

Anthony Doerr. *All the Light We Cannot See*. New York: Scribner, 2014. 544 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4767-4658-6.

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The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr, is a well-researched, carefully constructed, and sensitively depicted telling of some of the key events of the World War II Occupation of France, in particular that of the exodus from Paris in June 1940 and that of the final days of the fight to control Saint-Malo in August 1944. The novel centers on Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl who lives in Paris with her father Daniel near the National Museum of Natural History where he works as a locksmith, and Werner Pfenning, an orphaned German boy who with his sister Jutta hold onto their dreams for a better life via a broken radio they find in the streets of the dreary mining town of Zollverein. Weaving together the stories of these two principal characters, Doerr offers a bi-cultural perspective on how despite the effects of war and the influences of oppressive forces, people from opposite sides can, of their own accord, want to come together to help one another.

Both Marie-Laure and Werner are brilliant children. At the start of *All the Light We Cannot See*, we find Marie-Laure learning to adapt to her blindness (she was six years old in 1934 when she lost her sight) by using the perfect miniature of her neighborhood built by her father. This she fervently touches so she can visualize and learn by heart her way around the neighborhood outside of her apartment. She is an avid reader and a highly cherished birthday treasure is the braille version of the first volume of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (the second volume, also a birthday treasure, was only half-read before Marie-Laure and her father must flee Paris). We also learn how Werner satisfies his curious nature via the scavenger hunts he conducts with Jutta so as, for example, to find the necessary material to repair the rudimentary radio they found, thus creating a connection with the world beyond the Children's House, the two-story orphanage run faithfully by Frau Elena, a Protestant nun from Alsace. Doerr eloquently describes Werner's childhood:

Werner's earliest years are the leanest. Men brawl over jobs outside the Zollverein gates, and chicken eggs sell for two million reichsmarks apiece, and rheumatic fever stalks Children's House like a wolf. There is no butter or meat. Fruit is a memory. Some evenings,

during the worst months, all the house directress has to feed her dozen wards are cakes made from mustard powder and water.

But seven-year-old Werner seems to float. He is undersized and his ears stick out and he speaks with a high, sweet voice; the whiteness of his hair stops people in their tracks. Snowy, milky, chalky. A color that is the absence of color. Every morning he ties his shoes, packs newspaper inside his coat as insulation against the cold and begins interrogating the world. He captures snowflakes, tadpoles, hibernating frogs; he coaxes bread from bakers with none to sell; he regularly appears in the kitchen with fresh milk for the babies. He makes things too: paper boxes, crude biplanes, toy boats with working rudders. (24)

*All the Light We Cannot See* primarily focuses on the years from 1934 to 1944. Across these ten years, we see how two innocent children are directly impacted by the devastating unfolding of WWII. Marie-Laure and her father flee Paris to find safety with her great-uncle Etienne in Saint-Malo, an uncle who suffers greatly from post-traumatic stress disorder from WWI. Marie-Laure will come to learn the added danger of their fleeing because of what the director of the National Museum of Natural History asked her father Daniel to do and which eventually lands him in a prisoner-of-war camp. After Daniel is captured, it is via Etienne's housekeeper Madame Manec that Marie-Laure and Etienne come to be involved in the Resistance movement. For Werner, his life is changed dramatically when his talent for repairing radios becomes known to Nazi officials and he is recruited for a Hitler Youth academy. There, he unfortunately witnesses the demise of his friend Frederick but at the same time is given special status because of his advanced analytical and mathematical skills. Then, as the Germans begin to realize that they are losing the war, Werner is forced, at a much younger age than normal but because of his exceptional intellectual skills, to begin a special assignment to track resistance movements, first on the eastern front in Russia and then to the western front, eventually in Saint-Malo.

The storyline is not perfectly linear as Doerr slides among specific periods of time, allowing the reader to slowly develop an idea of what will eventually connect Marie-Laure and Werner. Moreover, Doerr does not end his story with the meeting of Marie-Laure and Werner but brings the story as far forward as 2014 and with time dedicated to learning what happened to Jutta at the end of the war and how Jutta meets up with Marie-Laure in 1974. The meeting between Jutta and Marie-Laure resolves many of the remaining questions the two of them had yet it still leaves us yearning for what could have become of Marie-Laure and Werner had it not been for the war.