



# **In the Garden of Beasts: by Erik Larson | Key Summary Breakdown & Analysis: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin**

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In the Garden of Beasts is Erik Larson's fourth book which he describes as "narrative historical non-fiction, " where he resurrects historical figures as fleshed out characters and re-inserts them into often gripping dramatic situations within their historical contexts. His books are not fictionalized accounts or retellings of rote chronological events, but a character-laden narrative that gets the reader interested in how the characters will fare, even if the outcomes, and even many of the characters' fates, are already known. It is like watching James Cameron's Titanic, and hoping somehow, that the doomed ocean liner will turn itself upright, and let Jack Dawson and Rose DeWitt Bukater happily live their lives together into old age.

The events of In the Garden of Beasts are chronologically, the most recent among Larson's other books, taking place in 1933 – 1934 as Adolf Hitler is laying the groundwork of his infamous Third Reich. It is told mostly from the perspective of the United States' ambassador to Germany, William Dodd, and his family, especially his beloved, but peripatetic, daughter, Martha.

William Dodd seemed like a desperate choice for the ambassador position in Germany, when it seems that no one wanted the position. A simple, professorial man, whose main joy in life was to spend time in his rural farm, he was, as the book says, a square peg in a round hole, not given to the flamboyance and extravagance of a high-ranking diplomat in a major European country.

Despite the howling winds of change ripping through Europe, and a Depression-wracked United States, he stood his ground, surviving through, as long as he could, the political sniping that was part and parcel of State Department politics; something that is very much in evidence to the current day. He did not compromise his lifestyle, his values, and his family, insisting that he live his ambassador's life on what the U.S. government paid him for that position.

While he and his family were largely untouched by the violence around them, he tried to go beyond his diplomatic duties, and appeal to whatever humanity existed in the monsters that were slowly taking over Germany. He was a man of few friends, and died basically alone, a widower, while his daughter Martha, the most colorful moving part in Larson's book, flitted from one man to the next, and from one lifestyle to the next, ending up as the longest surviving Dodd.

The consolation for Dodd is that he did not live long enough to witness the apex of the Nazi Third Reich, which he vigorously warned the United States about. It would have eaten into him to know that 6 million innocent Jews were killed because no one paid heed to the alarms that he sounded; especially when things were a little more manageable, and Adolf Hitler had not yet established his foothold on the levers of power

in pre-Nazi Germany.

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