

In the Garden of Beasts by: Erik Larson

A great artist's journey always begins with practice, as does any great's legacy. Some days this artist will clear his mind, and produce a painting of ordinary quality; while on other days this average person will pick up his paint brush and know in his gut that he will produce something spectacular. Yes, the artist might know what he is about to produce; but when a person who simply happened to be placed in the same room as this budding artist notices that a spectacular feat is about to take place, you must pause for a moment and admire this curious nonentity. In the Garden of Beasts loans the spotlight to one such nonentity who had both the brains and the guts to notice an aspiring Hitler's spectacular, yet horrific painting before many even admitted that such a thing had the capacity of being produced. Deep within the unhealthy heart of Nazi distorted Berlin, an American family found themselves apart of the prequel to the disturbing master plan of mass-destruction put in action through the horrific occurrences of World War II.

Larson takes his readers on a systematic journey through the eyes of one commonplace American ambassador, William Dodd, as dramatic irony is strategically placed as you are shown how Hitler's rise to power was possible. Chronologically written, you experience the full magnitude of this time period's glory and woes through the lives of the entire Dodd family, from Ambassador William Dodd's appointment, to each of his family members' potential demise.

Unlike many books taking place in Nazi encrusted Germany during the World War II era, this novel gives readers a strange yet refreshing perspective, that of a simple American family. From the beginning Dodd does not fit in with the high society living of ambassadorial rank, as he worked as a humble college history professor, yet Roosevelt noticed his potential. Dodd recognized the horrors going on in Germany during a time where many were simply willing to be spoon-fed cunning lies. He worked hard in his position, and strived to endorse American freedom and democracy in a country that had turned its back on equality.

Martha Dodd, William Dodd's daughter and also a main character of this story, sheds important light to the Nazi regime from a different angle. Even though it took her longer to recognize it than her father, she too soon noticed the fact that a cold and hostile Germany bubbled maliciously around its carefully dressed façade. Through her eyes you are privy to the tense situations faced by even Nazi officials. Rudolf Diels, the chief of the Gestapo, despite his position was constantly haunted by the fact that he had no trust in anyone and believed that there were constant attempts on his life, despite any contraries Martha told him.

The author does a wonderful job balancing both primary and secondary sources to create a story that is both thrilling to hear, yet logical to comprehend. Throughout the story Larson incorporates snippets of letters and primary conversations that characters had, and were fortunate enough to have recorded. This author has written many great works before this including The Devil in the White City and Thunderstruck. He has much experience writing for magazines, and was a former employee of the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time*.

I believe Larson completely fulfilled his promise in describing the intricate lifestyle required in Germany at this time, and realizations the Dodds made when navigating this new and complicated set of circumstances. Throughout the book I was constantly pondering and marveling at the different complications that kept meandering into every new chapter. I was shocked at the thought that the Dodds and their friends had to constantly keep watch about what they said because their conversations could be tapped at any moment. I felt sorry for Martha at times because of how she fell in love with a Russian communist who was strictly an enemy of the regime and country. Furthermore I was quite disturbed when Larson described “The Night of the Long Knives”, and how the upwards scale of 90 people were murdered for simply political reasons, or for no reason at all. This book did a superb job at recapturing life in Germany pristinely, as if I were transported directly into 1934.

It makes my mind ache to try and think about how many millions of people’s lives were impacted by the knowledge that I have only very recently acquired. This book is not simply a collection of dry and dusty facts that simply list the dead and gone. This is no more of a book than it is a story that lives and breathes and flows with such majesty that if one were not told, one would scarcely be able to recognize that these in depth characters are no longer with us here on this Earth. I recommend this book not only to those who want to be informed about an important time in history, but to those who want to be sucked in to a true story that draws you back into a time of turmoil and reality. Painters always seem to start a masterpiece carrying nothing more than spontaneity, yet the true masters, carefully map and plan their work with extreme precision and thought. World War II was no more spontaneous than it was cheerful, yet it is through disaster that we are forced to recognize a masterpiece filled with good, bad, and so much in between.

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Sawyer Lyons

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Author: Sawyer Lyons

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I liked how you talked about what the higher up officers in the military did after France was taken over. I also found it insightful how you talked about pockets of French resistance and what they did to help try to free France. I enjoyed reading about how members of the government left and set up Vichy government. I liked how you talked about how the resistance forces joined force to form one major resistance force. It was good how you talked about the German reaction to the French resistance and what they did to the village of Oradour-sur-Glane.

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Author: Sawyer Lyons

Date: Sunday, February 23, 2014 4:06:01 PM EST

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The fact that France could stay strong and form a resistance against a Germany that constantly struck fear into their minds whenever possible is shocking to me. It is hard to imagine that these people rose out of the nothing that the Germans left them, to build and organize a successful military group that risked all to help liberate their country. I feel that it is mainly through facing our greatest fears that we find out what type of person lies within us, and it is miraculous that so many strong people defined themselves despite the massive obstacles protruding around them.

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I thought that you did a really good job writing your paper. I learned a lot about the French Resistance just from reading your paper. I thought that it was interesting that France could keep the resistance alive while it was occupied throughout most of the war. We learned about D-Day in school and I learned in your paper that the French Resistance had a big role on D-Day and I never knew that.

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Author: Sawyer Lyons

Date: Sunday, February 23, 2014 4:06:01 PM EST

Subject: Free French Resistance

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Although De Gaulle formed the large Free French Resistance, smaller individual pockets of resistance groups were all over France waging guerilla warfare on the German Army. Not only did they wage war, they published newspapers that tried to make Frenchmen inside occupied territories to fight back. This newspaper was formed by a group of lawyers and scientists and was called the Musée de L'Homme. The group was very successful until it was infiltrated by a member of the Vichy government, the government that was working for with Nazi Party. All members were either imprisoned or executed. This group of individuals helped ignite the flame for not just men, but women across the country to think about resisting German occupation. Another key component was the resistance groups in the woods.

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wow! i learned so much just by reading your work. i can definitely tell you really understand the free french resistance. Charles De Gaulle play a great role in uniting all resistance groups under one leadership. very interesting!

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You have a great understanding of your topic i can see. I really like this topic and how the French could do what they did with the little they had, Germany left them with nothing. I liked how you talked about the government members leaving and setting up their own Government, it was also very interesting to me. I did not know that the French Resistance played a role in D-DAY and i am glad that i now have that knowledge. Great job writing this paper, very interesting topic.

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