

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

# Darkness Visible

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

By WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN   MAY 8, 2014

*(This book was selected as one of The New York Times Book Review's 10 Best Books of 2014. For the rest of the list, [click here.](#))*

I must blame Anthony Doerr for lost sleep, because once I started reading his new novel, "All the Light We Cannot See," there was no putting it down. Told mostly in the present tense, in short and usually pointed chapters, the story moves briskly and efficiently toward its climactic encounter during the Allied bombing of St.-Malo, France, a couple of months after D-Day. Although the narrative consists largely of flashbacks, it's easy to follow because it focuses most sharply on only two characters, the blind child Marie-Laure LeBlanc, who takes part in the French Resistance, and the very Aryan-looking Werner Pfennig, a technocratic private in the service of the Thousand-Year Reich.

Marie-Laure is an exquisitely realized creation. Her blindness is convincingly represented, and the steady love of her locksmith father (who builds scale models of the neighborhoods she must learn to negotiate with her cane) makes her story both more beautiful and more believable. Although they are eventually separated, we remember Daniel LeBlanc, for he has saved his daughter from helpless self-pity; and once he is gone, her self-reliant intelligence, nurtured by him, allows her to carry on most bravely and eventually to inspire others. Each time Madame Ruelle at the bakery sells her another "ordinary loaf" with a slip of coded numbers

inside for her great-uncle to transmit on his illegal radio, the girl calmly does her duty. Shortly before the Allies come, Madame Ruelle finally “does something she has never done: She reaches across the counter and cups Marie-Laure’s face in her floury palms. ‘You amazing child.’ ” It is a measure of Doerr’s talent that this moment is not saccharine.

Werner is less successfully realized. As a counterpart to Marie-Laure’s wise and steady father, Doerr gives Werner a little sister named Jutta, whose anti-fascist integrity, we are supposed to believe, will ultimately correct his own flawed moral compass. Near the beginning of the novel she first discovers the copper wire that will allow them to tune in to foreign broadcasts. “After prayers, after lights-out, Jutta sneaks up to her brother’s dormer” at the orphanage; “Instead of drawing together, they lie hip to hip listening till midnight, till 1, till 2.” Werner, it turns out, is an engineering prodigy, and his ability to build and repair radios allows him to escape the coal mines of Essen, where their father was killed. Winning admittance to the National Political Institute of Education at Schulpforta, he becomes a teacher’s pet, coinventing and perfecting a device for triangulating on enemy radio transmissions. “He cannot stop thinking of Jutta, who has not spoken to him since discovering he smashed their radio. . . . Her eyes said, *You are betraying me*, but wasn’t he protecting her?” Indeed he is, for listening to foreign frequencies is a crime under National Socialism.

The murderous nature of the Institute’s curriculum will be no surprise to anyone who’s heard of Hitler, and Werner’s education thus grows all too predictable. The boy’s only school friend is a dreamy, ornithologically inclined rich kid named Frederick, whose poor eyesight should have disqualified him from Nazi excellence; fortunately he has memorized the eye charts. As he explains to Werner: “Father needs me to be at Schulpforta. Mother too. It doesn’t matter what I want. . . . Your problem, Werner, is that you still believe you own your life.” How can Frederick then turn around and own his? The moment of truth comes when he alone refuses to take part in one of the school’s annual rituals: the communitarian murder of an “Untermensch.” Perhaps Doerr would have us believe that Frederick makes his stand suddenly but naturally, as a result of inner decency. As far as I am

concerned, this cardboard martyr never lived. Call him a casualty of inadequate character development.

Thankfully, Werner himself is both more interesting and more believable than that. But while Marie-Laure's participation in the Resistance develops naturally out of who she is, Werner's life lacks context, at least during the important period when he has departed Schulpforta for the Eastern Front. As a child he was as appealingly drawn as Marie-Laure. But he now becomes somehow less knowable to us, less real. His talent for triangulating on enemy signals lets him engage in anti-partisan operations, with which he goes along and goes along, until the mistaken shooting of a Viennese mother and child unhinges him. All of this is perfectly plausible, but I wish that Doerr had conveyed more of his thoughts and motives. From time to time he remembers his sister ("Jutta, he thinks, I finally listened"), but that poor girl receives no chapter from her own point of view until the war's end, and we only truly begin to know her mature self as of 1974, when she is living out a middle-aged existence as a wife, mother and algebra teacher.

The fact is, "All the Light We Cannot See" falls shortest when it tries to deal with Nazism. It falls back on flimsy types. Frederick is one. At times Werner is another. Most preposterous of all is a certain Sgt. Maj. Reinhold von Rumpel, whose wickedness and physical loathsomeness are offset by nothing that could make him into a rounded character. His unbelievability exemplifies a mistake writers often make when describing monsters. The fact that Hitler was kind to animals does not make him less monstrous, but only more human, more like us, and therefore less susceptible to being complacently dismissed: "Well, our people would never be like that!"

Given the ideologies involved, not to mention the distinct personalities of the central characters, the mere idea of an encounter between Marie-Laure and Werner bears considerable power. And Doerr has developed the situation into what could have been a profound parable: The blind transmitter, heroine, lawbreaker and potential martyr meets the ever-listening receiver, who has lost sight of his own principles. Perhaps it is not giving away too much to compare their story with the interesting film "The Lives of Others," in which a Stasi agent begins

to sympathize with the East German playwright on whom he is spying. But, oh, that miserable von Rumpel! Why did Doerr have to drag him in? “Through von Rumpel’s mind sail visions of the Führermuseum, glittering cases, bowers beneath pillars, jewels behind glass — and something else too: a faint power, like a low voltage, coming off the stone. Whispering to him, promising to erase his illness” — because once we get stuck with this flatly villainous cancer-ridden diamond appraiser, all clichés are compounded by means of an immortality-conferring, curse-bearing diamond! And so “The Lives of Others” becomes “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

“Raiders of the Lost Ark,” by the way, is highly enjoyable for its frenetic silliness, and “All the Light We Cannot See” did keep me entertained for half the night. But the book contains enough flashes of real talent that I kept hoping for more than entertainment. When he takes the trouble, Doerr can write beautifully, both page for page and line for line. Set aside von Rumpel and all his paragraphs, each of which epitomizes the German adjective *verdorben*: spoiled, rancid, putrescent. Instead, try this: “He listens to the notes and the silences between them, and then finds himself leading horses through a forest at dawn, trudging through snow behind his great-grandfather, who walks with a saw draped over his huge shoulders.”

“All the Light We Cannot See” is more than a thriller and less than great literature. As such, it is what the English would call “a good read.” Maybe Doerr could write great literature if he really tried. I would be happy if he did.

## ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE

By Anthony Doerr

531 pp. Scribner. \$27.

William T. Vollmann won the National Book Award for his most recent novel, “Europe Central.” His new book, “Last Stories and Other Stories,” will be published in July.

A version of this review appears in print on May 11, 2014, on Page BR16 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Darkness Visible.

---

© 2017 The New York Times Company