

Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania

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Are you looking for a big, absorbing book of nonfiction to fill these long winter nights? One to give as a present to a friend or relative who loves nonfiction? Want to get lost in another time, another place? Want to take a sea journey the old-fashioned way in grand style? In any of these cases, *Dead Wake*'s the book for you.

Larson brings the era just before the U.S. entered World War 1 to vivid life. Having just completed it, I feel as though I recently crossed the Atlantic in one of the most modern and luxurious vessels of the early 20th century.

Not only is Larson excellent at capturing everyday life in earlier times, but he also provides a cast of highly believable characters from the famous: President Woodrow Wilson to the obsessed: rare book dealer Charles Lauriat, to the vanguard: early feminist architect and spiritualist, Theodate Pope.

It begins on the fateful day, Saturday, May 1, 1915, nearly a hundred years ago, when the very fast ship (for those days), the Lusitania left Pier 40 on the Hudson River for England. Although most of the passengers did not have time to read the *New York Times* that busy morning, an ad had been placed there by the Germans warning Lusitania passengers that any vessel traveling through the war zones of its enemies was liable to destruction. In 1915 Germany was at war with Great Britain.

One couple, a Boston shoe salesman and his wife, cancelled because of the notice. A young woman spiritualist dithered and could not sleep trying to decide but in the end did not cancel but did not show up due to her sense of foreboding. During the crossing many joked about the possibility of a naval attack.

It became a kind of voyage joke. After all they were riding one of the fastest merchant ships in the world then, but what many did not know was that one of the four engines was shut down to save on coal.

Despite the warning, which nobody including the captain took seriously, no passenger was trained how to wear the new lifeboats or how to board the rescue boats should an explosion occur.

Larson is great at building tension. He alternates chapters between the ship's voyage with tales from the German submarine U-20 on a mission that first week of May in the waters between Ireland and England, the exact path that the Lusitania was on. Other chapters tell of President Wilson's great loneliness after the death of his wife, and of his new love for another woman that has him very distracted.

Although you know the ending of this book before you get there, the writing about the explosion and its aftermath is spectacular. Several survivors describe how it felt to be in the sea after the torpedo hit. And for some of them it was not harrowing or scary, but an experience of beauty and calm under a tranquil blue sky/

Larson also covers some of the war-time intrigue and British spying including a theory of why the Lusitania had no warship protection or even advice about taking a safer travel. Even after a hundred years suspicions linger that the tragedy did not need to occur.

The book is a great read. Don't miss it. And if you like its character-centered focus, try one on another major ship disaster, *Voyagers of the Titanic* by R.T.P. Davenport-Hines.

Posted by Dory L. on December 14, 2015

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