

LOCAL

She set out to write about her ancestor, and unveiled a dark secret in her family tree

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Cheyenne Richards shook as she sat on Cornell University's sloping hillside, looking out at the orderly streets of Ithaca stretched out below. Cayuga Lake stretched then faded into the horizon, its bottomless cold water holding a century-old family secret Richards had tried unsuccessfully to ignore.

A California native, Richards had traveled across the country to Ithaca to face it.

This is where her family history took a dark turn; where, long before Richards was born, a man named Edward Rulloff earned the nickname, "The Genius Killer."

He's a character she spent years trying to make sense of and understand, through her historical fiction novel, "The Prisoner's Apprentice," and this trip brought her to the physical center of his story.

It's here, somewhere in the depths of the lake before her, where it's believed the bones of a murdered woman and her baby girl rest.

Behind her, up the hill in Uris Hall, Richards' ancestor's brain is on display — it's one of the largest recorded. She didn't want to see it, had already made that decision before arriving on campus. But earlier, as she'd flipped through local history books in the campus bookstore, she'd changed her mind.

She'd never forget how it looked: like an off-white flower, suspended in bloom and kept safe in a glass jar.

"This thing that I've been able to keep at an arm's length just became incredibly real right in front of me," said Richards.

Outside on the hill, Richards slowed her breath to stop herself from shaking.

She felt "an enormous sense of responsibility" to find the truth of her great-great-great uncle Edward Rulloff's violent life. She owed it to the community impacted by his actions, she said, and to him.

"No one wakes up and decides to be evil," said Richards. "For him, it became a survival mechanism."

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A family secret buried for generations

Published in 2021 by Betterest Books, "The Prisoner's Apprentice" won the 2022 Indie Reader's Discovery Award for Historical Fiction. The debut novel is based on the life of Edward Rulloff, who killed at least three people in the Ithaca area during the 19th century.

Twenty years ago, Richards didn't know Rulloff ever existed.

Working in marketing and website management, she spent her free time researching her great-great grandfather William Rulofson, an esteemed Canadian American photographer who arrived in San Francisco during the California Gold Rush. Richards had dreamed of being a writer as a child. Perhaps, she thought, she'd write about Rulofson.

Up late one night, as she sat alone bathed in the blue light of her laptop, Richards' research unearthed a family secret buried for generations: William Rulofson had a brother.

His name was Edward Rulloff, and he'd committed unforgivable crimes.

A self-taught doctor, lawyer and school teacher who spoke 27 languages, Rulloff murdered his young wife and baby daughter in Tompkins County, allegedly discarding their bodies in Cayuga Lake. Rulloff later murdered a Binghamton shopkeeper during a botched burglary. He was publicly executed by hanging.

Richards shared her unsettling discovery with her family. They were stunned. No one knew about Rulloff.

Richards spent years trying to write about happier things, but the more she tried to bury what she calls “existential shame” about her family connection to a murderer, the more she wanted to know.

“It was like a gravitational force that just kept pulling me into this darkness,” she said.

The only way Richards could free herself from Rulloff’s dark genetic snare, she decided, was to write her way through it.

A 'childlike' understanding of a sociopath

"The Prisoner’s Apprentice” tells the story of the refined intellectual sociopath Rulloff through the eyes of his young accomplice, Albert Jarvis.

The son of the Ithaca undersheriff who jailed Rulloff, Jarvis was tutored by Rulloff and helped him break free. He spent his short life immersed in Rulloff’s crime sprees before drowning in the Chenango River while fleeing the scene of the armed burglary in Binghamton.

Writing from Jarvis' perspective helped Richards see Rulloff’s humanity. She believes Rulloff’s violence was rooted in childhood trauma and that Jarvis had "an innocent, childlike perspective" to understanding him.

"It's very easy to watch the true crime dramas and think of people involved as 'other' to create that psychological distance," said Richards. "But the purpose of this story was not to create a simple cut-out version of Rulloff but to give him a three-dimensional human form."

That process has left Richards proud to have written about the dark family secret which was once a source of shame.

"I am satisfied for continuing on something I felt many times I could have left behind," said Richards.

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