

Author Spotlight

ANTHONY DOERR



Anthony Doerr is the author of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and 2014 National Book Award finalist *All the Light We Cannot See*. He is also the author of two story collections *Memory Wall* and *The Shell Collector*, the novel *About Grace*, and the memoir *Four Seasons in Rome*. He has won four O. Henry Prizes, the Rome Prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award, the National Magazine Award for fiction, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Story Prize. Anthony Doerr was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. Doerr lives in Boise, Idaho, with his wife and two sons.

Ten years in the writing, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is an epic work of historical fiction. With richly detailed language and characters who are both brave and heartbreaking, Doerr weaves together the stories of a French girl named Marie-Laure who has lost her eyesight and a German orphan named Werner. As Hitler's occupied territory grows, Marie-Laure and Werner's lives and families are torn apart by the war, yet this gorgeous novel is the story of people who, against the odds, find good in one another.

Marie-Laure lives with her father in Paris near the Museum of Natural History, where he works as the master of its thousands of locks. When she is six, Marie-Laure goes blind and her father builds a perfect miniature of their neighborhood so she can memorize it by touch and navigate her way home. When she is twelve, the Nazis occupy Paris and father and daughter flee to the walled citadel of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's reclusive great-uncle lives in a tall house by the sea. With them they carry what might be the museum's most valuable and dangerous jewel.

In a mining town in Germany, the orphan Werner grows up with his younger sister. The children are enchanted by a crude radio they find, and Werner becomes an expert at building and fixing these crucial new instruments. His talent wins him a place at a brutal academy for Hitler Youth, then a special assignment to track the resistance. More and more aware of the human cost of his intelligence, Werner travels through the heart of the war and, finally, into Saint-Malo, where his story and Marie-Laure's converge.

In an interview with Scribner magazine, Doerr reflected on writing *All the Light We Cannot See*, "A visit to Saint-Malo, France, a city almost entirely destroyed by American artillery in 1944 in the final months of World War II was painstakingly put back together, block by granite block, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That a place could so thoroughly hide its own incineration, and that my own country was responsible for that incineration, fascinated me...Along the way it became a book about a radio and ultimately, the novel became a project of humanism. I longed to tell a war story that felt new, and to do that I needed the reader to invest as completely in Werner as he/she does in Marie-Laure."

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Discussion Questions for *All the Light We Cannot See*

1. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene for the rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and the time period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with the impact of the Internet on today's society?
2. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think the experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?
3. Whose story did you enjoy the most? Was there any character you wanted more insight into?
4. When Werner and Jutta first hear the Frenchman on the radio, he concludes his broadcast by saying “*Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever*” (pages 48–49), and Werner recalls these words throughout the book (pages 86, 264, and 409). How do you think this phrase relates to the overall message of the story? How does it relate to Madame Manec's question: “Don't you want to be alive before you die?” (page 270)
5. On page 160, Marie-Laure realizes “This...is the basis of his fear, all fear. That a light you are powerless to stop will turn on you and usher a bullet to its mark.” How does this image constitute the most general basis of all fear? Do you agree?
6. Reread Madame Manec's boiling frog analogy on page 284. Etienne later asks Marie-Laure, “Who was supposed to be the frog? Her? Or the Germans?” (page 328) Who did you think Madame Manec was referring to? Could it have been someone other than herself or the Germans? What does it say about Etienne that he doesn't consider himself to be the frog?
7. On page 368, Werner thinks, “That is how things are...with everybody in this unit, in this army, in this world, they do as they're told, they get scared, they move about with only themselves in mind. *Name me someone who does not.*” But in fact many of the characters show great courage and selflessness throughout the story in some way, big or small. Talk about the different ways they put themselves at risk in order to do what they think is right. What were some of the shining moments? Who did you admire most?
8. On page 390, the author writes, “To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness.” What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Laure's perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?
9. One of Werner's bravest moments is when he confronts von Rumpel: “All your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and are you ready?” (page 465) Have you ever had a moment like that? Were you ready? What would you say that moment is for some of the other characters?
10. Why do you think Marie-Laure gave Werner the little iron key? Why might Werner have gone back for the wooden house but left the Sea of Flames?

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Discussion Questions continued

11. Von Rumpel seemed to believe in the power of the Sea of Flames, but was it truly a supernatural object or was it merely a gemstone at the center of coincidence? Do you think it brought any protection to Marie-Laure and/or bad luck to those she loved?

12. When Werner and Marie-Laure discuss the unknown fate of Captain Nemo at the end of *Twenty Leagues Under the Sea*, Marie-Laure suggests the open-endedness is intentional and meant to make us wonder (page 472). Are there any unanswered questions from this story that you think are meant to make us wonder?

13. The 1970s image of Jutta is one of a woman deeply guilt-ridden and self-conscious about her identity as a German. Why do you think she feels so much guilt over the crimes of others? Can you relate to this? Do you think she should feel any shame about her identity?

14. What do you think of the author's decision to flash forward at the end of the book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characters? Did anything surprise you?

15. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." *All the Light We Cannot See* is filled with examples of human nature at its best and worst. Discuss the themes of good versus evil throughout the story. How do they drive each other? What do you think are the ultimate lessons that these characters and the resolution of their stories teach us?

Enhance Your Book Club Experience

- To learn more about the Battle of Normandy, find maps, timelines, photographs, and recommendations for films and books on the subject. Visit www.dday-overlord.com/eng/index.htm.
- Take another look at Werner's redacted letter to Jutta on page 283. There's so much blacked out that it's hard to take any meaning from his message. What do you imagine he might have been writing about? Try to fill in the blanks with your best guess.
- Radio was such an important part of Werner's and Marie-Laure's stories, and WWII in general. Visit the BBC archive collections at www.bbc.co.uk/archive/collections.shtml to listen to clips news reports, and personal accounts of World War II and Nazi propaganda,
- Have you ever read any Jules Verne? Pick up a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (or view the 1954 film adaptation) and talk about why you think Anthony Doerr decided to make Verne's fiction such a big part of his own.

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