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Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe

John Evangelist Walsh
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It is ironic indeed that the inventor of the modern mystery story died under mysterious circumstances. Now, 150 years after his death, Walsh comes a-sleuthing. Did Edgar Allan Poe die, as is commonly believed, from complications arising from a drunken binge? Or, as Walsh contends, from a savage beating administered by the brothers of his former childhood sweetheart, who strongly objected to the mid-life engagement of Poe and their sister? (A third theory, that Poe was drugged and "cooped" into voting at various polls around Baltimore by a gang of unscrupulous politicos, is convincingly dismissed as fancy by the author.)

The reader will have to decide for himself if the author accomplishes his goal—to definitively establish the cause of Poe's demise at the age of 40. Confusion as well as mystery surrounds Poe's death, and Walsh builds his case against the three brothers by first exploring the established details surrounding the demise of the famous writer: Poe leaving Richmond to give a lecture in New York City, but being found nearly dead several days later, incoherent and besotted, in a Baltimore tavern. At the hospital, Poe is unable to account for his condition or his prior whereabouts, and he exhibits symptoms of what today might be diagnosed as a severe closed-head injury. A few days later, he was dead.

Walsh then develops the "clues" which support his theory: On his way to New York, Poe, as if anticipating trouble, took a sword-cane from a doctor friend. Another friend tells of a visit at about this time by an agitated Poe, seeking shelter and telling a wild tale of being pursued by threatening men. As thoroughly as one of Poe's fictional detectives, Walsh cites numerous sources to lay out the evidence in support of his theory that those men were the brothers of his fiancé, and that they caught up with Poe in Baltimore. Walsh's credentials are impressive. He has written more than a dozen history and biography books, including Poe the Detective, which was awarded an Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America.

Experienced Poe biography readers and the reader with only a passing interest in this great American literary figure will enjoy this well-written book. Easily understood despite the intricate weaving together of details from various old letters and interviews, Midnight Dreary reads like a gripping murder mystery—made all the more fascinating by its nonfiction subject.

ALAN J. COUTURE (December 16, 1998)

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