

Conversations with Matthew Pearl

I do this pretty frequently and I'm usually pretty happy to answer your questions and talk about whatever you guys want.

The book took 3 years approximately... I wasn't writing every day, all day. It sort of goes in cycles... all in all, it took 3 years, which is what it took my first book.

I always loved Poe. I never did as much research about Poe until I started this book. I was a reader of Poe not a scholar of Poe until I started this book.... The research was really intertwined with the writing.

I first read Poe in high school and we were assigned Poe. The introduction to our edition had a little thing about Poe's death being mysterious. A good combination... someone who was mysterious in his writing and someone who had a mysterious death.

Through the course of writing and researching the book I learned more and more about the details of Poe's death. The questions of his death I always knew, but it took quite a while to come up with options and theories.... It's not the case that the character believes something and I believed it as well.

[We think this book should be made into a movie!]

Thank you for the compliment. It would be very fun to see anything I write made into a movie. It wasn't something I was thinking about because it wasn't a medium I'm directly involved in. This book would be very expensive to make into a movie because of its setting.... 80 – 100 million dollars in budget. Most books set in the past don't get made into movies... It would be fun if it happened.

In my mind, Quentin's journey is sort of an adventure that interrupts his life, but doesn't take him ultimately in a different direction. For me this was really a story of a personal journey for Quentin and would allow him to return to his life and be confident and comfortable in his life. Sometimes in real life we need that break or that interruption.

[Are you Quentin?]

You always see yourself in all your characters a little bit. There are some surface similarities between me and Quentin... we are sort of the same age, I started out in law. We were doing very similar projects because we were both investigating Poe's death.... You always feel like you're relating and participating with the character in a way.

[In doing the research about Poe's mysterious death, did you have any near-death experiences like Quentin did? Anything exciting happen?]

Nothing too exciting happened to me during my research... although walking around Baltimore can be pretty exciting.

[We were impressed with Hattie, her undying devotion to Quentin. How did she come about?]

Hattie was originally a different character. In the first draft, she was shallow and superficial... someone that Quentin liked but shouldn't like and ultimately would realize that he was meant for better things. She was a decoy character of a life that he thought he should have.... Then I changed... Hattie became the one person who really understood Quentin.... he is incapable of being comfortable in his own situation, in his skin and Hattie is the one who understood him... part of his journey would be to come back to her.... back to where he started with Hattie and being able to appreciate Hattie in a way he couldn't in the beginning.

[Is there a Hattie in your life?]

I do have a girlfriend... I'm not sure if she is a Hattie... we all need a Hattie in our life. Quentin really needed Hattie and of course he risks losing her and again, in life, some people have to see what they're going to lose before they can appreciate in the real sense. Quentin has to go through that to have his life back in a way that is more genuine so that he can reciprocate the kind of understanding and affection that she gives him. She is probably the only one Quentin will tell the truth about Poe's death to.

[You mentioned some of Poe's works in the book. How did you choose which ones to reference? Were these your favorites?]

I tried to refer to as many of Poe's stories and poems throughout the novel. *Ligeia* and *Berenice* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* are all concerned with death of young women. That was a very important topic to Poe... it signifies an end of order or a beginning of order in his universe.... Victimization of a woman required Dupont to put order back in the universe.... It's the center of gravity for many of Poe's stories... he didn't characterize women in many deep ways, but he idolized them and feared them in many different ways.

[As part of preparation for this discussion, we all read one of Poe's short stories.]

Oh, I would love to hear which ones you read.

[The Cask of Amontillado, The Black Cat, Berenice, Eleonora, The Imp of the Perverse, Ligeia, Ms. Found in a Bottle, The Pit and the Pendulum, The Purloined Letter, and The Tell-Tale Heart]

Ms Found in a Bottle is one of my favorites. *The Pit and the Pendulum* is incredible in how much it squeezes in just a few pages, as does *The Tell Tale Heart*. *Berenice* is the scariest of all the Poe stories....

[Laura: Really? I read it with my husband and we found it almost comical.]

Well, she was buried alive and he rips her teeth out... it's pretty awful. I guess you could be inclined to read it more comically today than in Poe's day.

[The characters in the book all had differing opinions of Poe. Some thought he was crazy and others thought he was a gifted write. What is your opinion?]

Is Poe insane or is he a genius? It's really hard to get a good picture of who Poe was as a person... He didn't leave a journal or a diary to get us directly into his mind. We have his fiction.... It's hard to draw conclusions from people's stories... He probably suffered from depression... probably some bipolar alternation between depression and ecstasy... his moods changed dramatically... He'd definitely be medicated if he were alive today... We have to assume that he wouldn't have written what he did had he been medicated....

He suffered and we got great fiction out of it. I think he is a genius because he took so much risk as a writer... His stories represent a range from supernatural to horror... he was willing to experiment in ways that writers did not do at the time....

[The music teachers of the group found ourselves comparing Poe to Beethoven. Beethoven had a miserable childhood and we know that he used his compositions as a way of expressing himself. Can we assume that Poe is expressing himself through his work?]

You can't think that the writing shows the psychology of who they are... it's always risky to do that.... Be careful to remember that in Poe's case, he is a professional writer.... He has to separate himself from what he is writing. His mother died in front of him when was two years old... his wife died in front of him years later... Of course, this will come out in his writing, but we have to respect the writer enough to acknowledge that the fiction he writes isn't a reflection of who they are... but they do find themselves in their books....I was reading today about the race in Virginia and one of the issues is that one of the candidates is writing novels... the storyline is very disgusting, incest... people think the subject matter is showing that the candidate's thoughts are corrupt....
[Can you tell us a little about the secret chapters that you have on your web site?]

There are secret chapters... rather than just being cut out, they're new chapters I wrote for the internet. I wanted to give readers a chance to see a little more of the story.... On the web site, it'll say, "this secret chapter takes place between chapter 8 and 9." It gives a secret event that took place but it's not in the printed book.... In a book, you don't see everything the character does... you don't follow the character everywhere they go, every time they eat lunch... There are secret events that you can find on the web site.

[Can you tell us a little bit about the editing process and how all the cuts you have to make effect the writing process?]

Secret chapters have certain things I cut out but also things that I just wrote for the internet.... How much gets cut out? Less than 1/3 of the first draft of the book ends up in the book... you are constantly writing and re-writing and revising... you have to come to

terms with the fact that a lot of what you write will be gone in the process... There's a saying that writers know: you have to be willing to kill your own baby... it's a terrible expression, but it's true because you get attached to it as you write it, but you have to be willing to delete and erase so that the project can grow.

[When will this be out in paperback?]

It will be out in paperback in June of 2007 and I'll be doing another tour to promote that.... Next Friday I'm in Concord, Massachusetts and after that I'm going to South America.... I'm always going around talking the book....

[What are you working on now?]

I just started... it's a similar type of book.. literary history combined with mystery. Poe will be mentioned. Some of the characters from my first book will be in it with some allusions of Poe... I'm not allowed to say exactly what the topic is... You can keep up to date with what I'm doing by visiting my website. You'll find out about my next book and if possible, we can do another phone interview.

[Thank you so much, Matthew! This has been a great conversation. We look forward to reading more of your books. If you get a chance, check out our website:

www.momsreading.com.]

I certainly will! Good night!