

# Book Review

## ***The Cottoncrest Curse***

A Novel by Michael H. Rubin

Offering a Wild Ride Through Louisiana History

Reviewed by E. Phelps Gay

Anyone who has had the pleasure of attending one of Mike Rubin's CLE presentations knows he is not just an accomplished lawyer and scholar; he is a brilliant entertainer. Not for him the dry 60-minute lecture packed with citations to case law and statutes. No, he has a performer's need to spice things up with witty original songs and gyrating PowerPoint graphics. We come to learn, yes, but also to laugh. A long time ago, a Roman poet named Horace said the goal of poetry is not just to teach but also to delight. Mike Rubin got that Memo.

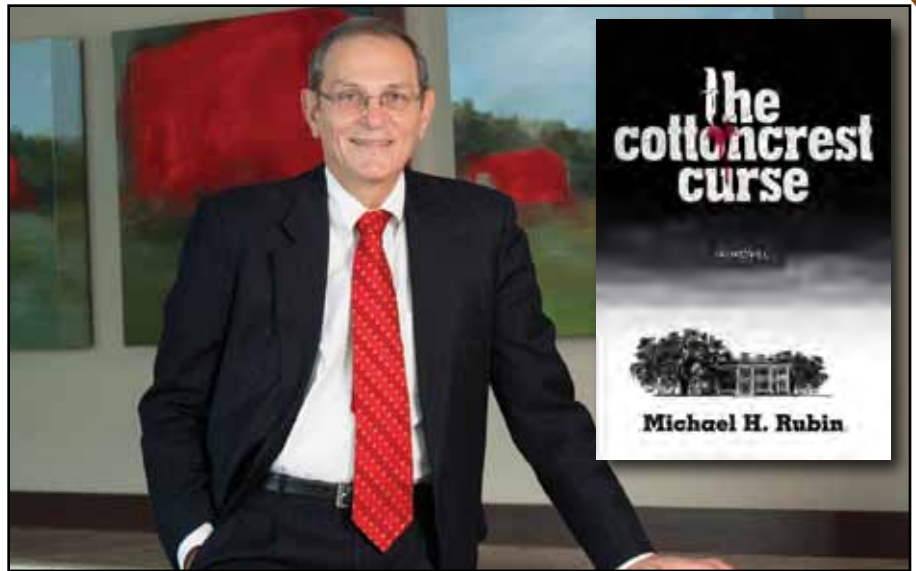
Now, at an age when many are slowing down, Mike is shifting into another, higher gear. Not content with having written numerous books and articles on topics ranging from collateral mortgages to conflicts of interest, nor with having composed countless songs, not to mention maintaining a busy law practice while teaching Security Devices at LSU Law Center, Mike has decided to write a novel. The result is a fascinating thriller steeped in our state's rich and sometimes lurid history, a book all Louisiana lawyers should enjoy.



Published by the award-winning Louisiana State University Press in September 2014, *The Cottoncrest Curse* centers around a grisly murder-suicide (or so it appears) which takes place at the Cottoncrest Plantation in Petit Rouge Parish on the west bank of the Mississippi River in 1893. “Whodunit” is the question, of course, and the answer unfolds in short, suspenseful chapters, during which we learn much about the victims, suspects and investigators. Colorful characters abound, from a patrician plantation owner named Colonel-Judge Augustine Chastaine to a bumbling sheriff’s deputy named Bucky; from a grizzled Civil War physician named Francois Cailleteau to a savvy and resourceful servant named Jenny; and from a fearless Cajun named Trosclair Thibodeaux to a multi-lingual immigrant from Czarist Russia named Jake Gold, who must hide his Jewish background during these racist and anti-Semitic times. I won’t spoil the plot, but trust me: this is a fun read, a page-turner likely to keep you up at night.

It is also a historically well-informed book. There are several references to the Battle of Port Hudson in 1863, where Colonel-Judge Chastaine sustained injury, Dr. Cailleteau amputated more than a few Confederate limbs, and the Corps d’Afrique fought valiantly for the Union side. Louis Martinet, practicing law in New Orleans, makes a cameo appearance and deals rather amusingly with the aforementioned sheriff’s deputy. The plight of sharecroppers who are paid poorly and can’t get credit at the plantation store is movingly portrayed. Most importantly, the “passenger car” case of *Homer Adolph Plessy v. J.H. Ferguson*, which was meant to fulfill the promise of the 14th Amendment but (as we know) wound up setting back the cause of racial justice for generations, plays a key role. Indeed, the book’s climactic scene takes place on one of that train’s Jim Crow cars as it makes its way from New Orleans around Lake Pontchartrain toward Hammond.

For lawyers there are occasional references to the Louisiana Civil Code, including changes to the 1870 Code allowing workers to seize and sell a plantation and use the proceeds to pay their wages. Mike points out that such changes were enacted during the Reconstruction-era administrations of P.B.S. Pinchback and C.C. Antoine



**Michael H. Rubin, former Louisiana State Bar Association president and author of the novel *The Cottoncrest Curse*. The official release date of *The Cottoncrest Curse* is Sept. 10, 2014. For more information on purchases, go to Amazon’s website at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).**

over the objections of white planters. Clearly, the author knows his way around Louisiana legal history. Seamlessly, he weaves this knowledge into the fabric of the story.

I should add that this is a “bloody” tale, not for the faint of heart. There are sharp knives, slit throats and blood dripping down staircases. People get shot, punched and mistreated; rats and maggots crawl over and into dead bodies. No punches are pulled in portraying the racism and anti-Semitism of the times. The Klan-like White Knights of the Camellia “ride” around the parish one terrifying night. Jake Gold’s status as a Jew, when revealed, provokes all kinds of vile, ignorant comments. Mixed into this gumbo, however, is a good dose of comic relief, largely from the aforementioned sheriff’s deputy who wants to be regarded as important but never succeeds. Given its exotic nature, I kept thinking the book would make an outstanding movie — directed, perhaps, by Quentin Tarantino.

One delightful feature of the book is the regular insertion of French and Yiddish sayings. Two examples: One character says: “*La pauvreté n’est pas un deshonneur, mais c’est une fichue misère.*” He explains: “It just means that poverty is not a sin, but it is a mighty inconvenience.” And from the Yiddish: “*Az me est chazzer, zol rinnen fun bord.*” Translated: “If you’re going to do something wrong, enjoy it.”

As befits any good murder mystery, *The Cottoncrest Curse* is skillfully and intricately plotted. Its short, punchy chap-

ters, picking up various strands of the plot, sometimes shifting to a different time and place, give you just enough information to wonder what happens next. Eventually, all strands are tied up and secrets are revealed.

Through it all, the writing is sharp, vivid and compelling. It is one thing to be a good lawyer and legal brief writer; one would expect as much from a person with Mike’s education and abilities. It is quite another to display a novelist’s ear for language and eye for physical description, to enliven the prose with arresting images, apt similes and metaphors. Here I should add (much too belatedly) that Mike’s talented wife Ayan, to whom the novel is dedicated, not only “edited and re-edited” the book, she also helped to write it, as Mike acknowledges at the outset. Between them, they have produced exactly what a novel is supposed to be: a good story, well told.

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