



# Thunderstruck

*Erik Larson*

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Erik Larson

**Thunderstruck** Erik Larson

**A true story of love, murder, and the end of the world's "great hush."**

In *Thunderstruck*, Erik Larson tells the interwoven stories of two men--Hawley Crippen, a very unlikely murderer, and Guglielmo Marconi, the obsessive creator of a seemingly supernatural means of communication--whose lives intersect during one of the greatest criminal chases of all time.

Set in Edwardian London and on the stormy coasts of Cornwall, Cape Cod, and Nova Scotia, *Thunderstruck* evokes the dynamism of those years when great shipping companies competed to build the biggest, fastest ocean liners; scientific advances dazzled the public with visions of a world transformed; and the rich outdid one another with ostentatious displays of wealth. Against this background, Marconi races against incredible odds and relentless skepticism to perfect his invention: the wireless, a prime catalyst for the emergence of the world we know today. Meanwhile, Crippen, "the kindest of men," nearly commits the perfect murder.

With his unparalleled narrative skills, Erik Larson guides us through a relentlessly suspenseful chase over the waters of the North Atlantic. Along the way, he tells of a sad and tragic love affair that was described on the front pages of newspapers around the world, a chief inspector who found himself strangely sympathetic to the killer and his lover, and a driven and compelling inventor who transformed the way we communicate.

## Thunderstruck Details

Date : Published September 25th 2007 by Broadway Books (first published October 24th 2006)

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Author : Erik Larson

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# From Reader Review Thunderstruck for online ebook

## Kealan Burke says

Larson is rapidly becoming one of my favorite writers. The Devil in the White City, Dead Wake, and now Thunderstruck, serve as prime examples of compelling narrative nonfiction.

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## Julie says

Thunderstruck, by Erik Larson is a non fiction account of the infamous murder of Belle Elmore by her husband, Hawley Crippen, and the story of Guglielmo Marconi, the inventor of wireless telegraphy. The story of both men was riveting. Marconi was obsessive about his work, probably had Aspergers syndrome. He battles it out with competitors over patents and rights. It was like a soap opera sometimes, all the accusations, and back biting. The details behind the invention was also very interesting. This man dedicated his life to his work, but it was a crime and the role his invention played in the apprehension of Hawley that really put his invention on the map.

Crippen, was an unassuming man. He married a rather flamboyant woman, that eventually drove him to commit an unspeakable crime. Crippen leads Scotland Yard on a history making chase through the ocean. Crippen was described as being "kind hearted" . The last person one would expect to commit murder. But, man, this guy was one cool customer all the way to the bitter end.

I am not a big fan of non-fiction history, because while it can be interesting, it is usually very dry. I am a huge fan of historical fiction, however. But, my son gave me this book for my birthday a few years ago, and it finally made it to the top of my TBR list. I had read "The Devil and the White City" several years back , after reading the stellar reviews, so I was really looking forward to this one. Larson's style is to write a few chapters about the invention and those involved with that, then he switched to the Crippen and what was happening with him. The suspense builds up as we see the struggles of each man and those involved with them, and as we see the two stories come together. Larson's books read like a novel making history seem very interesting and anything but dry.

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## Jim says

In his typical style Erik Larson tells two parallel interwoven stories. The first is the story of Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the wireless. The second is the story of Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, homeopathic doctor and one of the most notorious murderers in British history. The link? Dr. Crippen was the first suspect to be captured with the aid of wireless telegraphy.

I know that Marconi was a pioneer in wireless telegraphy. In this book I learned a lot about the man. From Larson's narrative it would appear that he was very driven and dedicated to his work. A "Type A" personality. While he must have been very intelligent it does not sound like he was good "people person". Not with the people he dealt with on a professional basis and not with women in his life. The story of Marconi and the development of wireless telegraphy was interesting. Not page turning, can't put the book down reading but rather interesting from a historical perspective. Certainly not as interesting as the story of Dr. Crippen.

Hawley Harvey Crippen was a doctor in homeopathic medicine. By all descriptions he was mild and kind. Short in stature, wore eye glasses, and thinning hair. The last person anyone would suspect of being a murderer. His wife, Cora, was a rather large woman who was demanding and openly told Crippen about the affairs she had. After a party at their home on January 31, 1910 Cora disappeared. The story is well known. Scotland Yard began to investigate Cora's disappearance, Crippen booked passage on a ship to Quebec with a typist from his office, a body was found in the basement of Crippen's home, an inspector from Scotland Yard booked passage on another ship to Quebec setting off a race across the Atlantic hoping to arrive first and arrest Crippen. While Crippen and Ethel Le Neve, the young typist, were enjoying their eleven day cruise wireless messages were busily describing their every move. What they ate, what they read, their conversations at the captain's table and with other officers of the ship. Crippen and Le Neve were the subject of people on both sides of the Atlantic and they were oblivious. Reading the story of Crippen reminded me of something out of a Alfred Hitchcock story. The mild, meek little man married to the large and domineering wife until he can't take it anymore and does her in. It wasn't until the end of the book that I read that he indeed used this event as a basis for several of his movies and television series.

I have found Erik Larson's books to be very enjoyable. His books are non-fiction about historical events but his writing style is more like historical fiction and therefore very readable. Thunderstruck was one of my favorites by this author.

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### **Teresa Lukey says**

This one turned out to be a bit of a disappointment for me. I loved *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* and was expecting something similar here.

Unfortunately, I was so weighed down in details of Marconi and his electrical engineering project, I could barely keep my head above water. There was simply too much detail when describing Marconi's work towards engineering wireless. Although an electrical engineer or any person interested in early communication methods might find this one engaging, it was too much for me.

I will not let this book deter me from reading other Erik Larson books. I have heard good thing about *In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin* and am looking forward to reading that one.

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### **Will Byrnes says**

First off, while this is an interesting and engaging story, it is not the top-notch book that *Devil in the White City* was. Here, Larson tells parallel tales of Guglielmo Marconi, inventor of the wireless, and Hawley Crippen, a relative nobody who gained infamy by doing away with his wife. Where they intersect is when the new-fangled wireless machine is used to track the fleeing killer and his mistress as they cross the Atlantic in a passenger liner. Larson is excellent at imparting a sense of a time, 1910 in London, and various locations in Europe and North America. He offers much information about Marconi as a person, a scientist, a suitor, husband and father, and a businessman. While Marconi's name may stand out to us today through the foggy details of history, there were several other individuals whose scientific investigations were also critical to the development of wireless communication. The politics, and the legal and business scheming that went into the wireless, make for a fun read. But, while Crippen and his pursuit by Scotland Yard may have represented the

1910 predecessor to helicopters trailing the white Bronco, Crippen seems such a minor presence as to stand out purely as literary device by which Larson can tell us about the time.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed the book. Larson is a gifted writer and he clearly takes delight in presenting us with a smorgasbord of details of the day. You will learn things you did not know before. There is considerable visual imagery that makes one yearn for a skilled film director to be on call. It is only when comparing it to *Devil in the White City* that it...um... pales.

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## Jane says

Where I got the book: purchased from my local indie bookstore at an author event\*. Signed with a funny drawing!

Like *The Devil in the White City*, *Thunderstruck* tells two stories that have a meeting point. In this case, it's the (at the time) notorious case of Dr. Crippen, who murdered his wife, embraced by the larger story of the development of the wireless telegraph. It was wireless that enabled the British police to catch Crippen and his lover Ethel Le Neve, who were on a ship bound for Canada--Crippen knew by this time that they were fugitives from the law, but Le Neve probably didn't. And neither of them, apparently, knew that they had been spotted early in the voyage by the ship's captain, and that the world's press had picked up on the sensation and had newspaper readers on the edge of their chairs waiting to see if they would be captured.

The story of wireless centers on Guglielmo Marconi, who, although no scientist, was the first to put the emerging theories of wireless transmission to practical use, succeeding by a process of trial and error in stretching the distance over which wireless could be used until he was able to send messages over the Atlantic with a certain degree of success. It's a pretty good tale of industrial rivalry, piracy and sour grapes, and a man with an obsession--nowadays we'd probably diagnose Marconi with Asperger's, given his ability to subjugate everything, even his personal life, to his mania for his subject. And yet Marconi is a businessman, always intending to make money out of wireless, a sharp contrast to the scientists who seem to regard their experiments as a sort of amateur gentleman's pursuit and are furious with the Italian-Irish upstart for actually daring to cash in on them. It's a portrait of a world waking up to the power of technology as an essential weapon in the furtherance of business, the early days of the age where inventions, supported by business cash, began to succeed each other with increasing speed--we're still somewhere in the middle of that age, and heaven knows where it's all going to end up.

Of course the most human story is that of Crippen, the shy and retiring purveyor of homeopathic medicines who ends up married to a loud, exuberant, wannabe actress who henpecks him and spends all of his money. It's a story of the worm that turns, and you can take your pick whether his mild exterior hid the soul of a psychopath or whether he just--snapped.

Larson is a darn good storyteller, and although I felt my attention flagging just a little in the middle of the book, on the whole I found both tales entertaining. The last hundred or so pages, covering the murder and the chase, were riveting. Fifty pages of notes, bibliography and index ensure that this work of popular history can also stay on the bookshelf as a reference work, always a plus. I'd recommend *Thunderstruck* to readers who like a good true-life yarn.

\*If you ever get the chance to hear Larson speak, take it. He's very entertaining.

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## Richard Derus says

It's an axiom that Great Men (and, one supposes, Great Women) are Unpleasant People. Larson's treatment of Guglielmo Marconi, great-great-great grandfather of the device you're reading this on, does nothing to dispel the miasma of meanness from him. What a rotten human being! How completely insensitive, how thoroughly obsessively devoted to his own self and comfort, what a complete rotter of a businessman!

Thank you, Guglielmo, for the gifts all that human wreckage you left behind have given us all. Rot in peace.

Then, at the precise opposite end of the emotional spectrum, lies the once-infamous, now largely forgotten, Dr. Hawley Crippen, who murdered his termagant of a wife (who \*richly\* deserved killing, being a female Marconi sans genius), so he could be with his little light-o-love. Didn't work out, needless to say, though if the Scotland Yard inspector had simply been told to go the hell away, the whole chase and capture and hanging might not have had to happen. There was no evidence of a killing, but the Inspector went on a fishing expedition in Crippen's basement--wouldn't be allowed today, not a chance!--and, well...he really did do it. Probably not alone, though....

Well, anyway, you've read *The Devil in the White City* and Isaac's *Storm*, so I needn't belabor the point that Larson has a magpie's eye for shiny things, bringing to the nest of the book a trove of odd and telling details about Edwardian London, about the nature of human relationships, about the science of radio waves as it was being discovered; most of all, he brings us characters we feel some connection to, and can really invest in. I know how the book ends before I pick it up, but I find myself wanting Crippen to get away with it and pulling for him and Ethel to make it to Canada \*this time\*.

They don't. Shame, that.

Wrap yourself in this big, warm greatcoat of a book that transports you back to an optimistic, doomed, bright summer afternoon of a time. It's oodles of fun, if you take it slowly and don't try to gulp it down. It's too big to swallow whole, and half the fun is setting the book down and savoring the images of this vanished world. Recommended to all but the most history-phobic.

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## Taryn Pierson says

This is a book about the invention of wireless telegraphy. As if he knew this wasn't the sexiest of topics, author Erik Larson includes a murder mystery alongside it, creating a fun little two-for-the-price-of-one non-fiction treat. He lures you in with relationship drama and then works in the science. So sneaky! And once the two distinct stories come together, so delicious.

I can see how some readers would be less than enthused about the more technical details of Marconi's science experiments, but I live with an engineer, so I have developed a pretty high tolerance for tech speak. I actually find it relaxing to let unfamiliar phrases and concepts drift past--it's not like I'm expected to chime in with meaningful feedback or opinions. I just nod encouragingly from time to time and let it all wash over me. So yeah, the experience of listening to this audio book was, for me, both familiar and comfortable.

And the story of the demure, unassuming patent medicine salesman Crippen and his voluptuous, volatile wife is a fascinating one, more than enough to keep the engine humming. I didn't entirely buy into Larson's incredulity that a man perceived as so gentle could be capable of murder. I must be a cynic--of course the quiet, retiring guy was eventually going to snap! Still, the chase towards the end of the book is surprisingly suspenseful, considering by today's standards it unfolded at a snail's pace.

Larson is a great storyteller and is particularly good at sniffing out historical events that would make for accessible, addictive reading. This is the third book of his I've read, and I've enjoyed them all. I especially recommend *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America*--so good!

More book recommendations by me at [www.readingwithhippos.com](http://www.readingwithhippos.com)

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### **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

This didn't move quickly only because I've had a bit less time to read in the last week. Although it isn't as compelling as either his *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* or *Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, this is an interesting story. From the beginning, we understand why Larson chose to tell these stories in the same volume. The juxtaposition of an entirely new technology - one unimaginable to most - and that of the police tracking down the perpetrators of a sensational murder was good.

The murder fascinated Raymond Chandler and so captivated Alfred Hitchcock that he worked elements into some of his movies, most notably *Rear Window*. Followed by millions of newspaper readers around the world, the great chase that ensued helped advance the evolution of a technology we today take utterly for granted. "It was hot news indeed," wrote playwright and essayist J. B. Priestley, himself a scion of the Edwardian age, "something was happening for the first time in world history."

I found the story of Marconi developing wireless telegraphy fascinating. He had insufficient knowledge to understand what it was he was doing or why and yet he succeeded. In his typical thoroughness, Larson gives us much background, including Marconi's family. It wasn't hard for me to picture them.

It is true that in this time people set their faces hard for photographs, partly from custom, partly because of deficits in photographic technology, but this crowd might not have smiled for the better part of a century. The women seem suspended in a state somewhere between melancholy and fury and are surrounded by old men in strange beards that look as if someone had dabbed glue at random points on their faces, then hurled buckets of white hair in their direction.

The murder story was far less interesting to me. Larson himself apparently never found the people involved very interesting, and, indeed, they seemed such normal everyday personages that the chapters on Crippen, Belle, and Ethel were sort of hum drum.

I'm afraid that the book doesn't quite cross the line into the 4-star territory. Still, it was an interesting read and I'll always be open to others by Erik Larson.

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## Adrienne says

I enjoyed parts of *Thunderstruck* and really had to force myself through others. The chapters about Marconi were often boring and too technical for my non-scientific mind. Larson sort of expects his reader to already understand certain elements of how radio waves works, which I don't. However, when Larson wasn't droning on about building towers and antennae, Marconi's story still captured my attention. (I'm sure more scientific minded people would enjoy the aspects that I didn't.)

In the end, I ended up quite disliking Marconi. I find it interesting when we have images of historical figures in our heads, and then we find that the image and the reality don't match up. I have a tendency to forget the humanity of such people. Marconi, as is sometimes the case, has the brilliant mind, but lacks the social astuteness necessary for having a happy and truly successful life, no matter what invention/discovery he has made for society: He took credit for many things which others had truly done and delved himself completely in his work without regard for his family or others around him.

As far as Crippen, Elmore, and Le Neve are concerned, the half of the book dedicated to their story fascinated me. Larson weaves in little tidbits of life at the turn of the century, creating a close to complete vision of the time. When I got to the parts about the discovery of the murder, I did skim some pages, I will admit. I couldn't fathom, as those who knew him, how Crippen could have committed such a crime because he was so mild and kind.

The last 80 or so pages were absolutely the best--the chase. I have to say that my very favorite person in the novel was Captain Kendall. Unfortunately, he is not in the story as much as I would like, but he is the smartest and most daring person we meet. I loved (loved isn't a strong enough word; I finished the book one night and woke up talking about this part the next morning) that the whole world knew what was happening except for the unsuspecting Crippen and Le Neve. Mostly because the story is true, this is the most magnificent irony any story could produce. I laugh a little at the perfectness of it all.

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## Mara says

In classic Erik Larson style, *Thunderstruck* is told through parallel lives and events. In this case, more so than in *The Devil in the White City*, it's not immediately evident how the elements will come to intertwine.

Guglielmo Marconi (below) was smart, contributed to society in the end, blah, blah, blah, but he was also kind of a jerk (that's my opinion, not expressly stated in the book). Larson chalks it up to a lack of social skills, which may be true, but it doesn't mean I have to forgive him for it.

It would still be a few more decades before Robert Merton would outline his "norms" of modern science, but in the face of a spiritualism frenzy, "real" scientists were trying to distinguish the components of, well, "good" science. Marconi (an entrepreneur, more so than he was a scientist, which he, ironically, noted in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Physics) was not on board with key components of this like communality and letting skeptics in on the experiments.

On the other side of town (or the ocean, depending on the day), our second story line involves a homeopath, an aspiring actress/singer (lacking in the skill department - think *American Idol* outtakes), and, of course, a



mistress.

If Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen were a woman and/or late 19th-century jurists had access to the **Law & Order** franchise, we might think his was a case of battered wife syndrome (in these PC days, "battered person syndrome"). I feel like just looking at the pictures of Crippen (above) and his wife, Corrine "Cora" Turner/Belle Elmore (below) you might get a sense of what a truly terrible match theirs was.

The details of how this all plays out are intriguing, and involve plenty of deceit, betrayal and a dash of 19th century detectivery and forensic science.

Skipping ahead, the story lines converge when Dr. Crippen and his mistress, Ethel Le Neve (below), take to the seas- in this instance, dressed as father and son. (Le Neve really should have seen bad things coming at this point, being asked by your lover to dress as a little boy should always be a deal-breaker!)

Without giving away too much, the *SS Montrose* essentially becomes the "white Bronco" of this whole affair, and (here comes the Marconi tie in), thanks to the advances in science, this was basically the first instance of **live tweeting** the hunt for a murderer on the run. The public appetite for this type of thing, it would seem, has always been high- so this was pretty much the best publicity Marconi could have ever hoped for.

I would give this more stars if it weren't Larson, who I know can (and does) do better. It's worth reading, I just wouldn't put it up there with his more recent books.

***Bonus Archer reference:***

*"Thanks Guglielmo Marconi...who I think invented the radio."*

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**Becky says**

I am waffling between three and four stars on this book. I haven't read *Devil in the White City*, but I did read *Garden of Beasts*, and it doesn't even quite stack up to that. It took a very long time to get into. The first half of the book wasn't *random* information per se, because it still centered around Marconi and Crippen, but it really had nothing to do with the story that would eventually unfold. I suppose that we needed to know that Crippen had a younger, estranged son, that lived in California, because it came into play later, but the early years really didn't need to take up a quarter of the book.

Then, at about the half way mark, after not listening to the audiobook for a month or two, I got interested. Really interested. Well, interested at least about the Crippen story. I didn't care for Marconi, he just kind of annoyed me. I don't want to say that I didn't find his story engaging, but the parts that I wanted to know

more about didn't involve Marconi, it was about the jilted and angry scientists around him. One of the most fascinating tidbits in this story was learning about the scientist who, in constant pursuit of paranormal activity, wrote a book after WWI about contacting the dead sons of Europe. It was a heartbreaking side story. Marconi himself was too dedicated and immersed in his work, and too headstrong, to be really interesting on his own.

The Crippen story, on the other hand, was fascinating too me. I am always curious about the way that crimes were "solved" in the past, it always seems so ludicrous from a modern day perspective. Crippen was such a frail fallow man, but he held my attention, and I was stressed when his chapters were interrupted, inevitably stopping at a cliffhanger (I see what you did there Larson). I found him sympathetic, I found Belle's audacity shocking, over all, it was their story that kept me reading.

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### **Saleh MoonWalker says**

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### **?Karen says**

The Author's Note says that the murder case in this book so captivated Alfred Hitchcock that he worked elements of it into Rear Window (and The Rope). Rear Window is probably my favorite movie of all time, so I had to find out which elements he was referring to. This is why I wanted to read this book and have had a copy for a couple of years now.

Larson incorporates via alternating chapters the story of Marconi's creation of the telegraph, and therein lies my excuse for NOT wanting to read this book despite buying it on sale. I know how this author so thoroughly researches everything to the point where you almost want to say TMI, Erik. Or zzzzzz. In the same Author's Note mentioned above, he also says, "I ask readers to forgive my passion for digression. If, for example, you learn more than you need to know about a certain piece of flesh, I apologize in advance, though I confess I make that apology only halfheartedly." (This made me smile; is that 1/2 apology, 1/2 F you?)

Honestly, I didn't mind the flesh pieces at all. But if I got bored of long-winded descriptions of wireless transmissions affected by sunlight or by fog or the lack thereof, I simply swallowed hard and remembered the author's words. He really cannot help himself. I as a reader of his books know by now that you take the good with the bad and you inevitably come out of the experience so much more the wiser and more knowledgeable. And I'm sure there are readers who prefer the Marconi chapters over the murder investigation, so something for everyone.

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### **Dale says**

There's a certain style of storytelling which I have an affinity for, both in terms of telling stories myself and

listening to them (or reading them). The style, in a word, would be called "digressive". I know this style doesn't work for everyone, but it works for me. I like talking about or hearing about the little things that don't necessarily advance the plot or aren't crucial to understanding the point of something. As long as the digressions are interesting in and of themselves, I think they have a corresponding value.

Thunderstruck really brought this point home for me. I enjoyed the book a lot, but I was well aware that it was full of digressions. (This fact was hard to miss - Larson acknowledges it and half-apologizes for it in the introduction to the book.) But, the digressions were interesting.

In keeping with my suddenly burgeoning interest in historical non-fiction, I picked this book up because I thought a story about the invention and spread of wireless telegraphy would be interesting. Especially when that tale intersects, coincidentally, with a bizarre murder case. And my thought proved correct - it is a fascinating story. But it's a thin one, too, so Larson fleshes things out with numerous asides, digressions, tangents and trivia. And I eat that up with a spoon (it doesn't hurt that Larson is a fine writer, too). I just have to admit that while I thought it was the best way to tell the intertwined stories of a murderer's escape and the dawning of a new industry, other people might not have the same patience for it. You've been warned.

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