

BOOKS

On eve of 200th birthday, Edgar Allan Poe still chills readers

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Locally, the musical duo Nox Arcana took inspiration from Poe to craft 21 songs with titles like "Masque of the Red Death" and "Murders in the Rue Morgue" that are a roll call of the writer's best-loved work.



When Edgar Allan Poe was 21 and a cadet at West Point, he and a buddy burst into the barracks brandishing a bloody knife and declaring that one of their professors would be bothering them no more.

The two students then flung a freshly killed, trussed-up goose into the room, which, in the low candlelight, looked like it might be the professor's head.

Theatrical, macabre and defiant of authority, even the pranks of Edgar Allan Poe burnish the legend. In the 200 years since his birth on Jan. 19, 1809, his influence has flourished -- in the stories we tell ourselves now and in our curiosity about the writer himself.

On Friday, the U.S. Postal Service marked the bicentennial with a commemorative Poe stamp. Herman Melville gets a nod in the coffee brand Starbucks, but Poe has his own football team in Baltimore. As a boy of 16, Alfred Hitchcock began reading Poe's stories, which he credited for igniting his lifelong interest in suspense. And when the Mystery Writers of America singles out the best work in that genre, the group calls the annual awards the Edgars.

Poe, in the canon for "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado," strove to bring a musical ear to his writing, so he might not be surprised to see the compliment returned. In 2003, Lou Reed produced a two-CD tribute, "The Raven," with an all-star cast of collaborators, including David Bowie. And the Northeast Ohio instrumental duo Nox Arcana has made a Poe-inspired CD called "Shadow of the Raven."

Even Sylvester Stallone has admitted that he writes poetry and has a long-standing ambition to make a film about Poe.

"There are a handful of writers whose lives are almost as fascinating as their work -- Poe, Hemingway and a few others," said Steven Fink, an English professor who teaches a course on Poe at Ohio State University. "This class was packed the last time I taught it. The students love him."

Writer still chills modern reader

Partly, Fink believes, that is because most undergraduates enjoyed a chill sampling of Poe in high school. Two centuries since his birth, Poe's fascination with the morbid and his explorations of obsessive love remain far more accessible to the reader wearing an iPod than do the dense works of other 19th century literary giants: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"Poe was a writer of tremendous versatility and perplexing contradictions: He was a genius and a hoaxer; an elitist who was nevertheless among our most popular writers," Fink writes in his course description.

"A poet, short-story writer, essayist, critic, and magazine editor, Poe was essential to the development of both the detective story and the gothic horror story. . . . He was both celebrated and misunderstood; desperate for public approval, yet an acerbic, jealous, and self-destructive critic of his contemporaries."

Poe thought of himself foremost as a poet, and "The Raven" is the incantatory, formal piece for which he is best known. Four years before his death, "The Raven" brought Poe the fame he craved. And although he sold it for \$9, the impoverished writer managed to charge for his recitations of it -- and sometimes for reprints.

" 'The Raven' made him sexy, and for the first time he was invited, paid to do readings," said Shelley Costa Bloomfield, who teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Art and is the author of the lively and well-received "The Everything Guide to Edgar Allan Poe" (Adams Media, 286 pp., \$14.95).

Emerson dismissed the poem that brandished "Nevermore" and contemporary academics are not overly fond -- Poe is not subtle -- but if it leads a reader to become curious about his other work, Bloomfield is encouraged.

"Even as a doctoral student in 19th-century American writers, I never really appreciated how central he is to American literature," Bloomfield said of beginning her book on Poe. When she finished, she said, "I got in the shower and cried -- I drew so close to someone who lived 150 years ago."

The word "detective" did not exist in 1841, but Poe managed to conjure the genre out of the atmospheric Gothic tales popular in his day, the 19th-century love of the lurid, serialized "Penny Dreadfuls" and his taste for the sensational.

His character C. Auguste Dupin laid the groundwork for Sherlock Holmes and all their subsequent children. Each of Poe's detective stories, wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "is a root from which a whole literature has developed. . . . Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?"

To Bloomfield, Poe brought a moral consideration to this genre's emphasis on crime and punishment. "CSI," anyone? And its enthronement of rationality also served Poe as a rebuke to the gooey mysticism of Transcendentalism, whose adherents Poe satirized as "Frogpondians," after the Boston Commons pond.

At the center of Poe's legend and legacy is horror. It was fanned and elevated, ironically, by a Poe rival named Rufus Griswold, who got busy as soon as he learned of Poe's mysterious death.

Griswold placed an obituary in the Oct. 9, 1849, New York Tribune that began, "Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement may startle many, but few will be grieved by it."

The Griswold character assassination backfired into a cult of personality.

"So much of Poe's fiction is about transgressing boundaries," Fink said. "He takes the normal and pushes that past the point of abnormal, such as with our impulse for revenge. One of the things that marks Poe as so important is how clearly he understood horror was psychological, not physical."

Both he and Bloomfield warned against making the rookie mistake of guessing that Poe's narrators are Poe and that his themes of deception and self-deception are simply autobiographical.

"He was more than we assume," Bloomfield said. "He was not a madman. He was not a drug addict and he was not a pervert."

She paused. "He *was* complicated."