

THE
ADVENTURES OF
EDGAR ALLAN POE

DISQUIET
HEART

A NOVEL

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. When Poe arranged for Augie's future as an apprentice at Deidendorf's farm, it was with the best intentions for the boy. However, Augie describes the work as abusive and laborious. Overall, knowing Augie's tragic and criminal childhood, do you think Augie would have been better off without Poe's interference? Or was the hard work on the farm overall a better option? Explain.
2. Describe Poe's relationship with his wife, Virginia. How does he deal with his grief after she passes? If you were Augie, what would you do or say to try to comfort the heartbroken writer?
3. When Augie is reunited with Poe for the first time in seven years, Poe is lamenting that his writer's well "has run dry." Have you ever experienced this kind of dead-end feeling when pursuing a talent or hobby? Can you empathize with Poe's writer's block?
4. When Poe and Brunrichter meet for the first time, they look at each other as if "amused by his own reflection in a mirror." Have you ever struck an instant friendship with someone like this? How did it happen?

5. What are your first impressions of Brunrichter and his estate? Why do you think Augie feels ill at ease around the luxury of both the man and the mansion? Is his hesitation warranted?
6. Describe Poe's feelings toward Augie. At some points he seems proud of his protégé, and at other times scornful. Why do you think this? What does this say about Poe's character?
7. Have you ever had a mentor-mentee relationship with someone? What were the qualities you admired in that person? How did you cultivate that relationship? Were there any setbacks or difficulties, and how did you overcome them?
8. Augie feels as if he is competing with Brunrichter for Poe's attention. Have you ever been in a position where you feel you are competing with one of your good friends? How did you handle that situation? How was it resolved? Do you understand Augie's strife?
9. Why do you think Poe and Augie are both fascinated and horrified when watching the public hanging? How do they feel after the act? Do you think that, as writers, they must suffer or experience suffering for the sake of their art?
10. Describe Augie and Susan Kemmer's relationship. Are Augie's feelings toward Susan anything like how Poe once felt for Virginia?
11. At Poe's reading, he gauges his audience's positive and visceral reaction to "The Raven," probably his most famous work. Have you ever been moved when an artist or writer presented their work? What is that experience like? Is there a book, poem, song, etc., that has particularly moved you?

12. How would you characterize Brunrichter's attitude toward Poe near the end of the novel, particularly Augie's description of events to Poe at Mrs. Jones's house and the discovery of the seven girls? Where do you think the line is between admiration and obsession? Describe Brunrichter's character now that he has blatantly crossed that line.
13. Compare and contrast Augie Dubbins and Edgar Allan Poe. How are they similar? How are they different? Do you find them likable characters? Relatable? Explain.
14. In the author's two novels featuring Edgar Allan Poe, numerous allusions are made to Poe's work. Do you see any correlation between Augie's full name and any of Poe's literary creations?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

In *Disquiet Heart*, there is a very important mentor-protégé relationship between Poe and Augie Dubbins. Have you ever had a personal or professional mentor?

Unfortunately, no. I grew up in a very rural part of western Pennsylvania, where the only industry was strip mining. Even in college I had no exposure to professional writers, and it would be another twelve years, the day I was awarded the Drue Heinz Literature Prize for my first book, before I would actually meet another writer. My mentors then were the writers whose work I adored: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and numerous others. I taught myself to write by studying their work. I still contend that this is the best way to learn to write. As a teacher of writing for the past thirty years now, I try to do for my students what Hemingway and my other mentors did for me—to serve as a resource and an example of what can be done, not as what should be done.

What does your writing process look like?

To others, it probably looks messy. It looks messy to me too. I am usually working on two or three projects at one time, with a couple of other stories kicking around in my head and clamoring

for attention. Back in my early twenties I adopted Hemingway's code of discipline, and even now, with my sons grown and on their own, and me rambling around alone in a house far too big for one person, I get up every morning between four and four thirty. I meditate for thirty minutes or so. Then, cup of tea in hand, I sit down to write. I used to write all of my fiction longhand, and still enjoy grabbing a tablet and pen and jumping onto my motorcycle in search of a quiet piece of earth alongside a river or lake. But mornings typically find me at the keyboard. My handwriting, when I really get going, looks like one long squiggle, which is often hard for even me to decipher. I'm a much neater typist.

On non-teaching days I write until noon or so, then head to Planet Fitness for an hour, then return to the keyboard to do research or revision. On teaching days I have to satisfy myself with a couple of hours of creative work in the morning before heading off to class. I so look forward to retiring from teaching so I can spend each and every day in creative activities. I have at least a dozen more novels I want to write.

Which character in *Disquiet Heart* was your favorite to write?

The answer would have to be Augie. It was easier for me to capture and convey his sense of alienation from others, and therefore his need for approval and affection from Poe and his family, than it was to probe the dark corners of Poe's psyche. Yet Poe was not a complete mystery to me; I fully understand his drive and hunger as a writer. I also used to share his "imp of perversity," which frequently caused him to say things not in his best interests. And, as a young man, I was fascinated by Poe's poetry and felt a kinship with those dark reflections. I still often find it difficult not to think or write in the trochaic octameter of "The Raven," which was the first long poem I memorized. I also admit to a fondness for the burly but gentle dockworker, Buck, father of the beautiful Susan. I grew up in

a blue-collar household, so I know and respect the qualities of such individuals.

The truth is that a writer has to occupy the minds and hearts of every one of his characters if they are to come alive for the reader. Even Brunrichter's dark fascinations have to be understandable to me on some level. But Augie will always come closest to recapturing who I was as a young man, always thirsting for experience and understanding, always trying to fill some unfillable, unnamable emptiness.

What is your favorite work by Edgar Allen Poe?

"The Raven," of course.

Do you think writers, in general, must have a fascination or understanding of suffering to produce great work?

If a writer is to write authentically about suffering, he must first suffer. If he is to write authentically about grief, he must first grieve. Creative writing is not about reaching the reader on an intellectual level, but on a visceral and emotional level; in order to do that, writers must not only be in touch with their own emotions, but must also have a deep empathy for others. It's a capacity we all have, I think. Unfortunately, society sometimes grinds down that sensitivity in some of us. The best writing puts us in touch with it again.

What would you like readers to take away from your novel?

My goal as a writer is to first entertain readers with an interesting story. To show them other lives in action. To take them along on others' journeys, through their triumphs and failures. And, in so doing, to precipitate an emotional response in the reader. I consider that my obligation. If a reader is kind and gracious enough to pick up one of my books, and to open to the first page expecting to be entertained and moved, that is what I owe her. It's not an entirely unselfish motivation,

though; writing is a very solitary craft, but is made less lonely with the thought that I am connecting with my readers through my writing.

How much of *Disquiet Heart* is fact and how much is your own story?

Poe was real, Brunrichter was real, and Pittsburgh is real. So much for the facts. Most of the rest came from somewhere else. But I am hesitant to say it all came from me. Sometimes my Poe would use words that I wasn't aware of knowing, so I would have to look up the definition, only to discover that my character's word choice was appropriate. So, did that word come from me or from somewhere else? I tend to favor the last possibility. It is impossible for me to believe that consciousness arises solely from brain chemicals and electricity. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Characters and stories come to me, and I frequently have no idea of their origins. For example, I have been carrying around in my head for the past three years a woman named Constancia from the state of Sonora in Mexico, circa 1920. She was raped at the age of fifteen, lived in a monastery run by nuns, fell in love with a young priest, became pregnant, had the child taken from her, left the convent, and worked in a smallpox clinic until she died of the disease in her thirties. She came to me in a lucid dream one night and told me that story. Is she a product of my own imagination? I have no idea. All I know is that she feels utterly real to me, and I am aching to tell her story, which, like every other story I write, will be shaded and subtly altered by my own experiences, whether in this life or previous ones.