

## The First Two Pages: *Crybaby Lane*

By Laura Ellen Scott

*Crybaby Lane* is Book 2 of the New Royal Mysteries, a series of dark mysteries set in the fictional prison/college town of New Royal, Ohio, where the University and corrections industry have partnered to create a unique Crime Writing Program that attracts intense, often unstable students. Book 1 is *The Mean Bone in Her Body*, featuring an amoral, icy professor named Murgatroyd who suspects a graduate student in the murder of a military widow and her two small children. *Crybaby* sees Murgatroyd's punk ex-con assistant Crocus take on the murder of the last descendent of the town's founding family.

There's a lot of murder in *Crybaby*, and the purpose of the first two pages is to establish that the seeds of New Royal's corruption were sewn at its founding. I grew up in Ohio, with more access to colleges, prisons, and mental health facilities than other kids I knew. I don't know how the rest of the world sees Ohio, but for me it's gothic, with gray skies and brooding institutions.

Most of my books do a bit of history-hopping, and *Crybaby's* first two pages are set in in the Northwest Territory in 1796. A frail, old settler is visited during a blizzard by a robust Norwegian traveler.

*The only good thing about being the last surviving member of the Monongalia Boys is that the blankets are all Joseph's now, as he huddles in*

*his tiny, inadequate shack, waiting for the snow to stop. But here in the doorway is Peter Horup, his new friend. The one he sometimes forgets is real.*

Joseph was once part of a small group of bachelor settlers, but one by one his companions perished. Peter is a latecomer to the settlement, seemingly affectionate (calling him "father"), but as he prepares to burn some precious wood for a Christmas fire, he uses the opportunity to dispatch Joseph.

*Joseph loves it when Peter is affectionate. While he waits for Peter to return, he arranges the kindling just so. His hands shake, and he recalls a time when they were steady—enough for work, enough for fight. Gordon, Gregory, and Apple Boy James. The Boys, they were called. The Boys, they called themselves. All dreamers, baptized in strife, now free and ready for the good life. Who would have thought that nature would defeat them, after man had done his worst?*

*Peter returns, plank in hand.*

*"It's too big, my boy."*

*"Seems just right, father." And down, down it comes.*

Peter's killing of Joseph is the first and last time the raw truth of New Royal's founding is told, meaning that the only one with this information is the reader. I do that in the opening of *Mean Bone*, as well. I made this choice almost as a deliberate rejection of the kind of story where everyone knows what's going on *except* the reader/audience (think of the bat-wielding Negan's infamous "eeny-meeny-miny-moe" scenes of *The Walking Dead*). I prefer a richer approach, where everyone knows something, but no one knows everything.

The murder of Joseph is the original sin of New Royal, and it occurs on the horse trail that will be known as "Crybaby Lane," for the next two centuries:

*When Joseph regains consciousness, he sees the gray sky sailing at speed, and he knows he's being taken out to die in the storm. The only warmth now is around his ankles where Peter drags him. They pause at small, rocky drop that was once a home for fox kits before Apple Boy hunted them. Peter swings into view, his fine, thick boots planted on either side of Joseph. Peter lifts him under the arms like a child and carries him to the edge of the outcropping.*

*Joseph tries to hold onto Peter, but he hasn't the strength. And in the struggle, he discovers a detail, perhaps that last detail he will ever understand.*

*Peter is wearing all the blankets, now.*

From this moment on, Peter Horup is in charge of history, but his legacy as a pioneering hero will be challenged in 2016, when 97 year old Viola Horup, Peter's last living descendent, is murdered in a mansion built on the grounds he seized two hundred years ago. *Crybaby* is largely about how Viola's murder unlocks the past, but the opening pages depict a truth that is too fragile to recover.

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