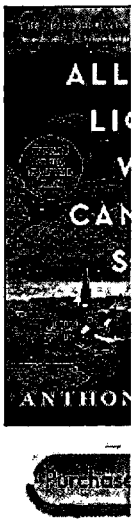
All the Light We Cannot See (Doerr)



All the Light We Cannot See
Anthony Doerr, 2014
Scribner
544 pp.
ISBN-13: 9781501173219

Summary

Winner, 2014 Pulitzer Prize

From the highly acclaimed, multiple award-winning Anthony Doerr, a stunningly ambitious and beautiful novel about a blind French girl a German boy whose paths collide in occupied France as both try to survive t devastation of World War II.

Marie-Laure lives with her father in Paris near the Natural History Museum, works as the master of its thousands of locks. When she is six, Marie-Laure blind and her father builds a perfect miniature of their neighborhood so she memorize it by touch and navigate her way home.

When she is twelve, the Nazis occupy Paris and father and daughter flee to walled citadel of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's reclusive great-uncle lives house by the sea. With them they carry what might be the museum's most and dangerous jewel.

In a mining town in Germany, the orphan Werner grows up with his younge enchanted by a crude radio they find. Werner becomes an expert at buildin fixing these crucial new instruments, a talent that wins him a place at a bru academy for Hitler Youth, then a special assignment to track the resistance and more aware of the human cost of his intelligence, Werner travels throu heart of the war and, finally, into Saint-Malo, where his story and Marie-Lau

converge.

Ten years in the writing, *All the Light We Cannot See* is a magnificent, deep moving novel from a writer, says the *Los Angeles Times,* "whose sentences to thrill." (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1973
- Where—Cleveland, Ohio, USA
- Education—B.A., Bowdoin College; M.F.A., Bowling Green State University
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize; Story Award; Rome Prize from American Academy Letters

  Guggenheim Fellowship; Young Lions Award from NY Public Library
- Currently—lives in Boise, Idaho

Anthony Doerr is an American fiction writer. Born and raised in Ohio, he att Bowdoin College, where he majored in history. He later earned an MFA fron Green State University.

Many of the stories in his 2002 *Shell Collector*, take place in Africa and New where he has worked and lived. In a 2004 online interview for the *Washing* Doerr mentioned that his next work would involve occupied France during V II and their subversive use of radios against the Nazis. The struggles in wri book are documented in his 2007 book, a non-fiction memoir entitled *Four . in Rome: On Twins, Insomnia, and the Biggest Funeral in the History of the* His next novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, came out in 2014.

Doerr also writes a column on science books for the *Boston Globe* and is a contributor to *The Morning News*.

Doerr is married with twin sons and lives in Boise, Idaho. From 2007–2010 considered Writer-in-Residence for the state of Idaho. (*Adapted from Wikipe Retrieved 4/15/2014.*)

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All the Light We Cannot See (Doerr) - Book Reviews

Book Reviews

[O]nce I started reading...*All the Light We Cannot See*, there was no puttin down.... The fact is [it] falls shortest when it tries to deal with Nazism.... M preposterous of all is a certain Sgt. Maj. Reinhold von Rumpel, whose wicke and physical loathsomeness are offset by nothing that could make him into rounded character. His unbelievability exemplifies a mistake writers often m describing monsters..... *All the Light We Cannot See* is more than a thriller than great literature... "a good read." Maybe Doerr could write great literat really tried. I would be happy if he did.
William T. Vollmann - New York Times Book Review

Incandescent...Mellifluous and unhurried...Characters as noble as they are er Doerr looms myriad strains into a luminous work of strife and transcendenc
Hamilton Cain - Oprah Magazine

Intricately structured...*All the Light We Cannot See* is a work of art and of preservation.
Jane Ciabattari - BBC

(*Starred review.*) If a book's success can be measured by its ability to mov and the number of memorable characters it has, Story Prize–winner Doerr's triumphs on both counts. Along the way, he convinces readers that new sto still be told about this well-trod period, and that war—despite its desperatio cruelty, and harrowing moral choices—cannot negate the pleasures of the w
Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Shifting among multiple viewpoints but focusing mostly or

Endlessly bold and equally delicate...An intricate miracle of invention, narrat and deep research lightly held, but above all a miracle of humanity....Anthoı novel celebrates—and also accomplishes—what only the finest art can: the create, reveal, and augment experience in all its horror and wonder, heartb rapture.

Shelf Awareness

(*Starred review.*) A novel to live in, learn from, and feel bereft over when t page is turned, Doerr's magnificently drawn story seems at once spacious a composed.... Doerr masterfully and knowledgeably recreates the deprived c conditions of war-torn France and the strictly controlled lives of the military occupiers.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) Doerr presents us with two intricate stories, both of which place during World War II; late in the novel, inevitably, they intersect.... Dc captures the sights and sounds of wartime and focuses, refreshingly, on the goodness of his major characters.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with impact of the Internet on today's society?

2. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?

3. Whose story did you enjoy the most? Was there any character you want

insight into?

4. When Werner and Jutta first hear the Frenchman on the radio, he conclu broadcast by saying "*Open your eyes and see what you can with them befo close forever*" (pages 48–49), and Werner recalls these words throughout tl (pages 86, 264, and 409). How do you think this phrase relates to the over message of the story? How does it relate to Madame Manec's question: "Do want to be alive before you die?" (page 270)?

5. On page 160, Marie-Laure realizes "This...is the basis of his fear, all fear light you are powerless to stop will turn on you and usher a bullet to its ma does this image constitute the most general basis of all fear? Do you agree'

6. Reread Madame Manec's boiling frog analogy on page 284. Etienne later Marie-Laure, "Who was supposed to be the frog? Her? Or the Germans?" (p Who did you think Madame Manec meant? Could it have been someone oth herself or the Germans? What does it say about Etienne that he doesn't cor himself to be the frog?

7. On page 368, Werner thinks, "That is how things are...with everybody in in this army, in this world, they do as they're told, they get scared, they m with only themselves in mind. *Name me someone who does not.*" But in fac of the characters show great courage and selflessness throughout the story way, big or small. Talk about the different ways they put themselves at risk to do what they think is right. What do you think were some shining mome did you admire most?

8. On page 390, the author writes, "To shut your eyes is to guess nothing (blindness." What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Lau perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?

9. One of Werner's bravest moments is when he confronts von Rumpel: "All you wait, and then it finally comes, and are you ready?" (page 465) Have y had a moment like that? Were you ready? What would you say that momer some of the other characters?

10. Why do you think Marie-Laure gave Werner the little iron key? Why mig

Werner have gone back for the wooden house but left the Sea of Flames?

11. Von Rumpel seemed to believe in the power of the Sea of Flames, but v truly a supernatural object or was it merely a gemstone at the center of coi Do you think it brought any protection to Marie-Laure and/or bad luck to th loved?

12. When Werner and Marie-Laure discuss the unknown fate of Captain Ner end of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Marie-Laure suggests the endedness is intentional and meant to make us wonder (page 472). Are the unanswered questions from this story that you think are meant to make us

13. The 1970s image of Jutta is one of a woman deeply guilt-ridden and se conscious about her identity as a German. Why do you think she feels so m over the crimes of others? Can you relate to this? Do you think she should shame about her identity?

14. What do you think of the author's decision to flash forward at the end c book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characte anything surprise you?

15. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote that "the line dividing good and evil through the heart of every human being." *All the Light We Cannot See* is fil examples of human nature at its best and worst. Discuss the themes of goc evil throughout the story. How do they drive each other? What do you think ultimate lessons that these characters and the resolution of their stories tea (*Questions issued by the publisher.*)

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The New York Times

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Light Found in Darkness of Wartime

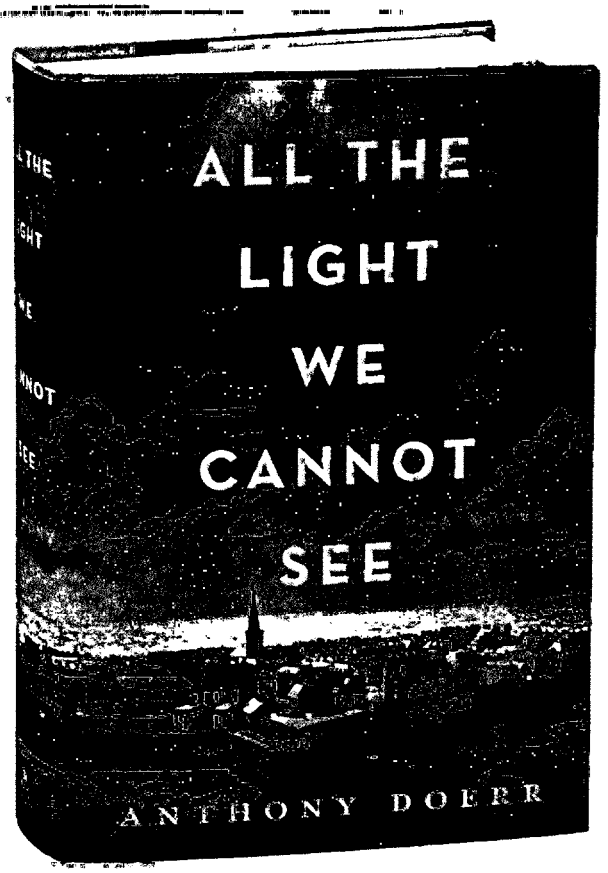
By Janet Maslin

April 28, 2014

Boy meets girl in Anthony Doerr's hauntingly beautiful new book, but the circumstances are as elegantly circuitous as they can be. The heroine of "All the Light We Cannot See" is blind, but anyone familiar with Mr. Doerr's work, which includes the short-story collections "The Shell Collector" and "Memory Wall," will know that its title has many more meanings than that.

The heroine is Marie-Laure LeBlanc, whose loving father, a talented locksmith, goes to extraordinary lengths to help her compensate for the loss of her eyesight. Professionally, Marie-Laure's father oversees all the locks at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Privately, after his daughter is blinded by cataracts in 1934 at the age of 6, he devises tiny, intricate models of the places she must go, so that she learns to navigate by touch and then by memory.

Mr. Doerr's acutely sensory style captures the extreme perceptiveness Marie-Laure has developed by the time World War II begins. Much of the story unfolds during the war, although it jumps back and forth. The book opens in August 1944, two months after D-Day, with the sound of things falling from the sky and rattling against windows. Marie-Laure knows these are leaflets. She can smell the fresh ink.



Patricia Wall/The New York Times

She is in the walled Breton city of Saint-Malo, a terrifically picturesque and apt setting for the most dramatic part of Mr. Doerr's story. Saint-Malo is occupied by German forces and under siege by the Allied bombers that destroyed much of it before the war was over. And five streets away from the house to which Marie-Laure and her father have fled, a young German soldier named Werner Pfennig is trapped in the ruins of a grand hotel. Long before Werner and Marie-Laure meet, Mr. Doerr has created a skein of ties between them.

Marie-Laure grows up beloved and fortunate; Werner's life is more grim. He is close to his sister, Jutta, but both are consigned to an orphanage after their father is crushed in a coal mine. For Werner, there truly seems to be no future: The German government decrees that when boys from his region reach their midteens, they must go to work in the mines. But Werner is also a

prodigy. Just as Marie-Laure's father has a genius for creating locks and models, Werner has a way with electrical circuits. He builds a shortwave radio that holds the key to his future.

Word of Werner's extraordinary talent gets around. One day in 1939, a German officer who smells of cake asks Werner to accompany him to the household of a rich, powerful couple whose big, expensive Philco radio is on the fritz. Fixing it not only gets him all the cake he can eat (a treat beyond imagining for a boy of his background), but it also brings him candidacy for an elite Nazi school where the emphasis is on extreme military training. Werner isn't surprised to pass the entrance exams easily. He's more nonplused to find his head measured with calipers and his hair whiter than any of the 60-odd shades of blond on the examiners' charts. It goes without saying that his eyes are also rated for their shade of blue.

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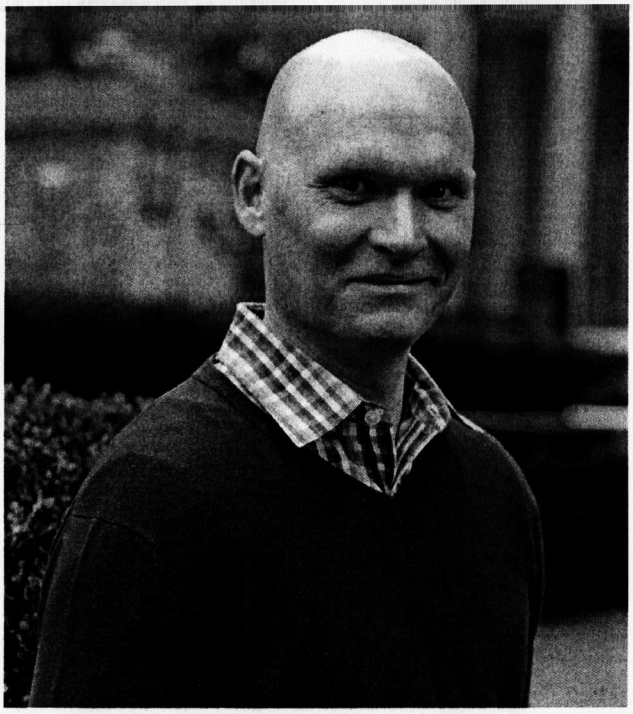
Werner's experience at the school is only one of the many trials through which Mr. Doerr puts his characters in this surprisingly fresh and enveloping book. What's unexpected about its impact is that the novel does not regard Europeans' wartime experience in a new way. Instead, Mr. Doerr's nuanced approach concentrates on the choices his characters make and on the souls that have been lost, both living and dead.

Anthony Doerr
Isabelle Selby



The light in its title is, among other things, a topic that Werner hears discussed on a late-1930s radio broadcast about the brain's power to create light in darkness. It's an idea that reverberates ever more strongly as the book progresses. That the professor speaking on the radio turns out to be Marie-Laure's grandfather just adds to the elements of felicity and coincidence that enrich this narrative. And the way Werner's school so brutally tests his decency threatens to snuff out any of the light that made him such a special boy. Even allowing for the kill-or-be-killed values beaten into cadets at the place, Werner lets himself be seduced by the power newly bestowed upon him. He does nothing to stop the system that elevates him from destroying his best friend.

Self-protection is another of the many motifs running through this book. Marie-Laure is fascinated by snails, and takes the nickname the Whelk when Saint-Malo begins its small but creative efforts at Resistance; she is not timid, but she admires a snail's ability to keep seabirds from smashing its shell. The book also falls under the spell of a huge blue diamond that is thought to cause suffering and is the subject of a frantic search on Hitler's behalf. ("I want to believe that Papa hasn't been anywhere near it," says Marie-Laure, even though Papa has been in charge of protecting it in the museum.)

And then there are the lies. They come in all sizes and shapes here, from the falsely sunny letters written by those in grave danger ("I am incredibly safe, as safe as safe can be") to the school propaganda that Werner is force- fed. As the words of his teachers fight the power of his memories, an inner voice tells him, "Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever."

A small thank you to Mr. Doerr for deliberately giving this intricate book an extremely readable format, with very short chapters, many about a page and a half long. As he told the Powell's Books blog in a recent interview: "This was a gesture of friendliness, maybe. It's like I'm saying to the reader, 'I know this is going to be more lyrical than maybe 70 percent of American readers want to see, but here's a bunch of white space for you to recover from that lyricism.' "

ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE
By Anthony Doerr
531 pages. Scribner. $27.

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