



Book Review by Jim Alexander

## ***Thunderstruck***

**By Erik Larson**

During the current health crisis, it's sometimes nice to shift focus back to earlier times, where we knew the outcome of events. There's no better author to help you do this than Erik Larson. As we noted in the review of his *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*, he's a master at taking two threads of contemporaneous history and weaving them together.

In *Thunderstruck*, Larson tell the story of Guglielmo Marconi, who developed wireless telegraph in the closing years of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth. Through meticulous research, Larson describes how the very young Marconi became fascinated with the thought of sending messages through the air, and started experimenting with radio signals. Lacking any formal training in the field, he repeatedly tried and learned, fighting every step of the way with sometimes pompous "experts" who had some training but in reality, not much more real knowledge of this new field than he had. If ever there were an example of the results of perseverance against criticism and the odds, Marconi's story is it.

As his ability to transmit Morse code across bodies of water evolved, he became obsessed with the idea of sending messages across the Atlantic. He was criticized for pursuing a fool's dream, since there were already a number of underseas cables very successfully carrying telegraph messages from Europe to North America. Since the distance of early transmission was limited, he came upon the notion of equipping ships in the North Atlantic routes with equipment to contact nearby costal stations and other ships.

While Larson is unfolding this story, he is also telling a separate story of a young doctor in London, Hawley Crippen, who is so oppressed by a domineering wife that he murders her and takes up with his young typist, who is unknowing but smitten. Crippen concocts a story that his

wife had left for the United States and had subsequently died there. As a Scotland Yard detective takes interest in the wife's disappearance, Crippen and his young companion flee to the Continent, where he changes his appearance, disguises his young lover as his "son," and boards a ship headed to presumed safety in North America.

On board, the ship's captain become suspicious, having read newspaper accounts of the hunt before leaving port. As he becomes convinced that they are the fugitives, he takes advantage of the Marconi wireless to notify Scotland Yard, which then sends several detectives in pursuit on a faster liner. The word gets out to the press from overheard wireless transmissions, and the newspapers take up speculation on what is happening on board, hearing and embellishing on the latest reports from the captain, which is how Larson brings his two stories together.

Crippen himself, having no idea that his identity had been discovered, takes an interest in the electric crackle coming from the ship's Marconi cabin. In the outside world, people quickly became enchanted with the magic of wireless, achieving an interest which Marconi's technical achievements themselves had not been able to attain. Stories were written about how wireless had transformed Crippen into an unknowing prisoner in mid-ocean, with the very air around him providing inescapable electric shackles.

Crippen is eventually taken into custody and hanged, while his young mistress is found innocent. Larson presents a picture of both that is understanding.

Marconi's reinforcing success occurred some years later when the Lusitania was sinking and was able to summon help from nearby ships by using its Marconi wireless. Indeed, the ability to monitor icebergs in the North Atlantic brought a halt to such collision sinkings. Marconi himself was eventually credited with being a major developer of radio, with voice and music on the air in addition to dots and dashes, and with other techniques that allowed today's more advanced communications.

Through all of this, Larson provides extensive personal insights into the lives involved, weaving together threads of history in delightful ways. If there is to be any criticism of his work, it is that he has difficulty leaving out enticing nuggets and details, a fact that he acknowledges when he observes that "I found myself forced by the demands of narrative coherence and pace to eliminate a number of compelling but useless pieces of information." Perhaps as consolation, he appends thirty-six pages of footnotes at the book's end, demonstrating the truth of his fascinating tale.

Indeed, as with his other books, Larson's *Thunderstruck* draws the reader in and holds until the last page.

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*Thunderstruck* is available in electronic and print media on Amazon and Barnes and Noble.