

DISCUSSION GUIDE

All The Light We Cannot See

by Anthony Doerr

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Anthony Doerr was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the author of the story collections *The Shell Collector* and *Memory Wall*, the memoir *Four Seasons in Rome*, and the novels *About Grace* and *All the Light We Cannot See*, which was awarded the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction.

Doerr's short stories and essays have won four O. Henry Prizes and been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories*, *New American Stories*, *The Best American Essays*, *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*, and lots of other places. His work has been translated into over forty languages and won the Barnes & Noble Discover Prize, the Rome Prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, an Alex Award from the American Library Association, the National Magazine Award for Fiction, four Pushcart Prizes, two Pacific Northwest Book Awards, four Ohioana Book Awards, the 2010 Story Prize, which is considered the most prestigious prize in the U.S. for a collection of short stories, and the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award, which is the largest prize in the world for a single short story. *All the Light We Cannot See* was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and remained on the hardcover fiction bestseller list for 134 consecutive weeks.

Doerr lives in Boise, Idaho with his wife and two sons. Though he is often asked, as far as he knows he is not related to the late writer Harriet Doerr.

BOOK SUMMARY

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Marie-Laure lives with her father in Paris within walking distance of the Museum of Natural History where he works as the master of the locks. When she is six, she goes blind and her father builds her a model of their neighborhood, every house, every manhole, so she can memorize it with her fingers and navigate the real streets with her feet and cane. When the Germans occupy Paris in June of 1940, father and daughter flee to Saint-Malo on the Brittany coast, where Marie-Laure's agoraphobic great uncle lives in a tall, narrow house by the sea wall.

In another world in Germany, an orphan boy, Werner, grows up with his younger sister, Jutta, both enchanted by a crude radio Werner finds. He becomes a master at building and fixing radios, a talent that wins him a place at an elite and brutal military academy and, ultimately, makes him a highly-specialized tracker of the Resistance. Werner travels through the heart of Hitler Youth to the far-flung outskirts of Russia, and finally into Saint-Malo, where his path converges with Marie-Laure's.

Doerr's gorgeous combination of soaring imagination with observation is electric. Deftly interweaving the lives of multiple characters, Doerr illuminates the ways, against all odds, people try to be good to one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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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 meant? 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 do you think were some 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?

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 Thousand 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?

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