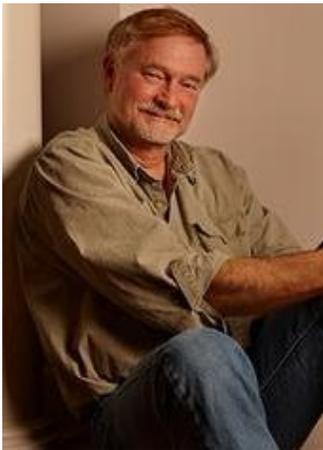


## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Erik Larson is the author of eight books, six of which became *New York Times* bestsellers. His latest books, *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz* and *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, both hit no. 1 on the list soon after launch. His saga of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, *The Devil in the White City*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and won an Edgar Award for fact-crime writing; it lingered on various *Times* bestseller lists for the better part of a decade. Hulu plans to adapt the book for a limited TV series, with Leonardo DiCaprio and Martin Scorsese as executive producers. Erik's *In the Garden of Beasts*, about how America's first ambassador to Nazi Germany and his daughter experienced the rising terror of Hitler's rule, has been optioned by Tom Hanks for development as a feature film.

Erik's first book of narrative nonfiction, *Isaac's Storm*, about the giant hurricane that destroyed Galveston, Texas, in 1900, won the American Meteorology Society's prestigious Louis J. Battan Author's Award. *The Washington Post* called it the "Jaws of hurricane yarns." Erik is particularly pleased to have won the Chicago Public Library Foundation's 2016 Carl Sandburg Literary Award for Non-Fiction.

He graduated summa cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied Russian history, language and culture; he received a masters in journalism from Columbia University. After a brief stint at the Bucks County Courier Times, Erik became a staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal*, and later a contributing writer for *Time Magazine*. His magazine stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and other publications.

He has taught non-fiction writing at San Francisco State, the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, the University of Oregon, and the Chuckanut Writers Conference in Bellingham, Wash., and has spoken to audiences from coast to coast. A former resident of Seattle, he now lives in Manhattan with his wife, a neonatologist, who is also the author of the nonfiction memoir, *Almost Home*, which, as Erik puts it, "could make a stone cry." They have three daughters in far-flung locations and professions. Their beloved dog Molly resides in an urn on a shelf overlooking Central Park, where they like to think she now spends most of her time.

- Author's website

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. The book's title comes from a line in John Colville's diary about the peculiar beauty of watching bombs fall over his home city: "Never was there such a contrast of natural splendor and human vileness." How do you think a tragedy like this could be considered beautiful? Why do you think Larson chose this title?
2. *The Splendid and the Vile* covers Winston Churchill's first year in office. What are the benefits of focusing on this truncated time period?
3. Larson draws on many sources to provide a vivid picture of Churchill's home and family life in his first year as prime minister. What struck you most about his family dynamic? Considering how powerful he was at the time, was his relationship with his family what you would have expected it to be? Why or why not?
4. Churchill's most trusted advisers spent many long days and nights with the prime minister, so much so that they became like members of his family. Why do you think Churchill had such close relationships with his political advisers? What do you see as being the key advantages and disadvantages of running a government office in this way? Which of Churchill's political relationships was the most interesting to you?
5. Larson provides various perspectives in the book, from diaries by Mary Churchill and Mass-Observation participants to the inner workings of both Churchill's and Hitler's cabinets. How did these different perspectives enhance your understanding of life in 1940 and 1941?
6. Reading about how war was waged and discussed by the public in 1940, do you see any similarities to how we talk about warfare today?
7. How did you feel reading about the raids? How would your daily life and your priorities change if your country were experiencing similar attacks with such frequency?
8. The book includes anecdotes about a vast array of characters around Churchill, such as his daughter-in-law Pamela, his children Randolph and Mary, and his wife, Clementine. What are the benefits of including various stories about the people related to Churchill—like Pamela's affair, or Randolph's gambling habits—in a book discussing his first year in office? Which of these characters did you find to be the most interesting? The most surprising?
9. Mary Churchill recounts the evening when the Café de Paris—where she and her friends had planned to go dancing—was bombed. After the initial shock, her group decides that the dead would have wanted them to continue their evening of gaiety and dancing elsewhere, and they move on to another location. What did you think about this choice? What do you think you would have done in their situation?
10. Discuss Mary Churchill's portrayal in the book. Do you feel she grows and matures throughout this tumultuous year? Why or why not?
11. What was the most surprising thing you learned about Churchill? Why did it surprise you?

12. While England rationed food, gasoline, and other supplies during the war, Churchill and his cabinet received extra provisions. What did you think about this policy? Do you think government officials are justified in implementing such measures during a time of crisis? Why or why not?
13. Were there any decisions Churchill made over the course of his first year as prime minister that you disagreed with? If so, which? Which of his decisions were you most impressed with?
14. Do you think there has been another leader as universally beloved in their day as Churchill was in his? If so, who? If not, why not?

- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/225405/the-splendid-and-the-vile-by-erik-larson/9780385348713/readers-guide/>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **Publisher's Weekly**

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Larson (Dead Wake) delivers a propulsive, character-driven account of Winston Churchill's first year as British prime minister (May 1940–May 1941), when the German air force launched “a full-on assault against the city of London” in preparation for an invasion that never came. Larson's profile subjects include Churchill's 17-year-old daughter, Mary; his private secretary, John “Jock” Colville, who kept a meticulous (and likely illegal, due to the national security secrets it revealed) diary; Nazi leader Rudolf Hess; and, to a lesser extent, ordinary Britons. Juxtaposing monumental developments, such as the Dunkirk evacuation, with intimate scenes, Larson notes that on the night Churchill learned French leaders wanted to make peace with Hitler, he raised his dinner guests' spirits by passing out cigars, reading aloud telegrams of support from other countries, and “chant the refrain from a popular song.” Larson highlights little-known but intriguing figures, including chief science adviser Frederick Lindemann, who made a multifaceted but unsuccessful case for why tea shouldn't be rationed, and documents the carnage caused by German bombs, including the deaths of 34 people at the Café de Paris shortly before Mary Churchill was set to arrive at the club. While the story of Churchill's premiership and the Blitz have been told in greater historical depth, they've rarely been rendered so vividly. Readers will rejoice. Agent: David Black, the David Black Agency. (Feb.) --Staff (Reviewed 02/17/2020) (Publishers Weekly, vol 267, issue 7, p).

### **Library Journal**

New York Times best-selling author Larson here investigates Winston Churchill as leader in the early days of World War II. Drawing on intelligence reports, recently declassified files, and personal diaries only now made available, Larson presents not just Churchill but those in his immediate circle, from his family to private secretary John Colville and newspaper baron Lord Beaverbrook. --Barbara Hoffert (Reviewed 10/01/2019) (Library Journal, vol 144, issue 9, p64).

## Kirkus Reviews

*/\* Starred Review \*/* The bestselling author deals with one of the most satisfying good-vs.-evil battles in history, the year (May 1940 to May 1941) during which Churchill and Britain held off Hitler. Bookshelves groan with histories of Britain's finest hour, but Larson (*Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, 2015, etc.) employs a mildly unique strategy, combining an intense, almost day-to-day account of Churchill's actions with those of his family, two of his officials (Frederick Lindemann, who was Churchill's prime science adviser, and Lord Beaverbrook, minister of air production), and staff, including private secretary Jock Colville and bodyguard Walter Thompson. Since no one doubted they lived in extraordinary times and almost everyone kept journals and wrote letters, the author takes full advantage of an avalanche of material, much of which will be unfamiliar to readers. Churchill remains the central figure; his charisma, public persona, table talk, quirks, and sybaritic lifestyle retain their fascination. Authors have not ignored his indispensable wife, Clementine (Sonia Purnell's 2015 biography is particularly illuminating), but even history buffs will welcome Larson's attention to their four children, especially Mary, a perky adolescent and his favorite. He makes no attempt to rehabilitate Winston's only son, Randolph, a heavy-drinking spendthrift whose long-suffering wife, Pamela, finally consoled herself with a long affair with American representative Averell Harriman, which was no secret to the family and was entirely approved. Britain's isolation ended when Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, but Larson ends on May 10. The Blitz was in full swing, with a particularly destructive raid on London, but that day also saw Rudolf Hess, Hitler's second in command, fly to England and engage in a wacky attempt (planned since the previous autumn) to negotiate peace. Nothing came of Hess' action, but that day may also have marked the peak of the Blitz, which soon diminished as Germany concentrated its forces against the Soviet Union. A captivating history of Churchill's heroic year, with more than the usual emphasis on his intimates. (Kirkus Reviews, February 1, 2020).

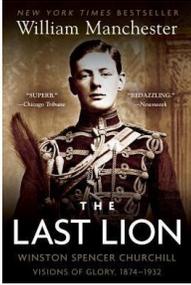
## READALIKES

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### ***Their Finest Hour* by Winston S. Churchill**

The former British prime minister describes his first year in office in 1940 and the problems he faced with World War II.



***The Last Lion* by William Manchester**

Describes the early life and political career of the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.



***Clementine* by Sonia Purnell**

A portrait of Winston Churchill's extraordinary wife and her lesser-known role in World War II discusses her relationship with political mentor Eleanor Roosevelt, her role in safeguarding Churchill's health throughout key historical events and her controversial family priorities.