to see the organic structure of the book," he said.

Larson's scissors often get a workout. He usually chops his manuscripts a good bit, leaving lots of material on the cutting

room floor. "I'm generally not happy unless I have 100 percent more material than I actually need," Larson said. His manuscript for the Churchill book was initially

860 pages long. The finished book, minus notes and index, is just under 500 pages.

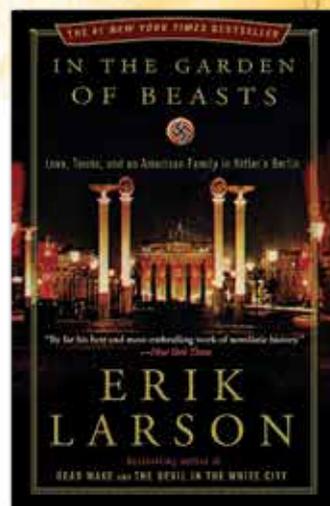
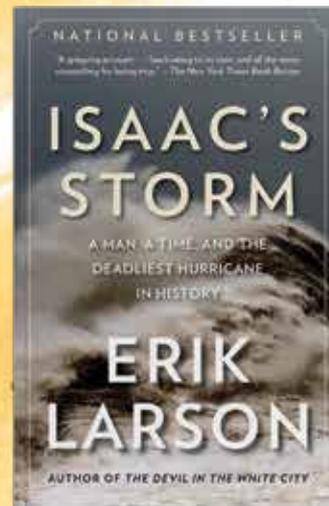
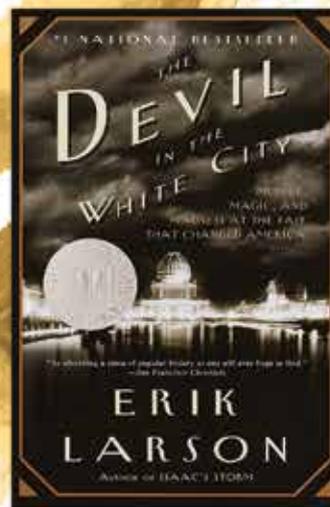
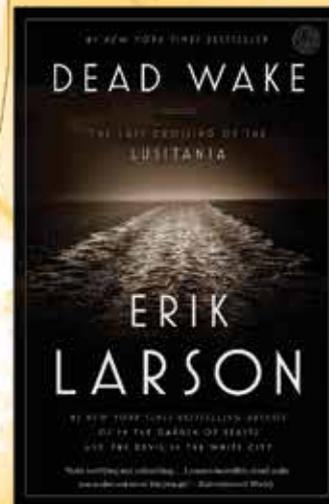
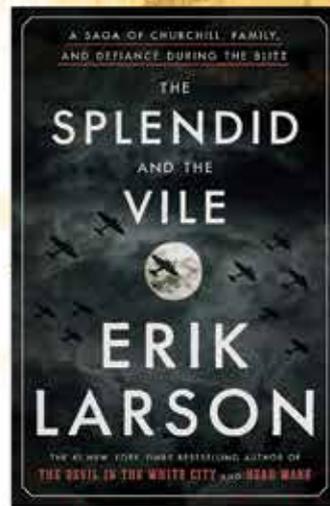
Churchill's presence in the book created a mammoth subject for research. Larson was aware that many other authors had written about Churchill, which presented its own challenges.

"It's easily the toughest book I've ever written," Larson said. "Probably not a day went by when I didn't ask myself, 'What in the world are you doing? Why did you take on this book?'"

Larson had several Churchill scholars vet his manuscript. "They suggested about thirty things they felt I needed to adjust," he said. Since

its release, *The Splendid and the Vile* has drawn positive reviews, even among Churchillians.

Larson often works on drafts when he travels, which complicates his cut-and-tape method. He dislikes checking his airline luggage, and scissors aren't allowed in carry-on items. Grudgingly, he buys new scissors at each destination, then leaves them behind in hotel rooms when he checks out. He wryly wonders if the presence of a traveler leaving scissors across Europe has attracted the attention of police.





Erik Larson, author of *The Splendid and the Vile*.
Photo provided by Nina Subin.

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Larson enjoys traveling for pleasure, and his research for books takes him on the road, too. Although he can now afford to hire researchers, Larson has avoided that option. He's used a fact-checker, but he prefers to do his own legwork.

"I love the archival phase so much much. ... It's like a detective story," Larson said. "When I'm in an archive, I don't know what I'm looking for until I've found it." Even the prospect of a juicy find in a research collection can be a thrill. "Sometimes, I feel like a little insect," Larson said. "My antennae start to vibrate."

Coming across a period news clipping, for example, Larson knew he had a story to tell about a monster hurricane that devastated Galveston, Texas, in 1900. The resulting book, *Isaac's Storm*, defined what would become Larson's signature approach, telling a big story through a small set of memorable characters. He credits his longtime agent, David Black, with helping him see more clearly how history lives through people. Larson said his initial treatment of the Galveston tragedy, a general history of the storm, prompted an encouraging thumbs-down from Black: "This is not what it needs to be. What's missing is a sense of story."

For Larson, the polite rejection – and its suggestion of a fix – was career-changing. "This was a kind of revelation," Larson recalled.

Several books later, Larson appears to have perfected the art of the nonfiction page-turner – a story so compelling that, as the old reviewer's cliché goes, a reader can't put it down.

In his own reading life, though, Larson doesn't like to quickly gobble up books he really likes. "I will read it much slower, ten pages at a time," he said. He can still remember in the 1980s lingering each evening over a successive handful of pages in John Le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

As Larson reads, even for pleasure, he's learning new things about how to make sentences into paragraphs, then into stories. From time to time, as a writing teacher, he's shared what he's learned in a life of reading and writing. Larson seems ambivalent about what he's brought to the classroom. He has doubts about the value of formal writing instruction. "I feel that if you think too much about what you do, it corrupts the process," he said.

Even so, Larson takes pride in his mentorship of students. "I think I'm a good teacher," Larson told *Forum*. "I think the things I'm able to convey to students come as a complete surprise."

An obvious lesson from Larson's professional routine is that good writing involves effort. His desk is a large table made of unfinished wood, a variation of a craftsman's workbench. Each day, he dresses like a tradesman before he arrives at his keyboard. "My standard uniform is jeans and casual shirt – long sleeves, rolled up," he said.

Showing up at the keyboard, he added, is the critical part of being an author.

"I do see it as work – as my job," Larson said. "I feel very strongly that what I do is a seven-day-a-week job. If you're waiting for a bus, it helps to be at the bus stop."