

The Cloud Atlas

by Liam Callanan

About the Book

Set against the magnificent backdrop of Alaska in the waning days of World War II, *The Cloud Atlas* is an enthralling debut novel, a story of adventure and awakening—and of a young soldier who came to Alaska on an extraordinary, top-secret mission...and found a world that would haunt him forever.

Drifting through the night, whisper-quiet, they were the most sublime manifestations of a desperate enemy: Japanese balloon bombs. Made of rice paper, at once ingenious and deadly, they sailed thousands of miles across the Pacific...and once they started landing, the U.S. scrambled teams to find and defuse them, and then keep them secret from an already anxious public. Eighteen-year-old Louis Belk was one of those men. Dispatched to the Alaskan frontier, young Sergeant Belk was better trained in bomb disposal than in keeping secrets. And the mysteries surrounding his mission only increased when he met his superior officer—a brutal veteran OSS spy hunter who knew all too well what the balloons could do—and Lily, a Yup'ik Eskimo woman who claimed she could see the future.

Louis's superior ushers him into a world of dark secrets; Lily introduces Louis to an equally disorienting world of spirits—and desire. But the world that finally tests them all is Alaska, whose vastness cloaks mysteries that only become more frightening as they unravel. Chasing after the ghostly floating weapons, Louis embarks upon an adventure that will lead him deep into the tundra. There, on the edge of the endless wilderness, he will make a discovery and a choice that will change the course of his life.

Praise for the Book

“First-time novelist expertly fictionalizes one of WWII’s least-known stories...a haunting story that will remind many of Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*—and that merits the comparison.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A poignant and lyrical first novel written with the assurance of a master—Alaska is beautifully realized in all its harshness and native magic.”

—T. C. Boyle, *Drop City*

"Beautifully written and astonishingly well researched.... It was the setting that swept me away, but the characters that I will remember."

—Mark Johnson, *The San Jose Mercury News*

Courtesy of Randomhouse

About the Author

Title: Liam Callanan

American

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Personal Information:

Born 1968; married; children: four daughters. Education: Yale University, B.A.; Georgetown University, M.A., 1993; George Mason University, M.F.A. Addresses: Home: Alexandria, VA. Agent: Wendy Sherman Associates, Inc., 450 7th Ave., Ste. 3004, New York, NY 10123.

Career:

Writer and educator. Worked variously at corporate jobs; Georgetown University, School of Summer and Continuing Education, Washington, DC, creative writing instructor, beginning 1993; University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, faculty member in English department and coordinator of Ph.D. writing program. Contributor of audio pieces to National Public Radio.

Awards:

Edgar Allan Poe Award finalist, Mystery Writers of America, 2005, for *The Cloud Atlas*.

Writings:

Novels

- *The Cloud Atlas*, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- *All Saints*, Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 2007.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Slate*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Washington Post Magazine*, *Forbes*, *FYI*, *Parents*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Writers Chronicle*, *failbetter*, and *Phoebe*.

Sidelights

Writer Liam Callanan draws energy from his varied activities, which include teaching creative writing, reading works on National Public Radio, and writing reviews for several periodicals. When one day he chanced to pick up a "cloud atlas" in the government documents room at the George Mason University library, he thought at first that he was holding a book about government efforts to map clouds--a fanciful and futile effort--rather than what it really was, a field guide to different kinds of clouds. The book sparked the idea for his first novel, *The Cloud Atlas*, which is based on a footnote of World War II history, the Japanese military's use of air balloons to carry explosives across the Pacific Ocean to land on American soil. The American soil on which they landed was Alaska, making it the setting for this "remarkable first novel," as *Library Journal* reviewer Christine Perkins described it. When Callanan looked further, he discovered Robert Mikesh's nonfiction study, *Japan's World War II Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America*, which contained maps of where the Japanese bombs had landed. "That was when I really started thinking about writing this subject," Callanan recalled to Greg Langlois on the *Blue & Gray Online* Web site. "My imagination had just started flowing from there." Callanan's copious research on the topic involved visiting the Air and Space Museum archives, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the army's Ordnance Museum, all in nearby Washington, DC. To evoke a sense of place, he watched Alaskan Web cams, listened to Alaskan radio stations broadcast over the Internet, and finally, using money from the publisher's advance, took a trip to Alaska to check his facts and impressions. Callanan's diligence paid off, for as Jonathan Kiefer, reviewing the novel for the *New York Times* commented: "Callanan wears the burdens of historical fiction with ease."

The Cloud Atlas describes the activities of Louis Belk, who early in the novel is a young sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Corps with the job of disposing of the Japanese balloons and their incendiary cargoes. While in the North, Belk must also deal with an abusive superior officer and a beautiful half-Yup'ik, half-Russian prostitute. By novel's end, Belk has become a Roman Catholic priest interested in native shamanism; he recounts the tale in a series of flashbacks. In "Belk's offbeat, lyrical narration," as a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer described it, the priest reminisces about his life to a dying Eskimo shaman under his care. The character-driven quality of the novel elicited positive comment from reviewers. For example, *Booklist* contributor Kaite Mediatore found both the characters and plot to be "alluring," and *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Alynda Wheat commented that Callanan's use of imagery and interior voice "beautifully convey Belk's sense of dislocation and fear." While the latter reviewer wished for more action in the plot, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor differed, noting that "Callanan's complex plot tightens neatly." The reviewer even found echoes of Michael Ondaatje's acclaimed novel *The English Patient* in *The Cloud Atlas*. According to the *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, Callanan's debut is a "haunting story," a view shared by the *Publishers Weekly* critic, who called *The Cloud Atlas* "atmospheric and moving" as well as "impressively assured."

In his second novel, *All Saints*, Callanan features fifty-year-old Emily Hamilton, a three-time divorcee working as a teacher in a Catholic high school in Southern California. Emily, who became pregnant when she was teenager and had a miscarriage, is still

dealing with her troubled past as she tries to help the upper-crust students in her church history class deal with their problems. Emily, who narrates the story, begins the novel by admitting that she kissed an eighteen-year-old in one of her classes and also has feelings for one of the school's priests. "The book is a lot about faith, for me," Callanan was quoted as saying on the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Web site. "I'm very interested in the notion of faith--people's ability to believe in things they can't see. I think love is like that. I think that's one of the things that Emily struggles with here." Many reviewers praised *All Saints*. "Callanan gets into [Emily's] head with page-turning panache and authority," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor. Helin Jung, writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, noted that Emily "speaks with a voice that is frustratingly real and endearing."

Further Readings About the Author:

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, December 15, 2003, Kaite Mediatore, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 725.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, February 13, 2004, Alynda Wheat, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 75; March 2, 2007, Helin Jung, review of *All Saints*, p. 73.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2003, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 1409; December 1, 2006, review of *All Saints*, p. 1185.
- *Library Journal*, March 1, 2004, Christine Perkins, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 107; January 1, 2007, Christine Perkins, review of *All Saints*, p. 87.
- *New York Times Book Review*, March 7, 2004, Jonathan Kiefer, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 16.
- *Publishers Weekly*, December 15, 2003, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 51; November 13, 2006, review of *All Saints*, p. 32.
- *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, April, 2004, Richard Seamon, review of *The Cloud Atlas*, p. 86.

Online

- *Blue & Gray Online*, <http://www.georgetown.edu/> (August 8, 2004), Greg Langlois, "Continual Education."
- *FWOMP.com*, <http://www.fwomp.com/> (August 8, 2004), Byron Merritt, "Interview with Liam Callanan."
- *Liam Callanan Home Page*, <http://www.liamcallanan.com> (August 9, 2004).
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, <http://www.jsonline.com/> (March 3, 2007), "Talking With: Liam Callanan."
- *OnMilwaukee.com*, <http://www.onmilwaukee.com/> (August 23, 2007), Heather Leszczewicz, "Callanan Swaps Sexes in 'All Saints.'"*

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Author Essay:

How I Wrote the Book: Background(or, the story behind the novel)

People usually interrupt me with two questions when I start telling them about this book. One, are the balloons real? That's easy; they are. The next question is tougher: when did you first learn about them?

The strange thing is that I don't ever remember not knowing about them. I'm a compulsive reader of footnotes and a cataloger of curiosities. Long before the internet, I followed old-fashioned hyperlinks through libraries and museums: a citation here would lead me to a source there and that source to another book or article, and then on to another one, and soon enough, the day was shot. I'd gone to the library to look up something on the Sierras, say, and emerged knowing something about the house where Grant died.

It must have been during one of those forays that I first came across the very strange story of WWII Japan's paper balloon bombs (also called fire balloons, or Fu-Go weapons). But I'm sure I didn't come across much of a story. Part of the reason the balloons remain such a secret today is that two entire nations were committed to keeping them a secret back then: Japan didn't want America to know where the balloons were coming from, and America didn't want Japan to know that their balloons were, in fact, reaching North America. The U.S. banned all news reports of balloons--you can read more about this in the site's "About the balloons" section--and though the censorship order was later rescinded, silence followed for decades.

There have been a few exceptions. In 1996, John McPhee published a New Yorker article about forensic geology (the article is collected in his book, *Irons in the Fire*). One part of the article dealt with the balloons, or more specifically, with the sand the balloons used as ballast: by examining the unique makeup of this sand, US government geologists were able to determine the balloons' launch sites. And in the 1970s, Robert C. Mikesch, a retired Air Force officer and National Air and Space Museum curator, wrote a slim volume, *Japan's World War II Balloon Bomb Attacks on North America*. It remains the most comprehensive history of this strange weapon.

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Another question people ask is how I wrote the book. At first, I thought people were looking to me to provide a deep, thoughtful, soul-searching answer about what it was like to write a novel--this novel--in an age where communication has become both paramount and pedestrian.

But it turns out people just wanted to know if I wrote with a pen, did I listen to music while I wrote, how long did it take? All the important stuff. So:

Since elementary school, I've only written one piece with a pen. It was on the back of a bank envelope that I found in the glove compartment of our car while I was waiting to

pick up my wife from a late class at business school. It wound up on the New York Times Op Ed page and was later anthologized.

Good omens, but the fact is, I can't stand drafting in longhand. I compose on the computer. Sometimes at home, but in order to escape the telephone and the scarring addiction that is web browsing, I often haul a laptop off to a nearby coffee shop/bakery that has an unbeatable freebie trifecta: free parking, free samples and free refills. (To my small regret, they've also introduced free wi-fi access--I've learned to leave my laptop's wi-fi card at home.) Despite the distractions of a public place, I find that writing there focuses me, in no small part because I'm so afraid someone will steal my laptop, I almost never leave my seat--which, as any writer will tell you, is the first step to getting any work done.

I do listen to music. When I was writing at home, I listened almost exclusively to Anchorage's KNBA to keep me in an Alaskan state of mind even when I wasn't in the state itself. I've kept listening after finishing the book, because I've decided that, for my money (which I mean literally; I donate), it's the coolest radio station in the country. (Outside of Washington, DC's WAMU, of course.) When I wrote away from home, I listened to one CD and one CD only. I have a habit of doing this during writing projects; I'm not sure why. The music melts into a kind of zen koan and I hardly even notice it's repeating. Senior year in college, I listened to Tanita Tikaram's *Ancient Heart*. For *The Cloud Atlas*, I listened to Morten Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna*, and for the novel that's following it, I've listened almost exclusively to Bossalingo's *Reprise*.

It took about two years to write. Or three years. I'm not really sure how long it took, or rather, I'm not sure how to measure it. I started working on the book in 2000, but every day since then was not spent on *The Cloud Atlas*. There were plenty of days, for example, more devoted to diapering, trips to the pediatrician for ear infections, trips to the pharmacy for antibiotics than they were to writing. And, of course, while I wish no ill on my daughters' middle ears, there were definitely days when I appreciated having a guilt-free reason to desert the novel. Well, mostly guilt-free.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Part One begins with a prologue depicting the Japanese boy's final hours. How does this initial scene affect your reading of the novel? What conflicts does it establish regarding the narrator and his own road to adulthood?
2. Louis Belk's first line in Chapter One is, "I'm a wanted man." Discuss the irony in this choice of words. In what ways is he a fugitive? By whom is he "wanted?"
3. Louis chooses to stay with Ronnie through the night when he sees "no morphine" written on his chart, a reminder of the boy's suffering as well. What are the politics of pain in **The Cloud Atlas**? How is Louis able to relieve his own pain?
4. The Alaskan landscape is in many ways a primary character. Do you see this landscape reflected in the emotional lives of its inhabitants?
5. How does Louis navigate sexuality? Do you view his celibacy as an indication of his strength or his fragility? What perpetuates the novel's chain of unrequited love?
6. Discuss the narrative choices made by Liam Callanan in this novel. What is the effect of his use of the first person? How would you characterize Louis' voice? In what way do the past and present mirror or enhance each other as **The Cloud Atlas** unfolds?
7. Do shaman and priest share much common ground in Louis' world? Should they? Are the missionaries and military personnel in this corner of the globe for opposing reasons? Who are ultimately the novel's most noble characters?
8. Various perspectives of an afterlife are offered through the characters in **The Cloud Atlas**. Which of these notions do you find to be the most plausible, and the most comforting?
9. Who were Louis' surrogate parents after he left the orphanage? Do you count Gurley among them? In what way do ancestry, class, and education level determine the status of the characters in this community?
10. The author undertook extensive research in creating **The Cloud Atlas**. What historical or geographic aspects of the novel were most surprising to you?
11. Rice paper plays a key role in the balloon-bomb strategy, and Gurley's discovery of its durability has nearly fatal results. How does this duality—paper as deadly yet delicate—reflect other aspects of the Japanese plot?
12. Does Ronnie's life story reflect Louis' at all? Does fate or circumstance perpetuate their friendship?

13. What ties Louis to this locale? What mysteries are finally resolved for him in those closing three days? Has his relationship to religion been transformed in any way?
14. What is the effect of Louis' merging memories in the novel's final pages? How are birth and death portrayed?
15. What contemporary comparisons can you make to this chapter in World War II history? Who are today's Sergeant Belks?

Courtesy of RandomHouseInc.