Matthew Pearl is a graduate from Harvard, summa cum laude, and winner of the Dante Society of America’s prize for his academic work. He brings all his knowledge and intellect to the task of writing *The Dante Club*, his first novel, but more importantly he deploys it with intelligence, imagination and vigour.

Boldly, Pearl has taken for his main characters the famous New England Fireside Poets – Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes (Senior), and James Russell Lowell. The year is 1865: the Civil War is just over. Longfellow is engaged upon a controversial translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy, the first to be published in America. Pearl uses this precise point in American history – the horrors of the Civil War fresh in everyone’s minds – and juxtaposes it with the opposition to the Dante translation from a conservative Harvard establishment convinced not only that the encouragement of modern languages poses a threat to the comfortable hegemony of Greek and Latin, but also that the Divine Comedy’s subject matter is scandalous and will undermine the morals of decent, Protestant Americans.

A series of murders in New England mimics the punishments Dante invented for various evildoers in the *Inferno*. The three poets, along with their publisher J. T. Fields, all members of the Dante Club convened to collaborate on the translation, see what the murderer is up to and desperately try and keep their discovery from the police. Otherwise, they reason, Dante will be discredited and the translation will never see the light of day. In a thrilling scene – *sotto voce* so as not to wake the Dante Club’s ageing fifth member George Washington Greene, asleep in his armchair – the four men recite Tennyson’s Dante-inspired poem ‘Ulysses’:
...that which we are, we are,

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

By the end of this bravura passage, the Dante Club is ‘reborn’, ready not only to defend Dante but to solve the murders. Part of their luck is to find a sympathetic police officer – the first of negro descent appointed following the Civil War. Vicissitudes and complications ensue, of course, but nothing that cannot be satisfactorily overcome.

Pearl’s prose and dialogue are well judged to evoke the time and place. Drawing on primary sources, he has endowed his factual characters with authentic voices and minds, successfully avoiding the anachronisms of speech and thought which bedevil so many historical novels. The atmosphere of the Divine Comedy suffuses the novel, imparting dignity and grandeur to a morbid tale of violence and human failings. At its bare bones The Dante Club is a classic detective novel, with all the excitement and suspense provided by the best of the genre. But this ambitious young author has fleshed out his narrative magnificently and produced far more than just a thriller.