

Wolfgang Hohlbein

ENGLEWOOD

Murder at the World Fair



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About the Book

Chicago. The 1893 World Fair. Thornhill arrives in the Windy City just in time for the mayhem of the grand expo. He knows that an influx of people to the city's run-down Englewood district will help feed his deadly habit. Nameless, faceless victims. Is it a curse, or rather a super power that makes him thrive on the blood of others?

As a boy during the American Civil War, Thornhill stumbled upon a dying Indian who cursed – or was it blessed? – him with a Wendigo spirit. Since then, he believes he must kill to maintain his strength. Thornhill has lived a transient life, careful not to overstay his welcome, lest his thirst for death gets revealed.

He kills with glee and fantasizes about murdering nearly everyone who crosses his path. Lured by the neighborhood's poor reputation, Thornhill checks into The Castle hotel to see if rumors are true about the owner, serial killer H.H. Holmes. Thornhill soon finds himself getting more thrills than he bargained for. In a part of town where ruthlessness is run of the mill and charity is in short supply, mere survival turns into a challenge for a man with a knack for staying alive.

About the Author

Wolfgang Hohlbein was born in Weimar, Germany, in 1953 and now lives with his wife and their six children and a number of pets near Neuss, Germany. After he graduated from school he trained to become a real estate agent. Today, he is one of the most successful German authors, and his books are published in 34 languages. Together with his wife, he has written over 160 books - including stories for young adults and children.

**WOLFGANG
HOHLBEIN**

ENGLEWOOD

Translated from the German by Collin
McMahon



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1. THE CASTLE

Many people who passed the hotel on a regular basis simply called it *The Castle*. The name made sense to Thornhill as he moved to get off the streetcar, his left hand instinctively adjusting the derby hat he used to hide his receding hairline. But the name failed to do justice to the imposing building's modern brick walls and large bay windows protruding from the façade – it was a breath of fresh air amid the surrounding buildings.

Yet, there *was* something ominous about the three-story building. Nothing you could put in words or grab with your hands, but an eerie aura hung over it like an invisible shadow, robbing the sun of a small part of its radiance in a way that leaves the body warm but the soul cold.

What an odd thought, entirely unlike him ... and from which he was abruptly torn by a shrill, impatient ring.

It took Thornhill a second to realize he still had a foot on the step of the streetcar. He stepped out into the street as the two beefy draft horses began to tug the trolley along its steel tracks.

The vehicle was a contrast itself, combining an ancient mode of transportation with the most modern. He had lived to see railways come to dominate urban streets. Thornhill caught himself watching as the streetcar had crossed the square and disappeared. Then he clutched his bag tighter, readjusted his derby and made his way toward the hotel.

He surely was doing the impressive building a disservice, but the fact remained: it scared him.

Maybe it had to do with the neighborhood. Chicago itself didn't enjoy the best reputation, and Englewood was

surely the neighborhood with the worst repute. In an already seedy city, everyone looked down on this place. Most people in Englewood had already become victims of the bad reputation they had brought on themselves and hardly dared to leave their homes after sundown.

That was precisely what brought Thornhill to the neighborhood in the first place.

A bicyclist came at him, with no intent to use the bell on his obscene contraption, even though the street was more than wide enough for the both of them. Thornhill walked on without even bothering to give the cyclist an evil glare, consoling himself with the thought of what he could have done to the man, had he been so inclined. The wind turned and a gust of the typically nauseating Chicago stench wafted over him. The reek of the city was more unbearable than the sight of its crime and poverty.

The ground floor of the large corner building was made up almost entirely of shops: A pharmacy, a small barbershop, an even smaller general store that could only exist in neighborhoods like this, selling little from the shelves but much more under the counter – contraband was in high demand by the look of it. Thornhill made a mental note to visit the shop and its owner later, but now turned his quick steps toward the hotel's main entrance.

He was amazed to find it equipped with a modern revolving door, the type you would expect to find in a much classier establishment, which transported him into a surprisingly large and tastefully decorated foyer. Thornhill was shocked – and a little confused. Naturally, he had inquired discreetly about the hotel before embarking for Chicago and knew its owner was, at best, a moderately talented physician but, judging from the utter lack of guests, not much of a hotel owner.

In a nutshell: The guy managed to bleed money with a hotel in a city that was bursting at the seams – a city where

you would expect vacant rooms to be worth their weight in gold.

The reception counter gleamed like it was freshly polished, and, like the rest of the lobby, was empty. Only a large brass bell and a guest book with expensive leather binding, with an old-fashioned ink jar and pen beside it, belied that people were staying here at all. Most room keys hung in neat rows on the wall behind the desk instead of jangling in the pockets of paying guests.

Thornhill put his bag down, rang the bell, and politely waited twenty seconds before ringing it again, a little less patiently now. Noise came from somewhere, and he thought he heard steps approaching.

He passed the time until their arrival by turning the guest book his way, unabashedly perusing it. What he read on the pages of finest vellum only confirmed his first impression of The Castle: It was practically empty. Only two of two dozen rooms were occupied – counting the room he had reserved via telegraph. It was the same story on the previous pages of the book. Thornhill was no accountant – or even interested in numbers at all – but anyone could see this handsome façade was all for show, and this grand hotel was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy.

A door opened and a skinny figure of ambiguous age approached with rapid steps. The woman was neat and slender, if just a little shabbily dressed for these environs. She had tied up her raven hair in an unsightly bun and her fair face carried a stern look that robbed it of much of the beauty it doubtlessly possessed.

There was no mistaking her strict demeanor as she slammed the guest book shut, Thornhill barely getting his finger out from between the covers in time.

“That not for guests,” she said in a thick Slavic accent. “Doctor not here,” she continued in a voice that sounded like she gargled iron filings and bourbon every morning.

"I'm not looking for a doctor, and I reserved a room," Thornhill answered. She probably didn't even understand what he said, he thought, since she simply repeated, "Doctor not here."

"I'm Mr. Porter," he introduced himself with the name he had assumed for this trip. As usual, it was not a made-up identity, but that of a very real, living person. A wealthy Boston merchant visiting the World's Fair on business.

"Why don't you just give me the registration slip, and I'll fill it out myself," he suggested, while wondering - albeit out of clinical curiosity more than anything - whether she would look any paler if he slit her throat and watched her bleed to death. Probably not.

"Doctor not here," she said one more time, not even glancing at the registration form she was not going to give him or the identification he produced from his bag and placed on the counter with his copy of the reservation telegraph. Thornhill felt an anger rising within him before he realized she was probably illiterate. His empty hand slid down into his jacket, caressing the mother-of-pearl handle of the razor-sharp weapon he carried in his pocket. *Not yet.*

"So where is the ... doctor?" he inquired instead. *Do it. Now. It's a perfect opportunity. No witnesses. No one has seen you.*

No one except the bicyclist. And the other streetcar passengers. And the conductor from whom he bought a ticket and then carelessly asked for directions to the hotel.

He not only had to resist the impulse to grab his razor, he had to suppress any thought of his own existence, taking a step back from the counter to increase the distance between them. Sometimes extreme proximity was all it took for his urge to overpower him, so he had long ago made a habit of keeping at least an arm's length from other people wherever possible.

"Doctor out," she answered his question with some delay and an involuntary wave of her hand in no particular

direction. As she cleared her throat, her voice turned into the squawk of a big, mangy raven, one that was perched on a branch behind the desk and waiting for a chance to peck his eyes out. "Delivery."

"Then I'll go out and look for him myself," he said. "Would you be so kind as to take my luggage to my room in the meantime? It is just the one bag."

He placed the bag on the counter, where the woman eyed it with the same look of slight revulsion as before.

Without waiting for an answer, Thornhill turned and crossed the foyer, spinning his way through the revolving door again, which still struck him like a little adventure each time. On his way out, he saw the receptionist remove his bag from the counter, but he wasn't really worried about it. All it contained were a few pieces of clothing and some of his tools, nothing that could give any indication of his real name or identity.

Back outside, the same stench wafting up from the city struck him again, a mixture of overheated machines, rancid fat, and a pungent rotting smell that immediately turned his stomach.

Thornhill resisted the nausea, but couldn't help wondering if coming here in the first place had been such a good idea. The size and anonymity of cities offered certain advantages, and Chicago in particular seemed especially appealing from afar, with its flourishing economy drawing scores of people to town. It was the eve of the World's Fair, which brought even more people, offering him countless potential victims and invisibility in the masses. Add to that the special reputation of this part of town. On paper, everything lined up.

But that wasn't the case.

For the third time, his hand slid into his pocket and clutched the razor. There was no longing in the motion now, and the only reward he might expect was the simple fact he may remain alive a little longer.

What claptrap! Why was he suddenly thinking like the prey and not like the hunter that he was? Thornhill sternly admonished himself, jerked his hand out of his pocket and turned to the right in the direction he assumed the woman had indicated. The foul-smelling wind blew in his face and brought tears to his eyes, and not just from its invisible ingredients. It cut through him like a knife, bringing a chill that belied the bright blue sky and radiant afternoon sun. Thornhill turned his face to the wind, lowered his head and held his breath for the next few paces. At least now he knew why they called it the Windy City.

The Stinky City would have been more appropriate. The hotel's façade led to a modern gateway into not only the much less attractive neighboring building but also a surprisingly large courtyard with room for stacks of barrels, wooden crates, and soggy cardboard boxes. It actually did evoke a bit of a feeling of a medieval castle's courtyard. Not that the walls were topped by parapets or battlements, but they were uncaulked and splattered with splotches of faded plaster. There were two smaller sheds and a larger coach house with room for at least two wagons. The door was open, showing Thornhill the coach house was empty. But he heard voices, and even if he couldn't make out the words, it didn't sound like a friendly conversation.

Thornhill froze midstep, listened in vain for a breath or two, and then retreated into the shadows of one of the little sheds. Something was warning him. He didn't know why, only that it was right of him to heed his inner voice. It was a voice he'd never heard before, yet seemed strangely familiar all the same. Maybe the instincts of the hunter and the prey weren't so different after all.

The voices grew louder and agitated. It was definitely an argument, but Thornhill couldn't make out what it was about. The voices were coming closer. Just a few more moments and they would spot him here, and he would have

to answer embarrassing questions, or at least find himself in an uncomfortable predicament, and he didn't need either at that moment. His work needed to be done in the dark.

It was too late to get out of the courtyard unseen, and he was on the verge of panic, a feeling he hadn't known for years.

It had to have something to do with this place. *The Castle*. He felt like a soldier behind enemy lines, where his hunting instincts were no help anymore.

He didn't need an excuse to be here, since the raven-haired receptionist had sent him out here in the first place. Still he racked his brains for an explanation as the voices came closer. As they approached he could tell they were arguing over money. Wasn't it always about money? Or pleasure. Except for him.

Walking backward, he bumped into the door to the shed, feeling for the doorknob; he couldn't believe it when it turned in his hand and the door opened with a click.

He quickly slipped inside. In the brief moment he entered, the light shone in and revealed the shed was full of bicycles. Thornhill pulled the door nearly closed behind him, leaving it open just a crack to watch what was happening outside. *What a pickle I've gotten myself into this time, and for no reason*, he thought. Even intruding on an embarrassing argument between strangers would earn him no more than a disapproving raised eyebrow he could ignore. But being discovered in here would require an explanation.

His hand automatically slid down toward his pocket again, clasping the mother-of-pearl handle that could serve as one of his possible answers.

However, the three men who emerged from the coach house into the courtyard a heartbeat later were so busy with their argument, wildly gesticulating with their arms, that they likely wouldn't have noticed him even if he'd been standing next to them.

Two of the men were middle-aged, dressed according to the latest fashion. Their attire was not cheap, nor extravagant enough to grab anyone's attention: Elegant three-piece suits, derby hats, white shirts and bow ties, tasteful cufflinks, and good shoes and spats. They both sported sideburns that had nearly grown into muttonchops, along with matching modern-style handlebar mustaches, making them look almost like brothers at first glance.

It was an impression he had to revise after a second's consideration. If they were siblings, then they must be Cain and Abel. They did not quite attack each other with fists, but seemed on the verge of doing so - at least the smaller of the two seemed to be itching for a fight.

"You won't get away with this, Holmes," he was saying, his voice trembling with rage. "I won't stand for it any longer!"

Fury flared briefly in the eyes of the man called Holmes - apparently the doctor - but he maintained much better control of himself.

"I beg of you, Mr. Fairchild, calm yourself," he said in a whisper, nearly sounding friendly. "I'm sure we'll find a solution to our mutual benefit."

"Oh, I already have," Fairchild retorted mockingly. "And a simple one at that. You pay me what you owe me, and I'll leave peacefully, with no more fuss. And I promise you'll never see me again. Certainly not!"

"Didn't I already explain I have a slight financial problem at the moment?" Holmes answered calmly. "The hotel isn't doing so well, and the bicycle rental - whose business potential you described to me in the rosiest of terms, I might add, my dear Fairchild - did not develop as expected. We could call it sluggish, to say the least. But as soon as the World's Fair opens its doors, thousands of people will crowd the city, and then ..."

"You've been telling me that for six months, Holmes!" the short man interrupted. There was something new in his

tone of voice: Determination gradually winning out over hysteria. "I'm out of patience! You pay your debts right here and now, or I'll tell Matthew to get the car and repossess my property."

He nodded at the third man, whom Thornhill only now fully registered. He had his back turned to the shed, so Thornhill couldn't see his face, but his surly poise and shoulder-length hair told him he must be very young. Twenty, at the most, he guessed. The burly man wore the rough clothes of a working man, a shabby bully's cap, and his pose became more threatening with every word Fairchild spoke. His hand clenched into fists, accompanied by a noise like cracking twigs. *In ten years he'll have arthritis in those hands*, Thornhill thought, and be whimpering in pain in fifteen when he tried to so much as light a match. If he ever got to be that old, which Thornhill doubted.

At the moment, he could sense the youthful energy and strength in the boy. It practically surrounded him like an enticing fragrance. If the situation had been just a little different ...

But it wasn't, and so his ancient hunger ate at him again. Thornhill didn't give in. On the contrary, he fought against it with all his might, which proved harder than he had expected. He'd waited too long. He didn't dare imagine how many years he may have lost already.

"You know that's not legal, my dear Fairchild," Holmes said almost in regret. "We have a valid contract of sale."

"Which you broke!" Fairchild was almost screaming.

"Well, then, sue me," Holmes announced, in the same polite, almost pleasant tone of voice.

"I don't have time for that anymore," Fairchild shot back angrily. "If you don't pay up, I'll take back my property. The bikes are in this shed, I presume?"

To Thornhill's considerable horror, the man pointed at the same door Thornhill was standing behind, observing

the ugly scene. "Get the bikes and load them on the cart, Matthew. Eight in all. Don't touch anything else in there. We only want what's ours, after all," Fairchild said, without taking his eyes off Holmes.

For the second time, panic clawed at Thornhill's mind as the young giant obediently turned. This time Holmes came to the rescue, shaking his head and sadly observing, "I'm afraid I can't let you do that. William?"

Something rumbled behind him, and Matthew seemed to shrink, first to normal size, then to the size of a schoolboy, as the biggest man Thornhill had ever seen stepped into the yard. Closer to seven feet than six, he was powerfully built, even if his build was more lanky than brawny, a deficit he compensated for with a cruel look about his mouth and eyes. His impressive moustache, its ends twirled needle-sharp, would have given any other face a funny, amiable look. Not his.

"What -?" Fairchild grunted.

"I am appealing to your good sense one last time, my dear Mr. Fairchild," Holmes sighed. "I abhor violence of any sort, but I warn you, I will defend my property if you force me to."

Fairchild gasped for breath, and his henchman froze as well. Thornhill still couldn't make out his face, but he could sense the nervous tension coursing through Matthew.

Finally, Fairchild gave a curt nod. His jaw was grinding. "You'll pay for this Holmes," he spat. "I won't stand for it. I'll see you in court."

"That's your right, Mr. Fairchild," Holmes said coolly. "Good day."

Fairchild's jaw was still grinding furiously, but instead of broken teeth, which Thornhill half expected, he only spat out something his opponent might construe as a random insult, turned on his heel and charged out of the yard.

As his companion Matthew followed more slowly, Thornhill glimpsed his face for the first time, adjusting his

estimate of his age downward significantly again. The boy was fifteen at the most, bursting with strength, doubtless the type of individual who would enjoy using force both liberally and ruthlessly. Despite his youth, Fairchild had obviously taken him along to intimidate Holmes, and without the ogre Holmes had pulled out of his hat, he surely would have achieved that goal. Now, however, Thornhill almost felt sorry for him, turning tail so visibly frightened.

Thornhill watched him go with a vague feeling of disappointment until he saw him disappear from the small sliver of the world he could see through the crack in the door. The boy was not just bursting with strength, but also with the exuberance of youth, and the mere sight of him was enough to reignite the hunger deep within his soul. And again he managed to silence the voice, but it took more effort than before, and next time it would take a little bit more. The whisper was soft, but persistent.

"Lock the shed, William," Holmes said, and Thornhill's heart leapt into his throat in fear, where it didn't keep hammering away, but seemed to come to a complete stop. The giant turned around promptly and came toward the door Thornhill was standing behind. Thornhill's hand not only clutched the straight razor's handle even tighter, he moved his thumb so he'd be able to draw the blade from his pocket in one swift motion.

Thornhill wanted to retreat from the door, stopping himself at the last moment when he realized he might knock over the assembled bicycles or give himself away with some other noise. Instead, he settled for trying to find a better stance and drawing out the razor. He didn't think he stood much of a chance against the troll, but at least he had the element of surprise on his side. And it was no coincidence he had preferred the razor as the tool of his trade for so many years. It was as versatile as it was surgical, and the psychological effect was truly devastating.

He had seen grown men who would stare down the barrel of a revolver retreat with shaking knees at the sight of its sharpened blade.

Somehow he doubted it would have the same effect on the giant, however.

The thin sliver of light was almost completely blotted out as the fiend reached the door and stretched his hand toward it. Behind the troll, Holmes said, "And the gate, too. I wouldn't put it past Fairchild to do something stupid. And hurry, William. We still have an errand to run, you know."

Instead of opening, the door was pulled shut completely. Thornhill presumably would've breathed a sigh of relief, had he not heard the sound of a key turning in the lock, twice. A rattle and jangle followed, the squeak of iron hinges that hadn't been oiled for far too long, then silence. Thornhill found himself in utter darkness.

He exhaled the breath he hadn't even realized he was holding and then inhaled so deeply it sounded like a faint cry in the silence of the shed. His heart was pounding and his hands started to tremble so much that he folded the straight razor up again to make sure he didn't foolishly cut himself with it. Slumping to the ground, he noted that the faster his heart beat, the more sluggish his thoughts seemed to become.

Thornhill couldn't say how much time passed as his thoughts raced in circles like blindfolded horses on a lariat. It must've been hours, in any case, the way his back hurt and his legs cramped so he could hardly stand.

With a hand that hadn't trembled in such a manner for many years – since his first encounter with the darkness, to be exact – Thornhill groped around in the shed, feeling cold metal and rough leather: one of the bikes jammed into the cramped shack.

Gingerly, he felt his way around his surroundings to find that it was practically impossible to move in any direction. Holmes – or his henchman – had somehow managed to fill