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The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz

by Erik Larson



About the Book

The author of THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY and DEAD WAKE delivers an intimate chronicle of Winston Churchill and London during the Blitz --- an inspiring portrait of courage and leadership in a time of unprecedented crisis.

On Winston Churchill?s first day as prime minister, Adolf Hitler invaded Holland and Belgium. Poland and Czechoslovakia had already fallen, and the Dunkirk evacuation was just two weeks away. For the next 12 months, Hitler would wage a relentless bombing campaign, killing 45,000 Britons. It was up to Churchill to hold his country together and persuade President Franklin Roosevelt that Britain was a worthy ally --- and willing to fight to the end.

In THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE, Erik Larson shows, in cinematic detail, how Churchill taught the British people ?the art of being fearless.? It is a story of political brinkmanship, but it?s also an intimate domestic drama, set against the backdrop of Churchill?s prime-ministerial country home, Chequers; his wartime retreat, Ditchley, where he and his entourage go when the moon is brightest and the bombing threat is highest; and, of course, 10 Downing Street in London.

Drawing on diaries, original archival documents and once-secret intelligence reports --- some released only recently --- Larson provides a new lens on London?s darkest year through the day-to-day experience of Churchill and his family: his wife, Clementine; their youngest daughter, Mary, who chafes against her parents? wartime protectiveness; their son, Randolph, and his beautiful, unhappy wife, Pamela; Pamela?s illicit lover, a dashing American emissary; and the advisers in Churchill?s ?Secret Circle,? to whom he turns in the hardest moments.

THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE takes readers out of today?s political dysfunction and back to a time of true leadership, when, in the face of unrelenting horror, Churchill?s eloquence, courage and perseverance bound a country, and a family, together.

Discussion Guide

In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal certain aspects of the storyline of this book. If you have not finished reading THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE, we respectfully suggest that you do so before reviewing this guide.

1. The book?s title comes from a line in John Colville?s diary about the peculiar beauty of watching bombs fall over his home city: ?Never was there such a contrast of natural splendor and human vileness.? How do you think a tragedy like this could be considered beautiful? Why do you think Larson chose this title?

2. THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE covers Winston Churchill?s first year in office. What are the benefits of focusing on this truncated time period?

3. Larson draws on many sources to provide a vivid picture of Churchill?s home and family life in his first year as prime minister. What struck you most about his family dynamic? Considering how powerful he was at the time, was his relationship with his family what you would have expected it to be? Why or why not?

4. Churchill?s most trusted advisers spent many long days and nights with the prime minister, so much so that they became like members of his family. Why do you think Churchill had such close relationships with his political advisers? What do you see as being the key advantages and disadvantages of running a government office in this way? Which of Churchill?s political relationships was the most interesting to you?

5. Larson provides various perspectives in the book, from diaries by Mary Churchill and Mass-Observation participants to the inner workings of both Churchill?s and Hitler?s cabinets. How did these different perspectives enhance your understanding of life in 1940 and 1941?

6. Reading about how war was waged and discussed by the public in 1940, do you see any similarities to how we talk about warfare today?

7. How did you feel reading about the raids? How would your daily life and your priorities change if your country were experiencing similar attacks with such frequency?

8. The book includes anecdotes about a vast array of characters around Churchill, such as his daughter-in-law Pamela, his children Randolph and Mary, and his wife, Clementine. What are the benefits of including various stories about the people related to Churchill --- like Pamela?s affair, or Randolph?s gambling habits --- in a book discussing his first year in office? Which of these characters did you find to be the most interesting? The most surprising?

9. Mary Churchill recounts the evening when the Café de Paris --- where she and her friends had planned to go dancing --- was bombed. After the initial shock, her group decides that the dead would have wanted them to continue their evening of gaiety and dancing elsewhere, and they move on to another location. What did you think about this choice? What do you think you would have done in their situation?

10. Discuss Mary Churchill?s portrayal in the book. Do you feel she grows and matures throughout this tumultuous year? Why or why not?

11. What was the most surprising thing you learned about Churchill? Why did it surprise you?

12. While England rationed food, gasoline and other supplies during the war, Churchill and his cabinet received extra provisions. What did you think about this policy? Do you think government officials are justified in implementing such measures during a time of crisis? Why or why not?

13. Were there any decisions Churchill made over the course of his first year as prime minister that you disagreed with? If so, which? Which of his decisions were you most impressed with?

14. Do you think there has been another leader as universally beloved in their day as Churchill was in his? If so, who? If not, why not?

Author Bio

Erik Larson is the author of seven national bestsellers --- THE DEMON OF UNREST, THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE, DEAD WAKE, IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS, THUNDERSTRUCK, THE DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY and ISAAC'S STORM --- which collectively have sold more than 12 million copies. His books have been published in nearly 40 countries.

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