

# Review

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Erik Larson, *The Demon of Unrest: A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak, and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War*. New York: Crown, 2024. Pp. xiv, 565.

Erik Larson, renowned for his deeply immersive historical narratives, focuses his latest work, *The Demon of Unrest: A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak, and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War*, on the tumultuous months leading up to the American Civil War. Known for bestsellers like *The Splendid and the Vile* and *The Devil in the White City*, Larson dissects the complex interplay of political, military, and social forces that culminated in the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April 1861.

Larson's talent for vivid storytelling shines as he navigates the tense five months between Abraham Lincoln's election and the outbreak of the Civil War. Readers are transported to a time of unprecedented national anxiety, with Larson's detailed descriptions bringing to life the political maneuverings, personal rivalries, and sheer desperation that defined the era. His portrayal of key figures, from the determined yet conciliatory Lincoln to the beleaguered Major Robert Anderson at Fort Sumter, is rich and nuanced.

The book meticulously describes the strategic significance of Fort Sumter and its surrounding geography, painting a vivid picture of the fortress at the entrance to Charleston Harbor. Larson's attention to the fort's architecture, the living conditions of the soldiers, and the logistical challenges faced by the Union forces adds a tangible sense of place. The tension mounts as Larson recounts the Confederate preparations for an attack and the fort's increasingly desperate situation as supplies dwindle.

Larson's narrative opens with an evocative recounting of the political chaos following Lincoln's victory in November 1860. Outgoing President James Buchanan's passive response to the secession crisis is depicted through Lincoln's incredulity at Buchanan's willingness to consider surrendering federal forts. Buchanan's inaction sets the stage for the ensuing drama, with Larson detailing the escalating tensions

in Charleston, where Anderson and his small garrison face a hostile environment.

One of Larson's greatest strengths is his ability to immerse readers in the historical context. His painstaking research is evident in the dense level of detail he provides, from the sound of the bells of St. Michael's Church in Charleston to the internal deliberations within Lincoln's administration. This depth of detail allows readers to feel as though they are witnessing history firsthand, a hallmark of Larson's writing style.

For instance, Larson captures the fraught atmosphere in Washington, D.C., as pro-slavery mobs attempt to prevent Congress from tallying the electoral vote. He also delves into the personal lives and motivations of his subjects, offering a cradle-to-coffin biography of South Carolina congressman-turned-Confederate James Henry Hammond. These personal histories are interwoven with the broader narrative, providing a human dimension to the political and military developments.

Larson excels in his depiction of the political landscape of the time. He delves into the machinations of Lincoln's cabinet, the fractious nature of Congress, and the varied responses of Northern and Southern states to the looming conflict. This section serves as a reminder of the deeply contentious and polarized political environment of the period.

Despite its strengths, *The Demon of Unrest* has shortcomings, particularly in its treatment of African Americans, both enslaved and free. The narrative centers primarily on the experiences and actions of white political and military leaders, rendering black individuals as peripheral figures. This oversight is glaring given the centrality of slavery to the secession crisis and the Civil War itself. Larson's use of terms like "escape-minded Blacks" oversimplifies the enslaved experience, and figures like Frederick Douglass warrant only fleeting mentions.

Larson's depiction of historical figures is another area where his approach both shines and falters. While he offers a thorough exploration of James Henry Hammond's political and personal life, his language sometimes lapses into euphemism, particularly regarding Hammond's sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Larson describes Sally Johnson and her daughter Louisa as Hammond's "mistresses," a term that inadequately conveys the coercive nature of their relationships.

However, one of the most striking aspects of *The Demon of Unrest* is Larson's exploration of the parallels between the political climate of the 1860s and today. He draws direct lines between the divisive

rhetoric and actions of the past and contemporary issues, suggesting that the lessons of history remain relevant. This reflective analysis adds a layer of contemporary significance, encouraging readers to consider the enduring impacts of division and the importance of unity.

*The Demon of Unrest* is a compelling read that showcases Erik Larson's strengths as a storyteller and historian. His ability to bring historical events to life with vivid detail and narrative flair makes for an engaging and informative account of the Fort Sumter crisis. However, the book's narrow focus on white perspectives and occasional lapses into euphemism diminish its impact. For readers seeking a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the events leading up to the Civil War, Larson's work offers valuable insights but also serves as a reminder of the importance of inclusive historical narratives.

Larson's latest endeavor, though imperfect, is a testament to his enduring appeal and his ability to make history accessible and compelling. As we continue to grapple with the legacies of the Civil War and the ongoing political strife in our own time, *The Demon of Unrest* offers both a mirror and a warning, reminding us of the perils of division and the enduring need for understanding and reconciliation.

In his depiction of the fraught interactions between the North and South, Larson does not shy away from the fierce rhetoric that characterized the period. He recounts the fiery speeches and inflammatory publications that stoked tensions, providing a vivid portrayal of a nation on the brink of war. This narrative thread underscores the power of words in shaping public sentiment and political action.

Larson's meticulous research extends to the military strategies and preparations on both sides. He details the Union's efforts to reinforce Fort Sumter and the Confederacy's maneuvers to secure its position. These military aspects are woven seamlessly into the broader story, illustrating the strategic thinking that underpinned the conflict.

The book's structure is another strength, with Larson skillfully interweaving multiple perspectives and storylines. He shifts between the national political scene, the personal experiences of key figures, and the on-the-ground realities in Charleston, creating a multifaceted view of the crisis. This approach keeps the narrative dynamic and engaging, allowing readers to see the complexity of the events from different angles.

While Larson's focus on prominent white figures is a limitation, his exploration of their personal and political motivations provides valuable insights into the era's leadership. The detailed portrayals of Lincoln, Buchanan, and Anderson offer a nuanced understanding of their decisions and actions. Larson's depiction of Lincoln, in particular,

highlights the president's evolving strategies and the immense pressures he faced.

The book's conclusion is both poignant and thought-provoking. As Larson recounts the bombardment of Fort Sumter and the official start of the Civil War, he reflects on the long-term implications of the conflict. This final section encourages readers to consider how the events of 1861 continue to resonate today, emphasizing the importance of learning from history.

In summary, *The Demon of Unrest* is a richly detailed and vividly told account of a pivotal moment in American history. Larson's ability to bring the past to life, coupled with his insightful analysis of the period's political and social dynamics, makes this book a valuable addition to Civil War literature. While its narrow focus and occasional euphemisms are drawbacks, the overall narrative remains compelling and informative. For those interested in understanding the complexities of the Fort Sumter crisis and its significance, Larson's work is a must-read.

Ultimately, *The Demon of Unrest* serves as a reminder of the enduring impact of the Civil War on American society. Larson's exploration of the period's challenges and conflicts provides a lens through which to view contemporary issues, reinforcing the idea that history is a continuous thread that shapes our present and future.