
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE ROOK

A NOVEL BY

DANIEL O'MALLEY

A conversation with Daniel O'Malley

You've mentioned previously that you were worried you may have made mistakes in your attempt to write a believable female character. I think you actually did a better job with Myfanwy than a number of popular science fiction and fantasy women writers do with their heroines. Our Rook has friends she both is open with and relies on, a rare trait in genre main characters despite it being true for most real women. Why did you buck the trend?

I didn't set out to buck the trend, and hadn't really realized that I had. But Myfanwy's friendship with other characters, especially with Shantay and Ingrid, was important—partially because I didn't want her to be defined solely by her power (both supernatural and governmental) and partially because she's a person, and people need friends. From the beginning of the book, Myfanwy is very alone, both because of her rank and because of her amnesia—she knows no one at all, and she's concealing the truth about everything. In that situation, I would have needed people that I could rely on.

Plus, of course, there is no concealing anything from one's executive assistant.

One of my favorite characters in your novel is pre-amnesia Myfawnwy (whom we meet through a series of letters she writes to her post-amnesiac self). Did you always plan for her to be a character in her own right, or was she mainly a clever way to relay exposition?

Pre-amnesia Myfanwy needed to be a few things. Firstly, she was going to provide a lot of info-dump (and I'm not being pejorative here; I love a good info-dump). Secondly, I wanted to demonstrate how different new Myfanwy was from old Myfanwy. And also she helped to show how the Checquy (my supersecret supernatural spy service) worked. I just found myself getting fonder and fonder of her as the book went on, and, yes, she demanded more attention, and commanded more affection, than I had originally intended. So it was a little sad that the whole story had to be based on the idea that she would cease to exist as a person.

Myfanwy is such an uncommon and difficult-to-pronounce name. Even she mispronounces it. I just gotta ask, why did you name her Myfanwy?

There was a Myfanwy and a Bronwyn who lived across the street from me, and I used to babysit for them. And I'd never met a Myfanwy before, so I was always rather taken by the name. The Myfanwy across the street pronounced it to rhyme with "Tiffany," at least I think she did (she was always just "Miff"), but the proper Welsh pronunciation is a bit more complex. The thing is, the real Myfanwy and Bronwyn are identical twins, but I couldn't put that in the book because I thought it would be kind of a horrendous cliché.

Though you wrote The Rook when you were in graduate school, you currently work for the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, a government agency. What do your coworkers think of the Checquy, your ass-kicking administrator heroine, and your burgeoning international fame?

They have been incredibly nice about it, and almost no one has asked if any characters are based on them. In fact, the local bookstore has reached the state where if someone buys the book, they ask if they're from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau or the Department of Infrastructure.

You introduce your readers to a wide array of supernatural powers that haven't been

seen before, or at least aren't common in current genre literature. What were some of your inspirations for them, especially for Gestalt and the Grafters/Belgians?

Gestalt came to me when I was helping a friend move, and I thought rather wistfully that this would be much less of a pain in the butt if I had a few extra bodies. And voilà! I was so thrilled with the idea that I had to put down a television set so I could scribble down the concept. The Grafters tapped into all my squeamish feelings about surgery, and how much you can do to a person before he or she might cease to be a person.

If you were to have a power like one of the characters in the book, what would yours be?

I've often thought that flight would be pretty cool, but I get a little nervous around heights. And I'm easily distracted, so I'd be worried about it cutting out at an inopportune time. It's not going to be a good scene if I can fly, and I never go higher than the top of my house. So maybe superjumping. Like Spider-Man. Or superspeed when I want it.

A sequel to The Rook is already in the works; is there a chance we'll be seeing pre-amnesia Myfanwy again? Any other hints about what's next for the Checquy?

I'm terribly, terribly fond of pre-amnesia Myfanwy, and her letters were a blast to write, so there might be a couple of those scattered in. But she won't be returning as a person at all, I don't think.

I'm really excited about the sequel. At the end of *The Rook*, the Checquy were facing some significant changes, and as any public servant can tell you, change means a lot of work. There's a merger that going to happen (maybe), and a lot of suspicion and paranoia floating around.

This interview was conducted by Megan Solomon and originally published on StellarFour.com.

Daniel O'Malley's suggested reading for fans of *The Rook*

Doomsday Book by Connie Willis

English historians use time travel to do their research. One of them is sent back to the time of the Black Death. It's clever, it's absorbing, and you care about these characters so much that it hurts.

Flashman by George MacDonald Fraser

If you don't like the *Flashman* books, you're kicked out of the O'Malley family. Any other crime is permissible, but these hilarious, irreverent historical adventures (with the best main character in fiction) are mandatory.

The Rivers of London by Ben Aaronovitch

A novel about supernatural law enforcement in London. I nearly had a nervous breakdown when I heard about this book, but I read it. It's different enough from *The Rook* that I calmed down, and cool enough that I immediately bought the sequel.

Mythago Wood by Robert Holdstock

This was the first book I ever stayed up past midnight to read. And on a school night! A forest in postwar England, where our oldest myths come to life. It's haunting, it's intricate, it's outstanding.

Death Before Wicket by Kerry Greenwood

A strong, elegant heroine in 1920s Sydney solving crime, confronting

occult practitioners, and taking the occasional lover. One book in a great series.

The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts by Louis de Bernières
Magical realism in South America. Guerrilla revolutionaries. Civic-minded prostitutes. A plague of cats. I feel I've made my point.

Daughter of Smoke and Bone by Laini Taylor
I just read this last week and loved it. I thought about hiding in the fire-escape stairwell at work so I could finish it without getting caught. Atmospheric fantasy tucked away in the corners of our world.

Pattern Recognition by William Gibson
The main character is allergic to trademarks. She is hired to track down the source of strange, haunting footage released on the Internet. Gorgeous writing that washes over you and pulls you down into the depths.

The Spellman Files by Lisa Lutz
These books are so much fun. A smart-ass, kick-ass PI whose greatest adversaries are her equally smart-ass, kick-ass family.

Hawaii by James Michener
The extent to which this really has anything to do with *The Rook* is negligible. Both of them take place on the planet Earth and both of them feature people. That's about it. But this is a beautiful book, and you should read it.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. How would you compare the portrayal of women in *The Rook* to books with similar sci-fi and fantasy influences?
2. Myfanwy Thomas's amnesia results in the emergence of a new, completely different personality. Do you think personality is something one is born with, or the result of our memories and experiences?
3. In *The Rook*, the Checquy are empowered to take those children they deem necessary, for both the good of the nation and the good of the children. To what extent do you think this is justified? Can you think of a real-world equivalent, contemporary or historical?
4. The Checquy works not only to protect normal people from supernatural threats, but also to keep them ignorant of those threats. Do you think real-world governments are justified in concealing dangers from the public?
5. Do you think that the role of women in the Checquy is a realistic reflection of women in power in the real world?
6. *The Rook* makes many references to works of fiction, popular culture, and mythology. What was one of your favorite references?
7. How good a job do you think you would do masquerading as another person? Do you think your life would be difficult for another to assume?
8. Which supernatural ability portrayed in *The Rook* would you like to have? Why?
9. Can you name the capital of Belgium?

Daniel O'Malley's playlist for *The Rook*

I'm not one of those writers who has music in the background while he writes. I'm just too easily distracted. And I don't listen to music when I'm out walking because I read when I walk, and I need to be able to hear the cars before they hit me (as a side note, the only time I fell down a manhole while walking happened when I was not reading). Still, there's a bunch of tunes that lend themselves to some scenes in *The Rook*. And if you're wondering did I listen to this music as I acted out the scenes in the privacy of my house, the answer is maybe. Here's my soundtrack. *The Rook* shifts genres at a fairly rapid clip; so too does this playlist.

“Let Go” by Frou Frou

I first stumbled upon this gem at a dance show. Well, all right, I'll be honest; it was a burlesque show. But it was a burlesque show done with the sharpest sense of humor I've seen on stage, and I watched it with a seventy-six-year-old lady sitting next to me. And during this song, no one took anything off. It speaks to me of a woman getting hit by a revelation. From this moment on, the world will be a drastically different place, and depending on how you approach it, you're either going to shatter or be changed.

“Mi Ricordo (Version 1)” by J. Ralph

When I first heard this, I was on a red-eye flight from San Francisco to Philadelphia. I looked out the window and saw a vast thunderstorm.

A huge wall of dark clouds with flashes inside, looming right beside us. “Mi Ricordo (Version 1),” with its overtones of solemnity and the references to memory and records, is ideal for sitting in a hotel room, reading letters written to you by the person you used to be. (Just as it is for sitting in a shuddering airliner, wondering if nature has you in its crosshairs.)

“The Phasmid,” from the soundtrack to *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*

God, this music is filled with anticipation and fear and menace, but it’s elegant, too. Perfect for a party of senior civil servants to sit in a darkened room and calmly observe an interrogation.

“Last Day on Earth” by Kate Miller-Heidke

The melancholy of entering a house whose owner is gone away forever. Her possessions are there as if she just stepped out. You touch a book that she left on a table, see the scribbles of her notepad by the phone. And you are wearing her body. But it’s okay, because she knew this would happen, and she’s gotten things ready for you.

“Breakaway” by Big Pig

This is a big song, with majestic, almost reverent overtones. The kind of thing that you want playing when you’re attending the hatching of a dragon. It starts impressive and each development ups the tension. And then it breaks away from what you expected, and you realize that you can’t take it for granted. Wait—are we talking about the music, or the dragon?

“Easy to Love” by the Jezabels

The opening is so calm, so matter-of-fact, and then there is a sudden sweep of delight—not unakin, I would like to think, to having a woman cautiously approach you in the street. She asks you your name and then tells you that she is your long-lost sister. For the next few minutes, you experience moments of pure, unbelievable clarity, and then you are engulfed in a wave of emotion.

“One Step Ahead” performed by Amiel

Neil Finn wrote this song for Split Enz and it continued on with Crowded House, but for me, Amiel’s performance is the one that really resonates. The unwavering tempo, the crisp, controlled enunciation of the singer. Everything about it bespeaks white-knuckle tension. This is what’s playing in your head when you’re infiltrating a secret government installation in the wilderness of Wales.

“Boadicea” by Enya

They played this song as the background to that terrifying educational video in high school where they show all the real-life car accidents. It’s always left me feeling deeply uneasy. The droning repetition, the dirge-like choir, the feeling of ominous crescendo—they all lend themselves perfectly to a house in the city of Bath, where a monstrous fungus has engulfed every room and the cult that has been occupying the place has been consumed.

“Body Talk” by Ratt

Ever since I saw *The Golden Child*, this has been my quintessential fight song. A fight scene, especially one featuring a lot of people, is big and chaotic and prone to breaking off into complicated little side events. Just like this song. To make matters even better, my big chaotic fight scene breaks out in a distinguished diplomatic reception, so picture this raucous, heavy-metal anthem playing as superpowered English civil servants butcher each other in the most elegant of surroundings.

“Come into My World” by Kylie Minogue

Having snuck out to a London nightclub, surely you have the right to expect that you won’t run into your vampire coworker. But if you do, this is the music that will, if there’s any justice, be playing in the background. Plus, if you’ve seen the amazing video for this song, you’ll be carrying around impressions of the world subtly warping around itself, which adds a nicely appropriate piquancy to the whole thing.

“Strangers” by Portishead

He is centuries old, he is powerful, and you have been called to his limousine to receive an ultimatum. He reeks of authority and menace. He has no skin—he’s a flayed human being in a tub of liquid. He’s unstable. And he’s Belgian. For such a situation, and for such a man, there is only one possible song. Its jarring transitions, its eerie echoes, the snatches of old-timey tone, and that heartbeat-like pulse in the background. For the best effect, this should be played while you’re underwater, with the lights out, and your eyes closed. If possible, throw some lake weed in there as well. After all, you want the full experience, don’t you?

“Wish You Well” by Bernard Fanning

This song communicates perfectly the feeling of waking up exhausted and finding that you are about to be subjected to a battery of medical examinations—examinations which are unpleasant, time-consuming, and highly intrusive. You’re in the hands of cheerful professionals, but still.

“Volcano Songs—Duets: Walking Song” by Meredith Monk

Let me lay the scene before you. You’ve been pulled into a giant cube made up of reconstituted human beings. And it’s doing its best to reconstitute you, breaking you down. The overwhelming tenor is organic, with people being turned into something else against their will. Which is what this song communicates, with its lack of words and instruments, its disconcerting layers of voices, its wavering tones. You can practically feel the heavy breath of others.

“Run, Rabbit, Run” by Flanagan & Allen

In a book full of ridiculous occurrences, there is one involving an animal that can tell the future. Powerful bureaucrats are summoned to witness the creature do its thing. There is a formal dinner, speeches are made, and then the questioning of the animal commences. Things do not end well, for either the bureaucrats or the animal.

“Kara Remembers” by Bear McCreary

Yes, it’s from the soundtrack to *Battlestar Galactica*, and I luxuriate in that fact. This music conveys like nothing else that pure moment of revelation, when all the details that you have before you merge into sudden and aghast understanding. All the implications flood in upon you, you can see the big picture, and you know that you have to act. Now.

This essay originally appeared on the website Largehearted Boy, http://www.largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2012/01/book_notes_dani_6.html. Reprinted with permission.