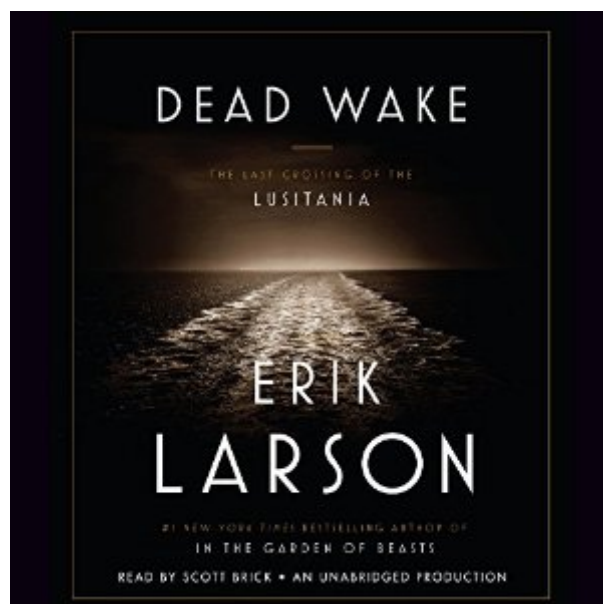


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# Dead Wake: The Last Crossing Of The Lusitania



## Synopsis

From the number-one New York Times best-selling author and master of narrative nonfiction comes the enthralling story of the sinking of the Lusitania, published to coincide with the one-hundredth anniversary of the disaster. On May 1, 1915, a luxury ocean liner as richly appointed as an English country house sailed out of New York, bound for Liverpool, carrying a record number of children and infants. The passengers were anxious. Germany had declared the seas around Britain to be a war zone, and for months its U-boats had brought terror to the North Atlantic. But the Lusitania was one of the era's great transatlantic "Greyhounds", and her captain, William Thomas Turner, placed tremendous faith in the gentlemanly strictures of warfare that for a century had kept civilian ships safe from attack. He knew, moreover, that his ship--the fastest then in service--could outrun any threat. Germany, however, was determined to change the rules of the game, and Walther Schwieger, the captain of Unterseeboot-20, was happy to oblige. Meanwhile an ultra-secret British intelligence unit tracked Schwieger's U-boat, but told no one. As U-20 and the Lusitania made their ways toward Liverpool, an array of forces both grand and achingly small--hubris, a chance fog, a closely guarded secret, and more--all converged to produce one of the great disasters of history. It is a story that many of us think we know but don't, and Erik Larson tells it thrillingly, switching between hunter and hunted while painting a larger portrait of America at the height of the Progressive Era. Full of glamour, mystery, and real-life suspense, *Dead Wake* brings to life a cast of evocative characters, from famed Boston bookseller Charles Lauriat to pioneering female architect Theodate Pope Riddle to President Wilson, a man lost to grief, dreading the widening war but also captivated by the prospect of new love. Gripping and important, *Dead Wake* captures the sheer drama and emotional power of a disaster that helped place America on the road to war.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Erik Larson is not capable of writing anything less than a gripping account of history. All of his previous books have been spellbinding accounts of storms, cities, crimes, inventions, ships and/or war. In *DEAD WAKE: The Last Crossing of the Lusitania*, Larson returns to the subjects of war and ships and stirs in a potent mixture of international politics as well as a little romance to once again seduce his readers with a contemporary view of an historical situation. Written to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania, a Cunard passenger liner sunk by a German U-Boat, Larson's account differs in several ways from other well-known books produced on the subject. Diana Preston's *LUSITANIA: An Epic Tragedy*, published in 2002, is one of the best-written accounts of the disaster. The difference between Preston's work and Larson's might be found in the subtitle of the Larson book which emphasizes the crossing while Preston's book is most memorable for its account of the sinking and its aftermath, particularly accounts of survival. No one can read Preston's book without feeling as if he/she is clinging to a piece of wreckage in a cold, spring sea awaiting rescue. No one can read Larson's book and not feel like the proverbial fly on the wall in the infamous Room 40 of the British Admiralty. While Preston addressed Room 40, in Larson's writing, the room takes on a role and becomes a character (albeit not a very appealing one) in its own right. Larson skillfully gets into the mindset of Winston Churchill and how determined he was to see America enter the war. In the States, Larson goes back in time and brings President Woodrow Wilson to life through a love affair that seemed to take up more of his time than thinking about the suitability of America's neutrality. Yet Larson allows readers to see Wilson in a most human light; perhaps the love affair gave him the strength for the decisions he had to make later. While the reader feels a connection with Wilson and also with the much-maligned but ultimately blameless Captain of the Lusitania, Captain Turner, utter horror and strong dislike is brought out when we read about Captain Schwieger of U-Boat 20 and, in a strange way, perhaps even more when we examine the real-life characters and goings-on within the Admiralty's Room 40. Germany and Britain both emerge as more than a bit despicable. The pluses of Larson's latest work are his acute examination of Room 40, his up-close look at Woodrow Wilson, and his ability to swing between the behind-the-scenes action and balance his discoveries with a conventional but absorbing look at some of the passengers on board the Lusitania all while building a true and terrifying suspense in

the narrative. His profile of Charles Lauriat, Boston bookseller and collector of rare documents and drawings, is excellent. One senses that Larson was truly interested in Lauriat and might, having not been faced with producing a book to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Lusitania's sinking, have chosen Lauriat as a sole subject for a book or article. Erik Larson can never disappoint.

Whether one reads a great deal about WWI history, maritime disasters, or early 1900s international politics, there is something new to be learned in DEAD WAKE. For those who have read very little about the Lusitania, this book is an excellent starting point. As mentioned before, Diana Preston's LUSITANIA: An Epic Tragedy tells a similar story but with a slightly different approach. Both books have something to offer, but Larson's, being newer, may include some fresh revelations about the history we thought we knew.

DEAD WAKE: THE LAST CROSSING OF THE LUSITANIA is the story of a horrific event that ended the lives of over 1,000 people. The sinking also played a key role in changing America's view toward Germany, and helped change America's position in World War I. It was two years after this sinking that the United States declared war on Germany. Recall that at this time America was not yet in the war against Germany; America was neutral. Over in England, Churchill hoped this would change: "For our part, we want the traffic--the more the better; and if some of it gets into trouble, better still." Britain had hopes that somehow, the U.S would "feel moved to join the Allies, and in so doing tip the balance irrevocably in their favor." The Lusitania was a gigantic ship. To give you an idea of the size of the ship, there were 192 furnaces on board powering the gigantic turbines. Just to keep the ship running, there were a hundred stokers working each shift, shoveling a thousand tons of coal a day. At the helm of the ship was the experienced Captain Turner. The author notes that the captain was "the most seasoned captain at Canard Lines--the Commodore of the line. He had confronted all manner of shipboard crises, including mechanical mishaps, fires, cracked furnaces, open sea rescues, and extreme weather of all kinds. He was said to be fearless." To set the stage for the U-boat attack, the author gives a background on submarine warfare: "The submarine as a weapon had come a long way by this time, certainly to the point where it killed its own crews only rarely." Life aboard a German U-boat was not very comfortable--hot, humid, and cramped: "When deep underwater the boat developed an interior atmosphere like unto that of a tropical swamp...caused by the heat generated by the men and by the still hot diesel engines." After the torpedo strike, the danger wasn't at first obvious to all passengers; the ship was so huge that some passengers thought it was nothing.

One passenger recalled thinking, "Well, that wasn't so bad." On the other hand those near the bridge could sense the danger: "Those closest to the bridge felt the impact in a matter more vivid and tactile." After the attack, families panicked; few knew what to do or where to go. There were many families on board with lots of children, and they were spread throughout the huge ship. When the lights went off, panic settled in. Passengers didn't know where their families were--they didn't know where their spouses were. Up on the bridge, the captain was giving orders to try to maneuver the ship so that the lifeboats could be launched. The lifeboats could not be lowered until the ship's momentum stopped. Plus, the ship's tilting was making deployment of the lifeboats nearly impossible. Even though the lifeboats could not be launched, passengers desperately began to try to get on board: "The first attempts to launch the Lusitania lifeboats revealed the true degree of danger now facing the ship's passengers." Passengers began jumping in the boats, even though they couldn't be lowered yet. One businessman even took out a pistol and forced a sailor to begin lowering the lifeboat. With the boats not safe for deployment, some passengers fell out of the boats the long ways into the ocean. Ironically, prior to being attacked, Captain Turner had actually ordered lifeboats to be prepared in case of an emergency. "Turner was being prudent. If an emergency were to occur, the boats could be launched from this position more quickly, and with less hazard, than if they were still locked in their deep sea positions." All in all, DEAD WAKE is a horrifying story, full of grief and tragedy. The accounts of families struggling to survive after the attack are heart-breaking. Erik Larson does an excellent job at painting this terrible picture, as well as explaining the events surrounding WWI. This book is well-researched and supported by extensive references, providing sources for the main portion of the book. Advance copy provided for impartial review

In *Dead Wake*, as in past books, Larson touches on the surreal and unlikely intersections that often arise in some of the biggest turning points in history. Larson's narrative story centers on the RMS Lusitania, a British ocean liner whose sinking by a German submarine provided Britain with a propaganda opportunity and shifted public opinion in the United States against Germany, which played a part in influencing America's eventual declaration of war. Larson's book narrates the story from divergent perspectives, including those of U-boat-20 and its captain Walther Schwieger, the crew and passengers aboard the luxury transatlantic liner the Lusitania, and the political buildup to World War I. A work of narrative nonfiction, it draws from historical records, letters, and journal entries to tell the story all during a time when Germany, France, and England were already locked in combat while America remained neutral. The continuing tension between the naivete of

the passengers of the luxury liner, the pacifism of the Americans who underestimated the German threat, the failures of British intelligence, and the patient stalking of the U-boat build throughout Larson's book, make for a compelling story. That said, this book does not quite live up to the greatness of *In the Garden of Beasts* and *Devil in the White City*, which both felt more like the author unearthed a story that had not yet been explored. The *Lusitania* story is one that has been much discussed in the past, and thus the book misses the fresh feel of those other ones. Anyone with a casual interest in history will likely enjoy this book, but those who hold Larson to the high standards of his prior works may not be quite as impressed.

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