

*In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*, Erik Larson (2011, Broadway Books (Random House))

As you see, this is not a new book, but it speaks to our time. In his introduction, Larson writes, "I have always wondered what it would have been like for an outsider to have witnessed firsthand the gathering dark of Hitler's rule." His book supplies an answer to his question, as it documents the experience of the American ambassador to Germany from 1933 to 1937.

This upright man, William Dodd, Chair of the History Department at the University of Chicago, was persuaded to serve his country as ambassador to Germany, though his main purpose in life at that time was to finish his four-volume study, *The Rise and Fall of the Old South*. He went to Berlin with his loyal wife, Martha, his son Bill, an unambitious history teacher, and his journalist daughter, Martha. At first the family was impressed with the orderly achievements of Hitler's regime and the complaisance of the public enjoying the Tiergarten, the "garden of beasts" in the center of the city. Young Martha, beautiful, self-confident, and promiscuous, had affairs with a number of prominent Nazis and enthused over the promise of German youth.

But gradually Dodd came to see what was really happening, especially as American residents were attacked by SA gangs, Jews suffered increasing oppression, and competition among Hitler's henchmen led to the massacre of the SA by the SS. Larson goes into fascinating detail about the gradual encroachments of Nazi policy on everyday life, about the changing attitudes of ordinary people, about Dodd's interviews with Hitler, and about the reactions of the various western ambassadors. Dodd was courageous in mounting a quiet dissent and in attempting to influence the regime, but he was hampered by the requirements of his position and also by the unbelieving response of the State Department to his reports. In fact, Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Assistant Secretary Sumner Welles considered him incompetent and biased, and despite his apparent support from Roosevelt, both worked to remove him from his post.

I can't begin to describe all the amazing incidents Larson's research reveals, or the personal complications that beset the Dodd family. If you are at all interested in the ways fascism takes root, or if you have wondered why the West didn't stop Hitler early enough to prevent World War II, I think you will find this account well worth reading.