



# A GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS

#1 New York Times Bestseller

## IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS

*Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*

by ERIK LARSON, bestselling Author of  
*The Devil in the White City*

Broadway Books Trade Paperback 978-0-307-40885-3

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### COAST-TO-COAST PRAISE FOR *IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS*:

“By far Larson’s best and most enthralling work of novelistic history. . . . Powerful, poignant . . . a transportingly true story.”—*New York Times*

“Tells a fascinating story brilliantly well.”  
—*Financial Times*

“Terrific.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“A stunning work of history.”—*Newsweek*

“Larson has meticulously researched the Dodds’ intimate witness to Hitler’s ascendancy and created an edifying narrative . . . that has all the pleasures of a political thriller.”—*New York Times Book Review*

“Harrowingly suspenseful.”—*Vogue.com*

“Even though we know how it will end . . . this is a page-turner, full of flesh and blood people and monsters too, whose charms are particularly disturbing.”—*Portsmouth Herald*

“Larson’s strengths as a storyteller have never been stronger than they are here. . . . How the United States dithered as Hitler rose to power is a cautionary tale that bears repeating, and Larson has told it masterfully.”—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Reads like an elegant thriller . . . utterly compelling. An excellent and entertaining book.”  
—*Washington Post*

“A master at writing true tales as riveting as fiction.”—*People*

“Like slipping slowly into a nightmare, with logic perverted and morality upended . . . It all makes for a powerful, unsettling immediacy.”  
—*Vanity Fair*

“Dazzling . . . Reads like a suspense novel, replete with colorful characters, both familiar and those previously relegated to the shadows. Like Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories* or Victor Klemperer’s *Diaries*, *In the Garden of Beasts* is an on-the-ground documentary of a society going mad in slow motion.”—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Gripping . . . a nightmare narrative of a terrible time. It raises again the question never fully answered about the Nazi era—what evil humans are capable of, and what means are necessary to cage the beast.”—*The Seattle Times*

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## INTRODUCTION

A major bestseller, *In the Garden of Beasts* tells the remarkable true story of William Edward Dodd, America's first ambassador to Hitler's Germany. Showcasing the storytelling power of author Erik Larson, a widely acclaimed master of narrative nonfiction, this mesmerizing book brings to light a crucial but little-known chapter in the rise of the Third Reich.

Tapped by newly elected president Franklin Roosevelt, Dodd was a mild-mannered history professor who had no previous experience as a diplomat. Yet he accepted the post, arriving in Berlin in 1933 with his wife, son, and flamboyant daughter, Martha. The stranger-than-fiction culture they encountered was by turns enchanting—marked by lavish parties and a seemingly visionary new leadership that promised to restore Germany to world prominence—and disturbing, in the wake of mounting evidence of persecution against Jews, communists, and anyone else Hitler deemed to be a threat. Despite her father's fears as frightening new laws were passed, Martha was slow to accept the looming danger. While Dodd's telegraphs went unheeded by the State Department, Martha had one affair after another, including with the first chief of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels. Culminating on June 30, 1934 (the so-called Night of the Long Knives), when Hitler launched a bloody purge of his own paramilitary officials, *In the Garden of Beasts* raises provocative new questions about how the nightmare of Nazi power became reality.

Suffused with fascinating details about an era that would unleash immeasurable destruction across Europe, with haunting portraits of figures such as Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels, *In the Garden of Beasts* is a dazzling cautionary tale. We hope that the following guide will enhance your exploration of this deeply human journey.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In his prologue (“Das Vorspiel”), Erik Larson writes, “There are no heroes here, at least not of the Schindler’s List variety, but there are glimmers of heroism.” What heroism did you find in this history? Who were the greatest cowards?
2. Discuss the significance of the title, derived from a literal translation of the word Tiergarten. What is captured in the deceptive beauty of the garden, a refuge for many of the men and women described in the book? What does it take to transform a beautiful creature into a “beast”?
3. How was Martha able to appear youthful, even virginal, yet also sophisticated? What made her attractive to such a broad variety of men, from literary figures to military leaders? What type of man was she most attracted to? How did these men compare to her father?
4. Studying for his doctorate thesis in Leipzig, Dodd researched American history while he was a student far from his homeland. Returning to Germany decades later, what did he discover about his homeland by looking at it as an outsider?
5. Larson describes Roosevelt’s struggle when no one would take the job as U.S. ambassador to Germany. Would you have accepted the job if you had been in Dodd’s situation?
6. Was Dodd’s lack of wealth a help or a hindrance as an ambassador, especially in a time of economic depression? Would Hitler have been more intimidated by an American ambassador who lived lavishly?
7. Dodd was repeatedly reminded that his biggest concern should be whether Germany would default on its massive debt to the United States. Why didn’t Washington link Messersmith’s warnings to America’s economic interests? Do eco-

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conomic concerns still overshadow human rights in foreign policy today? Are economics and human rights dependent on each other?

8. William Dodd longed to have time to write a complete history of the rise and fall of America's Old South, the land of his ancestors. He also became embroiled in controversy when he taught at Randolph-Macon College and tried to expose unsavory aspects of the Confederacy. How did his specialization in Southern history ironically help him navigate Hitler's Germany?

9. In *In the Garden of Beasts* captures the years when outsiders refused to believe Hitler was anything more than a passing sideshow. Dodd even sympathized with Hitler's belief that the Versailles Treaty gave Germany a raw deal, and that American banks were charging Germany unfair interest rates. Without the benefit of hindsight, what would you have believed about the political situation in Germany in the early 1930s?

10. How was it possible for Dodd and Messersmith to have such different perceptions of the same circumstances?

11. Discuss Martha's relationship with Boris. What allure did the Soviet Union have for her? Why was she drawn to travel there?

12. Discuss the Dodds' evolving attitudes toward Jews. Would you have hesitated to protect the Panofsky family (the Dodds' landlords)?

13. What was the effect of the power struggles within Hitler's regime? How did paranoia both help and hinder Hitler's cause?

14. Larson's research sources comprise more than forty pages. Look through this section and make observations about the process he undertook to reconstruct this history. How does it benefit a society to have free access to historical documents? Is there such a thing as "historical truth"?

## EXPLORING IN DEPTH

1. Which aspects of life in Berlin surprised you the most as you read the Dodds' story? How does this version compare to others you've read?

2. What was Hitler's formula for establishing control, despite limited military and economic means? How did the slow buildup of popular support occur? What was the role of random arrests, propaganda, and a minority scapegoat?

3. The book's subtitle is "Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin." What family dynamic was at play in the Dodd household overseas? Against this backdrop, what forms of love thrived?

4. Discuss the book's epilogue, "The Queer Bird in Exile." What does Martha's legacy as a fighter for equality say about her spirit, and her temperament? How did she finally overcome her naïveté? How would you have been affected by an experience like hers in Berlin?

5. In what ways has Hitler's formula been repeated elsewhere in the world? Why didn't the lessons from the Holocaust prevent future genocides such as those in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur?

## KEY FIGURES

### ***Rudolf Diels***

Head of the Gestapo from 1933 until his dismissal in 1934, he was protected by Göring and later supported the prosecution at the Nuremberg trials. He was one of Martha's lovers.

### ***Martha Dodd***

Born in 1908, she briefly served as assistant literary editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. Her first marriage, to New York bank vice president George Bassett Roberts, ended in divorce. She was twenty-four when she moved to Germany with her family. In 1938, she married millionaire Alfred Stern and was active in left-wing politics. She died in 1990 in Prague.

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## ***William Dodd***

Born in 1869 in Clayton, North Carolina, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Leipzig in 1900 and was a professor of history at Randolph-Macon College from 1900 to 1908 and then began a twenty-five-year career on the faculty of the University of Chicago. He served as U.S. ambassador to Germany from June 1933 to December 1937. He died in 1940 on his Virginia farm. He and his wife, Martha (known as “Mattie”), were married from 1901 until her death in 1938.

## ***William Dodd, Jr.***

Born in 1905, Bill Dodd taught history and served in the Roosevelt administration in various capacities, including the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Communications Commission. He died in 1952.

## ***Prince Louis Ferdinand***

He would have reigned as Kaiser of Germany if the monarchy had survived World War I. He was linked to anti-Hitler resistance groups.

## ***Mildred Fish Harnack***

A representative of the American Women’s Club in Berlin, she became one of Martha’s close friends. She was executed on Hitler’s orders in 1943.

## ***Joseph Goebbels***

Hitler’s Minister of Public Enlightenment, he managed a fearsome propaganda machine.

## ***Hermann Göring***

A leading member of the Nazi Party and Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe (air force). He was sentenced to death at the Nuremberg Trials but committed suicide before his scheduled execution.

## ***Ernest Franz Hanfstaengl***

Munich-born, Harvard-educated confidant of Hitler and one of Martha’s lovers.

## ***Paul von Hindenburg***

Second president of the Weimar Republic, 1925–1934.

## ***Cordell Hull***

Secretary of State under Roosevelt from 1933 to 1944.

## ***George Messersmith***

Foreign Service officer and head of the U.S. Consulate in Germany who wrote graphic but unheeded accounts of Nazi atrocities. He was rumored to be Jewish, and Dodd believed this misinformation.

## ***Jay Pierrepont Moffat***

State Department’s Chief of Western European Affairs, 1932–1935.

## ***Alfred Panofsky***

Jewish banker who rented his mansion at 27A Tiergartenstrasse to the Dodd family.

## ***Franz von Papen***

Chancellor of Germany in 1932 and vice-chancellor from 1933 to 1934. He encouraged Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as chancellor in 1933.

## ***Ernst Röhm***

Commander of the SA but a rival for power. He was executed on Hitler’s orders during the Night of the Long Knives.

## ***Daniel Roper***

Commerce Secretary and a close friend of the Dodd family. He was like an uncle to Martha and Bill and paved the way for Dodd’s ambassadorship.

## ***Sigrid Schultz***

American correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, which published her many exposés of Hitler’s atrocities.

## ***Boris Winogradov***

First secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Germany.

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He was one of Martha's most controversial lovers because he was suspected of being an NKVD spy.

## ***Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise***

The honorary president of the American Jewish Congress, he urged Roosevelt to join his vocal opposition to Nazism.

## **GLOSSARY**

*Gebeime Staatspolizei, Gestapo*: secret police  
*Konzentrationslager, KZ*: concentration camp

*Nationalsozialismus*: Nazism

*Schutzhaft*: protective custody

*Schutzstaffel, SS*: Nazi defense corps

*Staatsjugendtag*: Saturday State's Day for Hitler Youth

*Sturmabteilung, SA*: storm troopers

*Reichstag*: legislative body

*Untermensch*: subhuman, applied primarily to Jews

## **TIMELINE**

*July 28, 1921*: Austrian World War I veteran Adolf Hitler becomes chairman of the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) party. His inflammatory speeches—appealing to wounded national pride while attacking Jews, social democrats, and communists—cause his popularity to soar.

*July 31, 1932*: In national elections, Nazi candidates win more than 200 seats, becoming the largest party in the Reichstag.

*January 30, 1933*: President Paul von Hindenburg appoints Nazi party leader Hitler as Chancellor.

*March 4, 1933*: Franklin Delano Roosevelt is inaugurated.

*April 7, 1933*: The Reichstag enacts the so-called Aryan Clause, banning Jews from civil service jobs, including in courts of law.

*June 8, 1933*: Sixty-four-year-old William Dodd receives a phone call inviting him to serve as U.S. ambassador to Germany.

*July 5, 1933*: The Dodds set sail on the Washington, arriving in Hamburg on July 13.

*September 14, 1933*: Dodd meets with German foreign minister Konstantin von Neurath to make a formal protest against attacks on Americans.

*October 12, 1933*: Dodd delivers a speech before Berlin's branch of the American Chamber of Commerce predicting the collapse of a nation that tries to exert social control.

*October 17, 1933*: Dodd meets with Hitler to voice similar concerns.

*November 12, 1933*: In a public referendum, the German people ratify Hitler's decision to withdraw from the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations.

*January 1, 1934*: Hitler's cabinet enacts the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases.

*March 7, 1934*: A mock trial of Hitler, organized by the American Jewish Congress, is held in Madison Square Garden.

*May 12, 1934*: Dodd receives word that Goebbels has just given a speech calling Jews "the syphilis of all European peoples."

*June 30, 1934*: Hitler purges his own legions in the Night of the Long Knives. General and former chancellor Kurt von Schleicher, cabinet member Ferdinand von Bredow, and SA commander Ernst Röhm are among the casualties.

*August 2, 1934*: Hindenburg dies. Hitler declares the presidency dormant and transfers full powers to himself as Führer.

*August 1934–September 1937*: Dodd writes repeated, alarming reports and refuses to engage the Third Reich.

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*November 23, 1937:* Dodd receives telegram from Secretary of State Hull asking him to leave Berlin by Christmas at the latest, at the request of Roosevelt. Dodd's replacement is career diplomat Hugh Wilson.

*December 29, 1937:* The Dodds return to the U.S. William Dodd retires to his farm, teaches college, and joins the lecture circuit, giving cautionary speeches.

*May 28, 1938:* Mattie Dodd dies.

*June 16, 1938:* Martha marries Alfred Stern.

*November 9–10, 1938:* “Kristallnacht,” the Night of Broken Glass, a pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany and parts of Austria. Roosevelt calls Ambassador Wilson home.

*September 1939:* Hitler invades Poland, just as Dodd predicted.

*February 4, 1940:* William Dodd dies at his Virginia farm with son and daughter at his side.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erik Larson** is the bestselling author of the National Book Award finalist and Edgar Award-winning *The Devil in the White City*. His other previous books include *Thunderstruck*, *Isaac's Storm*, *Lethal Passage*, and *The Naked Consumer*. He lives in Seattle with his wife and three daughters. Visit his website at [eriklarsonbooks.com](http://eriklarsonbooks.com).

Guide written by Amy Clements.