



RAINEY ROYAL

a novel

DYLAN LANDIS

"A spare, elegant novel
that's pure nerves, pure adrenaline."
—Janet Fitch, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author of *White Oleander*



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RAINEY ROYAL

Dylan Landis

Winner of a 2014 O. Henry Prize
for “Trust,” a section of this novel

“Beautiful, brutal, mesmerizing... Reminiscent, at times, of Mary Gaitskill and Lorrie Moore, this is a novel—and a character—for the ages, a wholly original and singular piece of work. Unforgettable, indelible. Read it now.”

—Joanna Rakoff, author of *My Salinger Year*

Dylan Landis follows the breakout success of her debut, *Normal People Don't Live Like This*, which made *Newsday's* Ten Best Books of 2009 and *MORE Magazine's* list of 100 Books Every Woman Must Read with *Rainey Royal*, a mesmerizing novel told in fourteen narratives of scarred and aching beauty.

Talented and privileged, casually cruel, Rainey (a character from *Normal People*) is a magnetic force of a girl living in a falling-down brownstone, left mostly to her own devices: her mother gone, her jazz musician father more concerned with his live-in acolytes than his daughter (or the things his acolytes are doing to his daughter).

Over the course of this book, Rainey grows up—at least in age, from 14 to her early 20s—and the consequences of what has happened to her, and what she's able to inflict on others, sharpen and intensify. But despite the darkness, Rainey's story is ultimately one of beauty, art, and the connections between us that can't be broken, even if we wish they could.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Greenwich Village, 1970s: Rainey Royal, fourteen years old, talented, and troubled, lives in a once-elegant, now decaying brownstone with her father, a jazz musician with a cultish personality. Her mother has abandoned the family, and Rainey fends off advances from her father's best friend while trying desperately to nurture her own creative drives and build a substitute family. She's a rebel, even a criminal, but she's also deeply vulnerable, fighting to figure out how to put back in place the boundaries her life has knocked down, and more than that, struggling to learn how to be an artist and a person in a broken world. *Rainey Royal* is told in fourteen narratives that build into a fiercely powerful novel: the harrowing and ultimately affirming story of a young artist.

PRAISE

"There is a line in Dylan Landis's lush, fierce, and stunning novel *Rainey Royal*, that perfectly captures this book's intense beauty. 'Rainey feels half like a butterfly has landed on her wrist and half like a knife is angled to her neck.' *Rainey Royal* is a chronicle of girlhood as a dangerous, delicate thing. There is edge and tenderness and longing to be found here. Always, though, Landis's words are a butterfly and a knife both cutting you open in necessary ways."

—Roxane Gay, author of *An Untamed State*

"Every woman has known a *Rainey Royal*. The coolest girl in school, the most daring, the most beautiful, yet the one who could turn on you and then, bewilderingly, turn back. What makes a Rainey Royal, and her effect on everyone she encounters that chaos of yearning, cruelty, woundedness, seeking, and human poetry? We needed a great writer to show us, and here she is. Dylan Landis has written a spare, elegant novel that's pure nerves, pure adrenaline. Should carry a warning, do not read at bedtime."

—Janet Fitch, bestselling author of *White Oleander*

"Prose is a fine art in the hands of Dylan Landis ... *Rainey Royal* is yet another example of her lapidary fiction and her unsettling imagination."

—*Jewish Journal*

"Beautiful, brutal, mesmerizing, *Rainey Royal* draws you in from the first, breathtaking sentence and doesn't let you go. Few novels have affected me as this one did. Reminiscent, at times, of Mary Gaitskill and Lorrie Moore, this is a novel and a

character for the ages, a wholly original and singular piece of work. Unforgettable, indelible. Read it now.”

—Joanna Rakoff, author of *My Salinger Year*

“Dylan Landis is a writer of exceptional rigor and finesse. Every page of *Rainey Royal* is incandescent practically ablaze with the beauty and chaos of adolescence, heartache, art and New York City. I don’t know how she does it, but I hope she never stops.”

—Justin Taylor, author of *Flings*

“*Rainey Royal* gets under your skin, pushes you out of your comfort zone, and takes you to a truer, more frightening place. Dylan Landis captures the innocence and cruelty of teenage girls in flamey, jewel-like sentences that hover on the edge of rapture: read these stories with your heart in your throat.”

—Ellis Avery, author of *The Last Nude*

“Do not pick up Dylan Landis’s fire-hearted novel if you have any need for sleep, because this intense, passionate ride through turbulent girlhood will not let go of your throat until you have followed Rainey, Tina and Leah to the complex end. Evocative of literary coming-of-age classics like Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, yet with the modern edge of Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, *Rainey Royal* explores the underbelly of art, glamour, jazz, sainthood, magnetism, the 1970s, sex, and what it means to burn.”

—Gina Frangello, author of *A Life in Men*

“One need only consider some of the ingredients of this flammable dessert of a novel—art, jazz, sex, cigs, saints and miracles and dangerous modern school girls without parental brakes—to know that *Rainey Royal*, Dylan Landis’s terrifically entertaining novel, is not just for adults. Younger readers will be equally smitten with Rainey Royal, a hardier, funnier successor to Holden Caulfield.”

—Christine Schutt, author of *Prosperous Friends*

“Dylan Landis knows how to unnerve a reader, even as she’s appreciating being unnerved. *Rainey Royal* thrums with sex and power. A brave, exquisite book.”

—Mary Kay Zuravleff, author of *Man Alive!*

“In the stunning debut novel, *Rainey Royal*, Dylan Landis introduces us to girls who play games, girls who play with fire, and girls who distrust each other, drawing them into a friendship so profoundly real, it feels as if she knows our secrets. For those of us who were once these girls, and for those of us who were once afraid of these girls, this story unleashes memory both unnerving and thrilling. Deeply human. Surprisingly tender. Pure poetry.”

—Susan Henderson, author of *Up From the Blue*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dylan Landis is the author of *Rainey Royal* and *Normal People Don't Live Like This*, a linked story collection. She has published fiction in *BOMB*, *Tin House* and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and has won an O. Henry Prize and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Landis has covered medicine for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and interior design for the *Chicago Tribune*, and has written six books on decorating. She lives in New York City.



An Interview with Dylan Landis by her Soho Editor Mark Doten

What was the first short story that you remember really having a powerful effect on you? And this might be a little harder, but do you remember the first time you read a full collection and started to have a sense of cumulative power the right group of stories can have?

The stories in *Love Medicine*, by Louise Erdrich, really peeled me apart as I read them. You could tell they were constructed with a fine instrument and I spent some time dismantling and studying them. I'll go to my grave remembering Henry Lamartine, Jr. in "The Red Convertible" walking into the river and saying, "My boots are filling," before he drowns.

That's also the first linked collection—Erdrich calls it a novel, so forgive me—that made me really grasp how much power the whole can have when the parts harmonize. And it's not just about repeating names and places; it really is about resonance, about events told from more than one point of view and deepening or developing each time, or iconic objects taking on new meaning as they recur. Watch what happens with King Kashpaw's car every time you see it: it's freighted with more emotion. My copy of *Love Medicine* bristles with scores of tiny Post-its.

I also have to mention Elissa Schappell's linked collection *Use Me*, another beacon for me. Years later I still remember Evie Wakefield tasting her father's ashes, swallowing—then finding out, two stories later, that her best friend and her father had kissed. Escalation—that's what you get to do when the stories are linked. I hope I pulled that off.

Music and visual art both play big parts in the book. Do you find that art or music are an influence on your fiction? Do you ever write to music?

I do look at and live with a lot of art. But when I write, I find myself wide open to things that aren't part of my life. For instance, Rainey is deeply moved by a pieta and by what she learns about Mary Magdalene. I'm Jewish and not all that spiritual. I don't listen to music either, which might be why Rainey doesn't like her father's jazz. This is embarrassing to admit, but I live in my head, and listen to my thoughts, and music just distracts. Yes, I realize this is like missing a limb, or a sense. I did start listening to jazz to research *Rainey Royal*—though never while I wrote—and that was fascinating; it felt like auditory abstract art.

Rainey Royal shares characters with your previous book, *Normal People Don't Live Like This*. Did you know when you were finishing the first book that you weren't done with them yet? When did the form of *Rainey* start to take shape?

Rainey appears in the first two stories of *Normal People Don't Live Like This*, first as a girl who's being molested, and then as a bully. And then she vanishes from the collection. My mentor, Jim Krusoe, had read the manuscript and said, "You need a third Rainey story to balance out the book." But I was closing in on fifty and frankly I was impatient to have a book out. My agent sold it as it was, and I thought I got away with it, but readers kept asking: "What happened to Rainey? Will she get her own book?"

I loved Rainey. For a long time I used her name as my email address. But I spent four years trying to write an altogether different novel, banging my head against the wrong wall, before I finally listened to my heart and wrote that third Rainey story my mentor had wanted—and then a fourth, and a fifth, and finally enough to fill a book.

Before you turned to fiction, you wrote several books about interior design. I'm curious about that—are the satisfactions and challenges of putting that type of book together at all similar to fiction? Do you see any relationship between that work and your fiction? (I will say that *Rainey Royal* has some very richly realized interior spaces!)

Rooms protect us and cosset us and define us and hopefully are filled with the objects that reflect us. So they're important to fiction. And I like taking rooms apart the way I like taking books apart: to understand how they are made.

But putting a design book together is not like writing a novel. It's about selecting pictures and analyzing rooms; it's a form of journalism, with interviewing, and a little poetry in the writing. You might structure the book on color, or style. Whereas in fiction, structure has to do with story, and in order to write you have to first tap into the subconscious, the mind's basement. That's where I hear and see and smell everything. I can't know a character without seeing his or her space in detail. I can see the furniture and what's in it. The colors, what's on the walls. For me, in fiction, a room is both a stage set and a mirror of the people who live there.

When did you start writing fiction? Is there any advice that present-day you would give to the you that was just starting out?

I was forty, writing articles and books on interior design, and a friend insisted I take a fiction workshop given by Madeleine L'Engle. It was mind-altering the first Wednesday night. Madeleine said, "Nonfiction is about what is true, but fiction is about truth." I knew my life had to change.

I went to workshops and took notes, which became my textbooks. I learned how to read with an eye for craft. I developed a thick enough skin to withstand rejection, which I got plenty of. It took twelve years to publish my first book, which was really my second.

So I would keep telling my younger self, Don't get discouraged. It's not about talent, it's about staying in the chair. And I would say, Stop revising and show your work sooner. I used to polish endlessly before I'd let another writer critique my pages. Now I get the benefit of other eyes on my early drafts, and I'm a faster, better, more fluid writer. Finally I wish I'd heard sooner what my mentor, Jim Krusoe, would tell me later: "You have to have the faith that you can do the work, and the patience to get the work done."

What are you reading these days?

I just finished Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar*, which has urgency and beauty in rural Louisiana. And I've begun Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, which is practically needlepointed, the language is so fine. On the nightstand is an advance copy of Robin Black's *Life Drawing*, which comes out here in summer 2014 and is getting rave reviews in the UK. It has a gently ominous first line; I love that.

What can you tell us about your next book?

I'm afraid of jinxing it, so just the title: *The Hoarder's Daughter*. I'm fascinated by hoarders; there's one in *Rainey Royal*. What are these people really constructing? And why do we feel like if we could just go through all that stuff we'd find secrets at the bottom?



Read an Excerpt

“Trust”

“We’re just practicing,” says Tina.

“We’re just playing,” says Rainey.

“We’re just taking a walk.”

“Yeah, but we’re walking behind *them*,” says Rainey. She and Tina have turned right about twenty feet behind a couple who lean into each other, slowly strolling, and here is something Rainey has noticed: couples don’t attend to their surroundings the way solo walkers do. She wonders if the gun in her purse has a magnetic pull, if it wants to be near people.

“We’re losing them,” says Tina.

They’re playing robber girls. Before they took the gun out for a walk, Rainey and Tina were up in Rainey’s room tying scarves around their heads to disguise their hair. They put on cheap lime-green earrings from Fourteenth Street to take attention off their features and T-shirts from Gordy’s room, across the hall, to hide their own tops. The earrings and T-shirts will go in the trash right afterward, that’s the idea.

Would go. They’re just playing. The man and the woman amble on through the purpling evening, past the trees that encroach on the sidewalk.

“Gordy didn’t mind you going through his stuff, huh?” Tina’s T-shirt says LARRY CORYELL on the front and THE ELEVENTH HOUSE on the back. Rainey’s says CHICK COREA. Hers is signed.

Rainey regards Tina as they walk. She wonders if the question is loaded. Tina is the only person on earth who knows about Gordy’s night visits. But they are best friends. Plus Rainey doesn’t want to be one of what her father calls *those eggshell people*.

She says, guardedly, “If he figures it out, he’ll be pissed. But he won’t. I’m never in his room.”

Ahead of them, the couple slows to look up at the window of a townhouse, and Rainey stalls by bending over to retie her sneaker lace.

Tina makes a little smirk sound in her nose. “Yeah, why would you be,” she says. “He’s in *your* room every night.” Her hand fastens to her mouth. “Oh, no,” she says through her fingers. “It just came out. I’m sorry, Rain.”

Inside Rainey's purse, the gun beats like a heart. Its workings are a mystery. She and Tina were afraid to check if it had bullets because of the little lever that looks like another trigger. Rainey thinks the round part might be called a *chamber*, which sounds romantic.

"It's okay," says Rainey. What else is it her father says? *Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.*

Through the darkness that drapes them all, she studies the woman who walks ahead of them. She's tucked her sleek hair into her collar, implying some magnificent length—*Like mine*, thinks Rainey—and she wears Frye boots, which make a lovely, horsey click on the sidewalk. It's not enough for this chick to hold the man's hand; she has to nestle both of their hands into the pocket of his leather jacket, a gesture that irritates Rainey and makes her think, bizarrely, of the airlessness of that pocket, of lying under her quilt at night, waiting to see if her door will open and faking sleep.

How do you say no to an innocent back rub? She had finally asked Tina that.

"It's not okay," says Tina. "I can read you. It was a shitty joke, Rain. It just came out. I don't know why."

As they walk on, Rainey can see what the man and woman stopped to admire: a red room hung floor to ceiling with paintings. "Really," she says. "It's okay." She smiles sweetly at Tina. It isn't clear who's being punished by the sweetness. What kills her is the woman's cape. It flaps serenely behind her calves like a manta ray. Sometimes when Rainey meets her aunt Laurette for lunch, Laurette wears a cape, which connects it somehow with her mother.

"Swear it's okay," says Tina.

"I swear." She is still smiling, and it is like smiling at Tina from across a long bridge. Rainey ought to get over it—seriously, fuck her if she can't take a joke. Tina exhales. "Okay." They both watch the couple for a moment. Then Tina says, "It's not like I need the money."

Rainey opens her mouth and closes it. She's tempted to make a crack, but she holds it in. Tina's been going on about her grandmother a lot—how she gets paid twenty dollars a week to live with her. How the grandmother is blind. Best friends for five years, and Tina has never invited Rainey home so Rainey's not buying. She's never probed, though. Tina might detonate, or cry.

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