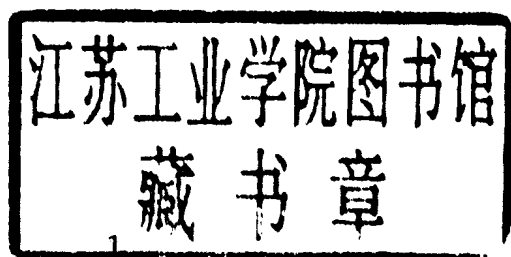


Book II in the MAGIC OR MADNESS trilogy

Magic Lessons

Justine Larbalestier

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by
Justine Larbalestier



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For Niki Bern, best sister in the multiverse

Note to Readers

Like the first book in this trilogy, *Magic Lessons* contains both Australian *and* American spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. Chapters from the viewpoint of the Australians, Reason and Tom, are written in Australian English, and those from Jay-Tee's point of view are written American style. You will find *synaesthesia* in the Australian chapters, but *synesthesia* in the American. If any of the words are new to you, turn to the glossary, where you will learn that being *jack of* something means you're *over it*, and that a *dog's breakfast* is a *mess*.

Reason Cansino

Once, when i was really little, we passed a road sign peppered with bullet holes. It was pretty much the same as any of the other road signs we passed out bush, but this one I read aloud in my squeaky toddler voice: “Darwin, 350. Two times 175. Five times seventy. Seven times fifty. Ten times thirty-five.”

My mother, Sarafina, clapped. “Unbelievable!”

“How old is the kid?” asked the truck driver who was giving us a lift to the Jilkmिंगgan road. He glanced down at me suspiciously.

“Almost three.” Sarafina was seventeen.

“Not really?”

“Really.”



When we arrived, three of the old women—Lily, Mavis, and Daisy—sat down with us on the dirt floor of the meeting place. They gave us tucker—yams, wild plums, and chocolate bickies to eat, and black-brewed, sticky-sweet tea to drink. A posse of kids hung around, darting in and out for plums and bickies, but mostly stood just out of reach, watching and giggling.

A few gum trees dotted the settlement, their leaves a dull green, standing out amongst the dirt, dry scrub, and ant hills taller than a man. Healthier, greener trees, bushes, and vines grew farther away, on the other side of the buildings, where the ground sloped into the banks of the Roper River. The buildings were low, made of untreated wood and rusting corrugated iron. The only one with four walls, a proper door, and windows was the silver demountable where school was held—the hottest, most uncomfortable building in the settlement.

“You’re that travelling woman, eh?” Daisy asked. “With all them different names?”

Sarafina nodded.

“What you want to be called now?”

“Sally. And my daughter’s Rain,” Sarafina said, even though my name is Reason.

“We hear about you,” Daisy said. “You been all over, eh? All the way down south, too?”

“Yes,” Sarafina said. “We’ve been all over Australia.”

“Seen lots of white man places, too?”

“Some.” Sarafina always stayed away from cities so that her mother wouldn’t find us. “I like Aboriginal places better.”

The three women grunted as if this were to be expected.

“That little one, that Rain,” Daisy said, looking at me. “She’s countryman, eh?”

Sarafina nodded.

“Her father countryman, innit?”

“Yes.”

"Where him from?" Mavis asked. She was the oldest of the three women. Her hair was all white and her skin was so black it shone. She took a piece of chewing tobacco from behind her ear and put it in her mouth.

"I don't know."

The three women murmured at this. "Don't know?"

Sarafina shook her head.

"Who his people?"

"Don't know."

"Them from desert country? Arnhem country?"

Sarafina shrugged. "He didn't tell me."

Daisy nudged Lily. "That little one, Rain? Him amari? Him munanga, I reckon."

"True," Lily said, "but him daddy still got country." She turned back to Sarafina. "Where you meet him?"

"Out west." Sarafina gestured past the water tank resting on a huge mound of dirt, to the horizon where the sun would set.

"How long you him together?"

"One night."

They nodded at this. "Drunken fella?"

Sarafina laughed. "No."

"Him from bush or white man place?"

"Bush."

"Ah," Lily said, pleased to be given something solid. "Stockman?"

"I don't know."

"Him barefoot or got boots?"

"Boots."

They nodded again. "Stockman."



Sarafina made flashcards. She cut up an old cardboard box that had once held cartons of Winnies, and she wrote on them with a fat black Texta she'd bought in Mataranka.

She wrote the names of nine recent places we'd either stayed or seen road signs for: Darwin, Jilkmिंगgan, Katherine, Mataranka, Ngukurr, Numbulwar, Borroloola, Limmen Bight, and Umbakumba; the names of all the planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto (though she said the last one wasn't *really* a planet); and the branches of mathematics: foundations, algebra, analysis, geometry, and applied.

We sat on the dirt floor under a roof of paperbark. Occasionally strands of it would drift down and land on us. The three women sat cross-legged, gutting a kangaroo and waving the flies away.

"Sally," Daisy asked, "what are you doing with your girl Rain?"

"Teaching her how to read."

They all nodded and agreed reading was important, though of the three of them, only Daisy really knew how.

Sarafina held up the cards with one hand, waving flies away, and patting one of the dogs with the other. The sky was the intense blue that only happens when the earth is the red-brown

of iron. Not one cloud. Dry season. There would be no rain for months.

“Ve-nus,” I read. “Dar-win. Al-ge-bra.”

Sarafina held up the next card. “Nnn . . .” I said, trailing off, staring at the card with its *n* and *g* and *k* and *r*’s and *u*’s. I wasn’t sure if I’d seen it before. I didn’t understand how those letters went together to make sounds.

“Ngukurr,” said Lily, sliding past the *g* that had confused me. Her people were from there. She knew how to read that one.

Sarafina put the cards down, realising she should, perhaps, have started with the alphabet. For the next two hours we sang, “A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P-Q-R-S-T-U-V-W-X-Y-Z.” The old women laughed and lots of the kids joined us, some of them sneaking out of school in the demountable, with the drunken white teacher. I informed Sarafina that *f*, *j*, *q*, and *z* were my favourites.

Annie, Valerie, Peter, little Rabbit, and Dave said they liked *s* best, so Sarafina invented an *s* dance for them. This involved standing up, putting your hands above your head, pushing your hips to one side and your shoulders to the other, and shimmering like a snake.

We all *s*-danced, falling down and snake-bellying away across the ground, coating ourselves with red dirt. Everyone was good at it except me. I was too little and unco. Sarafina was the best, even though she was the only whitefella, faster and more shimmery than anyone else. We all laughed.

The dogs barked and jumped up, running in circles, trying to join in, but they weren't good at moving on their bellies and kept rolling over, trying to get us to rub them instead. They didn't look like snakes at all.

When we were all danced out and tired and the women had the kangaroo roasting amongst the coals, Mavis told us the story of the mermaid ancestor and how she'd made the land. She had many names, but Mavis said munga-munga was best.

I dreamed about her that night and many nights, but in my dreams when she made her giant path across the country, sparkling numbers and letters spilled out from her tail, littering the red earth, turning into valleys and rivers and hills and ocean, drifting up into the sky and becoming the planets and the stars.

The munga-munga has always been my favourite.



Once, when I was ten years old and Sarafina twenty-five, I lost my temper. Sarafina had always told me never to lose my temper, but she never told me why.

I'd only been at the school for a week. It was my first and last time in a real school, one where you had to wear shoes and be quiet when the teacher spoke and not leave the classroom unless the teacher said you could, but also one where there were lots of kids and games and books about things I'd never heard of. I was really hoping I'd be able to stay.

I was being called Katerina Thomas and my hair was cut short and dyed light brown, almost blonde. I still looked like me, though.

Josh Davidson was the class creep. He'd go around snapping girls' bra straps (those that had them), calling them bitches, and, when he could, cornering them and trying to touch their breasts (even if they didn't have any yet). He was taller than the other girls and boys, stronger, too.

He was a lot taller than me. He'd already tried to snap my non-existent bra, and I had a bruise on my arm from where he'd grabbed me when I was coming out of the bathroom. A teacher had turned the corner and told him to let me go before he could do anything else.

The next day in class, Josh sat next to me. He pushed his chair as close as he could. I felt fear and anger inside me like an intense heat. He didn't try to touch my breasts; instead, he put his hand on my thigh. I held my knees tight together. Put my hand in my pocket to hold my ammonite.

"Spread your legs, boong," Josh whispered in my ear.

I felt my anger getting bigger, uncoiling inside me. There was a scream, but I didn't open my mouth. The stone in my pocket grew warm and sweaty as I clutched it tightly. The rage was like a wave, starting small, then spiralling out of me. Growing bigger and bigger, as fast and beautiful as Fibonacci numbers: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610, 987, 1597 . . . My eyes exploded in blinding red light.

Someone yelled out, something about a doctor.

Then, for a moment, I could see. The intense light in front of me faded away. Josh was on the floor. He wasn't moving. I felt glorious, better than I had ever felt in my entire life.

Then I fainted.

It was hours before I discovered that Josh Davidson was dead. An aneurism, they thought. The blood in his head had lumped together, had stopped the oxygen getting to his brain.

Had I made his blood do that?

I didn't ask Sarafina, but that night we left. Not just the town but the state—we went all the way across the country, as far as we could get. No more school for me.

We never talked about it, but after that, Sarafina's warnings about not losing my temper came even more often. Without explanation.

I know now. I stopped that boy's blood. I killed him.

I'm magic, like my mother, but she never told me. She didn't tell me that if I lose my temper, people might die. She never told me that if I don't use my magic, I'll go mad, like her. Or that if I do use it, I'll most likely die before I turn twenty. She never told me to choose between magic or madness.

Sarafina didn't tell me anything.

Back To The Asylum

Sarafina didn't look any different. She sat on one of the biggest of the ugly brown couches, still and silent, more statue than human, wearing the same white terry-towelling robe she had on last time I saw her. Only a week ago, I realised.

I wondered when time would come right again. Ever since Sarafina had tried to kill herself, it had been running either too fast or too slow. Right now it was 11 AM, but my body was convinced it was night time.

Jet lag, Tom had called it—then he'd laughed and said, "*Door* lag, really. We went by door, not jet. You get used to it. Jay-Tee and me are already on Sydney time on account of we didn't sleep away two whole days like you did."

They hadn't seemed so over it when I'd slipped out of the house, though. Jay-Tee had been sound asleep and Tom nowhere in sight. I doubted I was the only one still *door*-lagged.

The visiting room at Kalder Park was much more crowded than it had been a week ago, and hotter. The two ceiling fans didn't turn quite true and made more noise than cool air. Visitors and patients were dotted about the room, twenty-five of the first, nineteen of the latter, easy to tell apart.

Sarafina was sitting next to a much older woman with grey hair and strange, jerky movements who was trying to explain to her daughter (at least I imagined she was the woman's daughter) why Thursdays, not Mondays, were the best days for visits. It had something to do with the way *t*'s and *h*'s sounded together. Her voice was loud, carrying around the room, her cheeks red and damp. She looked exactly the way I'd always imagined a crazy person would.

Sarafina didn't look up or smile when I squeezed in beside her on the couch; her expression stayed blank and distant. I'd half expected her to tell me that I'd changed. She said nothing. She looked so much like Esmeralda. But I could see no resemblance between her and Jason Blake. It was hard to believe he was her father, my grandfather. Why hadn't she told me about him?

I reached into the hip pocket of my new pants, specially made for me by Tom, feeling for my ammonite. As my fingers touched nothing I remembered that I'd left it on the other side of the door, in New York City. I hoped Danny had picked it up.

Jay-Tee had called Danny yesterday. She'd chatted away with her brother for what seemed like hours, but I hadn't gotten to talk to him. It hadn't occurred to Jay-Tee that I'd want to. And Danny hadn't asked for me. I could call him later, when Sydney and New York time lined up properly, but I was too embarrassed.

Still, it was only Monday. I'd last seen Danny on Thursday.

No, *not* Thursday. That had been in New York City; it'd been Friday here in Sydney. It was three days since I'd last seen or spoken to him. I'd been asleep for almost two of those days, recovering from battling Jason Blake with magic. Maybe Danny had asked after me and Jay-Tee had forgotten to pass it on.

Did magic affect time? I'd first arrived in Sydney on Sunday afternoon and here it was, Monday, only eight days later, and yet so much had happened—I'd learned that magic was real, stepped through a door to another country, discovered other people with magic, made friends, met Danny, discovered what it is to be truly, truly cold. *Far* too much had happened in such a short amount of time—eight days!

My world wasn't spinning on the same axis anymore. The rules of physics had been broken. Magic was real.

The grey-haired woman's daughter leaned forward to nod at me briefly before turning her attention back to her loud, unstill mother.

I stared at Sarafina's profile, counting the freckles—thirty-eight of them—on the side of her nose. I followed the line of her gaze: out the window, down to the bay, where fifteen white-sailed boats floated on the sparkling water. Did she see any of it? Her eyes were glazed over, vacant.

Two weeks ago Sarafina's eyes had been alive, full of plans. We had been on the road together, had decided to go to Nevertire because the name made us giggle. She hadn't been sad, hadn't gotten all obsessive, insisting she count every speck of dirt or wash her hands fifty-five times in a row.

None of the usual signs that she was about to lose it. But then, she'd never lost herself completely. She'd never tried to kill herself before.

It shocked me all over again how unlike Sarafina she seemed. She'd never been a still person. Sarafina was always in motion, her face showing exactly what she was thinking. I looked at her now and saw no thought at all. It was as if she had stopped thinking, had run down and become still. All motion gone. Sarafina gone.

I tried to think of what to say. If I said, *I know about magic*, would that jerk her back to life? Not that I could say it with those two women close by. They'd think I was one of the patients. Besides, it was hardly the best way to break the news. What if Sarafina lost it again?

A trickle of sweat ran down my back. "Hot, isn't it?" I said, just to be saying something. "At least there's some breeze off the bay."

"They never open the windows," the jerky woman said, turning to look at me. Her voice was so loud I flinched. I was glad Sarafina sat between us; white, bubbly spittle formed at the corners of the strange woman's mouth, and specks flew as she spoke. "The breeze isn't allowed in. They want us to boil."

Every window was open wide.

She tried to lean closer to me. "Did they do that to your eye?" I put my hand to my still-bruised face and shook my head. "Did they put their needles right into your eyeball?"

"Mum, hush. Leave the girl alone." The daughter leaned