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AUTHOR INTERVIEW Q & A

BOOK TITLE: Cornflower's Ghost: An Historical Mystery
AUTHOR: Thomas Pullyblank

Q. This is your first novel. Tell us a little bit about the plot of the story.

A. It's about two mysterious deaths, one of an American Revolutionary hero in the early 1800s, and one of an upstate New York history professor in 1997. The deaths are intertwined because the hero's descendants were close to the history professor, and the history professor was obsessed with the hero's story. All of this is sorted out by a young graduate student.

Q. The subtitle of your novel identifies it as "an historical mystery." Would you classify it as a mystery, a ghost story, a suspense thriller, or historical fiction?

A. It's a little bit of all four, but not quite all of any of them. There's certainly mystery involved, in the way the grad student uncovers clues to both deaths. There's a ghost there, too, as indicated in the title. There's definitely some political and family intrigue that you'd find in a novel of suspense. And there's history in the fiction, although I do not tell the story within a historical setting like the way, for example, James Michener tells his stories.

Q. Where did the idea for this story originate and how did it evolve into a novel?

A. The story came from two seeds. The most important was a ghost story I told to a group of friends gathered on the shore of Collins Lake in Scotia, NY over a decade ago. That story, about Cornflower's ghost, stuck in my mind and grew there as I explored how it might have originated and how it might be interpreted these days by a professional academic historian. The second seed was a bit of intra-departmental intrigue that I witnessed as a graduate student at the University at Albany. It wasn't in the history department, and the department it was in shall remain nameless, but I was tangentially involved in it and was completely fascinated with how the whole thing began, developed, and was eventually resolved.

Q. Were the characters in your improvised fireside tale the same as we see in the book, or did you need to go through a lot of character development?

A. Cornflower and Theodorick Crane are the same. But I had to develop their characters from what were really cardboard cutouts originally, giving them backgrounds and motivations and challenges. I did this by reading many, many biographies of revolutionary war veterans and combining various parts of their stories into a sort of mosaic that became Theodorick Crane. For Cornflower, her story in many ways represents the overall experience of the Oneida people during the revolution, torn between the British and Americans.

Q. The characters in the story—either of a contemporary or a historical nature—are they based on real people?

A. Besides Cornflower and Theodorick Crane, the characters in the book are developed from scratch, although I know I based certain personal qualities and professional characteristics of my characters on people I knew, including myself. Nevertheless, the characters are not real people whose names have been changed to protect the innocent (or the guilty!). They are creations of my own, and owe their existence to me as their author.

Q. Your novel is based entirely in upstate New York, though not in actual places. Why did you choose the upstate region and how did create your fictional settings?

A. It's more that upstate New York chose me, it seems. I was born here, lived my whole life here except for a brief time in Boston, and, as far as we can control such things, will probably die here. It was completely natural that I would write of the land and people I know. Also, I think upstate New York is one of those places that deserves to be written about because of our unique and very interesting heritage and because of the fascinating characteristics of the people. As for Clinton Falls, I knew the setting of the story had to be a college or university town. But I didn't want to "fix" the story too much in what's actually here. In my case this was the University at Albany and its people. So I invented Clinton Falls, which would be located somewhere in Central New York along the Mohawk river, on its south shore it seems, and gave the city a university campus. Fictionalizing the setting, by the way, helped a great deal in being able to fictionalize the characters.

Q. Do you think the story is realistic?

A. Yes. The university setting and the characters there will be recognized by anyone on the campuses of Albany or Buffalo or Stony Brook or Binghamton. Life in the city, especially at Louie Fratello's 357 tavern and in my descriptions of trying to get around in bad weather, will resonate with people in any upstate urban area. There is certainly political intrigue on college campuses, although hopefully not as damaging as what I portray here. And Cornflower's ghost herself? Well, I'll withhold judgment on the "realism" of that part of the story and let the debate between rational materialists and believers in the supernatural speak for itself.

Q. How long did it take to research and write your book?

A. It took me about eight years total, from 1996 to 2004. But I was doing many other things during that time, including teaching history to college students, preaching sermons on Sunday mornings and caring for my parishioners, raising animals on a farm and, most importantly, spending time with my wife and son. I researched as I wrote, mostly in the first couple years of work, and remain very comfortable with a freestyle, minimal notes type of writing process.

Q. What was your writing process like? Did you have a routine?

A. I would and still do write when I can, usually ten hours or so a week. I seem to work best in the morning or later at night, but sometimes an idea will blossom and need to be tended in the middle of the afternoon, too.

Q. Did you have a model for the type of novel you were trying to write?

A. I compare this story to three books: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomson's *The Rule of Four* and Josephine Tey's *Daughter of Time*. Yet *Cornflower's Ghost* is an American story that addresses questions about how our past should and should not be used to address contemporary concerns. Also, unlike the first two books mentioned, each character strives not to solve a historical puzzle but rather to gain some degree of self-understanding. But most of all, and this is where I adore Josephine Tey's work, my story contains legitimate rather than sensationalized history. To move away from my usual gardening metaphors, *Cornflower's Ghost* is well-anchored in historical reality.

Q. How and where did you conduct your research for this book?

A. I read a lot of books from the library and did a lot of photocopying. Internet research was in its infancy back in the days that I needed to do research, in the mid nineties, and I relied heavily on the library at the University at Albany and on interlibrary loan. Today the process is much different.

Q. Were you confronted with any obstacles in the development of the plot or characters? What were they and how did you overcome them?

A. Because the book grew in part from my experiences as a graduate student, I faced a difficult obstacle in not writing myself into the narrator, Tom Flanagan. I solved this problem by giving Tom a completely different family background from my own, and by having him make decisions that I definitely would not make but remain consistent within the story. As for plot, many details of both mysteries, past and present, had to be sorted through carefully. Creating the puzzle, and discovering how various pieces fit together was very exciting for me.

Q. Do you have any advice for people who want to write historical fiction?

A. Know the background of what you write. In my mind it all works like an iceberg, where 10% or so is in view to the reader but the remaining 90% must be there to support what's visible. Don't try to cram every last detail of your historical research into your story, but know that the details presented will be made all the more real by the research and knowledge that feed the imagination.

Q. You took a non-traditional route to publish your book. Why, and how much control did you have over the process?

A. I half-joke with my publisher that small, independent presses are in the business of preserving civilization rather than practicing capitalism. The opposite seems to be true at several of the big publishing houses, and this model of literature as commodity is not attractive to me at all. I felt very much control of the process, yet I also learned that that publishing is a partnership and that compromise is necessary for success.

Q. What have you learned from the process of writing and publishing this book?

A. I learned a great deal about myself, both positive and negative, and how to effectively tell a story. I also learned a lot about history, much of it in that 90% under-the-water category that I spoke of earlier. I had no idea what publishing a book was like before this process. I hold a great deal of respect for publishers now, that is, for publishers who treat the author's work with care and not just as a commodity.

Q. What's next? Any plans for another book?

A. I'm writing a second novel, in fact, called *Napoleon's Gold*. It takes place in the Thousand Islands region of upstate New York, is also narrated by Tom Flanagan, and involves some minor characters from *Cornflower's Ghost*, including the radical fugitive Ben Fries, and some characters only mentioned in this book, including Tom's parents and brother. It's about, as the title says, finding a cache of gold that belonged to Napoleon and is now lost deep under the Saint Lawrence River. I'm about 50 pages into it, and writing it too, is a lot of fun.