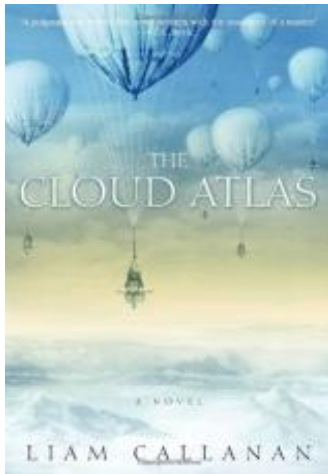


The Cloud Atlas

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.

At once a heart-quickenning mystery and a unique love story, **The Cloud Atlas** is also a haunting, lyrical rendering of a little-known chapter in history. Brilliantly imagined, beautifully told, this is storytelling at its very best.

Discussion Guide

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. What are Lily's powers? What is the source of her attachment to Gurley? How do you envision Saburo?

9. 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?

10. 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?

11. The author undertook extensive research in creating **The Cloud Atlas**. What historical or geographic aspects of the novel were most surprising to you?

12. 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?

13. Does Ronnie's life story reflect Louis' at all? Does fate or circumstance perpetuate their friendship?

14. 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?

15. What is the effect of Louis' merging memories in the novel's final pages? How are birth and death portrayed?

16. What contemporary comparisons can you make to this chapter in World War II history? Who are today's Sergeant Belks?

Author Bio

Liam Callanan's novel *PARIS BY THE BOOK*, a national bestseller, was translated into multiple languages and won the 2019 Edna Ferber Prize. He's also won the Hunt Prize, and his first novel, *THE CLOUD ATLAS*, was a finalist for an Edgar Award. Liam's work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and he's recorded numerous essays for public radio. He's taught for the Warren Wilson MFA program for writers, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He lives in Wisconsin.

Critical Praise

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

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Publication Date: October 26, 2004

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Dial Press Trade Paperback

ISBN-10: 0385336950

ISBN-13: 9780385336956