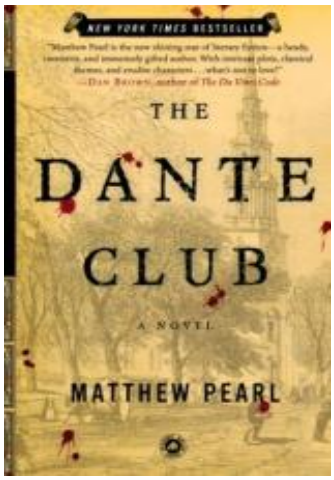
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Dante Club

by Matthew Pearl



About the Book

A New York Times Bestseller

Words can bleed.

In 1865 Boston, the literary geniuses of the Dante Club?poets and Harvard professors Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Dr. 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 remarkable visions to the New World. The powerful Boston Brahmins at Harvard College are fighting to keep Dante in obscurity, believing that the infiltration of foreign superstitions into American minds will prove as corrupting as the immigrants arriving at Boston Harbor.

The members of the Dante Club fight to keep a sacred literary cause alive, but their plans fall apart when a series of murders erupts through Boston and Cambridge. Only this small group of scholars realizes that the gruesome killings are modeled on the descriptions of Hell's punishments from Dante's Inferno. With the lives of the Boston elite and Dante's literary future in America at stake, the Dante Club members must find the killer before the authorities discover their secret.

Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes and an outcast police officer named Nicholas Rey, the first black member of the Boston police department, must place their careers on the line to end the terror. Together, they discover that the source of the murders lies closer to home than they ever could have imagined.

The Dante Club is a magnificent blend of fact and fiction, a brilliantly realized paean to Dante's continued grip on our imagination, and a captivating thriller that will surprise readers from beginning to end.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss how the various characters benefit intellectually and professionally from their association with the "Dante Club" reading and translation group. How is the group similar to book clubs now popular throughout the United States? How does it differ?

2. (Follow-up) What's the secret of the power of collective reading? Compare the dynamic of the Dante Club to your own book club or reading group.

3. The death of Fanny Longfellow leads Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to take "refuge" in his translation of Dante. Discuss why Dante in particular seems to help him through his dark period. How is his sanctuary affected by the outbreak of violence from that same work of literature?

4. (Follow-up) Are there ways in which literature has provided a refuge in your own lives at difficult or confusing times?

5. In Dante's Divine Comedy, Dante's poetic idol Virgil leads him through the dangerous passages of the afterlife. In what ways do the characters of **The Dante Club** guide one other? Who would you say is the real leader?

6. How does the backdrop of the American Civil War influence the events of the novel?

7. Did you guess who the murderer was before it was revealed?

8. (Follow-up) Come on, did you really?

9. (Follow-up 2) What are the ways in which the author "misdirected" the reader from the murderer? Or, if you had correct suspicions, what tipped you off? In what ways were the murderer's motives surprising? What do they reveal about the exploration of different types of "reading" that runs throughout the novel?

10. Discuss some of the instances in modern culture in which an artistic work ? music, film or literature ? seemed to have some impact on inspiring a crime. Some examples: Mark David Chapman carrying "The Catcher in the Rye" when he shot John Lennon; the Columbine killers supposedly drawing inspiration from Marilyn Manson songs and the video game "Doom"; several instances of people imitating "Natural Born Killers" in robberies and shootings. In that last instance, John Grisham led a campaign to prove Oliver Stone held responsibility after a friend of Grisham's was killed. Is the work of art ever to blame? Do the murders in **The Dante Club** stem from the brutality of **Inferno**?

11. (Follow-up) Should the Dante Club members have revealed the source of violence to the public? What was at stake besides their reputations?

12. Discuss Patrolman Nicholas Rey's role in the challenges facing the Dante Club, with consideration for Rey's status as a type of "exile" in Boston, and how this fits into the larger story.

13. Discuss the character of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. Why does he emerge as the character in the novel with the heaviest burden? What elements of his personal background make the events of the story so disruptive and frightening to Holmes?

14. (Follow-up) Discuss Dr. Holmes's relationship with his son, Wendell Junior. How does it compare or differ from James Russell Lowell's relationship with his daughter, Mabel Lowell?

15. Take a look at the pictures of the characters in the "gallery" of THE DANTE CLUB website (www.thedanteclub.com). Do their appearances differ from how you imagined them?

Author Bio

Matthew Pearl?s books have been international and New York Times bestsellers and have been translated into more than 30 languages. His nonfiction has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe* and *Slate*, and he edits *Truly*Adventurous* magazine. He has been chosen as Best Author in *Boston* magazine's ?Best of Boston? issue and received the Massachusetts Book Award for Fiction. He lived in the Boston area for many years and now lives in Florida.

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