

*Advance praise for*

## Cornflower's Ghost

*Cornflower's Ghost* is a vastly entertaining novel, replete with mysterious deaths, romantic intrigues, political deceptions and historical schemes covering more than 200 years. Implicated in these antics are professors and graduate students at a modern university, 1960s radicals, leaders of the American Revolution, 18<sup>th</sup> century politicians, and the specter of an Iroquois ghost. Thomas Pullyblank weaves this tale with a keen eye for detail and a storyteller's gift. But there's more than just a good story here: at the center of *Cornflower's Ghost* is history itself, and how we use the past to define ourselves and give meaning to our current struggles. Amid all the intrigue and suspense, Pullyblank's characters are fighting to claim the past and to understand it, since only history can reveal the answers to the secrets at the heart of *Cornflower's Ghost*. It's a novel that pulls you in and keeps you thinking long after you've turned the last page.

—*Brian Carso, J. D., Ph. D., Assistant Professor of History,  
Misericordia University*

Pullyblank's intricate tale of love, betrayal, lies, and murder cleverly weaves past and present in ways that will change the way we think about history. In fast-moving episodes full of plot twists and turns he deftly explores a fascinating region of the country – upstate New York – and the characters that have had parts both major and minor in the unfolding drama of the state's history. Importantly, *Cornflower's Ghost* is a vivid reminder that the past is always with us, and it profoundly affects how we live in the present and how we shape the future.

—*Paul D'Ambrosio, Ph. D., Vice President and Chief Curator,  
New York State Historical Association*

# **Cornflower's Ghost**

**An Historical Mystery**

**Thomas Pullyblank**

**BOOK PREVIEW**



Square Circle Press  
Voorheesville, New York

**Cornflower's Ghost:  
An Historical Mystery**

Published by  
Square Circle Press LLC  
137 Ketcham Road  
Voorheesville, NY 12186  
www.squarecirclepress.com

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First paperback edition 2009.  
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free, durable paper.  
15 14 13 12 11 10 09 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN 13: 978-0-9789066-5-8

ISBN 10: 0-9789066-5-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009934094

**Publisher's Acknowledgments**

The cover design is by Richard Vang, Square Circle Press, using the Corel suite of graphics software. The text of this book was created and formatted by Square Circle Press using OpenOffice.org, a free suite of office software ([www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org)). The title is set in CasablancaAntique, the type is in Garamond, the chapter headings in Blackadder ITC, and the chapter epigraphs in Book Antiqua.

The author's personal and professional acknowledgments appear at the end of the preface.

## Chapter One

*A cold coming they had of it, at this time of the year . . . The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off in solstitio brumali, the very dead of Winter.*

—Lancelot Andrews, *Of the Nativity*, 1622

ON MOST WINTER DAYS I STILL REMEMBER that coldest of winter mornings, and the memory always brings with it equally numbing recollections of Peter Langley's death and my first encounter with Julianne Radisson. It was a record low that morning, my first day back after a semester's leave of absence, and I was standing outside the door of Hammond Hall, just before eight o'clock, waiting for someone inside to unlock the door. The sky was clear and blue, almost purple along the western horizon. The warmth I'd generated on my walk to campus was gone. I could feel the cold air work its way through my anorak, scarf, and mittens and prick against my skin. As the carillon at the center of campus chimed out the alma mater I kicked myself for returning my key before I took time off.

I peered through the window and knocked hard on the door. Through the fog of condensation I saw my reflection—my brown hair looking black and my blue eyes looking gray—and finally saw Roger Whittaker, the history department chair whose phone call had gotten me out of bed, approach from the direction of his office. He wore his usual

outfit, a gray three piece suit just a shade lighter than his close-cropped hair. When he got to the door he flung it open with a force that startled me. I jumped back to avoid being hit in the chest.

Whittaker looked me over and cocked his head. The muscles that ran up his neck and behind his ears reminded me of the straps on an old leather football helmet.

“Did you walk?” he asked.

“Dead battery,” I said as I stepped inside and closed the door.

“I see,” he said. He ran his hand over his hair. “I have bad news, Flanagan.”

“What?” I asked.

“In my office.”

I followed him around the corner and sat down across from him at the anteroom table. He pushed a newspaper my way. I removed my mittens, used my scarf to wipe my glasses, and was blindsided by the following article on page one of the Clinton Falls *Clarion*:

**University Professor Dead After  
Late Night Automobile Crash**  
*Alcohol Use Involved*

Peter Langley, a Professor of History at the State University, is dead after suffering traumatic injuries to the head and body in an alcohol related automobile accident.

Police say Dr. Langley was traveling west-bound on State Route 5 sometime between 10 and 11 p.m. when his car hit a patch of ice and slid off the road and onto the frozen Westcott Creek. Unconscious and with severe injuries to the head and back, Dr. Langley was taken to Wildwood Medical Center, where he expired at 12:13 a.m. this morning.

Dr. Frank Weston of Wildwood told the *Clarion* that Professor Langley's blood alcohol content was well above legal limits. The Clinton Falls police department confirmed that an empty bottle of vodka was found at the scene of the accident, but would not elaborate on this information and said an investigation was pending.

Since arriving at the university in 1976, Dr. Langley has been widely recognized as one of the most engaging and entertaining lecturers on campus. He is most famous for his course "Forms of Political Protest" in which he led students in hands-on demonstrations against the university administration. The course was canceled after the Randy Bucci shooting incident in December.

"He was good-natured about FPP," said the university president. "He always kept his protests civilized, the Bucci incident notwithstanding. At the same time he showed students how they, as individuals, could make a difference.

"The accident is tragic. I speak for the entire campus community when I say that Dr. Langley's presence will be missed."

Professor Langley's contribution to higher education was recognized in 1994 when he was awarded the Distinguished Teaching Professorship, an honor granted to only three other professors in the university's thirty years of existence.

No funeral or memorial services are planned. Donations can be sent to the Clinton Falls Ambulance Emergency Fund.

"He called me yesterday," I said. "He said he couldn't wait to get back at it."

"I'm sorry, Tom," Whittaker said.

Then I looked again at the headline. "This can't be right," I said.

"What?"

"Langley didn't drink."

Whittaker's eyes narrowed.

"He had epilepsy," I explained. "I saw him have a seizure three years ago."

And as I stared at the headlines I recalled seeing Langley's eyes glaze over that day and go blank with shock, his muscles go limp and then seize with tension, his whole body quake with such force from the grand mal tremor that afterward he lacked the breath to tell me how to help him. He told me a few weeks later that he'd foresworn alcohol in the belief that the bottle of wine he'd split with a friend at lunch that day had triggered the seizure. I'd never heard him speak with more conviction.

"Denial is a common response to these things," Whittaker said. "Especially for someone who just went through what you did." He straightened up. "I talked to the doctor myself, Tom. He said Peter had a BAC of point two zero."

"I'm not in denial," I said. "I know he—"

"There's nothing we can do to change the facts. As a historian you should know that."

I stood up and walked to the window. I watched a pair of chickadees peck at a discarded pizza crust. Behind them the concrete edifice of the residential towers seemed heavier and more sullen than usual.

I turned back to Whittaker. "But we can try to explain what happened. As a teacher you should know that."

Just then the phone rang. I knew from Whittaker's side of the conversation who was on the other end: "Martha, yes, I heard . . . It is a terrible tragedy . . . we all feel that way . . . Why don't you take a few days? Yes that's fine."

It was Professor Martha Radisson calling, who, as I knew only too well, hated Langley and more than once had tried to ruin his career. The sympathy she was raining down on Whittaker was no doubt false.

Whittaker said goodbye and hung up the phone. “Everyone’s shook up about this, Tom, even Dr. Radisson.” He exhaled. “There’s another problem,” he said. “We’re short staffed. I need you to teach Langley’s American Revolution course.”

“I can’t think about that now,” I said, exasperated.

“I know it’s tough, Flanagan. It’s tough on all of us. But I don’t have time to find someone else and the department doesn’t have the money to hire an adjunct. Besides, Langley has been grooming you for this for what, two years before you took time off? It’s time for you to step up and show us that he was right in pulling you away from her.”

I didn’t answer.

Whittaker looked at his watch and said, “Cancel class this week. Monday’s a holiday. Start teaching next Wednesday. Stop by if you need anything. And Flanagan, you are ready.”

I ASCENDED THE STAIRS to the teaching assistant office suite and sat down. I took my Bible from my backpack, and surrendered myself to the ritual that had become my coping mechanism since I was first hit by personal tragedy four months before. I closed my eyes, opened the book and pressed my index finger to the page. That day, as on so many days past, the passage I pointed to put into words the feelings that were tearing away at my heart. From Psalm 13 I read:

*How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long must I wrestle with my thoughts*

*and every day have sorrow in my heart?*

*How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look on me and answer, O LORD, my God.*



*Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death;  
my enemy will say "I have overcome him,"  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

I'd been contemplating the psalm for about a half hour, not crying, but feeling the pressure of grief down into my bowels, when I heard a knock on the outer office door. I turned around and saw in the doorway an attractive, well-dressed woman with a leather coat folded in her arms. The black hair that fell down over her shoulders partly obscured a gold chain and cross that hung around her neck. At her feet were a small suitcase and shopping bag.

"I can come back if you're on your way out," she said.

I didn't understand until I looked down and saw that I was still wearing my coat and scarf. "No, it's OK. I'm just getting in," I said.

"Your glasses don't fog up?" she asked while scrutinizing me with her green eyes. "I bought contacts just last week because I couldn't stand wiping off my glasses every time I walked into a building. No one warned me that New York would be this cold."

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm here to see Professor Langley," she said. She turned around and read the name card on the door. "You must be Tom Flanagan."

"Langley's teaching assistant. Well, I *was* his TA until this morning. Now I'm his replacement."

She stepped forward. "Replacement?"

I stood up. "Professor Langley was in a car accident last night. He died early this morning."

She tightened her lips into a pout. "I don't believe you," she said.

On the floor behind her was the copy of the newspaper that the building janitor always slipped under the door as a gift to the teaching assistants. Excusing myself as I moved

past her, I reached around the shopping bag and suitcase, picked up the paper and unfolded it.

“Look here,” I said.

But instead of taking the paper she moved her eyes towards me and then to the window. “My name is Julianne Radisson,” she said.

I set down the paper and didn’t comprehend her at first because my mind was back on the alcohol issue. Then it registered. “As in Martha Radisson?” I asked.

“Martha’s my aunt,” she said. “I’m the daughter of Harold’s sister.”

“Why were you looking for Langley?” I asked, instinctively suspicious of anyone related to Langley’s rival. *Ex-rival*.

“I wanted to take Dr. Langley’s course on the American Revolution. Since you’re his replacement I still want to take it.”

“You’re a student here?”

“No. And I may or may not matriculate. For now, I’m here to take the course.” Her eyes flitted again. “That’s all I want is to take the course.”

“Why?” I asked.

I watched her gaze become steady again. “For the same reason most students take it. To learn about the American Revolution.”

That got me angry. “The room is full,” I said. “You’ll have to sign a waiting list with the others.”

Julianne Radisson was offended. “I don’t have to sign a list. I’m the niece of Harold and Martha Radisson.”

“The room is full,” I said with more conviction. “At least ten students have already signed the waiting list. Being Martha and Harold Radisson’s niece does not get you preference.”

She moved towards me in what a psychology student would call an invasion of personal space. I backed up only a step before stumbling into a chair and losing my balance.

But Julianne reached under my left arm and stabilized me, despite being a foot shorter than me and having no leverage. She moved her face a few inches from mine, her eyes burning now like copper flames.

“You should consider it a compliment that I still want to take the course even though it’s you, TA, and not Professor Langley, the expert, who’s teaching it.” I could smell the peppermint mouthwash on her breath as she spoke. “And if you still decide not to let me in, I’ll get permission from the department chair.” She let go of me, tapped my chest with her forefinger, and stepped back. “See you in class.”

She spun around on one leg, grabbed her shopping bag and suitcase with a swoop of her arm, and walked out of the room.

“Sign the list!” I shouted at her back.

LATER THAT EVENING, after a long day of thinking about Langley and looking over his notes for the course, I took a bus to a favorite local pub called “The 357,” owned by a family friend named Louie Fratello. Louie had worked with my uncle Jack in the construction business until his knees went out after too much climbing ladders and crouching on roofs. He went into the tavern business, and connected his past and present lives by displaying behind the bar a collection of framed eight-by-ten photographs of the best houses he and my uncle had renovated or built.

Louie took a break from adding up receipts and poured me a pint of Genesee Twelve Horse. “My condolences, Tommy,” he said with a frown and a shake of his head. “This is not what you need right now.”

For a moment I thought he was talking about the beer, then he topped off the pint and placed it on the bar.

“Are you sure you’re up to it? Going back to school?” he asked.

“I have to finish my degree sometime. Besides, I’ve been offered my first teaching assignment.”

“Congratulations.”

“It’s Langley’s American Revolution course,” I said.

“Make every lecture an elegy,” Louie suggested.

I smiled. “You bet I will.”

Louie returned to his bookkeeping, and I made my way to the back of the room where two graduate school friends, Mindy McDonnell and Jens Erlenmeyer, were sitting.

“We were just talking about you,” Mindy said. She smiled, and I took my time admiring the flecks of blue in her eyes that looked like sapphires embedded in granite.

I tapped my right ear. “I knew it,” I said.

“It’s about Walsh’s grade,” she added.

I groaned and sat down.

“He gave her a C plus,” Jens said with conspiratorial solemnity. “We’re going to file a grievance.”

“We?”

“GOSH.”

“Who?”

Jens took a puff from a freshly lit cigarette, and his face turned a shade closer to the red button down shirt he wore. “The Graduate Organization of Students of History,” he said.

“Catchy,” I said. “But it doesn’t mean a thing to me.”

“Alexa Ortiz and I started the group last semester,” Jens said. He reached into his duffel bag and produced a sheet of paper. “Here.”

It was the GOSH charter, a manifesto really that described the university faculty as “the servants of the students, whose duty it is to provide for us the programs we deem necessary to our professional education and development.” It ended with a call to arms: “petitions and, if necessary, strikes to make our demands heard.”

I handed the charter back to Jens. “What does this have to do with me?”

“I can’t have this blemish on my transcript,” Mindy said. “I’ll never get into Harvard or Yale with a C plus in my ma-

jour.” She looked my way. “I need you to testify to the committee that Walsh was out to get me.”

“I wasn’t even in your class,” I said. “I was in Florida all last semester.”

“But you know Walsh.”

“Did anyone else read your paper?” I asked.

“Rebecca Moreland from Art History. She said I deserved an A.”

I shook my head. “She’s just an adjunct, though. Lower than us on the faculty food chain. What exactly were Walsh’s comments?”

“That I didn’t spend enough time investigating the—how did he put it—the gender ideology of Thomas Gainsborough’s paintings.”

“Walsh thinks *The Blue Boy* was transgendered,” Jens said.

Mindy smiled.

“I’m teaching Langley’s course,” I said.

Mindy’s smile faded. Jens’ face lit up. “Political Protest?” he asked.

“American Revolution,” I said to his disappointment. “FPP was canceled after the Bucci incident.”

“Congratulations,” Mindy said. “You’re off the chain gang.”

“Thanks. But you know that teaching makes it tough for me to help you. I don’t want to piss anyone off, especially Whittaker.” I remembered our conversation earlier that morning and wondered where my loyalties should lie.

“GOSH will be there for you, too,” Jens said.

“I don’t want GOSH there for me,” I said.

“A rugged individualist,” Jens said.

“An independent thinker,” I countered.

Mindy took my hand. “Then think about helping me,” she said. “Please.”

AN HOUR OR SO LATER, after Jens left the bar with a group of German friends, Mindy asked me if I was doing all right.

“I had a cold last week, but I’m over it,” I said.

Mindy frowned. “About Langley.”

“I guess I’m OK,” I said unconvincingly. “Although I wish someone would have a memorial service.”

“Langley was an atheist,” she reminded me.

“Memorial services are for the living,” I said. “I for one need the closure.”

“Is there anyone to talk to about it? Did Langley have family?”

“I think he was an only child,” I said.

“Talk to the university chaplain, Tom. Maybe he can help you.”

“I will,” I said, then hesitated. “I’m also bothered about the drinking.”

“I know something about that,” she said after a moment of consideration.

“What?” I asked, puzzled.

“How well did you know him?”

“Pretty well, I thought. We went to lunch a few times each semester, and he took me to a Mets game once. What’s up?”

Mindy tapped her foot nervously. “I wasn’t going to tell you this.”

“Tell me what?”

“Late last semester, while you were in Florida, Alexa Ortiz filed charges of professional misconduct against him.”

I moved my chair closer. “What happened?” I asked.

“You didn’t hear this from me. Understand?”

“Don’t get cryptic, Mindy,” I said, getting angry with her evasiveness.

She lifted up her glass of wine and set it back down. “Alexa caught him drunk on the job.”

“What?!” The students at an adjacent table looked my way. I leaned forward and spoke softly. “What are you saying?”

“Alexa was his TA last semester, filling in for you. She

went to his office one evening in the middle of December to get some advice on grading final papers. Langley was bombed. He was slurring his speech. He made a pass at her." Mindy paused. "Evidently, Langley told her to do the best she could, then stumbled and fell over as he tried to put his arm around her waist."

"Or so says Alexa Ortiz."

"Alexa didn't say anything, Tom. That's why I don't want you to say anything." Mindy ran her fingers through her hair. "Martha Radisson told me about it yesterday afternoon. She asked me if I'd ever had any problems with Langley. I had no idea what type of problems she was talking about until she told me about Alexa. Now Langley's gone, and I'm still not sure if I know what Martha's talking about."

"Martha Radisson again," I said.

"Again?"

"I met her niece this morning."

"Long black hair? Expensive clothes?"

"Julianne," I said. "She wanted to take my course."

"Did you let her in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I think Martha wants her to keep an eye on me."

Mindy waited for more, then asked, "Why?"

"Do you know about her feud with Langley?"

"Only that they didn't like each other."

"In 1987 Radisson was denied tenure, due in large part to Langley's sway on the Faculty Review Committee. But a year later, tapping her husband's influence, she beat out Langley for the directorship of the new Center for the Study of American Revolutionary Culture and History."

"How does this concern you?"

"Martha Radisson was my advisor when I was a freshman. She put much effort into steering me in the right direction, which for her meant towards her and away from

Langley. And my indirect relationship with her goes even further back. My father used to run a newspaper, on the northern fringe of Harold Radisson's congressional district. In 1978 my dad helped deliver the votes that got Harold elected." I sat back. "When I matriculated into college Martha introduced herself as Harold's wife and said that she fully expected me to follow my father's political footsteps. She wasn't too happy when I refused to join the Young Democrat Society. She was outright furious when I chose Langley over her as my advisor during my junior year."

"I didn't know that," Mindy said.

"I know Langley didn't drink," I said. I was starting to believe that by repeating those words, I could make fact what everyone else seemed to believe was false.

Mindy finished her wine. "Did you know that Langley was supposed to become department chair next semester?"

"He didn't tell me that."

"There was talk among the grad students that Radisson was going to block his appointment."

"It seems it wasn't just talk."

"Right." She hesitated. "This chain of events explains a lot, Tom. First the Bucci affair. Then Dr. Radisson and Alexa file the charges, blocking Langley's appointment. Then he gets drunk and crashes his car . . ."

I moved forward again, almost falling off the chair, and tried to keep my voice down. "You're implying that Langley killed himself? You really believe that?"

Just then a train of students entered the bar, letting in with them a blast of cold air that hit the back of my neck and set my hair on end.

Mindy shivered too and looked at me with nervous eyes. "I don't know what to believe," she said.



## *About the Author*

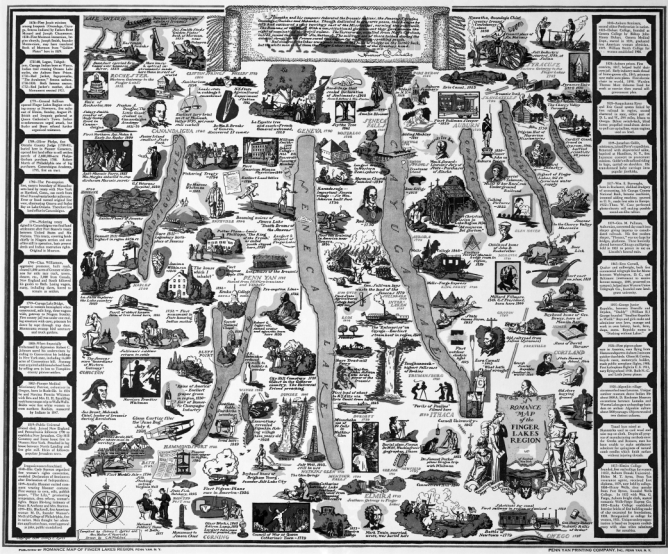
Thomas Pullyblank was born and raised in rural upstate New York. Having earned degrees in history at the University at Albany and a Master of Divinity degree from the Boston University School of Theology, Pullyblank now teaches history at the SUNY College at Oneonta and serves as a United Methodist pastor near Cooperstown, New York. He lives on a small working farm with his wife and son. This is his first novel. He is currently working on a second upstate New York historical mystery featuring Tom Flanagan.

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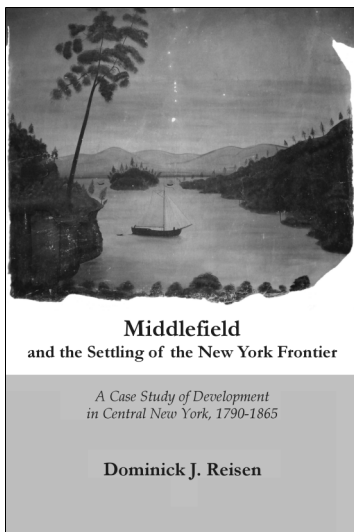
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LCCN: 2009929844

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