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Books

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

By Amanda Vaill May 5, 2014

I'm not sure I will read a better novel this year than Anthony Doerr's "All the Light We Cannot See." Enthrallingly told, beautifully written and so emotionally plangent that some passages bring tears, it is completely unsentimental — no mean trick when you consider that Doerr's two protagonists are children who have been engulfed in the horror of World War II. Not martyred emblems, like Anne Frank or the British evacuees on the torpedoed City of Benares, just ordinary children, two of thousands swallowed up in a conflict they had nothing to do with.

One is Marie-Laure LeBlanc, the blind daughter of the widowed master locksmith at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Shy but courageous and resourceful, Marie-Laure has learned to navigate the streets of her quartier with the help of a wooden scale-model made by her father. He also sharpens her mind by hiding birthday gifts in intricate puzzle boxes that he carves. (Pay attention to all such details. Each strikes answering echoes throughout the book.) She's fascinated by the marine specimens she's allowed to handle in the museum, such as the blind snail "that lives its whole life on the surface of the sea," floating on a raft made of foam without which "it will sink and die." And she's entranced by the imagined world she explores in her Braille edition of Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

But she's filled with uneasiness by another of the museum's treasures, a

priceless blue diamond called the Sea of Flames, which allegedly endows its keeper with the gift of eternal life and curses all he loves with unending misfortune. "I want to believe that Papa hasn't been anywhere near it," says Marie-Laure.

When the Nazis invade France in 1940, she and her father flee to the coastal town of Saint-Malo to take refuge with her great-uncle Etienne, a recluse still suffering shell-shock from the Great War. Unbeknownst to Marie-Laure, her father has been entrusted with the Sea of Flames or one of three exact copies, all of which must be hidden to keep them out of the Germans' hands. He conceals it in a model he makes of Etienne's house and street in Saint-Malo. But shortly thereafter, he is arrested by the Germans and disappears, leaving Marie-Laure alone with her great-uncle Etienne and his housekeeper. Soon, a Nazi treasure-hunter sets out on the trail of the Sea of Flames.

Meanwhile, in Germany, Werner Pfennig, an orphan with a preternatural understanding of circuitry, comes of age in the coal-mining town of Zollverein. When he and his sister Jutta find a broken short-wave radio behind the Children's Home where they live, Werner repairs it. Turning the dial, they hear a mysterious Frenchman talking about science: "What do we call visible light?" the Frenchman asks. "We call it color. But . . . really, children, mathematically, all of light is invisible." Werner is as entranced by this lesson as Marie-Laure is by the writings of Jules Verne.

His passion for science and his gift for radio mechanics earn him a place at a nightmarish training school for the Nazi military elite where, he's told, "You will all surge in the same direction at the same pace toward the same cause. . . You will eat country and breathe nation." Werner obeys, and when he graduates, his discipline and scientific aptitude carry him into the Wehrmacht, where he proves adept at finding the senders of illegal radio transmissions. But he's increasingly sickened by what happens when he tracks a radio signal to its source: "Inside the closet is not a radio but a child sitting on her bottom with a bullet through her head." And he's haunted by

his memories of the Frenchman's broadcasts, which remind him of a time when science seemed an instrument of wonder, not of death.

His path and Marie-Laure's converge in 1944, when Allied forces have landed on the beaches of Normandy and Werner's unit is dispatched to Saint-Malo to trace and destroy the sender of mysterious intelligence broadcasts. Doerr achieves this convergence and all the other wonders of this book by creating a structure as intricate as any model made by Marie-Laure's father. Cutting back and forth in time, he creates nearly unbearable suspense. Every piece of back story reveals information that charges the emerging narrative with significance, until at last the puzzle-box of the plot slides open to reveal the treasure hidden inside.

A lesser novelist would be content with this achievement, but Doerr twists the puzzle-box once more and brings his novel into the present. One of his contemporary characters imagines the electromagnetic waves coursing into and out of computers and cellphones, carrying with them the flood of quotidian communications that make up our lives. "Is it so hard to believe that souls might also travel these paths?" she asks, lamenting that "every hour, someone for whom the war was memory falls out of the world."

In this book — because of this book — those people do not disappear, but only become a part of the light that we cannot see.

Vaill's latest book is "Hotel Florida: Truth, Love, and Death in the Spanish Civil War."

ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE

By Anthony Doerr

Scribner. 530 pp. \$27

