

THE DANTE CLUB

Ficção

De: Matthew Pearl

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372 páginas.

In 1865 post-Civil War Boston, the literary geniuses of the Dante Club – poets and Harvard professors Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell, along with publisher J. T. Fields – are finishing America’s first translation of *The Divine Comedy* and preparing to unveil Dante’s masterpiece to the New World.

But the powerful fellows of the Harvard Corporation are fighting to keep Dante in obscurity, believing that the infiltration of a foreign culture into the conservative minds of New England will prove as corrupting as the immigrants arriving at Boston Harbour. Matthew Pearl draws an excellent picture of the atmosphere of the period, as well as of the attitudes that prevailed against the influx of immigrants and the so-called threat of foreign literature.

The members of the Dante Club fight to keep a literary cause alive, but they are shaken in their ivory towers when a series of cruel murders erupts through Boston. Only this small group of scholars realizes that the killings are modelled on the descriptions of Hell’s punishments from Dante’s *Inferno*. Knowing that only a limited number of people in America are familiar with Dante’s work, the members of the Dante Club conduct their own investigation into the killings. In their decision to pursue the killer, they are joined by Nicholas Rey, a fictional character based on the first black police officer in America. Rey rises above general racism and proves to be both the best of all detectives and a cunning reader. Expertly weaving together historical fact (the Dante Club did exist in reality, and even Ralph Waldo Emerson appears in a brief passage), complex characters and suspense, Pearl has written a unique and absorbing tale.

While reading Matthew Pearl’s *The Dante Club*, we understand that literature, life (and death) can be very close, that reading, writing and translating are indeed passionate activities, true adventures. Words can bleed, for sure, but they can also breathe, gain life and give life: “The fate of literature prophesied by Mr. Emerson has come to life by the events you describe – literature that breathes life and death, that can punish, and can absolve” (228).

The Dante Club is both an historical narrative and a mystery novel that recalls characteristics of Umberto Eco’s *Il Nome della Rosa*. In the political

machinations going on inside the walls of Harvard College, we recognize Eco's monks and abbots, who consider themselves as the unquestionable guardians of truth, knowledge and faith and that would resort to every means in order to keep those sacred principles to themselves. "Thou shall not share your knowledge with the commons" seems to be some characters' motto. "The motto of the College is 'Christo et Ecclesiae' and we are beholden to live up to the Christian spirit of that ideal", says the sinister Augustus Manning, treasurer of the Corporation. But we are to learn that: "The motto used to be 'Veritas', Truth" (205).

Along the pages of *The Dante Club*, there is a mirror play between author and translators, between the plot and the translating process itself, with an unexpected epilogue that questions the reality of real life and shows the dangers and mysteries of the task of the translator.

This novel is a first-rate complementary reading and motivation for students of Translation. Future translators are offered a very romantic perspective of their job, that appears to be thrilling, defiant, non-conformist. When a translator complains about his/her career being nothing but sitting in a lonely room and rewrite someone else's words among a pile of dictionaries, he/she should think of Longfellow's slow recovery from tragedy through his impassioned work, of Fields commitment to his writers, of Lowell's determination, and even of Holmes's weaknesses which, in certain moments, we all share. A good translator – just like a good writer or a good police officer (like Nicholas Rey) – may write his/her name into History. Translators like the ones at *The Dante Club* have the power to subvert the system, because their mission is, indeed, to bring new worlds into their already old Ivy League world.

In this passage, when Longfellow is working on his translation of Dante, Pearl offers his readers a beautiful image of the translating process:

But Dante resisted mechanical intrusions, and withheld himself, demanding patience. Whenever translator and poet came to this impasse, Longfellow would pause and think: Here Dante laid down his pen – all that follows was still a blank. How shall it be filled up? What new figures shall be brought in? What new names written? Then the poet resumed his pen – and, with an expression of joy or indignation upon his face, wrote further in his book – and Longfellow now followed without timidity. (221)

Matthew Pearl graduated from Harvard University in English and American Literature in 1997, and in 2000 from Yale Law School, where he wrote the first draft of *The Dante Club*. In 1998, he won the prestigious Dante Prize from the Dante Society of America for his scholarly work. He is the editor of the new Modern Library edition of Dante's *Inferno*, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. *The Dante Club* is his first novel.

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