



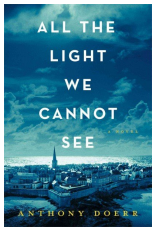
## BOOK REVIEWS

# A Fractured Tale Of Time, War And A Really Big Diamond

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ALAN CHEUSE



## All the Light We Cannot See

by Anthony Doerr

Hardcover, 531 pages

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No book I've read all year underscores the distinctions between the long form and the short story more than the award-winning story writer Anthony Doerr's new novel *All the Light We Cannot See*.

The book takes place in Europe — in three locations, mainly — Hitler's Germany, Paris, and the walled seaside town of Saint-Malo in Brittany, from the mid-1930s to the roaring and murderous years of World War II. It focuses on two main characters, one a German soldier-to-be, an orphan named Werner who rises in the ranks because of his talent for electricity in general — and radios in particular. The other is a blind French girl named Marie-Laure, whose father is the locksmith in charge of all the keys and vaults at the Museum of Natural History in Paris.

When the German Army takes Paris, Marie-Laure and the locksmith head out on the road. The museum director has charged her father with caring for and hiding what may be the most valuable gem in the entire collection, a giant blue diamond known as the Sea of Flames that bears a legendary curse. They arrive in Saint-Malo and take up residence in the house of an eccentric relative, where the father hides his treasure, almost in plain sight.

Werner, meanwhile, has been perfecting his technical skills, and as the war becomes more of a struggle for the Wermacht he earns a post on the Western Front — in Saint-Malo. Here, the parallel tracks of the main characters come dramatically close to intersecting. There's nothing like this variety of plot for creating suspense and expectation on the part of a reader.

Except that right from the start, the timeline of the plot lies broken into annoying fragments, for no good narrative reason that I can discern. It's almost as if an editor suggested that a rather traditional, forward moving-narrative might seem too old-fashioned — and urged the author to jazz it up by zig-zagging back and forth over the course of a decade or so.

Here's how that works: The book actually opens one month after the Allied invasion of Normandy, as U.S. airplanes drop leaflets urging the inhabitants of Saint-Malo to evacuate the town immediately. Marie-Laure, now an adolescent without her father, huddles on an upper floor of an ancient house, trying to make sense in her blindness of the events about to transpire. Five streets to the north, 18-year-old private Werner is bivouacked in an old hotel, scrambling to take cover in advance of the imminent bombing.

And then the narrative jumps back to 1934, when Marie-Laure is a tall six-year-old with failing eyesight. He father sends her on a guided tour of the museum, where we hear of the wonders of the Sea of Flames diamond and its exotic history. Meanwhile, Werner is an inquisitive child with an interest in science.

Then it's another leap into the past, this time to June, 1940, as Marie-Laure and her father set out on their pilgrimage, with — unbeknownst to the girl — the legendary diamond hidden among their belongings. And Werner, older now of course, takes exams so that he can continue his technical education.

And then we leap ahead again, to 1944, when an ailing German Sergeant Major von

Rumpel, in search of the French diamond, has followed the trail to Saint-Malo.

And then we travel back to January 1941.

And then ahead to Saint-Malo again, this time on August 8, 1944. And so forth, toward an end I won't reveal, but which takes place long after the major events of the novel have occurred.

Doerr is an exquisite stylist; his talents are on full display in brilliant passages passages such as this one, describing blind Marie-Laure in the midst of Saint-Malo: "To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness. Beneath your world of skies and faces and buildings exists a rawer and older world, a place where surface planes disintegrate and sounds ribbon in the shoals through the air. Marie-Laure can sit in an attic high above the street and hear lilies rustling in marches two miles away ... she hears the tamarinds shiver and the jays shriek and the dune grass burn; she feels the great granite fist, sunk deep into the earth's crust, on which Saint-Malo sits, and the ocean teething at it from all four sides."

It's a marvelous thing, to read a book studded with epiphanic sequences like this, sentences ringing beautifully on every page. But there's just something about the ragged time-line that makes Doerr's approach and execution all too jarring. If only we might have begun with the earliest chapter in the timeline, with the six-year-old Marie-Laure, "tall and freckled," on her way to begin a guided tour of the Natural History Museum where she first hears the story of the fabled diamond, "as blue as the sea, but with a flare of red at its core," and all the time of the larger story lying before her, unbroken.

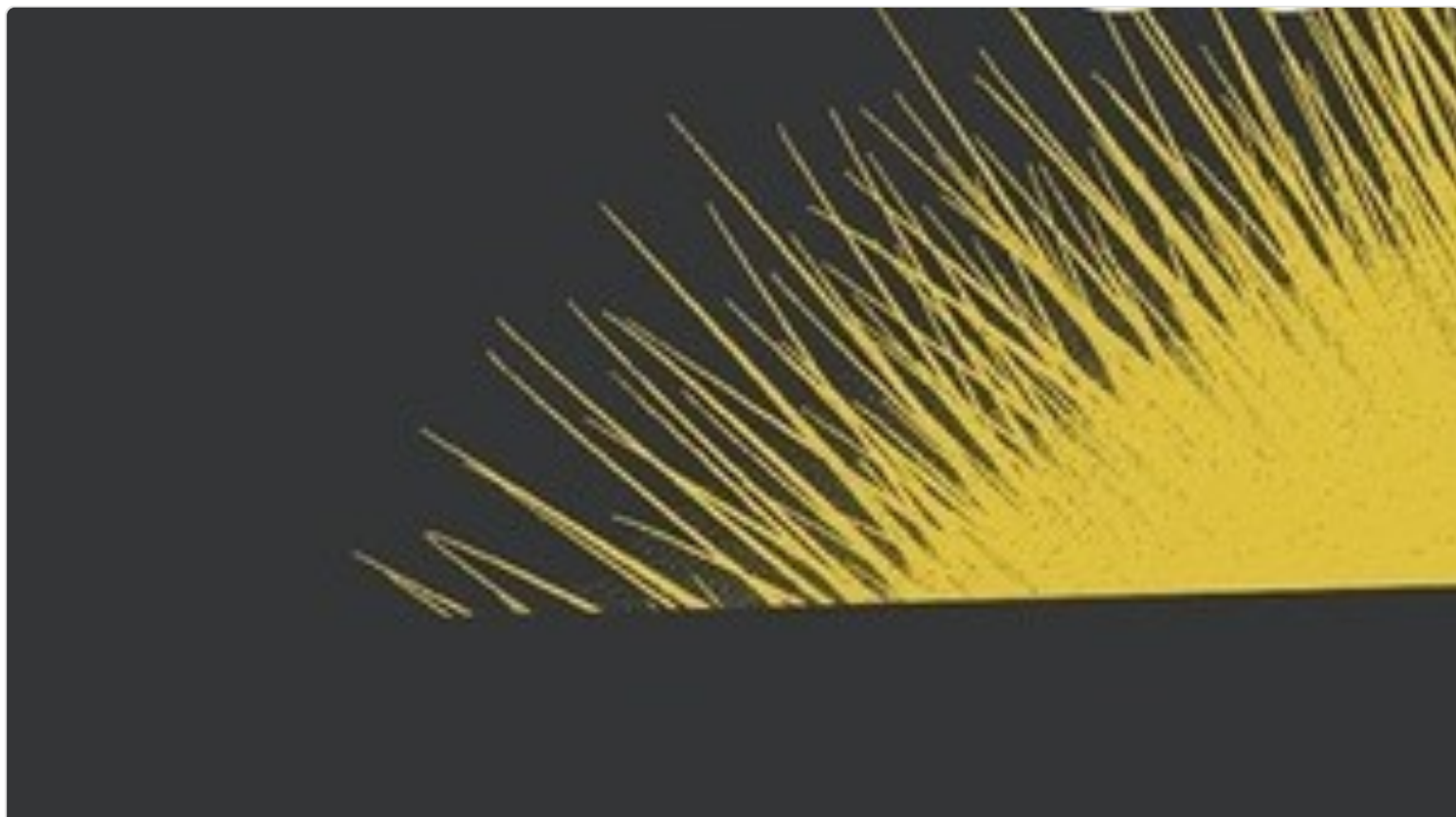
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