



## Richard Rayner

**The Cloud Sketcher**  
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### An Interview with Richard Rayner

**Q: This novel is a departure from your previous novel, *Murder Book*, although some elements of detective fiction are still present. Does it signal a permanent change of direction in your work?**

**A:** *Murder Book* was Los Angeles cops and robbers, in other words a straightforward genre novel, although it arose out of real and true experiences I'd had with the LAPD while reporting for the *New York Times* magazine, so it didn't quite feel like that as I was writing it. It felt like fictional reportage on the city in which I live. Only later did I realize, hey, I've written a police procedural. But I've always loved what good genre writers give you: story, pace, movement, life, a sense of things happening on the page. Likewise, I find a lot of so-called literary novels dull fare indeed. *The Cloud Sketcher* is very

different in that it's historical and has a big sweep-encompassing the Finnish Civil War, architecture and idealism, New York in the 1920s, the Jazz Age etc. The element of detective fiction is murder, a turning point in the story, although I don't think that violence belongs to, or should be left to, the crime genre alone. I suppose what I tried to do with *The Cloud Sketcher*, and will be hoping to do in the novel now in progress *The Devil's Wind* (set in Los Angeles and Las Vegas in the 1950s, the time of HUAC and bebop jazz and A-bomb tests, an age of anxiety) is to keep the excitement, the pop and fizz, of genre, while removing the more obvious superstructure. I described *The Cloud Sketcher* to my editor as 'operatic history', heightened history that hopefully brings an era, or eras, startlingly and passionately to life. On the whole I'm suspicious of literary categories - writing either lives or it doesn't.

**Q: Do you have a background in architecture?**

**A:** Not really, although I remembered while I was writing the book that an early dream of mine, during my pre-teen years when I was growing up in the north of England, had been to be an architect. The only trouble was that I had, and have, zero drawing skills. The average five-year-old is Rembrandt compared to me. So that was that. This early fantasy was an unconscious factor in the beginnings of *The Cloud Sketcher*, however, and the process of researching and completing the novel gave me an architectural education - I read books, spoke to many architects and professors of architecture, spent days on end walking around buildings - churches and skyscrapers especially. While I was doing this something rather wonderful happened. It's the book's gift to me, I guess. I began to experience architecture in a different way. That's to say, I realized the extent to which designed space can have an effect on you - for good or ill. When you walk inside a great building your spirit lifts. It's an actual physical experience. Some buildings kiss you, others comfort you, some put strength in your stride and make you walk with extra snap and confidence. Some buildings - like The Chrysler Building, or Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim, or Lars Sonck's cathedral in Tampere in Finland - just make you gasp with joy and sheer amazement at the idea that someone, another human being, thought of and caused to be made this extraordinary, beautiful, breathtaking space. I became preoccupied with this and one of the things I tried hard to do in *The Cloud Sketcher* (I don't know whether I succeeded) was to describe the experience of architecture in this emotional way, and to consider what it might be like to be a man - my hero, Esko Vaananen - whose life's dream is to sculpt joy out of stone and air.

**Q: Did you intend the act of designing and constructing a building to be a symbol? If so, of what?**

**A:** Sure, I think all buildings are symbols. A tent is a symbol. The Spanish-style bungalow where I live in Venice, California is a symbol. And as buildings get bigger so the symbol appears to grow weightier. In medieval times generations of men and women worked on structures they knew would not be completed in their lifetime, or their children's lifetimes. I'm thinking of the old cathedrals of France and England. As a student, I spent a lot of time in the east of England, in East Anglia, a region that is swampy and damp and foggy - pretty miserable from a climactic point of view. Yet whenever I traveled down there from the north I had my heart in my mouth because, as the train drew closer, I saw a speck on the horizon growing bigger and closer, and bigger and closer, until its vaulting lines finally became clear, like a Gothic ship sailing through the flatness of the Fenlands: Ely Cathedral, built hundreds of years before so that man could reach towards God and show himself what he could do when he put his mind to it. The skyscraper is perhaps the most loaded symbol of all. First of all, it is an emblematically American building. It denotes American confidence, American swagger, American know how and ambition - admirable qualities. That skyscrapers can exist at all is due to two pieces of technology - structural steel (you can build it high) and the elevator (there's no use in being able to build it high unless you can get up there) - that were first placed in spectacular combination in America, in Chicago, by a genius named Louis Sullivan. The form caught on: in good times, in boom times (these things are expensive), corporations and billionaires have traditionally engaged in competitive fugues of skyscraper building: witness the so-called skyscraper wars of the 1920s, which produced gaggles of towers in lower and mid-Manhattan, a background that I use in the novel. And so the skyscraper came to be perceived as a symbol of something else: of arrogance, perhaps, certainly of American world business dominance, of money. Now the skyscraper is a symbol of American tragedy too. When terrorists destroyed the twin towers of the World Trade Center they wreaked terrible and devastating human carnage; but the attack was also a symbolic one - they struck at buildings that soared in all our psyches as beacons of American aspiration. I'm pretty sure that someone in New York will respond to this horror by building another skyscraper, different but in its own way as splendid as WTC; it will be a gesture, a symbolic act, just as Nelson Rockefeller's determination to raise the civic magnificence of Rockefeller Center throughout the hard years of the Depression sent a message: we're not beaten, we're not even lying down - look at this!

**Q: Do you feel that the creative person is always ahead of his time or out of sync with the rest of society? Does that condition, therefore, provide a fertile ground for tragedy? Is that why Esko meets with a grim fate? And is that fate symbolic?**

**A:** I think that writers, architects, painters and so on are always reacting to the society they see around them, observing that society, criticizing it, endorsing it, trying to penetrate it and figure a way to exist within it while getting on with what they do. There's conflict, and, for the novelist plotting his story, that's useful. With architects the situation is heightened, because the architect is nearly always a hired gun. He's designing the project at someone else's behest. And the bigger the project, the more obstructive and demanding the client is likely to be. In the case of a skyscraper the client is probably going to a powerful company or a very fat cat. This multiplies the problems and drama: (Just think of going to work for Donald Trump while trying to fulfill your own artistic vision. Good luck!) But that's the dilemma of the architect down the ages. It's fascinating. In Ayn Rand's famous novel *The Fountainhead* her hero architect Howard

Roark does indeed spend most of the novel out of sync with society until Roark, through force of will and genius, whips society into shape and brings it to heel. Now this is no doubt a very comforting idea for those of us who harbor fantasies of romantic individualism and hero-worship, but I don't think it's the way architecture actually gets made in the real world. In order to get what he wants Esko dirties, bloodies, his hands in the waters any real architect must swim in. That's what brings about his fate. But he isn't destroyed: his building is achieved, and his soul lives on.

**Q: Which of the characters in this novel are real people? Is the protagonist either based on or a composite of any real-life architect?**

**A:** I drew some of the background for Esko's character from Eliel Saarinen, an architect in the *art nouveau* style (or *jugend* as it was called in Northern Europe) who was Finland's leading architect in the early part of the 20th century. Finland is a very flat country and yet Saarinen was obsessed with tall buildings. He built the wonderful railway station that still resides in the heart of Helsinki - and it has a thumping great tower at the side of it. In 1922 the *Chicago Tribune* invited architects from all over the world to compete in a contest to design their new office building. The prize was \$50,000, plus the winner would get to build his or her skyscraper right there on Michigan Avenue. Not too shabby. Saarinen came second with what was widely acclaimed at the time as the best design. Both Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan said publicly they thought he should have won. Certainly Saarinen's design was widely imitated throughout America in the rest of that decade - not least by Raymond Hood, who won the *Tribune* contest, built his skyscraper (now known in Chicago as "The Bat Tower"), became New York's leading skyscraper architect of the era, and always generously acknowledged his debt to Eliel. Saarinen himself was so encouraged by this success that he moved with his family from Finland to America where, although he did many designs, he never got to build a skyscraper. When I first heard this story I thought: there's the basis for a novel - it would be about a man who dreams of something and what he has to go through, what emotional and psychological crises he must endure, to achieve it. I made Esko a Finn; I made him obsessed by tall buildings and had him come to America; but there the resemblance to Saarinen ceases. In the writing of the book he became his own character, with his own different needs and motives and so on. Esko is less worldly than Eliel was, more driven and passionate; his architectural style is more modernistic, more like the other great Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto. He aspires to create beauty because he himself is ugly. Saarinen's son, incidentally, was Eero Saarinen and he became perhaps the most eminent American architect of the 1950s and early 1960s - he built the St. Louis arch and a host of other buildings, among them a skyscraper in New York. Eliel in a way had his wish in the end. The other character who has some basis in real life is Kirby, the older American architect who becomes Esko's mentor. He has the flamboyance of Frank Lloyd Wright, and some of Wright's career history too. But I was also - believe it or not - thinking of Robert Redford when I wrote the character, not because I hoped that Redford might play the part in a movie based on the book (in my dreams) but because I got to know Redford well while profiling him for *The New Yorker*. His struck me as a very American story - a guy who'd come out of nowhere to negotiate a remarkable career as actor, filmmaker, and artistic entrepreneur. Redford has always gone stubbornly his own way - and yet achieved much. I thought that, if I ever had an artistic mentor, I'd like him to be a combination of Frank Lloyd Wright and Robert Redford. So I created the Kirby character with that in mind.

**Q: Finland is both a beautiful and usual setting for a novel. What about the country captured your imagination? Did you identify a national character there? Does any of Esko - his values, personality, choices, worldview - relate to his Finnish background?**

**A:** My wife is a Finn, and it only became obvious to me after I'd finished the book that it is in all sorts of ways a love letter to her and to two countries, the one where's she's from, and which has come to occupy a large part of my life, and that where we now live, America: Finland fascinates me because it's history and culture are so rich and yet unknown anywhere else. For instance: I'd no idea that Finland had been through a civil war in 1918 (it happened on the back of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia) until I spent time there. Finland's a proud little country that fought for its independence and survival throughout the 20th century. The Finnish character is traditionally stoic, gloomy, poetic, stubborn, a little impish - if you say these things in Finland you get accused of stereotyping, but there's truth in them nonetheless. Winters are hard and long, darkness prevails for much of the year, and luck is not expected to be forthcoming. The landscapes and lakescapes of the country are untouched by time, though now everybody has a Nokia phone. To walk in the depths of the Finnish forest, or across a frozen lake in midwinter when it's 30 degrees below and the northern lights glimmer through the crystal stillness in the huge sky above your head - these are soulful, unforgettable experiences. Esko fights and fights to transcend his origins - and yet remains a Finn, very proud as they tend to be.