

Sue Waterman

# Literary Baltimore

Authors and bookstores to explore during the ACRL National Conference

## Chapter one: Baltimore writers

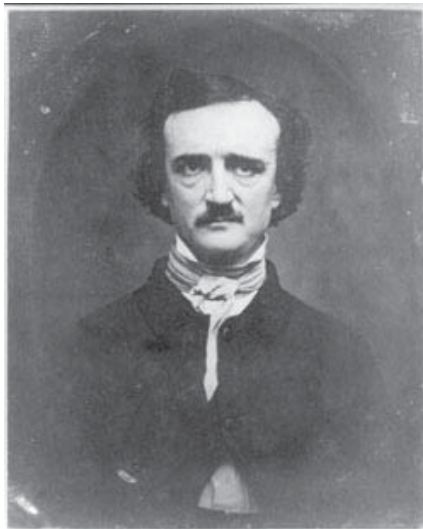
The city of Baltimore has long been associated with two literary lives: Edgar Allan Poe and H. L. Mencken. Poe first rose to prominence in Baltimore but went on to live in Richmond, New York, and Philadelphia before returning to Baltimore, where he died. Mencken lived his whole life in the city, and most of that in the same rowhouse. His life was inextricably bound with his city, and he expressed his preference for his hometown over the bright lights of New York, where most writers of his generation lived.

There are, however, many other names in literature, some famous, some less so, that can be linked to Baltimore. F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, lived in Baltimore for several years, while Zelda was being treated at the renowned psychiatric facilities at Sheppard-Pratt Hospital. Frederick Douglass escaped from Baltimore by train in 1838, and went on to write the most well-known slave narrative of the 19th century.

## Poe

The city clings stubbornly to Edgar Allan Poe as one of its own, and not only because Poe's final resting place is the Westminster Hall and Burying Ground in downtown Baltimore. Poe was born in Boston and lived much of his

life in Virginia and New York, but it was in Baltimore that his literary efforts first began to be noticed. Here he won a literary contest in 1835 for his story "A Manuscript Found in a Bottle," and this award brought him to the attention of a patron, John Kennedy Pendleton, who helped him place other stories in various newspapers and magazines.



Hartshorn, W.S., photographer. "Edgar Allen Poe." 1848. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Poe lived in a tiny house on North Amity Street for much of the time he spent in Baltimore, and this house has been carefully preserved as the Poe House and Museum. It was here that he fell in love with his young cousin, Virginia Clemm, who, at the age of 13, became his wife. In the uppermost room of the

house, Poe wrote many of the stories and poems for which he is now famous.

It was also in Baltimore that Poe died, a mysterious death that has never been fully explained. Many theories exist for why Poe was found, nearly unconscious and wearing a stranger's clothes, on a Baltimore street in October 1849.

One of the most recent accounts of his death is the bestselling novel by Matthew Pearl, *The Poe Shadow*. We may never

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know what caused Poe's death, but you can visit both the house where he wrote and his grave, where each January 19 on his birthday, a mystery fan, known as the Poe Toaster, visits and leaves a half-empty bottle of cognac and three red roses in tribute to this author of the macabre.

### H. L. Mencken

A much less mysterious, but no less colorful, Baltimore literary figure is Henry Louis Mencken, known to all as H. L. Mencken, the Sage of Baltimore. In spite of national success and acclaim, Mencken never left his hometown. Even though he kept an office in Manhattan, he returned every Friday to his home, a humble rowhouse that still stands at 1524 Hollins Street. In typical Mencken prose, he explained this in 1926:

The old charm (of Baltimore) still survives . . . I am never more conscious of the fact than when I return from New York. Behind me lies the greatest city of the modern world, with more money in it than all Europe and more clowns and harlots than all Asia, and yet it has no more charm than a circus lot or a second-rate hotel. It can't show a single genuinely distinguished street. It hasn't a single park that is more lovely than a cemetery lot. It is without manner as it is without manners. Escaping from it to so ancient and solid a town of Baltimore is like coming out of a football crowd into quiet communion with a fair one who is also amiable, and has the gift of consolation for hard-beset and despairing men.<sup>1</sup>

Author of an important study of the English language (*The American language*) and founder and editor of an influential review (*American Mercury*), Mencken was also a journalist for the *Baltimore Sun* and one of the 20th century's leading literary and social critics. Sometimes called the American Nietzsche, he was colorful, controversial, and absolutely candid.

Mencken always wrote what he believed, no matter whose feathers he might ruffle. And he often ruffled feathers. But his prolific writings, as newspaperman, book reviewer, and political commentator attest to a fiercely independent and passionate spirit. Baltimore clings fast to this native son; he was not afraid to speak his mind. Much of what he wrote reads like Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*.

Democracy is the theory that holds that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.

### Literary links

- *Westminster Hall and Burying Ground*, [www.westminsterhall.org/](http://www.westminsterhall.org/)
- *Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum*, [www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/historic/poehouse.html](http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/government/historic/poehouse.html)
- *The Poe Shadow*, [www.matthewpearl.com/poe/poe.html](http://www.matthewpearl.com/poe/poe.html)
- *The Poe Toaster*, [labyrinth13.com/Poe\\_Toaster.htm](http://labyrinth13.com/Poe_Toaster.htm)
- *The H.L. Mencken Room*, [www.epfl.net/exhibits/mencken/](http://www.epfl.net/exhibits/mencken/)
- *Enoch Pratt Free Library*, [www.pratt.lib.md.us/](http://www.pratt.lib.md.us/)
- *Harbor Place*, [www.harborplace.com/html/](http://www.harborplace.com/html/)
- *The Johns Hopkins University*, [www.jhu.edu](http://www.jhu.edu)
- *Daedalus Books*, [www.daedalusbooks.com/](http://www.daedalusbooks.com/)
- *Senator Movie Theater*, [www.senator.com/](http://www.senator.com/)
- *Children's Bookstore*, [www.thecbstore.com/](http://www.thecbstore.com/)
- *Atomic Books*, [www.atomicbooks.com/](http://www.atomicbooks.com/)
- *Red Emma's*, [www.redemmas.org/](http://www.redemmas.org/)
- *Mystery Loves Company*, [www.mysterylovescompany.com/](http://www.mysterylovescompany.com/)
- *Kelmscott Bookshop*, [www.kelmscottbookshop.com/home.php](http://www.kelmscottbookshop.com/home.php)
- *Royal Books*, [www.royalbooksonline.com/home.php](http://www.royalbooksonline.com/home.php)
- *Tiber Books*, [www.tiberbooks.com/](http://www.tiberbooks.com/)
- *Drusilla's Books*, [www.drusillasbooks.com/](http://www.drusillasbooks.com/)
- *The Book Thing*, [www.bookthing.org](http://www.bookthing.org)



H. L. Mencken at his typewriter. Credit: H. L. Mencken Collection, Enoch Pratt Free Library. Details at [www.epfl.net/exhibits/mencken/guidelines.html](http://www.epfl.net/exhibits/mencken/guidelines.html).

No one in this world, so far as I know . . . has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.

A newspaper is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier.

Suicide is a belated acquiescence in the opinion of one's wife's relatives.

The curse of man, and the cause of nearly all his woes, is his stupendous capacity for believing the incredible.<sup>2</sup>

You can find a host of Mencken-isms on the Web. And you can visit the Mencken Room while in Baltimore at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. Here you can view his library and the typewriter he used. While the Mencken Room is normally only open on Mencken Day in September, it will be open to ACRL conference-goers during a tour of libraries and their special collections. Another notable local collection is the Robert A. Wilson Collection of H. L. Mencken, a gift to the Johns Hopkins University from trustee Richard Frary. Housed at the Eisenhower Library on the Homewood

campus, it includes Mencken publications, original letters, and photographs inscribed by Mencken.

### Other literary notables

Many writers have lived or worked in Baltimore at some point in their careers. Among these, perhaps the most notable include:

F. Scott Fitzgerald, who lived in the Bolton Hill and Rodgers Forge neighborhoods and wrote *Tender is the Night* and *The Crack-Up* while in Baltimore.

Dashiell Hammett, who grew up in the city and worked for Pinkerton's National Detective Agency in the Continental Trust Building at the corner of East Baltimore and South Calvert Streets. Some believe the large black birds on that building were the inspiration for the *Maltese Falcon*.

John Dos Passos, died in Baltimore in 1970. He lived here during the latter years of his life and worked in the library of the Johns Hopkins University, the George Peabody Library, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

Gertrude Stein, even though she lived much of her life in Paris, declared that Baltimore was where we were born longer and that was because after all everybody has to come from somewhere.<sup>3</sup> Stein lived as a child in Baltimore and studied at the

Johns Hopkins Medical School before moving abroad.

Be sure to check out some local living writers before your visit. Choose from current favorite writers who live or work in Baltimore:

Alice McDermott, winner of the National Book Award for *Charming Billy* and author of the current bestseller *After This*.



H. L. Mencken's House. Credit: Andrews, Ronald L., photographer. National Register of Historic Places.

John Barth, National Book Award winner who writes from Maryland's Eastern Shore. *The Sot Weed Factor* and *The Tidewater Tales* are among his many novels.

Anne Tyler, National Book Award finalist; her latest bestseller is *Digging to America*.

Taylor Branch, National Book Award finalist and author of the trilogy *America in the King Years*.

Stephen Dixon, another National Book Award finalist and author of experimental novels and short stories, including *Frog*, *30 Pieces of a Novel*, and *Interstate*.

Russell Baker, National Book Award finalist for his autobiography set in Baltimore, *Growing Up*.

Laura Lippmann, author of mysteries set in Baltimore featuring Detective Tess Monaghan. Try *Every Secret Thing* or *In a Strange City*.

Tom Clancy, best-selling author of the Jack Ryan series of political thrillers, *Patriot Games* and *The Hunt for Red October* among them.

Sujata Massey, another local writer of mysteries, but set in Japan. Check out her female detective Rei Shimura.

## Chapter two: Bookstores

While it may take some exploring, Baltimore abounds in bookstores, large and small. From the giant **Barnes and Noble** at the Power Plant adjacent to Harbor Place, to the small radical bookstore and café, **Red Emma's** in Mount Vernon, there are books to be found and savored and purchased all over the city.

Everyone is familiar with Barnes & Noble's huge inventory of books and its café, but downtown Baltimore's location has something that is perhaps unique—a waterfront setting. Located at the Inner Harbor, a former power plant (really), you will find yourself at home, with a view. And newly opened in the Charles Village area near Johns Hopkins University is the newest Barnes and Noble in the area, with a lovely café and a good selection of serious fiction and non-fiction.

Another familiar name, although one without a face, is **Daedalus Books**, a popular

mail order catalog of new remaindered books and CDs. Daedalus has two locations in the Baltimore area, both huge bookstores with a wonderful selection of books, music, cards, and magazines at bargain prices. Closest to downtown is Daedalus Books on York Road, opposite the historic **Senator** movie theater. The Senator has premiered such hits as *Hairspray*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *12 Monkeys*. A popular night out in Baltimore includes taking in a movie at the restored art-deco Senator Theater, a visit to **Daedalus Books** across the street, and dinner at one of the small restaurants nearby.

The small bookstore is not dead in Baltimore. The **Children's Bookstore** in Roland Park, just off Roland Avenue, has been a Baltimore tradition for a generation. It boasts an impressive collection of (what else?) children's books for all ages in a charming surrounding. Accessible by taxi, its Roland Park neighborhood is worth a visit, too.

More for grown-ups, and also in a very interesting neighborhood, is **Atomic Books** on the Avenue (36th Street) in Hampden. Full of zines, graphic novels, independently published books, collectibles, Archie McPhee toys, and just plain books, this is one interesting bookstore. And you are sure to enjoy walking the Avenue, as Hampden's main street is known, as it is home to many interesting shops and restaurants of all kinds. This is Baltimore's most funky and interesting neighborhood.

In the downtown neighborhood of Mount Vernon is the relatively new bookstore/café known as **Red Emma's**, named after the early 20th-century anarchist Emma Goldman. While Red Emma's may be new, Baltimore has a tradition of radical bookstores, most of which have gone out of business but who live on in memory. Red Emma's has a very interesting selection of books on anarchy, feminism, philosophy, politics, and a good fiction section. Revisit the '60s here.

Another specialty bookstore, this one in the rapidly gentrifying and historic neighborhood of Fells Point, is **Mystery Loves Company**, with a stock devoted to, well, mystery



books. Baltimore writer Laura Lippmann's works can be found here, as well as all those other detective and mystery novels.

The used and rare book market is quite lively in Baltimore. The first block of West 25th Street, close to the Johns Hopkins University campus and the Baltimore Museum of Art is known as "**Book Row.**" Several fine rare book stores are located within this block, including **Kelmescott Bookshop**, **Royal Books**, **Tiber Books**, and **Johanson Rare Books**. In the Antique Row neighborhood, on North Howard Street, is **Drusilla's Books**, known for children's and illustrated books, folklore, fairy tales, and fables.

Finally, we must mention the unique Baltimore book venue known as "**The Book Thing.**" Created in 1999, by Russell Wattenberg, The Book Thing has a huge inventory of books that are free. That's not a typo, all the books at The Book Thing are free, as many as you want. Wattenberg has a passion for getting books into the hands of people who want or need them, in the hope that, as he puts it on his Web site, if everyone reads a lot there'll be more people to have intelligent conversations with. Donations are welcome, but not necessary. Just come with a love of books.

### Epilogue

So whether you are a literary sleuth, historian, or bibliomaniac, Baltimore holds some surprises and treasures. It is not gratuitous that one of Baltimore's nicknames is The City that Reads. Enrich and expand your visit to Baltimore by visiting its literary sites, shopping in its bookstores, and reading books written in this most eclectic and iconoclast literary city.

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### Notes

1. H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices, Fifth Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 237.

2. Gibbons Burke, The H. L. Mencken Page My favorites [www.io.com/gibbonsb/mencken/quotes.html](http://www.io.com/gibbonsb/mencken/quotes.html).

3. Frank Shivers, Gertrude Stein quoted in *Maryland Wits and Baltimore Bards* (Baltimore and London: JHU Press, 1998), 268. //

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