PDF | The Cloud Atlas

by Liam Callanan
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-quickening 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.
In his gorgeous debut novel, The Cloud Atlas, Liam Callanan merges fact and fantasy in a dual narrative set in Alaska amidst the waning days of World War II. In a hospice care facility Louis Belk is an aged priest providing religious comfort and confession to a dying friend, a Yup’ik shaman named Ronnie. But, as Ronnie reaches the final stages of life, Belk begins a confession of his own.

The narrative turns back to young Belk’s career as a bomb disposal specialist during the war. When Belk witnesses a bizarre balloon explosive kill several soldiers at Fort Cronkhite outside of San Francisco, he is summarily shipped to Alaska to join a top secret military unit dedicated to uncovering the mystery of what turn out to be Japanese balloon bombs (Callanan based this story on an actual Japanese program that was largely covered up by the US government during the war). Belk’s commanding officer, Captain Gurley—a cross between Conrad’s Colonel Kurz and Melville’s Ahab—is a disgraced former OSS man with a Princeton pedigree and an artificial leg. The leg is a permanent reminder of his failure to defuse his first balloon bomb, and it fuels an obsession to discover and collect all such bombs in the future. In possession of a captured leather-bound atlas filled with maps and neat Japanese script, Gurley is also convinced that the Japanese are about to launch far more deadly cargo on the balloons, perhaps spies or plague virus. Meanwhile, Belk and Gurley become embroiled in an explosive love triangle with the local fortune teller, Lily, a woman with an uncanny ability to read people’s lives but unable to understand her own destructive passions or escape her demons.

In unfolding this complicated story, Callan manages to keep the development of Belk, Lily, and Gurney in an almost perfect balance with the telling of a well-paced and compelling war-time narrative. Callanan enriches the novel with details of 1940s bomb disposal procedures and provides a thorough anatomy of Japanese balloon bombs. He also establishes Alaska—a place seemingly caught between American and Yup’ik culture—as a space for American magical realism, where spirit animals and Catholic mysticism can cohabitate. As a first effort, The Cloud Atlas is all silver lining. — Patrick O’Kelley

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