

## ***The Frozen River, by Ariel Lawhon***

### ***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy***

A fine blend of historical fiction and murder mystery, *The Frozen River*, Ariel Lawhon's new novel, is set in late November 1789, a time known then as "The Year of the Long Winter." Martha Ballard, its central character, was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century midwife in Maine who kept a journal documenting her life's work.

Martha and her husband Ephraim lived at Ballard's Mill, their sawmill on the Kennebec River in Hallowell. At their wedding thirty-five years earlier, Ephraim had given his bride a leather-bound journal. "As a midwife and healer," Martha remarked, "I am witness to the details of my neighbors' private lives, along with their fears and secrets, and I record them for safekeeping." Now in her 50s, Martha has delivered generations of babies in Hallowell.

One evening, after safely delivering a woman's third child, Martha is urgently summoned to town. A frozen body, encased in ice, was found in the Kennebec River. Martha, as Hallowell's healing professional, was required to determine the victim's cause of death. Quickly gathering her medical bag, Martha headed to Pollard's Tavern where the body was taken. The wooden structure "changes its purpose depending on the public function performed within: tavern, courthouse, lodge, meeting hall—or mortuary."

The victim was identified as Joshua Burgess, a man reviled in the community. In the fall, while Pastor Isaac Foster had been away in Boston, his wife Rebecca publicly accused Burgess and Colonel Joseph North of rape. Martha, examining Burgess' beaten body, noticed that his neck was snapped and there were rope burns below his jaw, indicating that Burgess had been hanged before he was thrown into the river.

At the inquest the next day, the presiding judge was none other than Colonel North, who had been elevated to the position for his service in the French and Indian War. Called to the stand, Martha described the victim's wounds, but her testimony was disputed by Dr. Benjamin Page, who introduced himself as a recent Harvard Medical School graduate. When Dr. Page declared that Burgess' injuries were due to being swept downstream in the ice, Colonel North quickly ruled that the death was "accidental drowning." It was now up to Martha to solve the Burgess murder and also bring Colonel North to justice.

Ariel Lawhon's well researched historical mystery novel contains fascinating details of the court system in early America. For example, a woman could not give testimony in court unless her husband or her father were present. On a frosty winter day, *The Frozen River* would be a good reading choice.