

Excerpts from the Prologue of
The Cottoncrest Curse



TODAY

Nobody blanched as she described the gruesome event. They were captivated.

“It happened right up here,” said the docent, who was dressed in an antebellum costume complete with lace collar, crinoline skirt, and double petticoats.

The tour group, which had been wilting while standing outside Cottoncrest in the intense Louisiana heat and humidity, gratefully jammed into the wide hallway that ran through the center of the massive plantation home.

The docent signaled to the tourists to follow her as she ascended the curved interior staircase

“The main house has been restored —y’all come up single file, please— has been restored to how it looked in the 1890s, when Colonel Judge Augustine Chastaine, the son of the original owner, lived here.”

The docent paused, her back to the wall, carefully avoiding an area near the banister.

“This is what y’all came to see, right here, where the most notorious murder-suicide in Louisiana occurred. One step below where I’m standing. As you come up the stairs behind me, look . . . but don’t walk . . . on these Plexiglas panels. This is where the Colonel Judge brutally slit the throat of his beautiful young wife, Rebecca, and then took his own life. Their intermingled blood soaked the wood, permanently discoloring it. Think of the tremendous amount of blood there must have been! But the deaths of Augustine and Rebecca Chastaine weren’t the start of the famous Cottoncrest curse. And they weren’t the end of it, either.”



1893

He had just finished cutting her throat. He had done it so swiftly that she hadn’t had time to make a sound.

With pleasure he had felt his long blade slice through the muscles of her neck and throat, scrape against her spine, and cut into the bone.

He was still holding her from behind as her head flopped backward onto his shoulder, coating his shirt with blood. He let her body slide onto the stairs as the blood poured out of her once-beautiful neck. Her head, held onto her body only by a bit of spine and a few shreds of flesh, fell to one side and, with a thud, hit one of the fluted white balusters that held up the handrail.

Her dark hair became a sullen red sponge. Her blue dress turned crimson. The steps became bloody pools.

He paused to admire his handiwork in the blue moonlight glow that filtered in through an upper window. He let the knife slide from his grasp and fall beside her body. It clattered as it hit the staircase.

Then he reached for his pistol.

* * *

Jenny did not dare open the door leading into the central hallway at the foot of the stairs. Although it was dark, she did not want to light a candle. Not yet.

Her heart was pounding. She had heard the noise clearly.

A gunshot.

Jenny had been at the foot of Little Miss's bed, checking on her. Little Miss was sleeping soundly, oblivious to everything, as only the very young and very old can be when they retreat to their interior world.

There was silence now. It was almost as quiet as the meals that the Colonel Judge and Rebecca shared, where the only sounds were the clinking of silverware on porcelain plates. For the last few months, the Colonel Judge and Rebecca seemed to speak to each other only when absolutely necessary. They were like two wary creatures forced to coexist in the same cage.

No noise at all came from the hallway. Not the rustling of Rebecca's white linen petticoats or the delicate clicking of her narrow shoes on the wooden floor. Not the tapping of the Colonel Judge's cane as he limped along.

Cautiously, Jenny moved to the foot of the stairs. She looked up toward the second-story landing. It was worse than she feared. She jammed her knuckles into her mouth. She could not allow herself to scream, although that was what she wanted to do.

Blood. Blood pouring from two bodies. It was the Colonel Judge. He must have shot himself.

Just like his father.

But this was worse. It was not only his blood. It was Rebecca's too. Both dead.



1961

Hank Matthews sat on a lawn chair in the shade of an oak tree, near the huge sign he had erected.

The words IMPEACH EARL WARREN were printed in letters five feet high, intended to be seen by all who passed up and down the highway skirting the edge of what used to be sugarcane fields.

Damn right, Hank Matthews thought, that a Supreme Court lawsuit trying to put blacks in the classroom would be called Brown. Brown versus Board of Education. Browns and blacks and all the other colors that weren't white. Petit Rouge Parish wasn't going to do anything different than it had been doing for the last fifty years, and no fool court was going to change that.

Hank Matthews loved his old, rambling Cottoncrest mansion, even though it badly needed a paint job. Even though at least eleven of the forty columns were cracked and broken. Even though the front steps were sagging and the once-elegant wallpaper was turning dark with mildew. Even though weeds had long since overtaken the gardens and tendrils of poison ivy had climbed over the fences and up into the branches of the oak trees.

He looked over with pride at the large Confederate flag hanging from the twelve-foot pole he had nailed to the frieze above the second floor. The flag told them damn fool northern meddlers that there was not going to be any meddling here. Not on his property. Not in his parish.

He knew he shouldn't have let that big-nosed, curly-headed kid onto the property. He had had a premonition. The kid had Jew written all over him, from his horn-rimmed glasses to his fancy words to the file folder he carried under his arm. Not only Jew, but northern Jew, the worst kind. Obvious from the moment the kid had opened his mouth.

Damn. Shouldn't have let him on the property. Shouldn't have listened to him. Shouldn't have let him open that folder and reveal its contents.

Well, they'll have something to talk about now, won't they? They'll say it was all a part of the Cottoncrest curse. But they'll never know the truth.

Hank took another long look at his house, leaned back in his lawn chair, and put the double barrels of his shotgun in his mouth. Stretching out his right hand, he pulled the trigger.



TODAY

The old man and the teenage girl were sitting on a bench in the rose garden. They hadn't followed the rest of those who had traveled more than an hour by bus from New Orleans to tour the beautiful antebellum home that bordered the Mississippi River.

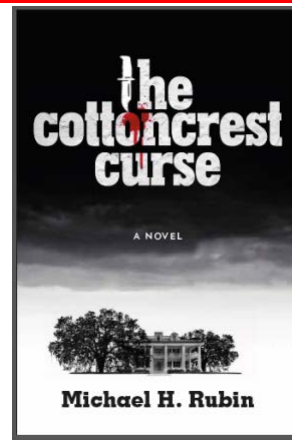
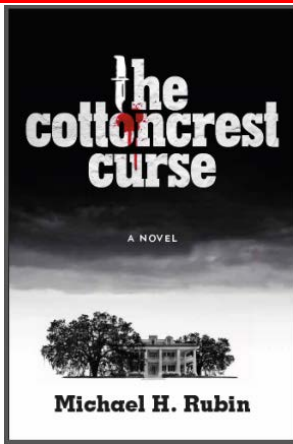
"Sit here a minute with me in the shade. There's no need to go into the big house just yet. There'll be plenty of time to tour Cottoncrest later this afternoon, before the bus leaves.

"As I was saying, the question is not how Jake Gold, your great-great-grandfather, got to be called the Cajun Jew. That's the easy part. And the question is not how a boy, who grew up in Russia speaking no English, came to Louisiana and then ended up marrying New Yorker Roz Levison, who herself had come from Poland.

"I know you think you know the answers, but the answers you'll give are the simple ones your parents told you. Simple answers that sufficed when you were younger. But the simple answer is as dry as a week-old loaf of French bread.

"The real question is how did Grandpapa Jake get mixed up with the Cottoncrest curse? Now that you're older than Jake was when he left Russia, you deserve to know his full story."





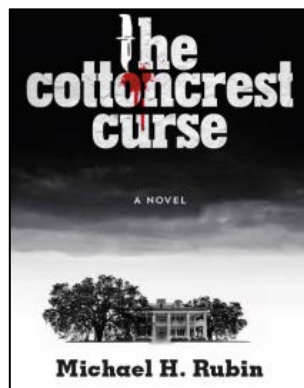
Book Details

In this heart-racing thriller, a series of gruesome deaths ignite feuds that burn a path from the cotton fields to the courthouse steps, from the moss-draped bayous of Cajun country to the bordellos of 19th century New Orleans, from the Civil War era to the Civil Rights era and across the Jim Crow decades to the Freedom Marches of the 1960s and into the present.

At the heart of the story is the apparent suicide of an elderly Confederate Colonel who, two decades after the end of the Civil War, viciously slit the throat of his beautiful young wife and then fatally shot himself. Sheriff Raifer Jackson, however, believes that this may be a double homicide, and suspicion falls upon Jake Gold, an itinerant peddler who trades razor-sharp knives for fur and who has many deep secrets to conceal.

Jake must stay one step ahead of the law, as well as the racist Knights of the White Camellia, as he interacts with landed gentry, former slaves, crusty white field hands, crafty Cajuns, and free men of color all the while trying to keep one final promise before more lives are lost and he loses the opportunity to clear his name.

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Praise for

"The Cottoncrest Curse"

"Rubin's **gripping debut mystery** depicts the bitter racial divides of post-Reconstruction South and its continuing legacy."

Publishers Weekly

This "historical thriller" is "thoroughly researched." It is "literary fiction" taking "readers on an **epic journey**."

Southern Literary Review

"Michael Rubin proves himself to be an **exceptional storyteller**." "The powerful epic is **expertly composed in both its historical content and beautifully constructed scenery**. I highly recommend picking up this book."

James Carville,
Political strategist and commentator

"Rubin takes his readers on a **compelling multigenerational journey** that begins with the Civil War and ends in the present day. '**The Cottoncrest Curse**' is **impeccably researched, deftly plotted, and flawlessly executed**...Michael Rubin is a gifted and masterful storyteller. Highly recommended."

Sheldon Siegel,
New York Times best-selling author of the
Mike Daley/Rosie Fernandez novels

"Trust me: this is a fun read, a **page turner likely to keep you up all night**." "*The Cottoncrest Curse* is skillfully and intricately plotted." "Through it all, the writing is sharp, vivid and compelling."

LSBA Journal

The "story is gripping, the writing is masterful." "Rubin has struck 'gold' in his debut novel."

Chicago CBA Record

"Michael Rubin's debut novel, 'The Cottoncrest Curse,' introduces us to a **fresh new voice that weaves talented prose and tack-sharp detail into an intriguing story** set in Louisiana's bayou country."

Alan Jacobson,
National bestselling author of "Spectrum"

A "**thrilling murder mystery**."

225 Magazine

Published by the Pulitzer Prize winning LSU Press

Michael H. Rubin is a former professional jazz pianist who has played in the New Orleans French Quarter, a former radio and television announcer, a nationally-known speaker and humorist who has given over 400 presentations throughout the country, and a full-time practicing attorney who helps manage a law firm with offices from the West Coast to the Gulf Coast to the East Coast.



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