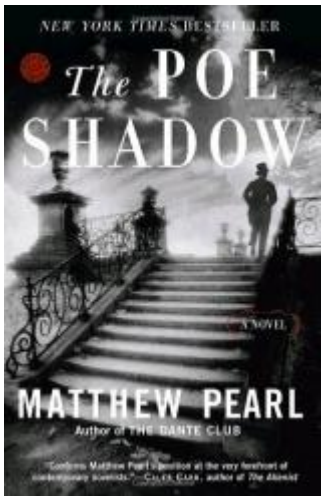
The Poe Shadow

by Matthew Pearl



About the Book

“I present to you . . . the truth about this man’s death and my life.”

Baltimore, 1849. The body of Edgar Allan Poe has been buried in an unmarked grave. The public, the press, and even Poe’s own family and friends accept the conclusion that Poe was a second-rate writer who met a disgraceful end as a drunkard. Everyone, in fact, seems to believe this except a young Baltimore lawyer named Quentin Clark, an ardent admirer who puts his own career and reputation at risk in a passionate crusade to salvage Poe’s.

As Quentin explores the puzzling circumstances of Poe’s demise, he discovers that the writer’s last days are riddled with unanswered questions the police are possibly willfully ignoring. Just when Poe’s death seems destined to remain a mystery, and forever sealing his ignominy, inspiration strikes Quentin-in the form of Poe’s own stories. The young attorney realizes that he must find the one person who can solve the strange case of Poe’s death: the real-life model for Poe’s brilliant fictional detective character, C. Auguste Dupin, the hero of ingenious tales of crime and detection.
In short order, Quentin finds himself enmeshed in sinister machinations involving political agents, a female assassin, the corrupt Baltimore slave trade, and the lost secrets of Poe’s final hours. With his own future hanging in the balance, Quentin Clark must turn master investigator himself to unchain his now imperiled fate from that of Poe’s.

Following his phenomenal debut novel, The Dante Club, Matthew Pearl has once again crossed pitch-perfect literary history with innovative mystery to create a beautifully detailed, ingeniously plotted tale of suspense. Pearl’s groundbreaking research-featuring documented material never published before-opens a new window on the truth behind Poe’s demise, literary history’s most persistent enigma. The resulting novel is a publishing event that, through sublime craftsmanship, subtle wit, and devious twists, does honor to Poe himself.

Discussion Guide

1. Aside from Quentin, most of the novel’s characters in this 1849 setting do not appreciate or read Edgar Allan Poe's works, and this fact in part provokes Quentin to try and rescue Poe's name. Why do you think Poe means so much to Quentin?

2. If you have read Poe, what are your thoughts about his work? Is there any author, from past or present, whom you would "fight" for as much as Quentin does for Poe?

3. In addition to serving as physical locales, Baltimore and Paris may be said to serve as "characters" in the book. What do the cities add to the novel, and what kinds of details bring alive their histories?

4. As the historical note at the back of the novel explains, the book uses authentic details about Poe's strange death. Had you heard anything about Poe's death before reading The Poe Shadow? After reading the evidence and theories throughout the novel, do you agree with all of the conclusions presented by the characters in the final chapters, or do you have any of your own theories?

5. Auguste Duponte and Baron Claude Dupin can be seen as doubles or doppelgangers, and the book discusses Poe's use of doubles in works such as "William Wilson," a tale that features two identical characters with the same names. Discuss the use of doubles and doubling in The Poe Shadow. Are there any other doubles besides Duponte and Dupin? Does Quentin have any doubles? Does Edgar Allan Poe?

6. The word "shadow" is used in many different ways in the novel. Quentin tells us, "Poe once wrote in a tale about the conflict between the substance and the shadow inside of us. The substance, what we know we should do, and the shadow, the dangerous and giggling Imp of the Perverse, the dark knowledge of what we must or will do or secretly want. The shadow always prevails." What are possible meanings of the title The Poe Shadow?

7. If you had been in Quentin's position at the end of the novel, would you have made the information on Poe's death public, or kept it private?

8. What do you think would have happened if Quentin had met Poe before Poe died? Do you think this would have made his personal quest more or less important to him?

Author Bio

Matthew Pearl is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE DANTE CLUB, THE POE SHADOW and THE LAST DICKENS. He is the editor of the Modern Library editions of DANTE'S INFERNO (translated by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow) and Edgar Allan Poe's THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE: The Dupin Tales.

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