



WRITERS' BLOC: From left, authors Matthew Pearl, Michael Lowenthal, Benjamin Cavell, Karl Iagnemma, and Christopher Castellani.

[BOOKS]

In the Company of Men

They're young, they're male, and these five Boston authors are taking the literary world by storm. By John Patrick Pullen

PEOPLE ARE WATCHING Matthew Pearl. The media's circling, and it smells a celebrity. So, too, do Pearl's fellow patrons at a Harvard Square coffeehouse. Eyes flutter across from conversations or peck up from the folds of newspapers, their curiosity alighting on the shoulders of this smallish young man.

"You have to overcome the presumption that you might not have the gravitas to pull off something important," says Pearl, who, though only 27, has proved his gravitas in spades. He's the author of *The Dante Club*, a novel that, with a 100,000 initial printing, international translations, and *New York Times* best-seller-list entrenchment, can gracefully wear the hackneyed tag of "sensation."

Pearl shows a jewel cutter's eye for detail in his story of poetry and 19th-century Boston. His work stands on its own, apart from his glittering Harvard and Yale Law School credentials. Apart from his youth. "It might not be fair that young authors get attention for their age," he says, sipping a hot chocolate—a schoolboy's drink. But in the highly competitive book publishing market, "you need to have something to separate you."

For Pearl and four other up-and-coming male Boston writers, that distinction comes from not only their youth but also their remarkable fiction.

"I never thought much about publishing a book," says Karl Iagnemma, 30, author of the short fiction collection *On the Nature of Human Romantic Interaction*. "But at the same time, it was definitely a dream."

Iagnemma is a product of MIT's mechanical engineering Ph.D. program, where, oddly, he minored in fiction writing. He still works at MIT as a research scientist.

"At MIT, it just seems that there was a richness of things to write about," says Iagnemma. No wonder. The Infinite Corridor is famed for its colorful inhabitants, its irradiated geniuses, its Nobel Prize men-children, its particle accelerators. Iagnemma

remembers one of his classmates trying to mathematically quantify convergent relationships between people—love as algebra. "It wasn't realistic by any means, but it was kind of funny, sort of sad, and sort of romantic," he says.

Iagnemma's stories can be described the same way. Refined like equations, they reveal precise truths about people—mainly scientists—who face failure or who discover the often disappointing, tangential nature of love. They've won him the *Paris Review* Discovery Prize and a Pushcart Prize.

Those sorts of literary spoils are what Benjamin Cavell is fighting for. If Pearl is the gold-belted champion, then Cavell, a former Harvard boxer and former student in Boston University's MFA program in creative writing, is the masked **»»»**