

H.H. Holmes

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

We've talked a lot on this show about the importance of branding. And this might be one of the best examples we've ever run across. Prolific murderer H.H. Holmes, often referred to as America's first serial killer...do you know his real name? Herman Webster Mudgett. HH Holmes did a lot of terrible and confounding things, but the least terrible and confounding thing he ever did was pretend to be someone whose name was not Herman Webster

Let's just get this out of the way, H.H. Holmes was not America's first serial killer. But he WAS America's first truly *infamous* serial killer. As far as the newspapers were concerned, he was our Jack the Ripper. If you know anything about H.H. Holmes, if you've heard any version of his story before, then you're familiar with his "Murder Castle"—the hotel that supposedly operated like a Venus fly trap with torture rooms and incinerators and trap doors, and no doubt you

recognize his most famous quote. "I was born with the devil in me. I could not help the fact that I was a murderer, no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing...I was born with the evil one standing as my sponsor beside the bed where I was ushered into the world, and he has been with me since." Do poets sing? Wouldn't they be songwriters? Regardless, the true story of H.H. Holmes is far more complicated and nuanced than the tabloid version that has been peddled for years. Like so many sensational stories of the past, the lines between legend and fact have been blurred, and we will probably never know the whole story. The one man who has defined the modern depiction of H.H. Holmes more than any other is a writer named Erik Larson, whose 2003 book *The Devil in the White City* was an absolute sensation, and immediately became the definitive source for Holmes trivia. If you've listened to a podcast or viewed a documentary about H.H. Holmes, there's a 90% chance that it's simply a repackaging of that book. I read it, I mostly enjoyed it for simple entertainment value, although if you're looking for a detailed true-crime novel focused on a serial killer, this isn't the book for you. Easily 2/3 of the novel is about the Chicago World's fair, aka the titular White City, which as we've mentioned in previous episodes was taking place only a short distance from the hotel, but Larson's book is so focused on the fair that Holmes almost feels like an afterthought. Plus, as a historical

document, it's deeply flawed. Erik Larson has pointed to the extensive research he compiled for the novel, and the beginning of the book even includes this statement: "However strange or macabre some of the following incidents may seem, this is not a work of fiction." Larson then proceeds to fictionalize every imaginable detail, pulling entire scenes and events and conversations and fanciful internal monologue completely out of his ass. Here's a murder scene from *Devil in the White City*: "Holmes... held her, stroked her hair, and with moist eyes assured her that she had nothing to worry about..." later, "Holmes offered Julia a cheerful 'Merry Christmas' and gave her a hug, then took her hand and led her to a room on the second floor that he had readied for the operation. He wore a white apron and had rolled back his cuffs. Possibly he wore his hat, a bowler. He had not washed his hands, nor did he wear a mask." Everything in that passage is stated as fact except the question of whether he wore a hat, which leads a reader to believe that everything except that one detail is settled fact. None of it is. That entire scene was 100% grade-A BS. Larson has no way of knowing if Julia was killed on Christmas, no idea what Holmes wore when it happened, no idea, honestly, if it even DID happen. Julia's body was never found. There's a thorough breakdown of the problems with this book in a linked article by Patrick Reardon. "In the "Notes and Sources" section in the back of his

book, Larson writes, "Clearly no one other than Holmes was present during his murders — no one, that is, who survived — yet in my book I re-create two of his killings...To build my murder scenes, I used threads of known detail to weave a plausible account, as would a prosecutor in his closing arguments to a jury." " Yeeeah. I don't have any philosophical problem with that, except maybe don't tell me in the intro that everything I'm about to read is true and then lie to me for 300 pages. Similarly, from another article critical article of Larson's book, "Other moments in *Devil in the White City*, like a visit by Holmes and two of his later victims, sisters Minnie and Anna Williams, to Chicago's meatpacking district, are similarly speculative: Watching the slaughter, writes Larson, "Holmes was unmoved; Minnie and Anna were horrified but also strangely thrilled by the efficiency of the carnage." The book's endnotes, however, acknowledge that no record of such a trip exists." That's fiction. That is the literary equivalent of winging it.

There are two other major problems with the standard narrative that we have all been sold regarding H.H. Holmes. Many researchers have used as sources H.H. Holmes own various confessions (he wrote three of them, and they're all different). The problem is that Holmes was a serial liar throughout his life. As we alluded to before, he may have been more of a serial *liar* than a serial *killer*. At one point after his capture, Holmes would

confess to 27 murders, but not only were a large number of the people he claimed to have killed definitely NOT victims of H.H. Holmes, many were still living at the time he made the claims. Presumably those people were surprised to learn that they had been murdered. One of them was a classmate from Holmes's alma mater named Robert Leacock, whom Holmes claimed to have killed for insurance money in 1886. But Leacock actually died hundreds of miles away in Canada three years later, in 1889. To further illustrate the credibility we should assign to these writings, Holmes also at one point claimed to be physically transforming into the devil. "I am convinced that since my imprisonment I have changed woefully and gruesomely from what I was formerly in feature and figure.... My head and face are gradually assuming an elongated shape. I believe fully that I am growing to resemble the devil—that the similitude is almost completed." So he seems credible. I love the idea that historians can just pick and choose which information to believe. "I'm not 100% convinced that this guy is physically transforming into the devil but everything else he said is probably legit."

The reason so much of Holmes raving bullshit was reported as fact is obvious: it's more fun to report fantasy than the truth. People want to believe the most sensationalist and salacious accounts. And that brings us to the last big problem with Erik Larson and

many other Holmes researchers; they relied not just on the confessions of a known conman and sociopathic narcissist but also on the sensationalist tabloid news stories of the day rather than serious journalism. One of the common misconceptions that gets thrown around about Holmes was that he may have killed up to 200 people, which was taken from a throwaway line in a pulp book published in 1940, with no relation to real fact. It would be like if in 100 years someone wrote a book about Jeffrey Epstein and as their source they used only Epstein's police interviews and stories from the national Enquirer. Some of it would be true, Epstein was an absolute monster, but he probably wasn't sacrificing babies and drinking their blood, and we sure as hell can't believe anything he told the police. Apart from the Devil in the White City there's another book on H.H. Holmes that caused a bit of a sensation. Written by Adam Seltzer and published in 2017, it's essentially a debunking of the Larson's more famous novel. It's called *H.H. Holmes: The True History of the White City Devil*. The *true* history...throwing some shade there. Even though Seltzer has been able to back up his claims with evidence, the caricature of H.H. Holmes and his murder castle popularized by tabloids and Larson's book still dominates pop culture depictions. So let's talk about the truth. What we know for sure. We know that Holmes was only ever convicted of one

murder, and on the day of his execution when he had nothing left to lose and nothing left to gain he once again professed his innocence, claiming that the only deaths for which he was responsible were two women who had died during abortions he performed. Even many of the details you've probably heard about his hotel were thoroughly invented. There is no evidence that Holmes ever even opened the hotel to the public, and in fact he was most likely using the third floor—which was the portion of the building that was supposedly set aside for hotel rooms—simply as an insurance scam. ““Many of the stories of him and his “Castle” are pure fiction. The castle never for one day truly functioned as a hotel...the hidden rooms were almost certainly used more for hiding stolen furniture than for destroying bodies. The legend of The Devil in the White City is effectively a new American tall tale.” It was a tall tale that captivated the public, and left them clamoring for more. As a result, newspapers competed to print the most extreme versions of the tale, often relying on unreliable sources or simply inventing stories from thin air.

“After Holmes’ arrest, newspapers began printing lurid stories about his alleged Chicago “Murder Castle,” claiming he’d outfitted it with trap doors and secret rooms to torture and kill guests.... these sensational details can be attributed to yellow journalism, the practice of exaggerating or simply making up news stories that flourished

in the 1890s. Without any evidence, newspapers claimed Holmes used his building's chute to transport bodies to the basement (the fact that he had a chute was not unusual, since many buildings had laundry chutes connected to the basement). These stories turned Holmes' building into an elaborate torture dungeon outfitted with gas pipes to asphyxiate victims and soundproof rooms to hide their screams." So pretty much everything I thought I knew about this story is 100% wrong, maybe this podcast should be called ruining narratives. Why do we do this? Knowledge is Power...the power to turn you into a bitter skeptic. Remember back before this podcast, when we believed in stuff? When a Tyrannosaurus Rex could've battled a stegosaurus? Those were good times. Tyrannosaurus Rex? I looked it up, there's no consensus. Tyrannosauri seems acceptable. There is debate as to whether H.H. Holmes even qualified as a serial killer, or if he was simply a ruthless conman who eliminated anyone who was in his way, and committed murder when it was financially beneficial. Unlike many notorious serial killers, Holmes doesn't seem to have targeted animals as a child, nor did he murder indiscriminately or compulsively; on the contrary, all of the murders that we know of and/or suspect he committed had a clear motive: money. According to his mother, "I never knew him to torment anyone, especially animals. Some boys, you know, like to torment

kittens and sometimes they are very cruel to them, but Herman was too tender-hearted for anything like that." Soooo take that with a grain of salt. Breaking news: killer's mother thinks he's innocent. Case closed.

In some ways Holmes may have been more like a ruthless mobster or thief than a ruthless maniac. More Al Capone than Ted Bundy. But look, now that I've completely undermined any possible suspense or excitement in this episode, I'm going to switch directions and say: there is no doubt that H.H. Holmes was a compelling figure, and a calculating, remorseless murderer. I picture him like a hitman, a stone cold killer who valued nothing beyond his own financial gain.

Credible historians feel confident that he was responsible for at least 9 murders and possibly quite a few more, and in this episode we're going to cover all of the facts as well as the speculation to try to paint a realistic picture of this mythical figure.

Herman Webster Mudgett was born in Vermont on May 16th 1861, the third child of parents Levi Horton Mudgett and Theodate Page Price. And I don't want to dwell on this, but Price...such a better name. I realize this was not a progressive era but Levi, dude, just take your wife's name. Or at least give it to your son. That's some impressive commitment to sexism, to have access to a perfectly good name and stick with Mudgett just because penis. So to set the scene, Holmes grew up

in an era when horses were still a primary mode of transportation, the few people who had telephones were rocking four digit numbers, electrical lighting in houses and on city streets was still years away. As were the types of advances in forensic science that could have put so many of the rumors and wild speculation regarding Holmes's supposed crimes to rest.

Young Herman Mudgett was rumored to have had strikingly blue eyes—Erik Larson's book is full-on horny for his eyes, which are described in loving and exhausting detail. What Larson doesn't mention is that his eyes may have been striking for another reason as well; Holmes is known to have had a "turned eye," or strabismus, we might call it a lazy eye. According to the Chicago Tribune, in a description of Holmes after he was apprehended, "He has a little black mustache and a pair of cold blue eyes, one of which, like his record, is not straight." I just wanna point out, if you've seen a picture of H.H. Holmes, I'm in love with the idea that the absolute walrus-lip he was rocking might've been described as a little black mustache. Presumably he had trimmed his facial hair before that description was written, because if not, wow. This was truly the era of the epic mustache

Holmes was bullied as a child, possibly as a result of his eye condition and also most likely his size, he wasn't a big guy, as an adult he'd be around 5 foot seven. When he was five years old he had to walk to school each day, and his route took him past a doctor's

office. Herman was terrified of doctors, for good reason. Doctors at the time were basically improvisers, if you were a child in the 1800s you could expect to be frequently poked and prodded by supposed medical professionals for dubious reasons with dubious results. So in one commonly cited bullying incident, two older boys found out about Holmes's phobia, so they dragged him into the doctor's office and forced him to come face to face with a skeleton. Holmes claimed this was a formative event; he found it terrifying at the time but it was also an experience that would later lead to morbid fascinations. The encounter with that skeleton would inspire Holmes to pursue a medical degree, and also kicked off a lifelong fascination with the macabre that would eventually spiral into violent obsessions. The incident also sounds like a load of bullshit. Where was the doctor or medical staff or even receptionist while this was happening? Is this something that was just permitted in the 1800s, "from noon to one we reserve the doctor's office for hazing incidents. Traumatizing local schoolchildren, considered a public service in the 1800s."

Of the experience Holmes would later write, ""It was a wicked and dangerous thing to do to a child of tender years and health, but it proved an heroic method of treatment, destined ultimately to cure me of my fears, and to inculcate in me, first, a strong feeling of curiosity..." I'm not sure

that's how it works. It would be like if a gang of dudes dragged you into a cave of spiders, I just can't imagine that being forcibly and violently subjected to your fear would help you conquer it in one session. Like if they did that to him every day for a month, yeah, desensitization, exposure therapy, but one traumatic incident is just going to reinforce the terror. I don't know if I mentioned this, but Holmes was a big fat lying liar. So Herman Mudgett was academically inclined, he was an exceptional student and graduated from high school at 16, and briefly became a teacher. In that same year he met and fell for a girl his age named Clara Lovering, their courtship would last just a few months and they would be married at 17. Two years later in 1880 they had a child, a boy named Robert Lovering Mudgett. I can't get over this name thing, this is crazy to me. So they used both names for their son, but instead of choosing Lovering as the family name they went with Mudgett again. What the hell is wrong with the 1800s. Like beyond the racism and medical barbarism etc. After the birth of their child, Mudgett promptly bailed on the family to attend the University of Vermont in pursuit of a medical degree. That's a good time to leave...skip the diaper phase. Strategic. Not much is known about Holmes time in Vermont, he was an unremarkable student, but there was one incident that I particularly enjoy. Holmes and his roommate Fred Ingalls engaged in a fistfight, some fisticuffs,

because without permission Ingalls had reportedly used some of Holmes mustache wax. The nerve. The gall. Violation of the bro code. You don't hit on another man's woman, and you don't use your roommate's mustache wax.

Holmes dropped out of University of Vermont after a year, headed home to his wife and child, and enrolled in the University of Michigan. This was not a positive outcome for his wife and child. By this point, Holmes had begun showing his true colors. He beat his wife until she finally left him—you go girl. Literally. Get the hell out of there—and it was around this time that Holmes is believed to have engaged in grave robbing with his professor, William James Herdman. The medical profession in the 18th century, as mentioned, was brutal and haphazard. It was a Wild West of reckless experimentation. In the context of the time, Holmes actions in medical school probably weren't particularly out of the ordinary. Many doctors moonlighted as "resurrectionist," which is a classy name for grave robber. Kind of weird name, because you're not resurrecting anyone, you're sort of making them more dead. Carving them up. This was mad scientist level stuff, like "let's dig up a dead body and strap it to an electric chair and see what happens. Interesting. Everyone make a note, my hypothesis was confirmed. An electrocuted dead body smells even worse than a regular dead body. Next experiment."

Another classic anecdote from Holmes's college days, related by his landlady: "Upon going upstairs to sweep later, Mrs. Brew noticed a foul stench in Holmes's room emanating from a "dark object" under the bed. Using the broom, she swept the object out and found that it was a dead baby. He was sternly told not to do such things again, and Mrs. Brew said it was weeks before she recovered enough to sweep the room again."

She was like, "I had to remind him of our strict 'no dead babies under the bed' policy. The experience was most unpleasant, it almost put me off my lunch."

The one thing that classmates seem to remember was his enthusiasm for dissection. Said one classmate: "he spent much of his time in the dissecting rooms ... and I believe he had the keys."

Another recalled,

""Once in the dissecting room I remember that he appropriated the foot of a child cadaver, taking it away for his own use."" Souvenir. Seems fine. He probably needed a paperweight or a doorstop. Or maybe he put it on a keychain like a lucky rabbit's foot. Totally normal. There's absolutely no reason to immediately contact the authorities.

Maybe my favorite quote from an acquaintance of Holmes at the University of Michigan: ""He told me he did not intend to practice medicine, but wanted a medical education to help him in his business."" Sure, why not. I can think of a lot of professions

where the ability to dissect humans might come in handy. Looks great on a résumé. "I'm a hard worker, detail oriented, I can disassemble a baby in under 15 minutes."

Final note from Holmes college days: a couple of classmates remembered him as having a "peculiar odor," and for a brief time his nickname was smegma. So you get to go to bed tonight with *that* knowledge. If I have to know that, you have to know it too.

After passing his exams and graduating in 1884, Holmes briefly moved among various cities working in drugstores and practicing medicine, and also dabbling in the art of the swindle. This was when he became acquainted with the idea of insurance fraud, and in particular may have experimented with taking out life insurance policies on willing participants and then faking their deaths by grave robbing for corpses that resembled them. How frustrating if you're trying to fake the death of a heavysset guy and you dig up the grave and find out it's a skinny dude. I guess if you wait long enough we're all skinny, the heavysset part is temporary...there's no more effective weight-loss regimen than death, and decomposing. So the scams in which Holmes was participating are a little hazy and there isn't any agreement as to how it all went down, but it seems clear that he was acquiring money without doing honest work. Which in my opinion is the best way to acquire money, without doing work. Honest or

not, I just want money for nothing, and chicks for free. That's a song, don't cancel me. What's the alternative? Paying for chicks? It's either chicks for free or sex trafficking. So there were some sketchy occurrences during this stretch of time in the life of the future H.H. Holmes. For instance, he was supposedly seen hanging out with a young boy who later disappeared. I don't know which is sketchier, the "disappeared" part or the "hanging out with a young boy" part. Also, when he was working in Philadelphia at a drugstore, another boy died from medicine purchased at the store and Holmes quickly left town. Sketchy, but nothing conclusive. As we mentioned, healthcare was hit and miss in the 1800s. Half of the so-called medicine of the time was hardcore narcotics, and the other half was straight-up poison. Got a cough? Take these cyanide pills, you'll never cough again.

In Minneapolis Holmes met, romanced, and married a young music teacher named Myrta Zulique Belknap, without mentioning that he was already legally married and had a child. He probably forgot. It's actually very common—you might not know this, but there is a medical condition in which a man will frequently forget that he's married when he wants to sex with a woman who isn't his wife. It's called "horny and sleazy." So despite the whole bigamy situation, and the fact that Holmes would turn out to be a serial killer, Myrta would never have anything

other than kind words when describing H.H. Holmes. It's a lot easier to view someone in a positive light when you're not one of the people they murdered. "He was a lover of pets and always had a dog or cat and usually a horse, and he would play with them by the hour, teaching them little tricks or romping with them...In his home life I do not think there was ever a better man than my husband. He never spoke an unkind word to me or our little girl, or my mother. He was never vexed or irritable but was always happy and free from care." So he apparently saved all of the abuse for his other wives. He got all his homicidal impulses out before he went home. Cheating and murdering was clearly therapeutic for him, it really takes the edge off. She continued, "I never saw a baby that would not go to Mr. Holmes and stay with him contentedly...He was remarkably fond of children. Often when we were traveling and there happened to be a baby in the car he would say, 'Go and see if they won't lend you that baby a little while,' and when I brought it to him he would play with it, forgetting everything else..." "Lend me that baby" is a statement that I feel should raise red flags. "He was a wonderful man, always asking to borrow a baby."

After stints in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and New York, Holmes and Myrta fled from creditors—and probably the police—to Chicago. By now Mudgett had abandoned his previous aliases, and was going by Dr.

Henry Howard Holmes, which would be his primary alias for the remainder of his criminal career. Many sources have claimed that the name was an homage to Sherlock Holmes, but according to Adam Seltzer, the first Sherlock Holmes story wouldn't be published until a year after Mudgett began using the name. Again, all stories are lies, life is a farce.

So the Holmeses settled in the rapidly expanding Chicago suburb of Englewood, and had a daughter in 1889, Lucy Theodate Holmes, so the branding is getting better. Lucy would eventually become a schoolteacher. So it's here in Englewood where the first major point of contention arises between the novel *The Devil in the White City*, and, I guess, reality. Erik Larson's version of this tale claims that during one of Holmes's random evening strolls through Chicago, he happened upon the ES Holton drug store and introduced himself to the owner and proprietor, the elderly Mrs. Elizabeth Holton, whose husband had taken ill with cancer. He offered his services, charmed her with his baby blue eyes—or at least the good one—and later, after she had become a widow, he offered to buy the business, financing it with his scamming proceeds and by mortgaging many of the store's assets. Supposedly the old woman agreed when he promised that she could retain her upstairs apartment, and then a few months later she mysteriously disappeared. This is definitely not true, the drugstore was not owned by a kindly

old couple, the Holtons were a young couple and Holmes knew Elizabeth Holton because they had attended the University of Michigan together. She herself was the pharmacist and primary proprietor of the drugstore, and she had recently given birth to a second child and was looking to sell the shop. Author Adam Selzer has a selfie of himself next to their graves, which include the dates of their deaths, proving that they both significantly outlived Holmes. However, Elizabeth Holton did give Holmes a job, and later Holmes did end up purchasing the drugstore and immediately set about selling all manner of snake oil nonsense including "Linden Grove Mineral Water" that had a bluish tint and was supposedly drawn from a special well, presumably capable of curing all manner of ailments. ""Like everything with which Holmes had to do," the Tribune later said, "this [mineral water] was a Humbug. Holmes simply applied his genius to the water pipe in the basement of his store, and by a slight chemical process the good old lake water from the pipes was discolored and sold as readily as mineral.""

Discolored lake water, mmm.

Holmes also built a crazy ridiculous contraption that he claimed could turn water into natural gas, but really all he had done was rigged up a box to both a faucet and a gas line so that taps poured out both water and gas, and there was no relation between the two. But he was slick enough to get people

to invest in this nonsense, and his exceptional salesmanship would be a theme with Holmes and benefit him again and again, his real identity, the core of his being was as a hustler and conman. Killing was a side hustle at best, more likely not even a hobby but rather a means to an end.

In 1887 Holmes purchased an empty lot across from his drugstore, and he personally designed a two-story building that occupied the entire block at 63rd and Wallace streets in Englewood, it was basically a modern strip mall with various businesses on the ground floor and residences up top. He then relocated his drugstore into the bottom floor of the new location, and promptly quit paying his bills, stiffing both the architects and building suppliers. When they sued him, Holmes began construction on a third floor that would supposedly function as a hotel, and he used the promise of his hotel-revenue as leverage to obtain more credit with zero intention of paying anyone back. Throughout the years Holmes would occasionally pay his debts if backed into a corner or if threatened, but his operation worked like a Ponzi scheme: he constantly took in large amounts of revenue and products and only paid out small amounts of compensation when necessary, always leaving him with a surplus. When he originally bought the property he'd registered the deed under the name HS Campbell, which gave him more leeway to stall and obfuscate. When

creditors came knocking he would say, "oh you're not looking for me, you're looking for the owner, HS Campbell. You just missed him. Again. Feel free to come back and just miss him again tomorrow." For some reason HS Campbell was extremely hard to track down. Of H.H. Holmes a former employee C. E. Davis, said, "he was the smoothest man I ever saw... Creditors come here raging and calling him all the names imaginable, and he would smile and talk to them and set up the cigars and drinks and send them away seemingly his friends for life. I never saw him angry. You couldn't have trouble with him if you tried.""

Around this time two important people entered Holmes's life: The first was a carpenter and petty thief named Benjamin Pitezel (pit-ezzle), who would briefly become Holmes's partner in crime before ending up as one of his most famous victims. Incidentally the three other most famous victims would be Alice, Nelly, and Howard...Pitezel's children. The second important person to enter Holmes life at this time was a woman named Julia Connor. She was a recent transplant to Chicago along with her husband Ned and their six-year-old daughter Pearl. Ned took a position managing a jewelry store on the bottom floor of Holmes's block-long property. Julia and Holmes quickly struck up an affair and by all accounts they didn't do a great job of concealing it, mostly for lack of trying.

In every depiction I could find, Julia comes across as kind of a b. She seemed to have rubbed in Ned's face the fact that she was banging his landlord. Of course, most depictions of Julia rely on her ex-husband as a source, so grain of salt and all that. But she was cheating on him so...yeah. Julia would live in the same building—the murder castle—as Holmes's wife for over a year while they carried on the affair. I'm not saying she deserves to die, but also karma works in mysterious ways. Ned eventually left and filed for divorce, at which point Holmes seems to have lost interest in Julia. Less fun when you suddenly have responsibility for taking care of your mistress's child and you no longer get the thrill of the whole cuckolding thing.

Shortly after Ned's departure, it seems likely that Julia became pregnant. And this is where again the details become blurry, and we have to work to separate the myth from fact. Holmes claims that he attempted an abortion, and Julia died during the procedure. Which frankly is a believable story. Holmes was not trained in abortions, and even the doctors who *were* in that day and age were just as likely to add an infection to your condition as they were to successfully extract a baby. "I have good news and bad news. The good news is the black-market chloroform was very effective. The bad news is you're still pregnant and you now have syphilis." Erik Larson in *Devil in the White City*, as we learned before, theorized that Holmes

convinced Julia to go through with the abortion on Christmas and simply murdered her when she was sedated. Either way, after her death Holmes most likely poisoned her daughter Pearl to cover up his role in her mother's death. Investigators would find the body of a female child buried in the cellar, and it's a pretty good assumption that it was Pearl.

So about that hotel. Modern historians don't believe that the hotel was conceived as a grand scheme to take advantage of an influx of tourists and ensnare travelers. We discussed the Chicago Worlds Fair in our Worlds Fair episode, so we won't retread that information here, but suffice to say that there is debate as to whether Holmes ever had any plan to take advantage of tourism inspired by the fair in order to target vulnerable women. But Eric Larson goes all in on this erroneous theory in *Devil in the White City*. According to Larson's novel, when *men* attempted to rent a room at the hotel, Holmes would claim that the hotel was full, yet he was always willing to rent to women from out of town. You'd think someone would notice that a bunch of women went missing, and you'd probably be right. But the myth is believable enough to persist, because after all, this was during a time when you couldn't simply text someone if they suddenly disappeared. If your relative went out of town, and then went silent, by which I mean you didn't receive a postcard for like six months, there was

no easy way to track them down. But there's no evidence that this happened other than tabloid news accounts, and as mentioned, there's no evidence that the hotel was ever open to the public or that it housed even a single guest. More likely, Holmes was using the third floor for his standard scam: he was convincing companies to sell him products and furniture in bulk on credit, claiming that the items would be used for the hotel, and then selling those items for profit, with no intention of paying back his creditors. He used the fact that he was supposedly building a hotel, and one that could capitalize on the Worlds Fair, to convince suppliers and creditors that he was legit.

According to popular mythology, the castle included trap doors and chutes and secret passageways and torture rooms rigged with gas. There is some tangential truth to this. As mentioned, most buildings had chutes for garbage and laundry etc. and there was at least one trap door in a second floor bathroom; there were also "hidden" stairs, but anyone who worked on the building was aware of these features. They just didn't care, because Holmes didn't say "build me secret stairs to a murder room." He was like "I want a quick way to get from this area to this area or a place to hide valuables, let's make that happen," and they were like "cool." The so-called secret areas were most likely used by Holmes to store items he had purchased on credit and planned to

sell. What *is* true is that Holmes constantly fired workers and hired new ones, which would later be interpreted as a strategy to ensure that no one but him knew the true layout of the building. However, rather than creating high turnover as a scheme to safeguard the secrets of his murder castle, this was most likely yet another scam, a technique for avoiding payment. Holmes would hire a small work crew, allow them to finish a portion of the building, and then criticize their performance and refuse to pay on account of their supposedly shoddy craftsmanship. Then he would hire another crew, rinse and repeat. Of course, this did result in the added benefit of very few workers knowing the entire layout of the property, but again, this was more likely a random benefit of his money-saving scheme rather than a calculated strategy for getting away with future murders.

In 1892, Holmes paid to have his aforementioned right hand man and lackey Benjamin Pitezel attend rehab for alcoholism provided by the famous Keeley institute. The Keeley cure is kind of a fascinating bit of weirdness in medical history. It consisted of an injection that supposedly cured alcoholism, and it was all the rage among celebrities and anyone who could afford it. It was referred to as the gold cure because of all the mysterious ingredients in the mixture, the only widely known ingredient was gold. Of course. Everyone knows that the key to curing a toxic addiction is to

introduce metal into your bloodstream. Bling out your veins, 24 carat arteries, you'll forget all about alcohol. The other ingredients in the injection were unknown but were colored red, white and blue, so the cure was referred to as a 'barber pole injection" and was delivered via one of those giant large-bore needles that extract a chunk of flesh with every jab. It has variously been claimed that the solution included strychnine, ammonia, willow bark, and a version of basically watered-down morphine, and that last one certainly tracks. I imagine that would kill your craving for alcohol. Or as we've mentioned in the past, at least it would replace it. I don't know if it worked for Pitezel, but shortly after he returned HH Holmes began selling a knockoff version of the gold cure in his drugstore, so the visit might've had ulterior motives. Beyond possibly bringing back a sample of the formula, Pitezel also returned with a bit of a crush: he regaled Holmes with breathless descriptions of a beautiful woman who worked for the Keely Institute, named Emeline Cigrand. Holmes sent her a letter offering her a job as his personal secretary, and she relocated to Chicago. She and Holmes reportedly were soon seen to be getting cozy. Six months later she disappeared. According to a Mrs. Lawrence who lived in the building, ""The day after Miss Cigrand disappeared, or the day we last saw her, the door of Holmes' office was kept locked and nobody went into it except Holmes and Patrick Quinlan

[another of Holmes's lackies]..."About 7 o'clock in the evening Holmes came out of his office and asked two men who were living in the building if they would not help him carry a trunk downstairs." Holmes would later try to throw the suspicious Mrs. Lawrence off the scent by producing a supposed wedding announcement from Emeline, indicating that she had eloped and married a man named Robert Phelps. Her family members received the same announcement in the mail. None of the family members had received an invitation to the wedding, and Emiline would never be heard from again. Interestingly, Phelps was the pseudonym that Benjamin Pitezel had used while attending the Keely Institute.

Holmes's next target, I mean gf, was Minnie Williams, an aspiring actress who is described by Erik Larson as "plain, short, and plump," with a "masculine nose, and virtually no neck." Ouch. Larson explains Holmes interest in her by the fact that Minnie had two large and specific attributes: a sizable bank account and a valuable plot of land in Texas that she inherited from her uncle. Holmes hired her as his secretary, romanced her, and eventually convinced her to transfer the deed to a man named Benton T Lyman, which was yet another alias used by Benjamin Pitezel. Minnie's sister Annie came to visit, and later wrote to relatives that she was planning to accompany "brother Harry" on a trip to Europe. Neither

Minnie nor Anna was ever seen again. It should be noted that none of the bodies of Holmes's presumed victims up to this point in the story have ever been discovered. In the Devil in the White City Erik Larson theorizes that Holmes sold their bodies to a man named Charles Chappell, skilled at removing the skin from corpses and selling them to medical institutes. So it's possible that at least one or two of Holmes victims are still on display, or maybe stuck in some dusty attic. But Charles Chappelle, like Holmes, was a notoriously untrustworthy source; perhaps the best evidence against the story of the articulator Charles Chapell is that he never actually existed. The man who approached the police with this story was instead name Myron George Chappel, aka MG Chappell... Charles was his son. Sketchy tabloid newspapers got the name wrong and never bothered to fix the error so the name stuck, which illustrates the quality of journalism we're dealing with here. MG's claims were never considered credible outside of the yellow journalism of the time. According to Adam Selzer, "His son, Charles, and his wife, Cynthia, both told police that M.G. was a drunk – he would make up wild stories when he was drinking, and then he'd forget that he'd made them up when he sobered up." "Most reporters mentioned that he seemed drunk off his ass the whole time he was around the castle. None of the people who lived and worked in the Castle recognized him." Drunk or not, the details of his story

simply didn't hold up. MG claimed he had sold the skeleton to Hahnemann Medical College in 1893, but the college was able to produce evidence that they had purchased the skeleton many years earlier.

Around this time Holmes's scams and murders began to catch up to him. Lawsuits were piling up, relatives of his various missing secretaries were sniffing around. He tried burning down the top floor of the castle for insurance, but bungled it...the building was left damaged but mostly intact. Holmes filed an insurance claim but by now the insurance company was on to him. With an ever-increasing army of creditors and the friends and family of his victims banging down his door, Holmes fled and went into hiding, abandoning yet another wife and child. He surfaced in Texas to claim Minnie's property and there he met a woman he seems to have genuinely had feelings for: Georgina Yoke. They were married in 1894, his fourth simultaneous wife. Joseph Smith would've been proud. Or maybe not, he had like 30 so this was amateur stuff. But the difference is that Mormon wives know the roster, the husbands aren't sneaking from house to house. And presumably most Mormon husbands aren't serial killers.

In Texas Holmes attempted an encore of his Chicago gameplan: create a building without paying for it. Meanwhile he convinced Benjamin Pitezel to adopt another false identity as an inventor named BF Perry, take out a \$10,000 life insurance policy and

then fake his own death via a laboratory explosion. Pitezel's wife would split the insurance money with Holmes and a crooked lawyer who was in on the scheme, a guy named Jephtha Howe.

The plan was for Holmes to find a cadaver the approximate shape and size as Benjamin Pitezel, but why bother digging up cadavers when you can create one built exactly to specifications? Holmes killed Pitezel and set him on fire.

He then told Pitezel's wife that everything had gone according to plan, and that Benjamin Pitezel was in hiding. He also convinced her to turn over three of her children to his care, presumably as bargaining chips should she figure out that her husband was dead and try to rat Holmes out.

Holmes traveled cross country with the children, first to Indianapolis, where he poisoned young Howard Pitezel and chopped up the body, and then eventually crossing into Canada, where he murdered Alice and Nellie, either by poison or by locking them in a trunk and attaching a gas line to a hole in the top and asphyxiating them. He buried their naked bodies in the basement of the house he had rented in Toronto.

Amazingly, the crime that finally took Holmes down wasn't murder or insurance scam, but the classic wild West Horse theft. In Texas they don't mess around with horse thieves, and he was finally tracked down by members of the Pinkerton detective agency. At some point we'll have to

cover them.

Holmes was arrested in 1894 and put on trial for the murder of Benjamin Pitezel. It took the jury only two hours to convict him following a five day trial during which his lawyers called no witnesses. Holmes was sentenced to death. While in jail and still apparently delusional enough to hope that he might somehow go free, Holmes accepted payment of more than 7000 dollars from the Hearst newspaper company for a confession. He would eventually write three confessions with often conflicting details, presumably after negotiating payment for each. It seems obvious that he was incentivized to make the confession as lurid and juicy as possible, which would account for all of the lying, and the 27 supposed murders. While incarcerated Holmes would also pen his autobiography, which painted him in an e greenly flattering light. It begins, "Come with me, if you will, to a tiny, quiet New England village, nestling among the picturesquely rugged hills of New Hampshire. This little hamlet has for over a century been known as Gilmanton Academy ... Here, in the year 1861, I, Herman W. Mudgett, the author of these pages, was born." Also, I like to murder women and children. Before Holmes's death sentence was carried out, the so-called murder castle was once again the target of arson; two men entered the building in august 1895 and were able to incinerate a good portion of the structure, but the bones of the building—so to speak—survived

until it was finally torn down in 1938. The site of the so-called murder castle is now occupied by the Englewood post office.

After he was sentenced to death, there was no point in charging Holmes with the murder of the children, though by then his role in their murders was common knowledge.

Holmes was executed by hanging on May 7, 1896, nine days before his 35th birthday. His final meal consisted of eggs, dry toast, and coffee. Given an opportunity to make a final statement on the gallows, Holmes recanted all of his confessions and professed his innocence. "Gentlemen, I have few words to say. In fact I would make no remarks at this time were it not for the feeling that if I did not speak it would imply that I acquiesced in my execution. I only wish to say that the extent of the wrongdoing I am guilty of in taking human life is the killing of two women. They died by my hands as a result of criminal operations. I also wish to state however, so that there will be no misunderstanding hereafter, that I am not guilty of taking the lives of any of the Pitezel family, either the three children or their father Benjamin, for whose death I am now to be hanged. I never committed murder. That is all I have to say." I'd hope so. I hope that's all he had to say, because he wasn't getting another chance...if you're planning an encore speech, you probably don't understand what's going on here. The fall from the gallows didn't break Holmes's neck, and he slowly asphyxiated to death.

I'm ok with that. Not happy about it, but it's not going to keep me up nights. Holmes was buried in an unmarked grave in Holy Cross cemetery, and had requested a "double deep coffin" entombed in wet cement to guard against grave robbers. Ironic. I don't know why the state agreed to this request, it would seem like poetic justice if he ended up a skeleton in some hospital.

Now that Holmes was out of the picture, tabloids were free to speculate even more wildly about his exploits. The pioneer of "yellow journalism" i.e. tabloid news, the New York World, wrote ""The list of the 'missing' when the Fair closed was a long one, and in the greater number foul play suspected. Did these visitors to the Fair, strangers to Chicago, find their way to Holmes' Castle in answer to delusive advertisements sent out by him, never to return again? Did he erect his Castle close to the Fair grounds so as to gather in these victims by the wholesale ... ?""

Did HH Holmes violate his victims with a scaly red satan penis? Are there canals on Mars? Read all about it in this edition of pointless rhetorical questions.

I love that they didn't bother to try to answer any of the question they raised...I don't know about you but when I think of serious journalism I always think about newspapers posing hypotheticals. Was there a terrorist attack today? Did hundreds of people die? Who can say. I also like that they called their paper the New York world.

That's a little smug. "This is the Fresno international."

With so much misinformation surrounding HH Holmes, it's only natural that conspiracy theories have proliferated. All of the standard nonsense that you would expect. Holmes faked his death somehow, escape to South America, people are idiots.

In 2017 Holmes' body was exhumed by the University of Pennsylvania anthropology department, at the request of his descendants: Jon, Richard, and Cynthia Mudgett. Of course this was a clout-chasing publicity stunt performed for the television show "American Ripper," a show that attempted to justify the pathetically tenuous theory that H.H. Holmes was also Jack the Ripper. Which is not even worth discussing. Per Holmes's request he had been buried encased in cement, and as a result his body had not decomposed as a standard corpse would have. Reportedly his clothes and mustache were fully intact. So he was a skeleton in a suit with a mustache. How dapper. Forensic tests confirmed the obvious: Holmes was not a criminal mastermind who had escaped his fate; if he WERE a mastermind he wouldn't have been caught in the first place. "his clothes were almost perfectly preserved and his moustache was intact on his skull. But the corpse had decayed. "It stank," said University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Samantha Cox. "Once it gets to that point we

can't do anything with it. We can't test it, can't get any DNA out of it."

Holmes' teeth were used to identify him, she said. I wonder how much it cost to exhume a stinky mustache and confirm the obvious.

To this day it can be difficult to wade through the nonsense and hyperbole when it comes to HH homes. There's only direct evidence—all of which is circumstantial, but compelling—tying Holmes to nine victims:

Julia Connor and her six year old daughter Pearl. Emeline Cigrande. Minnie Williams and her sister Annie. Benjamin Pitezel and his children Howard, Nellie, and Alice. Nine total. I'm guessing Holmes probably killed a few more during his life but that's nothing more than wild speculation. It certainly wouldn't surprise me but it also wouldn't surprise me if he only killed six or seven and one or two of the ladies actually did just skip town or died accidentally during an abortion. The 19th century was a dangerous time and Chicago was a dangerous place, anything could happen. If you're looking for more info, there are a fuckton of embarrassingly terrible quote-unquote "documentaries" out there, and you should avoid pretty much all of them at all costs. Really the only decent one I found is a British documentary called *Murderous Minds - HH Holmes*, and when I say decent I just mean least inaccurate. It's extremely boring and monotone, but the research is sound.

Which may somewhat describe this

episode. I wish I could have provided a more entertaining story, I feel weird wishing that the guy had killed more people, but there it is. I wish I could give you the Bradford D Jones version, he wrote an article called *Mr. Mudgett's corpse factory*, describing HH Holmes as a sex fiend with burning eyes who stripped the skin from corpses and sold them to medical schools. But that's not what we do on midnight Facts for Insomniacs. We do strip the skin from corpses and sell them to medical schools, but we don't lie about it. We don't have to exaggerate our awfulness, we are terrible people. Mostly you. I'm an accomplice at worst. So in conclusion, ultimately this episode about H.H. Holmes was really an episode about all of us, it's about how we humans revise historical narratives to fit what we want them to be. Columbus was considered a hero, now he's a villain, who knows how he'll be perceived 100 years from now. Probably still a villain. At the very least an asshole.

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Brilliant and Funny

1y ago

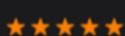


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Mar 26, 2022



Lori A Thomas

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This is Tell A Friend Week (?)

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Larson, Erik

The Devil in the White City: A Saga of Magic and Murder at the Fair that Changed America

Vintage books,

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Murderous Minds, H.H. Holmes

Directed by Ben Gilbert

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The True History of the White City Devil by Adam Selzer
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