

HISTORY

Eiffel's blend of engineering and art

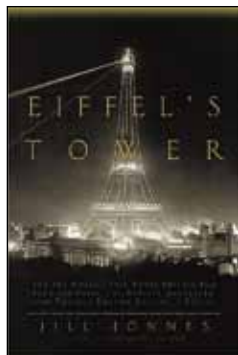
BY JAMES SUMMERVILLE

The Paris World's Fair of 1889, held to mark the centennial of the French Revolution, also looked to the future. Gustave Eiffel's *Tour en Fer* was and remains an engineering marvel, in part because the builder had only minimal technical training in engineering and architecture. What he possessed can't be fully explained, as genius cannot be. But in *Eiffel's Tower*, Jill Jonnes (*Empires of Light*, *Conquering Gotham*) presents an engaging story of a great engineer, one with an "attractive boldness, impetuosity, and natural courage." His triumphant creation marked the beginning of the age of technology.

Eiffel "loved designing and erecting gigantic practical structures," Jonnes writes. His career as a builder of railroad bridges had demonstrated his meta-cognitive skills in mathematics and logistics. In winning the commission for the fair's centerpiece, he stood against the arts and cultural establishment of his day, who reviled the proposed tower. Jonnes' account of its construction is thrilling. Eiffel's plans sometimes depended on measurements with a margin of error no greater than one-tenth of a millimeter. His cranes hoisted large plates of metal high into the sky, and each level depended on the solidity and integrity of those below it. The builders worked their hammers and stoked their forges hundreds of feet above the ground in the icy winds of Paris winters, driven by a fiendish schedule so the tower would be ready when the fair opened. At 984 feet it was done, on March 31, 1889, then and forever a symbol of French grandeur.

Returning throughout to the tower, Jonnes tells the rest of the story of the Paris exposition through the lives of others drawn there dreaming big dreams. William ("Buffalo Bill") Cody took his Wild West Show to the fair, and Parisians overflowed the stands. James McNeill Whistler's exhibit enjoyed a brief adulation, while Paul Gauguin's exhibits garnered less enthusiasm. As the years passed, other lives revolved around the great structure, including the soldiers determined to raise the tricolor above Paris when the Nazis were defeated. That moving story fittingly closes this absorbing, wonderfully crafted and well-told tale. ♥

James Summerville writes from Dickson, Tennessee.



Eiffel's Tower

By Jill Jonnes

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