

BOOKS

Light Found in Darkness of Wartime

'All the Light We Cannot See,' by Anthony Doerr

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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.

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.

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.

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

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