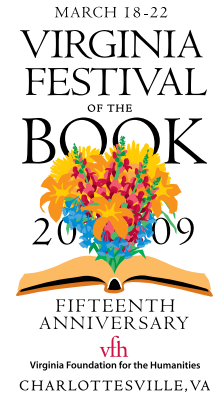


## *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Tales and Poems* recommended by Casey Clabough

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Casey Clabough—author of *The Warrior’s Path*, the *Encyclopedia Virginia* literature section editor, and English Graduate Director at Lynchburg College—recommends *Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Tales and Poems*. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Yes, Poe. Perhaps a redundant and overly obvious recommendation. But on second thought, one can never be too sure in these doggy-end days of declining literacy and the incessant roar of new media. When was the last time you picked up and read a Poe story or poem? As Virginians, it’s worth reminding ourselves from time to time—and not without a certain measure of pride—that Poe considered himself a Virginian and, more importantly, likely carries the mantle of being our state’s most celebrated writer of all time. He is widely praised for having helped evolve the art of the short story and inventing detective fiction. A testament to the range of his talent is that his shadow and literary influence loom over writers as varied as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, and the French poet Baudelaire.

As a Virginian, he lived on and off in Richmond and there edited the *Southern Literary Messenger* from 1835 to 1837, quadrupling its subscription numbers, or so he claimed. Charlottesville was important to him as well. He attended the University of Virginia in 1826 and the landscape of central Virginia would figure into at least one of his stories, “A View of the Ragged Mountains.” You can view the mountains in the title yourself just south of Charlottesville if you look to the west while traveling Highway 29. Even now, day-hiking students from the University of Virginia occasionally are known to lose their bearings amid those coves and the curious mist of the Blue Ridge in summer.

There is an account of a notable walk Poe once took with a group of students in the

hills around Charlottesville during which he informed them that a great war among themselves would one day descend upon the land. According to the legend, the young men in his company laughed and called him a fool. What had Poe meant? Had the mountains revealed to him a vision of the Civil War? “From childhood’s hour,” he wrote in his poem “Alone,” “I have not been/As others were—I have not seen/As others saw.”

It is hardly surprising that much of Poe’s work was deemed disturbing in his own time, an era in which fiction was considered damaging to one’s character. At the Buckingham Female Institute, for example—a women’s preparatory college not unlike Hollins or Mary Baldwin or Sweet Briar—being caught reading fiction violated the Institute’s bylaw number seven, which stipulated that a young lady could “not read novels or stories or tell stories which would excite the imagination or call forth feelings of fear and apprehension.” Given these restrictions, it is fun to imagine a nineteenth-century debutante innocently reading in her school library, yet having secretly inserted a copy of Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* inside a larger volume of Cicero.

Poe’s work and his myth continue to darken and enlighten our thoughts today. Another tale exists of a fascinating confession he made to an acquaintance: that often in the evening he distinctly could hear the *sound* of nightfall, of darkness, rolling toward him over the horizon. Not sunlight, not dawn, but the approaching black of night.

Poe’s visions rarely afforded clarity. It was, instead, the nature of the inner and outer

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recommended by Casey Clabough (continued)

dark that fascinated and preoccupied his staggering intellect. In the poem "Alone" the dimness of mystery is described as forever binding

the speaker, altering the canvas of his reality into a nightmare:

[T]he cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view.