



## The Cloud Sketcher

By Richard Rayner  
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### Introduction

**"Katerina was his passion and his flaw; his inspiration, his blindness; his history; his future; she was the million stars that pricked and made brilliant his soul" (p. 328).**

For a little boy, eleven years old at the beginning of the 20th century, great dreams begin with simple things. A clipped-out newspaper story about a new invention called the elevator inspires a passion to build skyscrapers, or as they are called in Finland, "cloud sketchers." And with an equal force, a beautiful little girl's hand mirror becomes his talisman for a grand, impossible, and ultimately tragic love. Yet, when Richard Rayner's epic novel opens, it is already 1928, the luxury liner *Ile de France* is docking, and Esko Vaananen, a famous architect, is about to be arrested for murder. What brings him to this crossroads and has entangled him in a homicide is the tale of a child who becomes a man driven to do extraordinary things. Rayner's rapidly unfolding narrative, filled with sharp surprises and unexpected encounters, flashes back to Esko's childhood in a tiny Finnish village as close to the Arctic Circle as Helsinki. There Esko has already been burned - literally and figuratively - by a tragedy that has left his face badly scarred, his mother dead, and his father a political fugitive. Then, as the Russian Revolution spills over into Finland with horrific results, Esko is swept along on this great tide of history into a fateful encounter with Katerina Malysheva, the exquisitely lovely child of a Russian aristocrat. When she gives him her mirror at their first meeting, Esko - a disfigured, impoverished village boy - falls in love and seals his fate. Traveling from war torn Europe to glittering Jazz Age Manhattan, Esko pursues his twin visions - to build a modern skyscraper that will change the New York skyline and to find Katerina. That quest will lead the introspective, tall, blond young man to make painful choices involving his art and ethics, and ultimately into pacts with different kinds of devils, such as a ruthless land speculator named MacCormick who can finance his building project and a Mafioso chieftain Paul Mantilini who can save his life. Rayner's riveting plot and lush prose plunges readers with equal ease into the quiet snowbound expanses of Finland, the bloody battle of Tampere (the defining battle in the Finnish Civil War), and the sexy rhythms of Harlem speakeasies in a seamless narrative that covers 30 years. It is also a fascinating treatise on modern architecture, especially that of New York City, that exposes the human drama behind the structures that have awed the world - and the human cost of transforming grand visions and magnificent dreams into stone and steel. **Discussion Questions**

1. Rayner writes "Architecture never lies. It invariably expresses both its own era and the character of the men who build it" (p. 4). How did Esko's skyscraper reflect his character? Take a building you particularly like, and discuss how it reflects its era and what it might reveal about the person who envisioned or designed it.
2. As a young boy Esko asks, "What does an elevator *mean*?" In light of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers - arguably the world's most iconic skyscrapers - has the "meaning" of skyscrapers changed?
3. Would you describe Esko's love for Katerina as an obsession? If so, how does obsessive love differ from other types of love? How does it differ from his feelings for his wife Anna? Does obsessive love have any positive characteristics along with its more obvious destructive ones?
4. What about Katerina? Is she credible? Do you think she is more a symbol than a woman? What are her motives for choosing men?
5. Esko is undoubtedly a genius. But what is his tragic flaw? Can you name some contemporary, real life men or women who also seem to possess a tragic flaw along with their genius or talents?
6. When Esko is designing Katerina's penthouse, he begins with a coffeepot. Why? He also says "it would be inappropriate to turn from views of Manhattan's increasingly Babylonian skyline...and see a Louis XVI sofa" (p. 270). Do you agree that design - whether it is of a building or a sofa - needs to reflect its environment or era, and that furnishings and architecture and environment should be homogeneous?
7. When Esko dreams of his skyscraper, he notes that although humans finally possessed the technology to build tall buildings, no one knew what they should look like (p. 269). The contest in the *Gazette* is won by a design that is pseudo-Gothic. What do skyscrapers look like today? Why do you think they have evolved this way? Do you see any alternatives - or new directions?
8. One of the heroes of the story is W. P. Kirby. How would you characterize his relationship to Esko? Why is he in the story at all? Is he essential to the plot? Does his death doom Esko? If not, what does lead to Esko's ultimate downfall?
9. Part of the enjoyment of a historical novel is discovering new facts and details about a faraway place or era. What information did you enjoy discovering in *The Cloud Sketcher*?
10. What do you make of Joseph Lazarus? Is he the villain of the tale? If not, who is?
11. If some writers do appeal more to women than men, or vice versa, do you think *The Cloud Sketcher* would have a great impact and find a greater audience among men or women? Why?

**About the Author:** Richard Rayner's previous books include the memoir *The Blue Suit* and the novels *Murder Book*, *Los Angeles Without a Map*, and *The Elephant*. His work appears in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Talk*, and many other publications. He met his wife, Paivi Suvilehto, in Finland in 1990. He lives in Los Angeles.