

Fiction

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr review - a story of morality, science and Nazi occupation

Carmen Callil on a fable of technological liberation against a backdrop of war



Doerr's story takes in the Nazi occupation of France and the D-Day landings. Photograph: Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

Carmen Callil

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This novel will be a piece of luck for anyone with a long plane journey or beach holiday ahead. It is such a page-turner, entirely absorbing: one of those books in which the talent of the storyteller surmounts stylistic inadequacies and ultimately defies one's better judgment.

Good things first: the story, which is set in Germany and France before and during the German occupation of France. Doerr's energetic imagination seems steeped in the favourite books of childhood: Marie-Laure is a little blind French girl, motherless, with the freckles of Pollyanna and Anne of Green Gables. Werner Pfennig and his sister Jutta are orphans in the German mining town of Zollverein, near Essen. He is a boy of seven with white hair, like snow, whose presence is "like being in the room with a feather". Werner may be tiny, but he is no Peter Pan. He has a gift for science, and the intricacies of radios in particular. He can fix anything.

Marie-Laure is six years old when the novel begins in Paris in 1934, where she lives with her beloved Papa, a locksmith and keeper of the keys at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle. There, hidden in its vaults for the past 200 years, is an accursed gem, a greyish-blue sea diamond with a red hue at its centre: the Sea of Flame.

Marie-Laure's father is also the creator of ingenious puzzles and delightful miniatures - of the streets and houses of Paris, for instance. The miniatures teach Marie-Laure, using her fingers as eyes, how to navigate the city. Ultimately she survives the destruction and desolation of the Occupation through the books she can read in braille. Though this is a novel Dickens would read with some interest, it is Jules Verne and Darwin who are the key to Marie-Laure's future. She devours *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*.

Werner's talent brings him to the attention of the Nazis, and he is sent to a national school that trains, ferociously, an elite cadre for the Third Reich. The chapters on Werner's schooling, and the fate of his brutalised friend Frederick, are the best in the book. Doerr's prose needs no embellishment as this section gently probes the question of how ordinary German people could have done what they did.

Marie-Laure and her father escape Paris in 1940, and take refuge in Saint-Malo, on the coast of Brittany. Her father has been entrusted with the Sea of Flame. Werner's genius is put to work tracking radio transmissions across Russia and Central Europe, until he is sent to Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's great-uncle Etienne uses his radio transmitter on behalf of the Resistance. The pursuit of the Sea of Flame continues as the US Air Force blasts the walled city to smithereens two months after the D-Day landings.

Doerr constructs an unusual edifice, made up of fable and the prodigious inventions of the mechanical, technical and natural world. Snails, molluscs, the creatures of earth and sky, the properties of gemstones and coal, all the technological marvels embraced by the Nazis are converted into sources of wonder, as the intricacies of radio waves, and the data they hurtle through the air, offer an alternative way to harness both science and the goodness in human nature.

Unfortunately, Doerr's prose style is high-pitched, operatic, relentless. Short sharp sentences, echoing the static of the radios, make the first hundred pages very tiresome to read, as does the American idiom. Somehow it is strange to listen to the thoughts of Marie-Laure and Werner and the many other characters, both German and French, give forth such Yankee utterances as "Werner ... you shouldn't think big." Sidewalks, apartment houses, the use of "sure" instead of "yes" - all these cut across the historical background that Doerr has so meticulously researched. No noun sits upon the page without the decoration of at least one adjective, and sometimes, alas, with two or three. And these adjectives far too often are of the glimmering, glowing, pellucid variety. Eyes are wounded, nights are luminous and starlit, seagulls are alabaster. "Fields enwombed with hedges" is almost the last straw. And so the novel is far too long.

Nevertheless, often Doerr rises again as, entranced with the story he is telling, he lets the overwriting slip away. And his attention to detail is magnificent. Always you want to know what happens next to Marie-Laure, to her father, her great-uncle Etienne, to Werner and Jutta, and to his considerable parade of other characters. Much can be forgiven a Pied Piper like Doerr, who can pour his obsessive energies into a tale such as this.