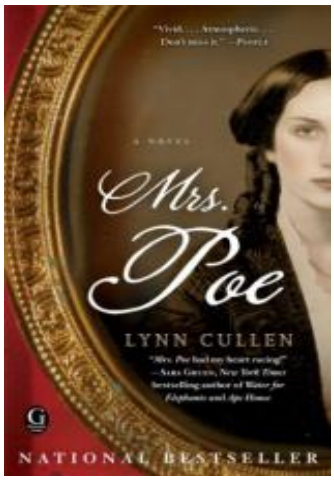
ReadingGroupGuides
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Mrs. Poe

by Lynn Cullen



About the Book

1845: New York City is a sprawling warren of gaslit streets and crowded avenues, bustling with new immigrants and old money, optimism and opportunity, poverty and crime. Edgar Allan Poe?s ?The Raven? is all the rage --- the success of which a struggling poet like Frances Osgood can only dream. As a mother trying to support two young children after her husband?s cruel betrayal, Frances jumps at the chance to meet the illustrious Mr. Poe at a small literary gathering, if only to help her fledgling career. Although not a great fan of Poe?s writing, she is nonetheless overwhelmed by his magnetic presence --- and the surprising revelation that he admires her work.

What follows is a flirtation, then a seduction, then an illicit affair?and with each clandestine encounter, Frances finds herself falling slowly and inexorably under the spell of her mysterious, complicated lover. But when Edgar?s frail wife, Virginia --- a cousin half his age --- insists on befriending Frances as well, the relationship becomes as dark and twisted as one of Poe?s tales. And like those gothic heroines whose fates are forever sealed, Frances begins to fear that deceiving Mrs. Poe may be as impossible as cheating death itself?

Discussion Guide

1. Cullen begins MRS. POE with two epigraphs. In the first, Osgood is recounting her first meeting with Poe to Reverend Griswold. In the second, Poe describes Frances Osgood. How do these two quotes set up the novel? Were Cullen?s representations of Osgood and Poe as you expected after reading the epigraphs?

2. Although Frances narrates the story, it is named for Mrs. Poe. Why do you think that Cullen has chosen to call the novel MRS. POE? Did the title affect your reading of the story? How?

3. After Frances meets Virginia Poe for the first time, Eliza asks her, ?What does she seem like? Sweet? Sharp?,? and Frances replies ?Both, oddly enough.? (p. 55) What does she mean? Do you agree with Frances?s assessment of

Virginia? Why or why not?

4. Miss Fuller tells Frances, ?Beneath that pretty society-girl surface, you strike me as the striving sort.? (p. 163). Do you agree? What reasons does Frances have to be ?the striving sort?? What are your initial impressions of Frances? Did your feelings about Frances change throughout the novel? In what ways?

5. Of Poe, Reverend Griswold says, ?I find that there is nothing about Edgar Poe that is remotely like the rest of us. He is a predator, plain and simply. A wolf in wolf?s clothing.? (p. 123) Why do you think that Griswold feels such animosity towards Poe? What do you think of Griswold? Discuss his interactions with Frances.

6. After Frances learns that Poe has praised her poetry in a lecture, the two meet to discuss writing. She tells him, ?I find that the thoughts spoken between the lines are the most important part of a poem or story.? To which he replies, ?as in life.? (p. 36) How does this apply to their relationship? Are there other instances in the novel where this is true? Discuss them.

7. The subject of marriage comes up frequently in MRS. POE. Eliza tells Frances ?Wedded bliss is a tale made up to keep the species going? (p. 278), and Margaret Fuller says, ?for every married person [at Anne Lynch?s conversazione] there is a story of rejection and betrayal? (p. 77). Discuss the marriages in MRS. POE. Why do you think Eliza feels that wedded bliss is simply a story? And, why does Frances stay married to Samuel although she knows he is a philanderer? Do you think that Frances is justified in making her decision?

8. At one of the *conversaziones*, Poe says, ?Desire inspires us to be our very best.? (p. 169) Do you agree? In what ways, if any, do Poe and Frances improve because of their relationship?

9. Margaret Fuller warns Frances to steer clear of the Poes, stating that Poe is ?not what he seems? but rather ?a poor boy much damaged from the trauma of his childhood.? (p. 193). Do you agree with her assessment of the Poes? What do you think caused her to drop the idea of running a profile of them? Do you think that Margaret is acting as Frances?s friend, as she claims? What makes you think so?

10. Were you surprised by Samuel?s return? Although he is ?maddeningly agreeable? (p. 230) with regard to Frances?s relationship with Poe, he is critical of her work. After reading one of her poems, he tells her, ?There was a time when you would have made fun of a poem like this.? (p. 240). Why does Samuel?s statement bother Frances so much? What do you think of the poem that he critiques?

11. Frances thinks that Virginia Poe is out to do her harm. What evidence supports her suspicions? Were you surprised when you found out the truth?

12. The Poes invite Frances to attend a play called ?Fashion? with them. How does the plot of the play mirror their outing? Why does Poe apologize for his wife?

13. In several of his conversations with Frances, Poe makes references to stories that he has written, including ?William Wilson? and ?The Oval Portrait?. How does Poe use these stories to communicate with Frances?

14. Poe reads ?Al Aaraaf,? the poem he wrote when he was fourteen, at the Boston Lyceum, claiming that he wanted ?to

see if they could tell the difference between a child?s verse and a masterpiece.? (p. 260). What do you think the real motivation behind his decision is? Do you agree with Mrs. Ellet that he called ?down the wrath of the Boston circle? because it terrified him to do so (p. 271)? Why?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB (3-5)

1. The New York Literati scene of the 1840s serves as a the backdrop for MRS. POE and many luminaries of the period appear as minor characters within the book, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John James Audubon, Walt Whitman, and Margaret Fuller. Discuss their famous contributions with your reading group and share some of the writers works, creating your own *conversazione*.

2. Read Griswold?s eulogy of Poe from *The New York Tribune* here. Then, discuss Cullen?s representation of Griswold. Was his writing as you imagined after becoming familiar with Griswold in MRS. POE?

3. When Frances first reads ?The Raven? she says, ?What trickery. It?s just a word game.? (p. 17). Read it here, then discuss it with your book club. Do you agree with Frances that it?s trickery? Or, do you think, like much of the literati in MRS. POE, that the work is an enduring classic.

4. To learn more about Lynn Cullen, read her blog and to read more about her other books, and find out how to invite her to your book club, visit her official site here.

Author Bio

Lynn Cullen?s bestselling novels, including THE WOMAN WITH THE CURE, THE SISTERS OF SUMMIT AVENUE, MRS. POE, TWAIN'S END, THE CREATION OF EVE and REIGN OF MADNESS, have been translated into 17 languages and are the recipients of various honors, including NPR Great Read, Oprah.com Book of the Week, *People* magazine Book of the Week, Indie Next List selection, and *Atlanta* magazine Best Books of the Year. She lives in Atlanta.

Critical Praise

?When struggling poet and betrayed wife Frances Osgood meets Edgar Allen Poe, she is hoping only for a boost in her literary career --- certainly not what came next. Swept into an illicit love affair with the complicated, magnetic, and married Poe, Osgood and Poe must together face the consequences, which are no less horrific or revenge-filled than his best loved horror stories --- and quite possibly as deadly. MRS. POE had my heart racing...Don't miss it!?

?Sara Gruen, *New York Times* bestselling author of WATER FOR ELEPHANTS and APE HOUSE

?MRS. POE is a compelling tale of ill-fated love, passion, and the writing life in antebellum New York, rich with period detail and suspense.?

?Jennifer Chiaverini, *New York Times* bestselling author of MRS. LINCOLN?S DRESSMAKER

?Layered with the atmosphere and intensity of Poe's prose, Cullen's MRS. POE infuses a tale of tragedy and loss with a spirit of passion and vitality. Fans of historical fiction and Poe will devour this novel.?

?Erika Robuck, bestselling author of CALL ME ZELDA

?Readers can expect a page-turning tale exposing the transgressions, antics, and heroics behind a literary icon. Literary fiction fans and readers who loved Paula McLain?s THE PARIS WIFE will relish another novel based on historical scandal and romance.?

?*Library Journal*, starred review

?Is it true that Edgar Allen Poe cheated on his tubercular, insipid young wife with a lady poet he?d met at a literary salon? Cullen makes you hope so.?

?*New York Times*

?Lynn Cullen seems to have transported herself to Old New York --- MRS. POE feels that authentic. Without a doubt, this is one of the best historical fiction novels I've read in a long time. Evocative, compassionate, intelligent, sexy and utterly addictive. The passion between Frances Osgood and Edgar Allen Poe burns up the pages while at the same time her relationship with MRS. POE makes your heart ache. Truly a book to savor!?

?M.J. Rose, international bestselling author

?Part romance, part mystery, part biography, this fictional reenactment of the mistress of Edgar Allan Poe escorts you into the glittering world of New York in the 1840s, when poets were celebrities and the admission of emotions--like silk gowns and glossy beaver hats --- were a luxury...A bewitching, vivid trip into the heyday of American literary society.?

?Oprah.com

?In MRS. POE, Lynn Cullen conjures a darkly atmospheric 19th century New York with a masterful hand. Rich with period detail and compelling characters, MRS. POE weaves a thread of creeping menace into the true story of Edgar Allan Poe?s obsessive liaison with Frances Osgood for a thoroughly unforgettable and chilling read. Enthralling.?

?Deanna Raybourn, author of A SPEAR OF SUMMER GRASS

?The fierce ambitions and dangerous rivalries of literary New York in the 1840s come vividly alive in Lynn Cullen's riveting novel MRS. POE. With masterful skill, Cullen tells the story of the real-life fatal attraction between the toast-of-the-town Gothic storyteller Edgar Allan Poe and vulnerable poet Frances Sargent Osgood. Full of longing, this is a story both poignant and shocking --- and not easily forgotten.?

?Nancy Bilyeau, author of THE CHALICE

?Clearly composed and carefully researched the book?s vivid prose accentuates the passion, jealousy and hatred that evolve from a tangled three-way relationship that could easily have come straight from the pages of Poe?s stories. A must-read for those intrigued by Poe, poetry and the latter half of 19th-century America.?

?*RT Book Reviews*, four stars

?Taking advantage of letters and published poems, imaginative historical novelist Cullen cleverly spins a mysterious, dark tale told by Mrs. Osgood about the long-ago intrigue, with just enough facts to make it believable.?

?*Booklist*

?Lynn Cullen weaves a dark, sensuous love triangle between three real people, and in the midst of many real historical details, she creates something truly and wonderfully surprising...Devotees of dark historical fiction will devour MRS. POE, but so too will fans of Gothic romance and forbidden love stories. This is an invigoratingly creepy historical novel propelled by brilliant pacing. If you like books that send a little shiver up your spine, don?t miss it.?

?*Book Page*

?MRS. POE is an entertaining tale with interesting characters, a vibrant locale, a good dose of romance, and even some intrigue, which is what an historical novel should be.?

?*The Copperfield Review*

?MRS. POE is a captivating novel. Cullen?s attention to historical detail, lush prose and enlightening evocation of an interesting moment in American literary history make this story a fascinating read.?

?Arts ATL

?Brilliant?a wonderful and fascinating novel?Poe absolutely comes to life in Cullen's novel?MRS. POE is truly one of the best historical fiction novels of 2013 and possibly ever.?

?Examiner.com

?Cullen creates a delicious sense of suspense and impending doom; antebellum Manhattan and the ruling literati cast an irresistible spell.?

?*Atlanta Magazine*

?MRS. POE is such a compelling novel, bringing history to vivid life. Danger, sensuality, mystery and passion fill the pages of this bewitching story set in the crowded cobbled streets, alleyways, cheap boardinghouses and literary gatherings of mid-nineteenth century New York City.?

?Stephanie Cowell, author of CLAUDE AND CAMILLE

?At once beautiful and heartbreaking, Lynn Cullen has woven together a tapestry of fact and rumor to give us an intimate view into the forbidden love between two complicated, creative lives. Historical fictions fans, you?re in for a treat.?

?Susan Crandall, bestselling author of WHISTLING PAST THE GRAVEYARD

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