
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded on 5 August 2006.

In 2004 Matthew Pearl published *The Dante Club*, an exhilarating literary thriller that featured American nineteenth century poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Oliver Wendell Holmes as its main characters, with a plot inspired by Dante’s *Inferno* and Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’.

Pearl’s second novel, *The Poe Shadow*, also uses literary history as a backdrop, though this one has a fictional first-person narrator. Quentin Clark is an Edgar Allan Poe fan, a wealthy young lawyer who had offered to act for Poe against his slanderous detractors and who, upon hearing of his death in mysterious circumstances in 1849, decides to defend his reputation against the scandalous accounts of his death in the press. This quest takes him to Paris to seek the original of Poe’s fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin and enlist his help in solving the mystery of Poe’s death, and back to his home city of Baltimore, where Poe died. He visits slums, graveyards and prisons, encounters a relative of Napoleon Bonaparte and a French female assassin, and is arrested for the murder of a self-styled Baron.

Sounds exciting, doesn’t it? Sadly, *The Poe Shadow* is overlong, tedious, and awkwardly written. The stilted style could have been attributed to the rather inept and naïve narrator, but it carries over to all the dialogue, some of which is spoken by French characters whose English may not be perfect, but is no stranger than that of the American characters. It seems like a failed attempt at archaism, which is puzzling, since *The Dante Club* succeeded so brilliantly at recreating the language of its era.
The main problem with *The Poe Shadow* is the character of Quentin. He is an unreliable narrator but the author behind him seems to be just as confused about where the plot is heading. Quentin’s quest is the classic and predictable journey into the wilderness, risking the loss of everything – girlfriend, business, house, fortune and health – but for a rather ill-defined purpose. It is hard to see him as anything but wrong-headed and tiresome, though Pearl obviously intends us to believe his heart’s in the right place. The plot grinds slowly on, turning too often on Quentin’s flighty and slightly crazy thought processes. Sometimes the language is so strange that it’s hard to fathom what’s going on at all. Some of the other characters are potentially interesting – the Parisian hit-woman with a soft spot for Quentin, for example – but the clever and erratic detective Auguste Duponte is just Sherlock Holmes with a French accent, and the domineering aunts are pure stereotypes.

So *The Poe Shadow* is a huge disappointment after the fast-paced brilliance of *The Dante Club*. Pearl has tried too hard to replicate his success and seems to have run short of energy and inspiration.