

THE
ADVENTURES OF
EDGAR ALLAN POE



ON
NIGHT'S
SHORE

A NOVEL

RANDALL SILVIS

"Stylish, dark-toned adventure
...gritty and opulent."

—*Publishers Weekly*

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *On Night's Shore* begins with a very startling scene as Augie witnesses a young woman tossing her child out of a window and jumping after into the river below. How does this scene set the tone for the novel? What does it foreshadow?
2. Why do you think Poe takes to Augie so quickly and adopts him as his protégé? What qualities in Poe does Augie admire, and vice versa?
3. If you were choosing a protégé, what qualities would you look for in that person? What if you were choosing a mentor? What are the benefits of these types of relationships?
4. Augie gets the benefit of learning from one of the greatest American authors of all time—Edgar Allan Poe. If you could be the companion of one author, who would it be? What would you ask them, and what would you hope to learn?
5. Do you think artists need to understand suffering to produce great work? What do you make of Poe's depression and alcoholic tendencies? How does Augie care for him?
6. Describe Poe's relationship with his wife, Virginia, and Mrs.

Clemm. How do you think Virginia's sickness affects him? How does Augie view the two women?

7. If you were to become a famous writer, like E. A. Poe, what kind of writing would you be famous for? How do you think your fame would affect your life? Why do you think Poe struggles with his own brilliance?
8. Poe seems to be a pariah of the newspaper world, having to sell his stories door-to-door to make any sort of living. Compare this with Augie's own neglected upbringing. How are the two characters similar? Do you think Poe sees himself in the mistreated Augie?
9. Describe Augie's mother. How does Augie overcome his upbringing? Do you think she got what she deserved? Does her death ultimately help or harm the young boy?
10. What do you make of Johnston Hobbs? Is he better or worse than the violent, low-brow criminals Augie encounters in Five Points? Explain.
11. How do Poe and Augie go about solving the Mary Rogers murder? Which of the suspects do you trust? Which do you not? Why?
12. How does Johnston Hobbs initially get away with murdering Mary Rogers? How is he finally brought to justice?
13. Throughout *On Night's Shore*, Poe repeatedly brings Augie into dangerous situations with crooked people. However, he also serves as an almost father figure to the neglected child. Do you think Poe is a good influence on Augie overall? Why or why not?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

When Poe meets Augie Dubbins, he tells the young boy that he has the instincts of a writer. As a child, did you have the instincts of a writer? Did you always write?

Looking back, I can see that I did have a storyteller's instincts. I was the kid who entertained the others in the neighborhood after a night of hide-and-seek or some similar game. I made up stories about aliens or wild beasts or whatever sprang to mind. We passed many nights sitting in the grass, watching the stars, me spinning outlandish tales.

On long trips in the car with my parents and siblings, I would huddle up against a window and tell myself stories, even assuming different voices. Eventually, my older brother would punch me on the arm and tell me to shut up.

So I never recognized this ability as anything unusual, or as anything useful. No adults ever commented on it. I was twenty-one years old before an adult suggested I had talent as a storyteller.

If you had to give aspiring writers one piece of advice, what would it be?

If a writer is meant to write, and wants nothing but to write, he/she will find a way to write. Success or failure doesn't have anything do with the degree you get or the how-to books you

read or the advice other writers press upon you. Passion, talent, and discipline are the only determining factors.

You do a great job at bringing to life the complicated character of Poe. How did you go about understanding this enigmatic man?

Before I wrote a word of the first novel, I reread most of Poe's stories and books and poems, plus all of the biographies available. Only then did I feel sufficiently informed to write about him and his family and the New York of 1840. Along the way, I came to recognize that he and I share many traits: the driving ambition and hunger, the imp of perversity, and so forth. I tried to be as sensitive to his nature as possible and to interpret his actions with a brotherly eye.

We see that Poe is an investigative journalist, a poet, and a fiction author, among other things. Do you dabble in other genres and writing projects?

Like him, I have a wide-ranging interest in literary forms and genres. I've written a lot of creative nonfiction in many of its subgenres, have written in five or six genres of fiction, have published a few poems, am a produced playwright and screenwriter. I enjoy the challenge inherent to not doing the same thing over and over again. The only genre I haven't written is criticism, probably because I don't read it.

How would you describe your writing style?

I like to vary my voice as much as possible to suit the story, but in a general sense, I do love descriptively rich language that also carries a lot of subtext, and maybe a little humor.

At the heart of *On Night's Shore*, we have the mystery of Mary Rogers's death. Is mystery the genre you enjoy reading?

Not exclusively, but it is one of the genres. I also love magical realism, mainstream/literary fiction, and creative nonfiction.

Who are your favorite authors?

Among the masters: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, John Steinbeck, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor. More contemporary favorites include William Gay, Karen Russell, and James Lee Burke.

Both Augie and Poe have been through hard times: Augie with his family and rough upbringing, Poe with Virginia's illness. How do you think these events influence their writing?

Individuals react to hard times in one of two ways: either by becoming sensitized to the travails of others, or by becoming cynical and hard themselves. I like to think that Poe and Augie and I belong to the former group.

What does your writing process look like?

It looks like a man sitting at his desk for three or so hours every morning, alternately staring into space and scribbling illegibly in a notebook.

How much of *On Night's Shore* is fact, and how much is your own story?

Mary Rogers's death is a historical fact, but none of the incidents in the novel are factual.

Are you working on anything new?

That's like asking a chicken if it's working on another egg. I always have two or three or four eggs germinating at one time. Right now, I'm working on two crime novels, a mainstream/magical realism novel, and a memoir.