

The Cottoncrest Curse

Michael H. Rubin

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Racial prejudice drives the action of this historical novel.

In *The Cottoncrest Curse*, the debut novel by Michael H. Rubin, an old family curse explains a murder-suicide on a Louisiana sugarcane plantation. The official explanation masks a more commonplace truth: racial prejudice and revenge propel a manhunt for an innocent man.

In the book's prologue, a docent at an antebellum mansion describes how Colonel Judge Augustine Chastaine of Cottoncrest slit the throat of his beautiful young wife, Rebecca, and then shot himself. It wasn't the first suicide on the property, and it won't be the last. The place is cursed.

The local Sheriff isn't so sure. The murder-suicide doesn't square with what he knows about the judge or the scene of the crime. But when a trunk of razor-sharp knives is found in the barn, he sends a search party to find Jake, an itinerant Jewish peddler. The three black servants have also disappeared from the mansion, rightly fearing retribution from the racist Knights of the White Camellia. Jake and the servants aren't guilty, but they know secrets that, if revealed, would threaten a community already teetering on the brink of change.

The novel is told in two time frames: 1893, when the murders take place, and present day, when Jake's grandson and granddaughter tour the old mansion. Plot twists are plentiful, but the real pleasure of the novel is the historical information woven into the story. From the sharecroppers on the plantation to a village of former slaves, from the Cajun community in the swamps to the Italian immigrants swarming the docks of New Orleans, *The Cottoncrest Curse* offers a vivid portrait of Louisiana at the end of the 19th Century. The author, a practicing lawyer, has called on his legal background to incorporate issues of hereditary law and early civil rights.

The characters in *The Cottoncrest Curse* see what they expect to see. A family curse persists because it is easier to believe than the truth, even if the evidence points elsewhere. As Jake's grandson tells his granddaughter, "Maybe that's the real curse of Cottoncrest—that we can never know the complete truth, that each of us bears witness only to our own version of the truth, and that this incomplete vision blinds us in some way that we can never comprehend." The novel rewards readers with an action-packed search, while expanding their understanding of the truth.

KAREN ACKLAND (Winter 2015)

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