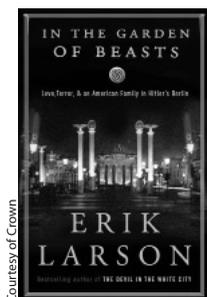


analysis, however, the sixty-two essays by the war's most illustrious commanders, coupled with five year-by-year introductions by America's most esteemed historians, make *Hearts Touched by Fire* indispensable reading for any student of this country's bloodiest conflict.



New York: Crown,  
2011

448 pages

\$26.00

## ***In the Garden of the Beasts: Love, Terror and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin***

by Erik Larson

**Reviewed by Henry G. Gole**, now writing the biography of Colonel Truman Smith, Military Attaché in Berlin, 1935-1939

Erik Larson, an experienced and highly successful writer, has done it again: *In the Garden of the Beasts* is near the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list. Briskly told in short chapters, it focuses on Ambassador William E. Dodd and his twenty-four-year-old daughter Martha in Berlin. Rich in detail reflecting extensive research, it begins with their arrival in July 1933 and ends on 30 June 1934, the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler purged his party of insufficiently obedient elements by having Ernst Roehm and other old SA (*Sturmabteilung*, the brown-shirted Nazi paramilitary army) Kameraden murdered. While at it, he also eliminated other political enemies, among them two army generals. Appalled at the barbarism, Dodd never again spoke to Hitler and had as little contact with top Nazis as possible. He had earlier refused to attend the Party Days in Nuremberg that celebrated Hitler and the Nazis, an admirable stance. But how useful is an ambassador who refuses to speak to the government to which he is accredited?

The Dodd family—four members, but wife Mattie and adult son Bill are minor figures in the book—remained in Berlin for four and a half years. Larson explains: “It is their first year that is the subject of the story to follow, for it coincided with Hitler’s ascent from chancellor to absolute tyrant.” What was it like to dine, dance, and joke with Goebbels and Goering? Larson attempted to recreate what it was like to have witnessed that year firsthand, and he has succeeded.

Dodd was not the first choice of newly inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s to be Ambassador to Germany. In fact, Larson writes, “No one wanted the job.” When approached by Roosevelt to take up the post, Dodd asked for time to think about it. He was reluctant to accept, dubious about his own effectiveness, and, at best, willing to give Hitler and his gang benefit of the doubt. These facts had to be considered: he was not rich; he had little political influence; he was associated with deceased President Woodrow Wilson’s internationalism, anathema to isolationists; he was professor of history at the University of Chicago and designated as President of the American Historical Association; his priority was completing another volume of his *Old South*, a history, and was in his middle sixties; he was a devoted family man concerned with the futures of his adult children. On the other hand, he had access to

the President, lunched privately with him, and directly exchanged letters; he had earned his Ph.D. with a dissertation on Jefferson at Leipzig University in 1900, knew German, and spoke the language; and the president held open the possibility of returning in a year. It was unquestionably an honor. He accepted.

Martha is described as a spoiled thrill seeker ready to sleep with interesting or attractive men, either characteristic would do. A partial score card included Americans, Germans, at least one Frenchman, and one Russian. She wanted to believe that the Hitler movement made sense, but then a Soviet diplomat became one of the great loves of her life and she turned left. He combined The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) business with pleasure: she was attractive, willing, and the American Ambassador's daughter! (He was executed in Stalin's purges in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s.) Her politics and sexual activity were too entangled to sort out. Her behavior was noted in State Department communications and in the Berlin grapevine. It is difficult to believe that Dodd was oblivious to his daughter's escapades or that he accepted them, but it had to be one or the other. Did your reviewer mention that this is a page-turner?

Dodd, the Jeffersonian, was determined to manage his household and duties entirely on his annual salary of \$17,500, not nearly sufficient for the ambassador to fulfill his representational role in a major European capital, even in 1933. He was bored at formal affairs and resented wealthy American diplomats and haughty Ivy Leaguers who dominated the State Department. They reciprocated, regarding him with contempt as a bumpkin or fuzzyheaded academic who looked for the Student Prince of 1900 in Hitler's Germany and couldn't find him.

As a general reader, your reviewer assigns very high marks to Larson. He makes flesh and blood protagonists of the Dodd family and breathes life into other players, thus evoking the empathy of the reader, even where available evidence requires slight embellishment, particularly in romantic scenes created from a few lines in a diary or memoir.

This historian has a pedantic "ahem." It has to do with Hitler's path to becoming an "absolute tyrant." Purging the SA pleased the professional army, and both Defense Minister Blomberg and President Hindenburg congratulated Hitler for his "soldierly decision and exemplary courage." A competitor army had been reduced in influence, if not eliminated. But an extremely important event took place a month later, after the tidy one-year period Larson chose to highlight: the death of Hindenburg on 2 August 1934. Hitler pounced, combining the offices of president and chancellor into one *person*, the Fuehrer, and most importantly, requiring every soldier to take a personal oath to Adolf Hitler. That is what made Hitler's powers absolute. He cowed the German people just as he would soon cow the governments of his neighbors.