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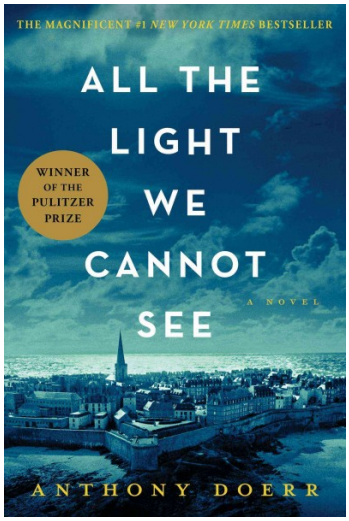
Description: All the Light We Cannot See is a moving historical novel that describes the coming of age of Werner Pfenning, an orphaned German boy, and Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, before and during World War II.



All the Light We Cannot See

by Anthony Doerr

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions contain detailed plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

All the Light We Cannot See is a moving historical novel that describes the coming of age of Werner Pfenning, an orphaned German boy, and Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, before and during World War II. The story moves back and forth between their experiences -- and between the past and present -- until their paths coincide in Saint-Malo, a walled port town in northwestern France, as it is being shelled by Allied forces in August, 1946.

Werner and his younger sister Jutta grow up in a children's home in a mining town in western Germany. One day, clever young Werner repairs a radio found on a junk heap; brother and sister listen raptly to a French program about science. Werner dreams of studying science at university, but under the Nazis, all he can expect is a life in the mines. Werner's cleverness doesn't go unnoticed: after he repairs the expensive radio of a mining official with ties to the Nazi party, he is offered the chance to apply to attend Schulpforta, a military school for the "racially pure."

Once there, his self-taught knowledge of science and engineering draws the attention of the instructor of technical sciences, Dr. Hauptmann. Werner helps Hauptmann develop technology to be used by the military. Another student aide, the giant

upperclassman Frank Volkheimer also befriends Werner. These two warm friendships help to insulate Werner from the unnerving brutality of the other instructors and students; however, Frederick, another student -- a dreamer who loves to study birds -- is singled out for increasingly violent abuse. As the German war effort becomes more desperate, sixteen-year-old Werner represented as an eighteen-year-old and sent to the Russian front. There he joins Volkheimer, now a sergeant leading a unit that uses the transceivers they developed at Schulpforta to track down and eliminate Russian partisans. Eventually, they are called to track down French resistance broadcasts on the Breton coast, near the island citadel of Saint-Malo -- precisely where the little French girl, Marie-Laure, and her father fled after the Nazis first invaded France.

Before the invasion, Marie-Laure LeBlanc lived in Paris with her father, Daniel, a master locksmith at the National Museum of Natural History; her mother died during childbirth. At age six, Marie-Laure develops cataracts and goes blind; her devoted father builds a small scale model of her Parisian neighborhood so that she can relearn her surroundings. When the Germans invade France, Marie-Laure and her father flee to his family's home, a tall narrow house by the sea in Saint-Malo. Daniel carries in his protection one of the museum's most prized possessions, the "Sea of Flames," a stone rumored to have the power to make the owner invulnerable -- but in return, it brings great harm to all those around him or her. In Saint-Malo, Marie-Laure bonds over science with her great-uncle, Etienne, a man whose memories of World War I have kept him imprisoned in his own house for the last twenty years. And she shelters under the motherly attention of the aged housekeeper, Madame Manec. As the war progresses, Marie-Laure first loses her father to German labor camp and then the aged Madame Manec to illness. Just before the Allied bombs begin to fall, her great-uncle -- who has been using a powerful radio transmitter to send messages for the French resistance -- is rounded up by the Germans, leaving Marie-Laure entirely alone and vulnerable.

The story reaches its climax during the Allied bombing of Saint-Malo: Marie-Laure, clutching the Sea of Flames, takes refuge in the attic to use her great-uncle's radio transmitter to broadcast her voice as she reads aloud for any who might hear her. In the house below her, Von Rumpel, a mortally ill German officer obsessed with the stone's supposed healing powers, ransacks the house, moments from discovering the hidden door to the attic. Five streets away, Werner climbs out from under the rubble of a bombed out hotel, in whose deep cellar he has been buried for days, and races to rescue the young girl whose reading voice has been a light in his darkness.

Questions
The following questions and answers should spark discussion of this book, but are not all there is to say. Readers bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

What is the significance of the book's title?

The title clearly references the novel's characters and events, a blind girl and a self-

taught radio expert brought together by a technology that uses electromagnetic waves invisible to human eyes. We should be aware, the novel suggests, that there are many thousands of things beyond our ability to see -- “the air swarms with so much that is invisible” (pp. 57-58). As well, we should make better use of our eyes to see the things that are visible to human sight. As Marie-Laure’s grandfather exhorts, “Open your eyes . . . and see what you can with them before they close forever” (pp. 48-49). Too often, we do not use the eyes we are given. There are things we are physically capable of seeing if we would only chose to do so.

The novel also uses physical sight as a metaphor for something much less tangible, moral acuity. As we should open our eyes to see the physical world, so too we should open our eyes to moral rights and wrongs. For much of the novel, Werner refuses to open his eyes in this way. He is willfully blind to what is going on around him. For instance, he crushes his jury-rigged radio with a brick (p. 86), breaking off any connection to “foreign” or dissenting voices. Only at novel’s end does Werner open his eyes. Buried in darkness under rubble, he yearns “just to see again” (p. 380). His physical blindness is a metaphor for his moral blindness; it is also a precondition for his opening his inner, or spiritual, eyes. Only in the absence of physical sight can Werner shake off propaganda and self-concern to see the right thing to do, namely, to save Marie-Laure.

What attitude does the novel convey toward the natural world?

Through the principal characters, the novel suggests that the natural world is so large and complex -- immense and inscrutable -- that it will always escape our attempts to understand it fully. Given the vast number of things we don’t know, the only appropriate attitude is a fundamental reverence for the world.

Werner and Marie-Laure both evince this awe along with an irrepressible curiosity. Werner is always asking questions, sometimes unanswerable, about the way the world works, while Marie-Laure marvels at the worlds within worlds to be found in the smallest creatures, for example, in the snails tucked away in a secret, tide-washed grotto: there are “galaxies of snails. A story of life immanent in each” (p. 260). And they react with the same almost speechless wonder when they encounter the vast waters off the Breton coast, Marie-Laure drawn to “the hypnotic voice of the sea” (p. 121), Werner writing, “it is my favorite thing,” and observing, “It seems big enough to contain everything anyone could ever feel” (p. 405).

Given the world’s immensity and inscrutability, it would be a mistake to impose human order upon the world or to claim certainty about the things we think we know. During Werner’s time at Schulpforta, the students are repeatedly told, “There must be order” (p. 240). They are warned, “Minds are not to be trusted. They are always drifting toward ambiguity, toward questions, when what you really need is certainty” (p. 264). At times, Werner finds himself questioning the emphasis upon order, certainty, and purity. He wonders, “isn’t life a kind of corruption. . . . Each bite of food, each particle of light entering the eye -- the body can never be pure” (p. 276). In other words, order and the certainty that such order may grant are only to be achieved at the cost of lifelessness, in the sterility of death.

What is the significance of the precious stone, the Sea of Flames?

The stone offers a way to talk about a scientist's responsibility toward others, to ask what one should do with one's knowledge of the world. In the legend, the stone saves the life of a prince but takes those of his family and friends. The prince refuses to give up the stone, no matter the harm to others. Like the prince, Von Rumpel is indifferent to the costs that accompany his gains.

In contrast, Marie-Laure's response once the stone comes to her is simply to return it to the sea. Hers is a very different way of using nature or knowledge about the physical world. Like naturalists of old, she is content merely to observe, to catalogue the living world around her. She is like the men at the natural history museum, for whom each individual thing is equally precious: "to a curator," they attempt to explain to von Rumpel, "none is superior to any other" (p. 175).

Werner is not a naturalist. For all his awe of the world, he wants to do more than observe it. "What he loves most is building things, working with his hands, connecting his fingers to the engine of his mind" (p. 62). In other words, he is an engineer, using his knowledge of the natural world to make it work for him. In finding fulfillment in the building of things -- specifically the transceivers he helps develop at Schulpforta -- without considering the cost to others, Werner comes dangerously close to Von Rumpel's own casual disregard of human lives, encouraged to do so by Dr. Hauptmann, who tells Werner that the work is simply an abstract exercise, "only numbers. . . . Pure math" (p. 184). Werner refuses to report Marie-Laure and her great-uncle to his commanding officers because he can no longer ignore the effect of his work on others.

What choices, and what responsibility for those choices, do individuals have in the novel?

Certainly, the novel shows, one's choices may be very limited. Poverty, for instance, limits Werner's choices, and those of others in the mining town in which he grows up. Similarly, poverty leaves Frank Volkheimer few options. Entombed in the hotel cellar in Saint-Malo, Werner and Frank both confess that they chose Schulpforta out of economic desperation -- Werner seeking to escape the mines; Frank, the Prussian forests -- than out of some fervent belief in racial purity (p. 389).

Frederick, wealthy and well-educated, would seem to have many more choices than either Werner or Frank. Yet he tells Werner bleakly, "It doesn't matter what I want." And when Werner insists otherwise, he scoffs, "Your problem, Werner, is that you still believe you own your life" (p. 223). He is being crushed under the weight of his parents' expectations, who are in turn struggling with those of their circle of friends. Not just poverty, then, but familial and social expectations can leave one with what seem to be few or no options.

Ultimately, however, no matter how restricted one's choices, no matter how desperate one's situation, one is not excused from the consequences of one's actions. As Werner realizes, in the end: "Frederick said we don't have choices, don't

own our lives, but in the end it was Werner who pretended there were no choices" (p. 407). In other words, the belief that one has no choice is all too often an excuse for one's failure to take action.

In German-occupied Saint-Malo, Etienne and Madame Manec confront similar questions about an individual's power and responsibility in the face of larger forces that seemingly rob one of all choice. Like Frederick, Etienne is paralyzed by a sense of his powerlessness. When Madame Manec tries to get his help for resistance activities, Etienne protests weakly, "How do you fight a system?" Madame Manec replies, "You try" (p. 269), firmly convinced that one always has a choice in one's actions.

How is National Socialism shown to shape boys like Werner in the novel?

On the one hand, Werner is asked to conform, to be like everyone else. When Jutta finds Werner adopting the attitudes and actions of boys in the Hitler Youth, she asks, "is it right . . . to do something because everyone else is doing it?" (p. 133). Whether or not it is right in Jutta's sense, Werner finds that conformity -- not having any thoughts that are different or "foreign" -- is effectively opening a way out for him, a way to escape the mines. Thus he does not question what he is asked to do as part of the entrance exams for Schulpforta. He simply closes his eyes and jumps.

On the other, Werner is required to show himself different from "the enemy." Indeed, conformity can be achieved most effectively, as the novel shows, when all who conform are opposed to some ostracized figure. In the game of "the weakest" the boys play at Schulpforta, any student who fails to conform can be identified as the target. Frederick -- marked by his difference, his "dreaminess, his otherness -- it's on him like a scent, and everyone can smell it" (p. 238) -- is repeatedly singled out. By hunting down this other, Werner and the other boys symbolically eradicate otherness within themselves and within their group, becoming a more uniform mass in the process.

To be able to identity with others and to distinguish oneself from them are both essential to a well-developed personality. The novel shows how National Socialism took both to extremes, and in the process warped and damaged individuals.

About the Author

Anthony Doerr's first short story collection *The Shell Collector* drew critical praise for richly detailed physical descriptions conveying a profound reverence for the natural world. Unsurprisingly, Doerr admits to being "kind of in love with the world" (quoted, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/61823-how-the-story-comes-together-anthony-doerr.html). In his writing, he tries to "come from a place of awe" (quoted, http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/anthony-doerr-the-powells-com-interview-by-jill/).

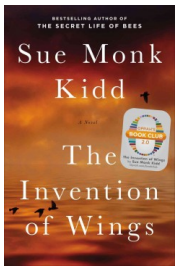
A notable absence of awe provided the first impulse for *All the Light We Cannot See*, his second novel: overhearing a commuter train passenger's loud, violent complaints

about a dropped cell phone call, Doerr was struck by how much we take for granted today regarding the technology that connects us. With *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr strives to recapture the wonder experienced when the radio was first introduced (http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/61823-how-the-story-comes-together-anthony-doerr.html). Doerr credits his mother -- a science teacher and avid reader, for whom stories and science are both "ways to interrogate the world" (quoted, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/61823-how-the-story-comes-together-anthony-doerr.html) -- for his novel's focus not only on the physical world, but also on the science that allows us to comprehend it.

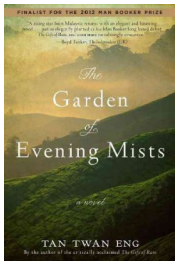
Doerr also sought to bring readers some more realistic understanding of the internal conflicts that everyday Germans, like Werner, may have experienced living under the National Socialist regime: "I wanted the reader to get to the point where he or she is actually cheering for Werner's first find in Russia when they track down that resistance transmission and Volkheimer goes ahead and kills those people. I wanted that to be a very morally complicated moment for the reader" (quoted, http://www.powells.com/blog/interviews/anthony-doerr-the-powells-com-interview-by-jill/).

Further Reading

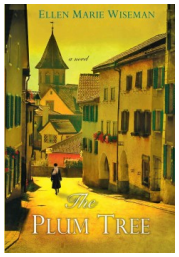
Fiction



The invention of wings
By: Sue Monk Kidd
Kidd's historical novel about abolitionist and early women's rights activist Sarah Grimke and her slave maid Hetty, or "Handful," shows how individuals can be complicit, knowingly or not, in perpetuating morally unjust institutions and finally how they can act to overturn them.

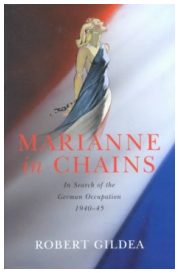


The garden of evening mists
By: Twan Eng Tan
Cutting back and forth between past and present, this novel -- about a woman coming to terms with her experience as a prisoner in a World War II Japanese labor camp and her love for a man who may have been a Japanese spy -- explores similar issues of guilt and possible atonement.

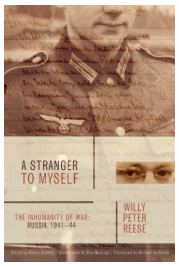


The plum tree
By: Ellen Marie Wiseman
Set in Germany before, during, and after World War II, this novel's story of a young German woman who falls in love with a Jewish man explores some matters addressed only obliquely in Doerr's novel -- the Holocaust and the experience of women, like Jutta, fighting the war at home.

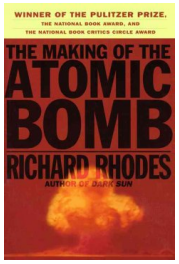
Nonfiction



Marianne in chains: in search of the German occupation, 1940-1945
By: Robert Gildea
Drawing upon a wide range of primary materials, Oxford historian Robert Gildea offers a nuanced study of French life under German occupation during World War II; it examines how French citizens struggled both to survive on a day-to-day basis under Nazi rule and to maintain a degree of moral integrity.



A stranger to myself: the inhumanity of war : Russia, 1941-1944
By: Willy Peter Reese
In this almost lyrical personal account, a young German soldier -- Willy Peter Reese, twenty when he was sent into combat and dead before the war's end -- records the mind- and heart-numbing brutality practiced by all sides on the Russian front in World War II.



The making of the atomic bomb
By: Richard Rhodes
This Pulitzer Prize-winning work memorably portrays the scientists whose work contributed to creating atomic bombs first dropped on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, bringing about the Allied victory -- if at an apocalyptic cost. Oxford historian Richard Rhodes captures their almost child-like fascination with puzzles in physics, as well as their growing horror as the implications of the destructive power of their discoveries became clear.

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Teresa Younga Chung. Teresa Younga Chung holds a PhD in Literature from Duke University and is a freelance teacher and writer in San Francisco, CA.

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