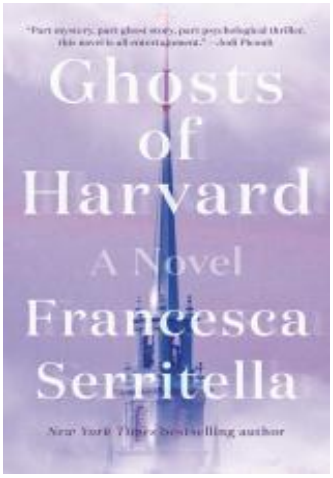
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Ghosts of Harvard

by Francesca Serritella



About the Book

A Harvard freshman becomes obsessed with her schizophrenic brother?s suicide. Then *she* starts hearing voices.

Cadence Archer arrives on Harvard?s campus desperate to understand why her brother, Eric, a genius who developed paranoid schizophrenia, took his own life there the year before. Losing Eric has left a black hole in Cady?s life, and while her decision to follow in her brother?s footsteps threatens to break her family apart, she is haunted by questions of what she might have missed. And there?s only one place to find answers.

As Cady struggles under the enormous pressure at Harvard, she investigates her brother?s final year, armed only with a blue notebook of Eric?s cryptic scribblings. She knew he had been struggling with paranoia, delusions and illusory enemies --- but what tipped him over the edge? With her suspicions mounting, Cady herself begins to hear voices, seemingly belonging to three ghosts who walked the university?s hallowed halls --- or huddled in its slave quarters. Among them is a person whose name has been buried for centuries, and another whose name mankind will never forget.

Does she share Eric?s illness, or is she tapping into something else? Cady doesn?t know how or why these ghosts are contacting her, but as she is drawn deeper into their worlds, she believes they?re moving her closer to the truth about Eric, even as keeping them secret isolates her further. Will listening to these voices lead her to the one voice she craves --- her brother?s --- or will she follow them down a path to her own destruction?

Discussion Guide

1. College is often called ?the happiest time? in a person?s life, but it can also be a stressful period of transition and pressure. In what ways are the anxieties Cady has going into college unique, and in what ways are they typical? What kinds of pressures are on young people today? Which were unique to you or your generation? Did anything about

Serritella?s description of life at Harvard surprise you? Would you want to attend Harvard or send your child there?

2. In the book, Cady is haunted by Harvard?s past inhabitants, literally and figuratively, and burdened by the expectations of the future. Is there any time or place in your life where you felt the weight of history? What about a time in your life when you felt the pressure of high expectations? Did you feel motivated to rise to the occasion, or paralyzed by fear of failure?

3. Potential is a theme in this novel: the potential of genius, the pressure to live up to that potential, the potential of a predisposition to mental illness, the potential thwarted by slavery, discrimination and war. In our culture, we love prodigies, wunderkind and rising stars. Why is potential so fascinating and prized in our culture? Is it over-valued? Psychologists say it is generally easier to imagine positive outcomes rather than negative ones. Is that true for you?

4. At the outset of the novel, Cady?s identity has been shaken by the illness and loss of her brother, her hero. Her role in her family has also changed; once in the background, she is now the focus of her parents? attention and concern. Do you think people get assigned roles in their family? Did that happen to you or your children? How do the stories families tell, and the stories we tell ourselves, shape our identity and expectations? Have you ever had to challenge those personal narratives or family myths?

5. Cady believes the voices she?s hearing are ghosts. On the other hand, she?s a lonely girl under acute emotional distress from a family with a history of mental illness. Do you think the ghosts are real, or is Cady suffering from auditory hallucinations? Why do you think so?

6. Cady likens the nature of the ghosts to visiting her childhood home years later, where ?she could hear Eric?s little-boy voice echoing around the stairwell. Her family?s past selves were captured between those walls, preserved in memory, like an insect in amber.? Later, Cady co-opts a theoretical physics concept about hidden dimensions in which space-time ?folds over? to explain it. Do you believe in ghosts, or have you ever had a paranormal experience? If so, what is your ?theory? of ghosts, what they?re like, and how they reach us? Do you agree with Whit that ?ghosts don?t haunt the living. We haunt them.??

7. Cady regrets her role in what she believes was the turning point in Eric?s life that set him on a course of self-destruction. Although, in reality, his life story wasn?t as simple a narrative as she thought. In what ways are the three ghosts at turning points in their own lives and at turning points in American history? How are they examples of potential thwarted? In retrospect, what was a turning point in your life?

8. Cady is haunted by those what-if scenarios: what if she could have said or done something different with her brother, could his death have been prevented? She carries those alternate realities in her mind and tortures herself with what could have been. She longs to rewrite history, and the ghosts initially seem to offer that chance --- but it can never be done. Do you have any what-if parallel universes in your mind? Life with an ex-partner, a different career, a different life choice? Have you ever compared yourself or your choices to a hypothetical alternative? Is that fair to do?

9. As the novel states, ?history is never as simple a narrative as we write in books.? With controversies over Confederate monuments, Christopher Columbus, and the slave-holding history of lauded figures and institutions, we?re in a cultural moment where we?re challenging long-held histories. Is this upheaval necessary? Why is it painful to let go of idealized versions of historical figures or places? Did learning that Harvard?s leadership once participated in slavery change your

perspective on the school? Which is more powerful, fact or fiction? Is a comforting lie ever preferable to a brutal truth?

10. Cady is haunted by why Eric killed himself. She goes to Harvard looking for answers, while suffering under the secret belief that it was her fault. By the end of the book, we learn other characters have traced their own lines of responsibility in Eric?s death. Can one simple narrative be accurate? What do you think were contributing factors to Eric?s suicide? Could his death have been prevented? Have you ever made a decision where you were confident of your assessment, only to later learn you didn?t have all the relevant information?

11. Sadly, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people aged 10-24. Why do you think young people today might be at greater risk of suicide than in past decades? Are colleges doing enough to provide adequate mental health services to students? Do the privacy laws excluding parents from the medical care of their children, legally adults, help or hurt students? well-being?

12. Is grieving a suicide more difficult than other types of loss? If so, why? How can we better support those who have lost someone to suicide and dispel the unfair stigma?

13. The phrase Cady hears at the Sever entrance whispering wall, ?It takes only an error to father a sin,? is a genuine quote from the real Robert Oppenheimer. What do you think it means? Can you see how it applies to Oppenheimer?s life, both in the novel and in history? Do you think it applies to Cady?s story? What about your own? Are we responsible for all the unintended consequences of our actions?

14. Robert tells Cady, ?I labor under my awful fact of excellence as if I am bound for extraordinary things. But even if, in the end, I?ve got to satisfy myself with testing toothpaste in a lab, I don?t want to know till it has happened.? This snippet of dialogue is a quote from a genuine letter Robert Oppenheimer wrote during his Harvard days. Do you agree with him? If you could know your future, would you want to?

15. At the end of the novel, Cady thinks to herself, ?Now she understood that we must love people whom we cannot control, in fact we are lucky to love and be loved by people we cannot control. If we could control the person, love wouldn?t be a gift.? What do you think of this observation? Do you think you can control or influence your loved ones? Have you ever been frustrated by a loved one making a choice you didn?t agree with? Do you ever put pressure on yourself and your behavior, as if your actions could influence someone else?s? Does love ever mean letting go of control?

16. People often say ?Hindsight is 20/20,? but is this true? In the novel, Robert argues that our feelings about the end result color our perception of the past, so it?s ?poor scientific method.? And in listening to the minister?s sermon at the end, Cady reflects on the ?inherent incompleteness of any single perspective.? What do you think? Should we be more compassionate with ourselves, even, or especially, in hindsight?

Author Bio

Francesca Serritella is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of two novels: FULL BLOOM and

GHOSTS OF HARVARD. GHOSTS OF HARVARD was nominated for Best First Novel by International Thriller Writers. She also co-authored a nine-book series of essay collections with her mother, author Lisa Scottoline, based on their Sunday column in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. She graduated cum laude from Harvard University, where she won multiple awards for her fiction, including the Thomas T. Hoopes Prize. She lives in New York City with her 18-year-old cat and her new puppy.

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