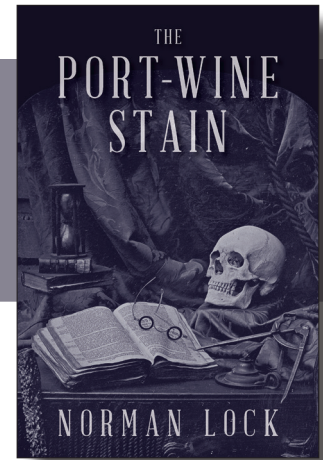




The Port-Wine Stain

A novel by Norman Lock

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“Lock’s novel engages not merely with [Edgar Allan Poe and Thomas Dent Mütter] but with decadent fin de siècle art and modernist literature that raised philosophical and moral questions about the metaphysical relations among art, science and human consciousness. The reader is just as spellbound by Lock’s story as [his novel’s narrator] is by Poe’s. . . . Echoes of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Freud’s theory of the uncanny abound in this mesmerizingly twisted, richly layered homage to a pioneer of American Gothic fiction.” —*New York Times Book Review*

INTRODUCTION

In *The Port-Wine Stain*, Norman Lock recounts the story of Edward Fenzil, who, in the winter of 1844, falls under the sway of two luminaries of the grotesque imagination: Thomas Dent Mütter, a surgeon and collector of medical “curiosities,” and Edgar Allan Poe. As Fenzil struggles against the powerful wills that would usurp his identity, including that of his own malevolent doppelgänger, he loses his mind and his story to another.

Set in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, the novel features a cast of famous figures—all geniuses and innovators in their own fields, some of whom were considered morbidly distasteful in their time—including Poe, Mütter, and artist Thomas Eakins, whose famous painting *The Gross Clinic* features prominently in this story. Poe devotees will recognize the novel as a descendent of Poe’s own story “William Wilson,” which was one of the first stories about the doppelgänger in popular culture.

As Lock masterfully captures our ongoing fascination with doubles, mistaken and stolen identity, and virtual selves, he offers not only a psychologically thrilling work of fiction, but astute commentary on the source of our deepest fears.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The characters—both real and imagined—in this novel flourished during the middle of the nineteenth century. In which ways are their struggles and inner turmoil a reflection of the period and in which ways do they reflect fears that still consume us today?
2. Edward Fenzil steals the manuscript of an unfinished tale by Poe. How does this tale advance the plot and precipitate Fenzil’s downfall? Is the tale believable as one that could truly have been written by Poe?
3. What does the doppelgänger represent in your interpretation of the novel? Does it serve a purpose other than contributing to the overall gothic texture? Does it become a symbol? If so, what mental state does it symbolize? Why was Edward Fenzil susceptible to his doppelgänger’s influence? Why is it important that Fenzil encounters his evil twin at Madame Tussaud’s waxworks?
4. The author has called this novel a “psychological thriller of the grotesque imagination.” In comparison with other thrillers you have read, how does *The Port-Wine Stain* differ? Does it have the necessary dramatic tension and energy to be considered a thriller? Would you describe its journey into the depths of a fractured mind as repellent? Intriguing? Did it frighten you?
5. Edward Fenzil thinks of Poe and Dr. Mütter as poles of the grotesque imagination. How are they alike and how do they differ? In what way is the former inclined toward the supernatural and the latter toward materialism? What effect does each man have on Edward Fenzil and his view of the world and ability to define himself?
6. Much of the novel explores nineteenth-century obsessions—from the attraction of minds, bodies, and objects in space



and time to the insidious influence of a stronger will over a weaker one and the phenomena of psychic possession and predestination. Given that modern science has refuted these ideas, is there any reason a reader should take an interest in them? Despite old-fashioned notions of phrenology, physiognomy, mesmerism, the ether and spiritus, does the novel illuminate important concepts relevant to our own time?

7. Homing pigeons are a symbol of the almost-universal wish to return home. In this novel, however, they serve another function related to its greater themes. What are your thoughts about the author's use of these birds in relation to the overall story and what additional meaning might they suggest?

8. *The Port-Wine Stain* includes several comic scenes. Did they contribute to your appreciation of the story?

9. Were you disappointed by this novel's acknowledged departures from the "facts" concerning Poe and Dr. Mütter? In which ways might fiction be a more reliable guide to understanding the past than historical and biographical accounts purporting to contain the "truth?"

10. The author refers several times to the practice of storytelling itself and seems to view the art with some apprehension. In what way does storytelling echo the theme of determinism and free will, which are central to this novel's overall intention? In what way is *The Port-Wine Stain* a cautionary tale?

11. Although this novel is self-contained, it is also part of Norman Lock's multi-book American Novels series. He has stated, "What I hope to produce is a series of novels that discover in our national past the causes and beginnings of certain qualities in the American character." In what ways does *The Port-Wine Stain* reveal qualities that could be representative of a national character? What are those qualities and how have they been shaped by literature and history?

12. If you have read the author's previous novel, *American Meteor*, you will realize that Edward Fenzil is telling his story to the narrator of that earlier book, Stephen Moran. Does this linkage add to your enjoyment of *The Port-Wine Stain*? In what other ways is this book connected to the epic canvas that Lock has created in his American Novels series?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Lock is the author of, most recently, the short story collection *Love Among the Particles* and six books in The American Novels series, a major literary project that exquisitely subverts traditional boundaries between history and imagination, and fiction and nonfiction, to illuminate humanity's glorious and monstrous legacy. Although each novel stands alone, Lock weaves subtle connections between each book, paying homage to major American literary figures and genres: first with Mark Twain and the coming-of-age story in *The Boy in His Winter*; then with Walt Whitman and the Western in *American Meteor*; Edgar Allan Poe and the gothic psychological thriller in *The Port-Wine Stain*; Henry David Thoreau and other transcendentalists in a marriage of slave narrative and pastoral drama in *A Fugitive in Walden Woods*; Emily Dickinson in a lyrical lament of love and innocence lost in *The Wreckage of Eden*; and Herman Melville in a dark tale of ambition and the secrets of the heart in *Feast Day of the Cannibals*. Lock lives in Aberdeen, New Jersey, where he is at work on the next books in The American Novels series. Visit his website at www.normanlock.com.

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