

Scott Peeples, *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe and the City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 224 pp.

Reviewed by **Jason Richards**, Rhodes College

Edgar Poe was the second son of traveling actors who crisscrossed the Atlantic seaboard, working the antebellum theater circuit. Poe's father—a drinker, debtor, and punching bag for theater critics—abandoned his family soon after Poe was born. Poe's mother—talented, dedicated, but fatally ill—died some months later. Orphaned at two, Edgar was fostered by a family in Richmond, but he was never legally adopted, and his surrogate father eventually disowned him. Living by his pen, Poe spent his professional life rolling up and down the Atlantic coast, working in one major publishing city after another. At each stop, he enjoyed varying degrees of fame but never stable success. Some combination of drink, debt, literary ambition, or his family's welfare drove him to the next city, where the cycle would repeat. Born to loss and transience, Poe never attached anywhere for long.

He has since attached to the world's imagination, however, his shadow looming large over the global literary landscape, his whirlwind life retold in countless narratives. Bringing an overworked biographee like Poe back to the page is no easy endeavor. Yet when someone who has studied Poe for years detects new patterns in the old biographical evidence, produces new evidence reinforcing those patterns, and draws important conclusions from the findings, we're reminded that it can be done. Scott Peeples's *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe and the City* is a lean and brisk biography, stylistically crafted for a wide readership. Poe courted the same readership—then called the masses. But he also wrote for the “critical taste,” as he put it, for the crowd well lettered. The same goes for Peeples, whose study combines the accessible and the academic in ways that should satisfy both the general and specialist reader.

The Man of the Crowd contains an introduction, which theorizes Poe's life as one of constant movement within or between cities, four chapters grounded in cities that most shaped Poe and his career, and a final one on the author's last 18 months—spent, fittingly enough, mostly on the road. The project benefits from important earlier biographical research, the wealth of historical texts on the Poe Society of Baltimore website, and Michelle Van Parys's excellent photography. It also benefits from the historicist repositioning of Poe that began in the late twentieth century. Exasperated by a long tradition of reading Poe in terms of timeless universals—as “Out of Space - Out of Time”—new historicists intervened and told traditionalists that *they* were out of space and out of time, and that the time had come to read Poe in historical context. Here Poe emerged not only as a writer attuned to social exigencies of race, class, and gender but

also as a roving author-editor who was both a product of and producer within the largely urban publishing industry.

While Poe's nomadic career is the moving center of this biography, Peeples also explores the social categories, especially race. In the chapter "Richmond," we see how the author grew up just blocks from the auctions, violence, and separation of black families that were the daily horrors of the city's slave trade. And we see how Poe later lived in his foster father's newly purchased mansion, maintained by several enslaved Black live-ins. Poe's proximity to chattel slavery lends additional weight to an observation Peeples makes earlier, designed to put Poe's talent and mobility in context. After acknowledging how exceptional Poe was, Peeples acknowledges that Poe "was also, in many ways, a typical American white man of the first half of the nineteenth century: he was free to move, to pursue a dream" (11-12).

The Man of the Crowd also evolves from recent geocritical writing on Poe—much of which appears in the fine collection *Poe and Place* (2018)—that uses concepts of place to better understand the author. Thinking about Poe and place is nothing new. The question of where to place this antebellum oddity—regionally, nationally, a ceeples

