

## Book Review

# Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*: All the history the novelist cannot see

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23 March 2016

*All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr (Scribner, 2014)

*All the Light We Cannot See*, a historical novel by Anthony Doerr, set during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II, is a runaway best seller (it remains on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list after 97 weeks). It has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Australian International Book Award, and was shortlisted for the National Book Award. The American Library Association awarded Doerr its highest honor, the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

Doerr (born in Cleveland in 1973) is the author of two previous collections of short fiction, *The Shell Collector* (2002) and *Memory Wall* (2010), a novel, *About Grace* (2004), and a memoir, *Four Seasons in Rome: On Twins, Insomnia and the Biggest Funeral in the History of the World* (2007).

*All the Light We Cannot See* opens during the US bombing of Saint-Malo, a historic, walled port city in Brittany on the northwestern coast of France, in August of 1944—two months after D-Day. The narrative then backtracks ten years to 1934. In a time-worn “Romeo and Juliet” plot, the story follows the lives of the two principal characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a Frenchwoman eventually fighting for the Resistance, who is totally blind; and Werner Pfennig, a German soldier and electronics expert who ends up in France as a member of the *Wehrmacht*.

In Marie-Laure, Doerr wanted to create a heroine who loves to read and loves the sea. He conducted extensive research on the visually impaired. Blind from the age of six, Marie-Laure is fortunate to have a father who is compassionate and loving, designing intellectually challenging puzzles for her and encouraging her to read classic French novels in Braille. She grows into a self-reliant young woman, undeterred by her handicap. When World War II comes, she doesn't hesitate to join the Resistance to the German forces, taking the code name “the whelk”—an aggressive little snail.

In a novel that takes human empathy as its central theme, Doerr writes with sensitivity and compassion of the plight of refugees, as Marie-Laure and her father join the mass exodus of Parisians fleeing the German occupation. In the most difficult

circumstances, Doerr believes, it is important for people to hold onto their basic humanity.

Werner Pfennig, the German soldier, is an anti-hero, a familiar type in American literature, struggling in a world without meaning. He is deeply conflicted, repulsed by the cruelty of Nazi racial practices, yet willing to shout “Heil, Hitler!” on cue to further his ambitions.

Werner is an orphan from Zollverein, a coal mining complex in an economically deprived region of Germany, which has no future. His innate moral decency was formed in his childhood. He and his sister Jutta were raised by a kind foster mother. Both listened to forbidden radio broadcasts about Nazi atrocities.

Werner's experience as a cadet in an elite paramilitary school for Hitler Youth, and the school's cruel curriculum, will be of great interest to readers. Forced into the German military, Werner's job is to identify enemy radio signals. The partisans broadcasting them are then hunted down and killed. Werner, suffering a profound sense of alienation, is haunted by the specter of their faces.

While Doerr creates compelling characters, the story feels divorced from its settings. There is little sense of the historical process—for example, that German life changed in any fundamental way under the Nazis, particularly in the German coal mining area where Werner is raised. In Brittany, the author introduces some colorful scenes portraying the neighborhood housewives organizing to help the Resistance. But even here, he does not capture the heartbeat of Saint-Malo.

Doerr presents war as a moral issue—a struggle between good and evil. The Nazis—and, as we shall see, ISIS—are evil and their myths stem from evil. What, then, causes evil? This is the question that Doerr cannot answer, and it damages his fiction. For example, expanding the rogues' gallery of evil-doers, Doerr takes some cheap shots at the Soviet forces. Red Army soldiers make a brief appearance, drunk and foul-smelling, only to rape Werner's sister.

Interviewed in *Publisher's Weekly*, Doerr said he wanted readers to learn “that war is more complicated than they might have thought, that there were civilians on both sides making really complicated moral decisions.” This is fairly banal stuff.

In Doerr's worldview there are neither powerful economic forces nor any ambitions of the competing major capitalist powers that would help explain the war.

A major defect of the novel is Doerr's inability to analyze the roots of the catastrophe of the Second World War. Interviewed for the American Library Association, Doerr elaborated his view of history: "History is about studying how, when, and where large numbers of human beings fell under the spell of various myths," he said. He elevates myth to the level of a titanic force that drives history.

Expanding on this conception in another interview, Doerr blames myth for the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria): "Myths are still used to foment nationalism in all sorts of places, and the Internet is being used to transmit myths in much the same way radio was used in the 1930s and 1940s." ISIS extremists "upload acts of horrifying violence to YouTube to wage psychological terror," he told the interviewer.

Another critical problem in the novel is Doerr's use of the radio as a communicator of myth. Employing the postmodern technique of internal paratext (i.e. text-within-a-text), Nazi propaganda is broadcast throughout the novel, e.g., "Only through the hottest fires can purification be achieved. Only through the harshest tests can God's chosen rise."

The novel's dominant myth surrounds the "Sea of Flames," a 133-carat diamond the size of a pigeon's egg that carries an ancient curse: anyone in possession of the diamond will live forever while everyone dear to her or him will experience tragedy or death. The Sea of Flames drives the dramatic tension in the novel. The diamond is the subject of an intense pursuit by Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel, the Nazi villain.

A cursed jewel has long been a stock element in second-rate movies. Did the Sea of Flames cause the American bombardment, the arrest of Marie-Laure's father by the Gestapo and all the heroine's other misfortunes? Doerr keeps us guessing.

Writers and film directors have long known how to use blind orphan children and virtuous, endangered heroines to milk the sympathies of an audience. Various trends in contemporary fiction, with facile, postmodern elements, easily absorb the genre of melodrama, popular in the nineteenth century. In the novel's climactic rescue scene, after a remarkable series of coincidences, Werner responds to Marie-Laure's desperate call for help broadcast over the radio, saving her from the clutches of von Rumpel, who would murder her to get his hands on the Sea of Flames.

The clear distinction between "good" and "evil" and the tightly structured, just-in-time rescue format in melodrama suit Doerr's purposes.

The novel also suffers artistically from Doerr's reliance on fashionable narrative techniques. The non-linear narrative moves forward in short chapters, out of order chronologically, giving, intentionally or not, a fragmented view of reality, and forcing the reader to flip back and forth and participate in the

development of the story. Some readers have found this annoying.

Intertextuality is the postmodern technique of referencing or re-telling other literary works. The novel's title is a reference to the biblical story of Jesus healing the blind man. Doerr's text, "a world full of light" echoes the biblical description of Jesus as "the light of the world." The blind man is healed by faith. Werner, suffering from spiritual blindness, is exhorted to "open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever."

Werner experiences a spiritual awakening and transformation. Through his love and his violent death, he is transformed into a Christ-like figure: "His soul glowed with some fundamental kindness."

Anthony Doerr's strong suit is his attention to the theme of human empathy. The writing's beauty is impressive, particularly the descriptions of the Breton coast and marine life. He creates memorable characters and intricate plots, but the novel feels contrived, relying on coincidences and props, e.g., the role of radio and the Sea of Flames. He thereby avoids facing the great historical issues behind the war. Doerr has largely created a fantasy world and a phony war.

The legacy of World War II is still with us. France today faces the growth in influence of the neo-fascist National Front (FN) headed by Marine Le Pen; while in Germany, certain reactionary historians are attempting to rehabilitate Hitler's reputation. Humanity faces a gathering storm—the threat of another world war. Doerr has nothing to offer his readers about the tremendous historical impact of this war, except spiritual panacea. His approach, focusing on the supposed moral complexity of personal choice, does not represent a broad social and historical view.



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