

EDGAR A. POE:
MOURNFUL AND NEVER-ENDING REMEMBRANCE

Kenneth Silverman

HarperCollins/576 pages/\$27.50; \$13 paper

EDGAR ALLAN POE:
HIS LIFE AND LEGACY

Jeffrey Meyers

Charles Scribner's Sons/348 pages/\$30

reviewed by ERIK RIESELBACH

Only a handful of Edgar Allan Poe's tales maintain a grudging respect on their literary merits—except among adolescents and Frenchmen. Yet Poe's life has always exercised a fascination over the reading public, derived in equal measure from Poe's untruths and foes' slanders—and from the raptures of Baudelaire.

The facts are well known. Born in Boston, Poe had lost his parents, both actors, by the time he was three: his father had abandoned the family and his mother had died. (His brother was a rover and a drunk, his sister apparently retarded.) He was taken in by the Richmond merchant John Allan, who "never allowed him to lose sight of his dependence upon his charity," and sent him to the University of Virginia with too little money to pay for his classes. Poe took to drinking, ran away from home, then joined the army. He negotiated a release in order to attend West Point, but was not happy there either, and deliberately had himself court-martialed and dismissed.

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He took refuge with his father's sister, Maria Clemm, who would mother him for the rest of his life, and eventually married her daughter when she was 13. When John Allan died, leaving none of his ample fortune to his former ward, Edgar was 25.

Poe lived fifteen more years of poverty and misery. He worked for a succession of magazines, whose editors were impressed by his brilliance but alienated by his personal habits; he quit



or was fired from each of them, working no longer than fourteen months at any one. He wrote and published widely, but was paid next to nothing, even though some of his works—especially "The Raven"—were hugely popular. As a book reviewer, he denounced almost everything that came before him, thus earning him the eternal enmity of that part of the literary world he had not already alienated with his drinking sprees. Poe was a particularly unpleasant drinker: he would gulp down his drinks, driving himself into a state of total intoxication as quickly as possible, and his belligerence would overwhelm his usual studied courtesy. "If he took but one glass of weak wine or beer or cider the Rubicon of the cup was passed with him, and it almost always ended in excess and sickness," noted a friend. Poe's first employer, Thomas Willis White of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, who hoped to rehire Poe after he had quit or been fired, warned him in a letter, "No man is safe who drinks before breakfast!"

For a few months after publishing "The Raven," Poe found himself lionized in literary salons. A number of society ladies, most of whom fancied themselves poetesses (Poe gladly puffed their writings in his reviews), fell under his spell: "I see," wrote one of them to another, "that your beautiful invocation has reached the Raven in his *cote* . . . May Providence protect you . . . for his croak

[is] the most eloquent imaginable. He is in truth 'A glorious devil, with large heart and brain.'" But these relationships, which were passionate, if platonic, landed Poe in hot water, and when one of his jealous protégées accused him of slandering her, the salon doors were closed in his face. After his wife died of tuberculosis, Poe carried on intense relationships with four women simultaneously, and thought of at least two of them as possible wives. But his reputation and his own ambivalence made marriage impossible.

Poe died in the course of a protracted alcoholic binge, dressed in clothing that was not his, "bloated and unwashed, his hair unkempt, and his

whole physique repulsive." Even though his enemy Rufus Griswold—who described Poe as "exhibit[ing] scarcely any virtue in either his life or his writings"—was given control of his literary estate, Poe's collected works were in their seventeenth edition within nine years of his death.

Kenneth Silverman's book is in many ways a perfect academic biography: Silverman has consulted a vast amount of primary material and assembled it unexceptionably. In the sheer marshaling of details, he succeeds in creating a vivid picture, if not of Poe himself, at least of the world through which Poe's inscrutable figure stalks. Silverman's analysis of the writings is not particularly profound, but he usefully traces the thematic connections among various works. (I'm especially fond of his penchant for revealing the countless names in Poe's writing that include the double *a*'s and *l*'s of "Allan.")

This is Jeffrey Meyers's ninth biography, and Silverman's renders it almost useless. Meyers lays out Poe's life in some detail, but includes almost nothing that can't be found more fully discussed in Silverman. Meyers provides much commentary, but all is on the most superficial plane. He all too frequently tries to illuminate Poe's behavior by adducing parallels from other writers, many of them subjects of previous Meyers biographies: "Like D.H. Lawrence, Poe could say, 'I daren't sit in the world without a woman behind me.' Like George Orwell . . . Poe precipitously proposed to several ladies who rejected him."

Meyers's two final chapters—"Reputation" and "Influence"—have a certain summary usefulness as a catalogue of later writers' responses to Poe, including a nice description of Baudelaire's fascination with him. But many of the supposed influences are tenuous indeed. Poe writes a piece on premature burials; in *Ulysses*, Bloom meditates on the horror of being buried alive. Poe's story "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" describes the mutiny of patients in a lunatic asylum; this "prefigures the ideas of iconoclastic thinkers like R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, and the theme of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*."

Poe was clearly a maddening man, "a chaos of deep passion," as he says in the early poem "Dreams." He constantly invented false histories for himself, claimed that various poems had been written much earlier than they really had, misstated his own date of birth to make himself younger than he was, and produced all manner of bizarre rationalizations for his own behavior. A manipulative streak seems to have characterized his relations with virtually all of his friends and employers. He repeatedly turned on those who had tried to help him, and Elizabeth Barrett described the review of one of her books as vacillating between "the two extremes of laudation and reprehension, folded in one another. —You would have thought it had been written by a friend & a foe, each stark mad in love & hate, and writing the alternate paragraphs."

Poe also felt compelled to undermine himself. Late in his life, he seems to have written a pseudonymous letter defending Longfellow against accusations of plagiarism that Poe had made in his own signed articles. Poe then published five rejoinders to his own pseudonymous attack on himself. Poe's idea of plagiarism was obsessive and odd: no actual lines, or even words, had to be purloined; rather it was the general subject that was craftily stolen. The irony is that Poe's own writings are filled with wholesale liftings from other poets, critics, even encyclopedias. The most astounding comes in the "Letter to Mr. —," in which Poe announces that "a poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth." This definition is almost exactly that given in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, down to the italics. Poe's only contribution is the phrase "in my opinion," which it exactly isn't.

But the oddest incident came at a reading Poe gave in Boston in 1845. Poe had always been at odds with the New England transcendentalists—for one thing, they were abolitionists, while Poe thought blacks sub-human. But he was hungry for acclaim in the city of his birth, and he arranged to give a reading at the Boston Lyceum, promising to deliver a new poem. This he was unable to write. On taking the stage, after a fifteen-minute apology for the "indefini-

tiveness" and "general imbecility . . . so unworthy a *Bostonian* audience," of the poem he was going to read, Poe launched into "Al Aaraaf," an astronomical fantasy almost 300 lines long. The audience—which had already endured a two-and-a-half-hour speech by the American commissioner to China—found it interminable and pointless. Many listeners fled. At a reception afterward, Poe claimed that "Al Aaraaf" had been written when he was 12 (actually, it probably dated from his twentieth year).

On returning to New York, he announced in the *Broadway Journal* that "we have been quizzing the Bostonians, and one or two of the more stupid of their editors and editresses have taken it in high dudgeon." When this provoked further attacks, Poe laid out a full "explanation" of his actions. Beginning by claiming that he had in fact been "cordially received" and that the poem had been read with "many interruptions of applause," he proceeded to attack the dullness of Boston, its bad hotels, its hostility toward himself, and its pathetic duck pond. For such an audience, he could hardly have been expected to waste his time in writing a new poem. Fortunately, he'd had "lying by him" one published when he was *ten*. □

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RISING IN THE WEST:
THE TRUE STORY OF AN "OKIE" FAMILY FROM THE
GREAT DEPRESSION THROUGH THE REAGAN YEARS

Dan Morgan

Alfred A. Knopf / 532 pages / \$25

reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck portrayed the Oklahomans displaced in the 1930s as radicalized victims of capitalism who would transform California politics—which they were not. In the 1980s, Republicans saw them as forming part of the backbone of a supply-side revolution—which they did not. More recently, their devout religiosity has led some on the left to view them as reactionaries willing to turn back the clock on such issues as racial integration—which they are not.

Washington Post reporter Dan Morgan—who developed a lifelong obsession with the Okies after his own reading of Steinbeck's novel, even spending a college summer picking fruit with them—sets out in *Rising in the West* to discern their motives and measure their impact. He chronicles four generations of one of the most successful Okie families, the Tathams, who left Sallisaw, Oklahoma—hometown of "Pretty Boy" Floyd and starting point for Steinbeck's Joad family—in 1934. (To a much lesser extent, he covers a smaller family, the Tacketts.)

Oca Tatham had been drifting from tent cities to migrant farms to welfare hotels, getting in trouble with women and running afoul of the law, until he married and was "saved." In 1934, he loaded his truck with fifteen others, including his wife and two children and his parents, and set off for California. After several mishaps—including the overturning of his truck—Oca wound up in Delano, just north of the Okie capital of Bakersfield and just south of Fresno, which would be the family's base by the end of the century. Over the years, Oca would take advan-

tage of his horse trader's instincts and lucrative real estate deals to turn himself into a multi-millionaire. His son Bill would multiply Oca's fortune several times by operating nursing homes, leasing firms, and professional sports teams. Ultimately, their plutocratic triumphs led them to a big-time involvement in Republican politics. Morgan tells the story in painstaking detail: while hardly typical in either their ambitions or their fortunes, the Tathams experienced virtually all of Okie migrant life in microcosm.

For Morgan, the Okie migration is an immigrant story, and the consequences of the culture of the old country for California were profound. The Okies grew the tobacco they smoked. They gave their children odd nonce names like Brenee and Caprice. They brought with them a cornball sense of humor and an earnest sentimentality that manifested itself not only in Woody Guthrie songs but also in popular California radio shows like "Dog Talk." Importantly, as Morgan notes, they never stayed in any one place long enough to become part of the power structure; in turn, "their suspicions of higher authority meant that they created a patchwork of minimalist authority everywhere they went."

At dead-center of Okies'—at least the Tathams'—cultural life was their religious faith. Drake's Prairie, the broad sweep of foothill farmland around Sallisaw, was known as the "prayin'-est place in all Oklahoma." Through "brush-arbor" revivals, populist religion entered the warp of Oklahoma culture, and the various Pentecostal sects quickly proved not only the most controversial but also the most durable. Pentecostalism modeled itself on Luke's description of the

days following the Resurrection, and sought "spiritual gifts" that were evidence of "Baptism in the Holy Spirit"—including prophecy and speaking in tongues. The latter became the trademark of Pentecostalism and almost immediately earned its adherents the opprobrium among Christians that it would later suffer among the public at large. Baptists in particular saw this enthusiasm as leaving ample room for spiritual fraud and "cheap grace." Thus, Pentecostalism became a fringe religion before most Americans had even heard of it.

Influenced by African worship and Wesleyan Methodism, the modern Pentecostal movement was launched by the black Texan William Seymour at the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906. (It's an irony worthy of a Richard Rodriguez essay that the religion the Okies "brought" to Southern California was in fact launched there.) Morgan asserts that Pentecostalism, not jazz, was the first major black influence on the white middle class. But Pentecostalism became widespread in California at about the same time as radio, and soon took on many of the "Middle American" trappings by which we recognize it now as the Assemblies of God: televangelists, broadcast faith healings, modern churches in the middle of gigantic parking lots, and Christian spin-offs, from vacation resorts to dating services.

The Okies were beset with slanders and misunderstandings from the first, and it was religion that led to most of them. Even today, the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the source of most of the Okie stereotypes, and almost all of them are false. Steinbeck distrusted Pentecostalism, and portrayed it as something smarter Okies considered fanatic and risible, not as the strongest common bond uniting the various Okie subcultures which it so clearly was. "Evidently," Morgan writes, "Pentecostal and other fervent religion was seen by social reformers as standing in the way of molding Okies into a more progressive force in California politics."

Steinbeck had a political axe to grind, portraying the Joads as having been "dusted" off their land by a combination of fluke weather and rapacious bankers. (In fact, of the slightly more than 100,000 Okies who came annually to California in the mid-1930s, only 2-3 percent came from the six panhandle counties of the state's Dust Bowl.) The Joads get involved