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Discussion Questions

1. In his Note to Readers, Erik Larson writes that before researching Dead Wake, he thought he knew "everything there was to know" about the sinking of the Lusitania, but soon realized "how wrong [he] was." What did you know about the Lusitania before reading the book? Did any of Larson's revelations surprise you?

2. After reading Dead Wake, what was your impression of Captain Turner? Was he cautious enough? How did you react to the Admiralty's attempts to place the blame for the Lusitania's sinking squarely on his shoulders?

3. Erik Larson deftly weaves accounts of glamorous first-class passengers such as Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt with compelling images of middle-class families and of the ship's crew. Whose personal story resonated the most with you?

4. Charles Lauriat went to extraordinary measures to protect his Thackeray drawings and his rare edition of A Christmas Carol, but eventually both were lost. In Lauriat's position, which possessions would you have tried to save? Why does Larson write in such great detail about the objects people brought aboard the Lusitania?

5. Edith Galt Wilson would come to play a significant role in the White House after Woodrow Wilson suffered a massive stroke in 1919. What made her a good match for Wilson? What other aspects of Wilson's personal life did you find intriguing?

6. Why was Wilson so insistent on maintaining neutrality even as German U-boat attacks claimed American lives? Was his reluctance to go to war justified?

7. How did you respond to the many what-ifs that Larson raises about U.S. involvement in the Great War? Would Wilson have abandoned his isolationist stance without the Lusitania tragedy? Could Germany and Mexico have succeeded in conquering the American Southwest?

8. By attacking civilian ships, were Captain Schwieger and his U-20 crew committing acts of terrorism? Does it matter that Germany ran advertisements declaring the waters around Great Britain to be a war zone?

9. How did Captain Schwieger's leadership style compare with that of Captain Turner? Did you feel sympathy for Schwieger and his crew?

10. Though the British Navy was tracking U-20's location, it didn't alert the Lusitania, nor did it provide a military escort. Why not? Do you consider Churchill and Room 40 partly to blame for
the sinking? How should countries balance the integrity of their intelligence operations with their duty to protect civilians?

11. Some have argued that Churchill deliberately chose not to protect the Lusitania in hopes that the sinking of such a prominent ship would draw the United States into the war. After reading Larson’s account, what do you think of this theory?

12. While Germany’s advertisement scared away some would-be Lusitania passengers, most placed their faith in the British Navy to protect the ship, and some laughed off the risk altogether. In their position, would you have cancelled your ticket?

13. What lessons does the sinking of the Lusitania have for us in the twenty-first century?
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

Erik Larson’s Fresh Eyes on a ‘Dead Wake’

Erik Larson has a history of turning the history we think we know into compelling stories that keep us on the edge of our reading seats. In The Devil in the White City, he found a serial killer at the heart of the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. In Thunderstruck, he turned the invention of the radio by Marconi into a trans-Atlantic chase thriller. With In the Garden of Beasts, his readers witnessed, through the eyes of the American Ambassador and his family, the transformation of Germany into a Nazi state shortly before World War II.

Larson’s gift for turning historical events into works of non-fiction that read as novels reaches a new level with his latest, Dead Wake: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania. He’s always managed to craft nail-biting suspense from the so-called lessons of the past, but this time around, he finds not just tension, but romance in the ruins. It adds even more depth to his already complex canvas. By using the literary toolkit of novel-length fiction, Larson is able to evoke not just the facts, but the emotional truth of the past.

I caught up with Larson before his upcoming appearances to get a preview of the book and the means by which he crafted it.

Your historical works of narrative non-fiction often turn on the impacts, both intended and unintended, of new technologies. Were there technological innovations at work in the story of the Lusitania?

Very much so. The submarine was a wholly new weapon at the start of the first World War, one that neither the British nor the Germans at first understood. One unintended consequence was that it led Germany to discard century-old rules governing naval warfare against civilian ships, in particular a long-honored, outright prohibition on attacking passenger liners. In the end, this proved a fatal consequence for Germany, not because of the Lusitania attack itself, but because of a series of submarine attacks against American flag vessels (the Lusitania was British) during the two years after the sinking, as well as the so-called Zimmerman Telegram, which together drove President Wilson to at last realize that America could no longer sit on the sidelines.

In a story like the sinking of the Lusitania, you have a huge cast of potential characters. How — and how soon into your writing and research — do you find the main characters who will tell the most effective and compelling story?

A simple rule governed my selection of characters: Whoever left behind the most detailed accounts of the voyage and sinking got into the book. Because in writing narrative nonfiction, detail is everything. Without a lot of fine-grained detail it’s impossible to produce the kind of rich historical experience that allows readers to sink into the past (no pun intended).

Was there an image that you found most compelling, that had an emotional impact that was more powerful than mere words?

Yes. A series of images, actually. I was given an opportunity to view photographs of dead passengers, unidentified, taken soon after the sinking as they lay in three makeshift morgues in Queenstown, Ireland, before being buried in a mass grave. The photos were shot in hopes that
next of kin might one day identify the victims. The images were very good quality, and showed people wearing exactly what they’d worn to lunch just before the sinking — men, women and children. The children were the hardest to view. But seeing these images was very important, because it reinforced for me that that was what the story was all about. This was not just some dusty geo-political node on the timeline toward war, but a human tragedy of vast dimension. (Note: I was not permitted to photograph any of those images.)

Your narrative makes it clear how monumental the sinking of the Lusitania was. How has it managed to run under our cultural radar for so long?

It hasn’t really run under our cultural radar — everyone knows something about the Lusitania. But its true nature has been distorted. It was not the proximal cause of America’s entry into World War I, though if you asked 10 people on the street they likely would tell you it was. We all first learn about the ship in broad survey courses that tend to give it short shrift in the rush to get to the war itself. As a consequence there’s a persistent belief that the Lusitania was to World War I what Pearl Harbor was to WWII. It wasn’t. But, there’s simply no time in such courses to delve deep into the true character of the disaster and the various forces that converged on that lovely day in May 1915 to cause it.

http://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2015/04/14/interview-erik-larsons-fresh-eyes-on-a-dead-wake/
Erik Larson’s ‘Dead Wake,’ About the Lusitania

By HAMPTON SIDEMARCH 5, 2015

Credit John Shuley & Company/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

One day seven years ago, while on a magazine assignment, I found myself on a boat off the coast of Ireland, bobbing in dark, heavy seas 300 feet above the slumbering wreck of the R.M.S. Lusitania as sport divers returned triumphantly to the surface. When they came aboard, the gleeful explorers, part of a marine archaeology expedition sanctioned by the Irish government, produced a piece of history—a plastic container holding a handful of .303 rounds they’d found inside the plankton-hazed ruins, rounds that had been manufactured in America and bought by the British to kill Germans during World War I. One of the divers peeled back the lid, and the corroded ammunition greeted fresh air for the first time in 93 years. “There’s thousands of cases of ammo down in that hole!” one of the Irish divers cried out. “You could just scoop the stuff up!” But then he turned somber. Even though he had dived the great wreck dozens of times before, the expression on his face was that of a spooked man. “It will always be a scary place, a daunting place,” he told me. “There’s a lot of lost souls down there.”

Few tales in history are more haunting, more tangled with investigatory mazes or more fraught with toxic secrets than that of the final voyage of the Lusitania, one of the colossal tragedies of maritime history. It’s the other Titanic, the story of a mighty ship sunk not by the grandeur of nature but by the grimness of man. On May 7, 1915, the four-funnelled, 787-foot Cunard superliner, on a run from New York to Liverpool, encountered a German submarine, the U-20,
about 11 miles off the coast of Ireland. The U-boat’s captain, Walther Schwieger, was pleased to discover that the passenger steamer had no naval escort. Following his government’s new policy of unrestricted warfare, Schwieger fired a single torpedo into her hull. Less than half a minute later, a second explosion shuddered from somewhere deep within the bowels of the vessel, and she listed precariously to starboard.

The Lusitania sank in just 18 minutes. Nearly 1,200 people, including 128 Americans, died with it. The casualties included the millionaire Alfred Vanderbilt, the Broadway impresario Charles Frohman and the noted art collector Hugh Lane, who was thought to be carrying sealed lead tubes containing paintings by Rembrandt and Monet.

The world was outraged to learn that the war had taken this diabolic new turn, that an ocean liner full of innocent civilians was now considered fair game. The sinking turned American opinion against the Germans — demonstrating, for some, the incorrigible treachery of the “Pirate Huns” — and became a rallying cry when America finally entered the war in 1917.

But in the years that followed, unsettling questions clung to the Lusitania case, contributing to a persistent hunch that the ship had somehow been allowed to sail into a trap. (Or, at least, that important aspects of the story had been assiduously covered up.) Why had the British Admiralty failed to provide a military escort? What was the cause of that catastrophic second explosion? Why was a British cruiser sent to rescue the Lusitania’s dying victims suddenly called back to port? And what about Winston Churchill, then first lord of the Admiralty, who conveniently left Britain for France just days before the sinking? What did Churchill know, and when did he know it?

Shortly before the disaster, Churchill had written in a confidential letter that it was “most important to attract neutral shipping to our shores, in the hopes especially of embroiling the United States with Germany.” Afterward, he all but celebrated the sinking as a great Allied victory, saying, “The poor babies who perished in the ocean struck a blow at German power more deadly than could have been achieved by the sacrifice of a hundred thousand fighting men.”

The Germans, for their part, argued, and with good reason, that the British had long been using passenger liners like the Lusitania to ferry troops, weapons and ordnance from supposedly neutral America to war-weakened Britain. The Lusitania, in fact, was known to be carrying many tons of war matériel that fateful day (including four million rounds of ammunition, samples of which the Irish divers discovered seven years ago). The U-boat captain, Schwieger, was surprised that a single torpedo had sunk such a massive ship — and so quickly. Yet from his periscope, he noted a second explosion, apparently the same one that so many aboard the ship also felt and heard. Over the years, many people have contended that this second explosion was very likely caused by secret stores of volatile munitions — like aluminum powder or guncotton — that detonated within the ship’s holds.

This nagging question of the second explosion is one of many Lusitania riddles that persist to this day. And with the hundredth anniversary of the ship’s demise almost upon us, the subject would seem to be ripe for a new and fresh interpretation.
Erik Larson is one of the modern masters of popular narrative nonfiction. In book after book, he’s proved adept at rescuing weird and wonderful gothic tales from the shadows of history. Larson is both a resourceful reporter and a subtle stylist who understands the tricky art of Edward Scissorhands-ing multiple narrative strands into a pleasing story. Few nonfiction books have employed this technique better than his best seller “The Devil in the White City,” a horrifying account of a serial killer lurking at the edges of the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. It’s a contrapuntal tale of depravity and sophistication, of evil and beauty, of the hunter and the hunted.


And so Erik Larson and the sinking of the Lusitania would seem to be an ideal pairing. The mighty ocean liner was the paragon of civilization, big and fast, strong and sleek, tricked out with every kind of innovation, a White City on the high seas. And hunting it was an ever sly and furtive machine of the deep, a nautical sociopath with an unquenchable thirst for bringing down tonnage.

When it comes to the story of the sociopath, the Larson magic is very much on display in “Dead Wake.” The passages concerning the U-20 knife along with a clean and wicked élan. These sections are so well done that the reader scarcely notices the considerable research Larson obviously logged. Maybe it’s a perverse thing to admit, but for much of the book I found myself rooting for the German submariners, sympathizing with their loneliness and claustrophobia, their mad dives and other maneuvers as they groped through the murk, the perils squeezing in from all sides. The U-boat stank like a sty. There was, Larson says, the “basal reek of three dozen men who never bathed, wore leather clothes that did not breathe, and shared one small lavatory. The toilet from time to time imparted to the boat the scent of a cholera hospital and could be flushed only when the U-boat was on the surface or at shallow depths, lest the undersea pressure blow material back into the vessel.”

Though Captain Schwieger apparently bore little sense of pity for his human victims, he had a soft spot for dogs — at one point, the U-20 had six aboard. Larson paints him as less villain than aggressive and essentially amoral predator in full mastery of his vessel, a decent leader of men who did his job relentlessly well while working under nearly impossible circumstances. The view
from the periscope was, Larson says, “a crabbed one at best. A captain got only a brief, platelike glimpse at the world around him, during which he had to make decisions about a ship’s nature, its nationality, whether it was armed or not and whether the markings it bore were legitimate or fake. And if he decided to attack, it was he alone who bore the responsibility, like pulling the trigger on a gun, but without having to see or listen to the result. All he heard was the sound of the exploding torpedo as transmitted through the sea. If he chose to watch the tragedy unfold, he saw only a silent world of fire and terror.”

What makes the story of Schwieger’s ceaseless predations so much more discomfiting is that the British Admiralty apparently had a very good idea of his whereabouts in the days leading up to the sinking — and yet did nothing. Encryption experts working with the Admiralty’s Room 40 regularly intercepted Schwieger’s transmissions and closely followed his movements around the British Isles. “It was a curious moment in the history of naval warfare,” Larson writes. “Room 40 knew a U-boat was heading south to Liverpool — knew the boat’s history; knew that it was now somewhere in the North Atlantic under orders to sink troop transports and any other British vessel it encountered; and knew as well that the submarine was armed with enough shells and torpedoes to sink a dozen ships. It was like knowing that a particular killer was loose on the streets of London, armed with a particular weapon, and certain to strike in a particular neighborhood within the next few days, the only unknown being exactly when.”

Larson’s passages concerning those aboard the Lusitania, however, are less engaging. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that he was writing “Dead Wake” around the time of the recent media orgy surrounding the Titanic disaster’s 100th anniversary, but in places he seems bored by this steamship and its Edwardian—era passengers. We are treated to the familiar lists of clothes and personal effects and obligatory discussions of hat styles. As the Lusitania makes its final Atlantic crossing, Larson’s language grows slack. “The usual shipboard tedium began to set in,” he writes. There were “books, and cigars, and fine foods, afternoon tea. . . . Now and then a ship appeared in the distance.” Passengers “drank and smoked. Both; a lot.”

Larson paints a nuanced and empathetic portrait of the Lusitania’s fate-ravaged captain, William Thomas Turner, but he seldom lingers long enough with any of his other characters to establish a lasting connection. When the torpedo strikes, the reader has little sense of suspense, and little concern for who will live and who will die. To be sure, in the final moments before the impact, there are masterly Larsonian touches — the staccato crosscutting, the crisp zeitgeisty vignettes, the interweaving of chills and thrills. But after the torpedo blast, the narrative rarely gains emotional traction again. I could see the disaster unfolding. But I couldn’t feel it.

In an interview, Larson once said: “It is not necessarily my goal to inform. It is my goal to create a historical experience with my books. My dream, my ideal, is that someone picks up a book of mine, starts reading it, and just lets themselves sink into the past and then read the thing straight through, and emerge at the end feeling as though they’ve lived in another world entirely.”

If creating “an experience” is Larson’s primary goal, then “Dead Wake” largely succeeds. There are brisk cameos by Churchill and Woodrow Wilson, desperate flurries of wireless messages and telegrams, quick flashes to London and Berlin. These passages have a crackling,
propulsive energy that most other books about the Lusitania — often written for disaster buffs or steampunk aficionados — sorely lack.

Yet from the standpoint of scholarship or human drama, there’s not much fresh ground here. Readers of Diana Preston’s definitive (if occasionally soporific) “Lusitania: An Epic Tragedy” (2002) will find little in the way of new evidence or new revelations. To his credit, Larson refuses to descend into the many rabbit holes of conspiracy and esoteric forensics that could have bogged down his story. But he seems curiously incurious about the second explosion — which remains the single greatest mystery of the Lusitania’s rapid sinking, and the ultimate cause of the terrible carnage. In a brief wrap-up, he devotes less than a full page to the question, then brusquely declares, on the basis of scant evidence, that it was caused by a rupture of the Lusitania’s main steam line.

Anniversaries, even big ones, rarely provide a compelling rationale for writing a book, and at times Larson’s pages have the rushed quality of a writer laboring to meet a pressing deadline. If “Dead Wake” is not (by Larson’s standards) a great book, it is an entertaining book about a great subject, and it will do much to make this seismic event resonate for new generations of readers. A century later, the Lusitania remains a daunting subject just as it remains a daunting shipwreck — a dark realm, full of secrets and lost souls.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/books/review/erik-larsons-dead-wake-about-the-lusitania.html?_r=0