

All the Light We Cannot See: Shedding little of that on the events of World War II

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All the Light We Cannot See is a drama series directed by Shawn Levy and developed for Netflix by Steven Knight, based on the 2014 war novel of the same name by US author Anthony Doerr.

To its credit, the four-episode series attempts to grapple with some large questions: war, technology, fascism, intolerance and more. But despite a good deal of effort, no doubt sincere for the most part, the results are weak. The viewer does not know a great deal more about those questions than he or she did before watching the drama. The series tends largely to confirm liberal, muddle-headed accepted wisdom.

All the Light begins with the US army bombing the northwestern French port city of Saint Malo in August 1944, during the final stages of World War II. The German forces, who have been occupying the city since 1940, are on their last legs.

Marie-Laure (Aria Mia Loberti), a blind French teenager, broadcasts parts of Jules Verne's novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* from her attic in the city. In fact, she is delivering coded messages to the Allies. She is also trying to contact her father Daniel (Mark Ruffalo) and her uncle Etienne (Hugh Laurie), the latter a member of the French resistance.

Meanwhile, also in Saint Malo, Werner (Louis Hofmann), a young radio technician and a member of the German occupation, listens illicitly to Marie-Laure's readings on the air. He is a highly gifted radio engineer, having studied at an elite Third Reich school, although he is not a Nazi in his heart.

In one of the more far-fetched strands of the plot, when Marie-Laure and her father escaped from Paris to Saint Malo, the latter took a large gem, known as the Sea of Flames, from the museum where he worked to keep it from the Germans. A psychopathic Nazi officer,

Reinhold von Rumpel (Lars Eidinger), is desperate to get his hands on the legendary gem, because he believes it will magically cure his diseased body.

The paths of the central characters will intersect and that will have traumatic consequences.

All the Light We Cannot See has certain qualities. The two protagonists, Loberti and Hofmann, are fine and believable. Marie-Laure's younger blind self is endearingly played by Nell Sutton, as are the children in Werner's orphanage. Those performances are sincerely and genuinely done. If there is a strong point in the series, it is the theme of youth pitted again against authoritarianism and violence, especially during today's epoch of unending wars and now genocide.

But the approach to World War II, Nazi Germany, the German occupation and the French resistance is muddy, confused and ahistorical. One would have to look elsewhere to learn anything truly valuable and concrete about these events. They merely form the backdrop to a "timeless" tale about a struggle between heroically good people and unaccountably bad people. Von Rumpel, in particular, is a character out of the Marvel Comic Universe with his fanatical pursuit of the disease-curing diamond (think, for example, of the ridiculous Johann Schmidt/Red Skull in *Captain America: The First Avenger*).

The Sea of Flames as a motif is not a valuable addition to the story. Daniel, Marie-Laure's father, tells his daughter that the legend about the gem "says that the stone ... is cursed. ... The curse is that if you touch the stone whoever you love will suffer a terrible misfortune. But if you possess the stone, you yourself will never die." Presumably, the stone is a metaphor for the Nazi greed for power and territory. This watered-down bit of Wagnerism simply seems clumsy and out of place in a semi-realistic historical drama.

Moreover, the film's ending is very melodramatic and predictable, although implausible, with a "female empowerment" twist.

Obtrusively, the filmmakers have decided to book-end the series with the Americans as great liberators, even as the US was preparing to firebomb Dresden and other German cities and a year later would incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians.

The WSWS review of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) argued that to suggest, as Spielberg's film did, that American soldiers "freed the world" was inaccurate, "even if one assumes that the defeat of Nazism by Allied, not simply US, forces represented such a thing. By June 1944 the fate of Hitler's regime had already been largely sealed by defeat at the hands of the Red Army; first, outside Stalingrad in January 1943, and second, in the massive tank battle at Kursk in July of that year... The Soviet population, despite the crimes and blunders of the Stalin bureaucracy, played a critical role in defeating Nazism."

To introduce the notion in our day, after more than 30 years of continuous war leading to millions of deaths, that the American military is a force for freedom is both fraudulent and dangerous.



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