

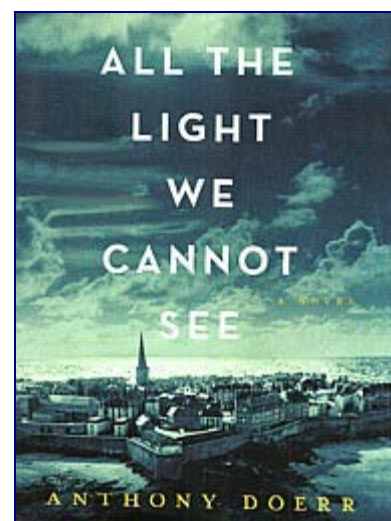
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*A READER'S JOURNAL*

**All the Light We Cannot See**  
A Novel  
by  
**Anthony Doerr**

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne  
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**In August, 1944 the historic walled city of Saint-Malo, the brightest jewel of the Emerald Coast of Brittany, France, was almost totally destroyed by fire . . . . Of the 865 buildings within the walls, only 182 remained standing and all were damaged to some degree.  
— Philip Beck**

With this note before the novel begins, we are told the ending of Saint-Malo, and we can now read from the beginning all the events leading to the conflagration and see them through three sets of eyes, well, only two sets of eyes as Marie-Laure is completely blind. Blind, indeed, but what she reports through her senses of touch, smell, taste, and hearing fill us with an up-close-and-personal experience of Saint-Malo few people could achieve with a pair of working eyes.

What a magnificent strategy by the author: to tell the story in the present tense through the senses available to a pre-teen blind girl. The other characters fill in the visible world, and she fleshes out the rest of world for us.

The city is empty or nearly so, citizens heeding the dropped leaflets suggesting an urgent exit before the bombs arrive, but there were no leaflets in Braille and Marie-Laure was alone. She reports the approach of the bombers to us.

**[page 6] She can hear the bombers when they are three miles away. A mounting static. The hum inside a seashell.**

**When she opens the bedroom window, the noise of the airplanes becomes louder. Otherwise, the night is dreadfully silent: no engines, no voices, no clatter. No sirens. No footfalls on the cobbles. Not even gulls. Just a high tide, one block away and six stories below, lapping at the base of the city walls.**

**And something else.**

**Something rattling softly, very close. She eases open the left-hand shutter and runs her fingers up the slats of the right. A sheet of paper has lodged there.**

**She holds it to her nose. It smells of fresh ink. Gasoline, maybe. The paper is crisp; it**

**has not been outside long.**

**Marie-Laure hesitates at the window in her stocking feet, her bedroom behind her, seashells arranged along the top of the armoire, pebbles along the baseboards. Her cane stands in the corner; her big Braille novel waits face-down on the bed. The drone of the airplanes grows.**

We know by page 7 that we are in for a special treat in this novel. We will be riding shotgun with this young girl, experiencing what she is experiencing and, being her only set of eyes, we will be tempted to shout, "Be careful, he's coming for you!" But she will know it before we do, know much more than we do, so it will be us depending on her to lead us through the adventures and dangers awaiting us.

There is a young soldier named Werner doing his job in the Hotel of the Bees, who scurries down to the cellar when the planes arrive. This hotel was the home of a rich privateer who gave up raiding to study bees in the meadows outside Saint-Malo. Within minutes the cellar will be Werner and his crew's dungeon, with no way out, as the hotel collapses.

The third story line involves a German officer named Rumpel and his quest for the Sea of Flames, no, not the flaming city of Saint-Malo, but large precious diamond which he seeks to add to the collection of jewels and artworks going into the Fuhrer's collection in a mountain vault, the contents of which was to be placed into a National Museum in Linz after the war. The museum was to be a half-mile long, and a more correct name would have been the *Theft Museum*.

Marie-Laure's father works at the National Museum in Paris as a locksmith and keeper of the keys. When not working, he builds a miniature of the city neighborhood in which he and his beloved daughter live. He instructs her to memorize this model with her fingers so that she can find her way around the city on her own someday. Each birthday he places two items on the table for Marie-Laure to open and enjoy. One is a puzzle box which when it is successfully opened, reveals a special treat, usually a chocolate. The other is a book in Braille for Marie-Laure to read and go on adventures in her imagination. Her favorite is Jules Verne's "Twenty Thousands Leagues Under the Sea" which she shares with us from time to time. It is a huge volume in Braille so it is broken into two volumes and she reads and re-reads Volume I while waiting for her next birthday. When the Germans approach Paris her dad takes her to her uncle's house in Saint-Malo.

While Marie-Laure is growing into a teenager in Paris, Werner is in a private school making good grades in school and learning to build and repair radios. His teacher gives a trigonometry problem to the class, Werner figures it out without any help. This gets him inducted into the army as head of a crew of two even younger men tasked with locating enemy radio broadcasters who are wreaking havoc on German soldiers and troop convoys. Given his abilities, I could imagine he was either Werner von Braun (rocket scientist) or Werner Heisenberg (quantum theorist). But he was Werner Pfennig and had a job to do, a job that would lead him to Saint-Malo.

Rumpel has a job to do: appraise and record the jewels stolen from the rich residents of Germany and France and ship the jewels to storage for a *Theft Museum* post-war, of course, that was not the name intended by the Fuhrer. Rumpel's primary focus centered on the magnificent and legendary diamond, the 130 carat Sea of Flames, and that quest would lead him to Saint-Malo.

There is a fourth character in this novel, the Sea of Flames, whose whereabouts are as important as any other's and whose story is equally interesting. This blue diamond was made by the Goddess of Earth as a present for the God of the Sea, but before it could get to the sea, the riverbed dried up. A prince came along and found it and kept it, not knowing of the legend and the curse.

**[page 21] "The curse was this: the keeper of the stone would live forever, but so long as he kept it, misfortunes would fall on all those he loved one after another in unending rain."**

The only way to break the curse was to throw the diamond into the sea where it was destined to go in the first place. But what could Marie-Laure do if she found it? The beaches were blocked by German soldiers and no one was allowed near it. To protect the diamond from theft, three perfect imitations of it were made out of spinel, a gemstone often used to forge faux diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones. But Sgt. Major Rumpel knew how to tell the difference between a real diamond and a spinel, and he systematically recovered the three fakes. The next one will surely be real, if he lives long enough or he will die trying. His father used to tell him, "*See obstacles as opportunities. See obstacles as inspirations.*" (Page 174)

You have now met the major players, four of them, and the story unfolds as to how and why they end up in the same place at the end of the world, Saint-Malo, which is perched on a granite prominence on coast of France and which is being bombed into smithereens.

Let us peek into Marie-Laure's mind as she explores the world of the Paris museum where her father is the locksmith, where she accompanies him to work on most days.

**[page 44] Sixteen paces to the water fountain, sixteen back. Forty-two to the stairwell, forty-two back. Marie-Laure draws maps in her head, unreels a hundred yards of imaginary twine, and then turns and reels it back in. Botany smells like glue and blotter paper and pressed flowers. Paleontology smells like rock dust, bone dust. Biology smells like formalin and old fruit; it is loaded with heavy cool jars in which float things she has only had described for her: the pale coiled ropes of rattlesnakes, the severed hands of gorillas. Entomology smells like mothballs and oil: a preservative that, Dr. Geffard explains, is called naphthalene. Offices smell of carbon paper, or cigar smoke, or brandy, or perfume. Or all four.**

When she is back in the corner of her room, she travels around the world through the adventures of Mr. Fogg who did it in 80 days, in a balloon, a train, and every imaginable kind of conveyance; she did it in Braille. She hears a riddle, "What travels around the world and stays in a corner?" She knows the answer because she feels like a postage stamp<sup>(1)</sup>. "Will I ever get to be near the sea," she often thinks. Her time is coming.

For now her father seems to be building a special puzzle box for the Sea of Flames. Marie-Laure wanted to know about the Sea of Flames diamond about which so many stories were told. Her father wouldn't talk to her about it. She asked Dr. Geffard about it.

**[page 52] Dr. Geffard's answers are hardly better. "You know how diamonds — how all crystals — grow, Laurette? By adding microscopic layers, a few thousand atoms every month, each atop the next. Millennia after millennia. That's how stories accumulate too. All the stones accumulate stories. That little rock you're so curious about may have seen Alaric sack Rome; it may have glittered in the eyes of the Pharaohs. Scythian queens might have danced all night wearing it. Wars might have been fought over it."  
"Papa says curses are only stories cooked up to deter thieves."**

The above passage reminded me of the most famous war in ancient history, the Trojan War, and the long stream of stories told about it before writing was invented, all of which inspired me to write this poem.

### **A Tale to Grow By**

"Stories grow like diamonds,"  
Homer said.

"My Iliad was a simple story about a silly lad  
that I named Achilles.

"An invincible lad who  
had been dipped in the River Styx

to give him immortality  
while being held up by his heel.

"That was my tale and  
all that I had to regale  
my friends around the fire at night.

"Each retelling of my simple tale  
added a detail or so  
another layer,  
another player,  
another slayer,  
another quest,  
another foe to best,

"And soon the boy  
had grown into a man  
on the battlefields of Troy.

"Like a diamond adds a dozen new layers  
every year,  
My tale added a dozen new words  
every year,  
And Achilles grew in *timé* and *kleos*.

"When Agamemnon loses his concubine in one telling,  
he takes away Achilles' concubine in the next.  
How will Achilles respond to the theft, to the crime?

"Another layer adds the wrath of Achilles  
to the end of my tale and to its beginning.

"A nice touch,  
which I liked a lot —  
I could have opened the story by asking  
the Muse to speak to me  
of the wrath of Achilles!"

As Homer grew old his tale grew longer,  
and as he listened to it being re-told  
around the fire by others, he wondered,

"What have I begun?"  
and a chilling thought came to him,  
"I am an old man and I will never hear  
how my tale will end."

On his deathbed, a storyteller relates to him  
how Achilles withdraws from battle,  
in John Galt fashion  
and the Greeks begin to lose battles  
to Hector and the Trojan armies.

"Ah, if only I could hear the ending of my tale,"  
was Homer's last words.

So the story grew  
from the seed of Homer's tale,  
which he had strewn upon the storytellers.  
And like from an acorn  
a mighty oak began to grow  
And how could anyone know  
from where the leaves had sprung  
but from the mouth of Homer  
and the echoes of his voice  
down through the ages of unwritten time.

There are no more echoes of Homer's tale  
to be heard by living ears,  
Only the recording of the tale  
of the last storyteller  
Which was written down  
when the voice and echoes of Homer's voice  
faded away and  
writing arrived to replace memory.

Each new generation  
awakens to hear, to read, to appreciate  
the ageless and indestructible diamond  
of the *Iliad* as if it had arrived in finished form,  
instead of growing over centuries and centuries,  
accumulating over millennia of unrecorded time,  
revealing to us the sparkling facets  
of the wrath of Achilles  
in the *Iliad* — a tale cooked up to deter thievery.

~^~

After traveling around the world on land, in the air, and over the seas with Mr. Fogg, she begins a new journey when she unwraps a large volume on her eleventh birthday, this time with Captain Nemo, in the *Nautilus* 20,000 leagues under the sea. Rereading it many times waiting for Volume II, she memorized this passage, "The sea is everything. It covers seven tenths of the globe . . . The sea is only a receptacle for all the prodigious, supernatural things that exist inside it. It is only movement and love; it is the living infinite." (Page 60) Here was a novel about a world which had no boundaries, only endless and unfathomable oceans, which Marie-Laure swam through effortlessly using only the tips of her fingers.

As Marie-Laure and her father travel away from the Germans approaching Paris to Saint-Malo where her Uncle Etienne lives, we learn that her locksmith father has a diamond in his possession. Not even he knows if it's the real or the fake Sea of Flames.

**[page 90 The locksmith tells himself that the diamond he carries is not real. There is no way the director would knowingly give a tradesman a one-hundred-and-thirty-carat diamond and let him walk out of Paris with it. And yet as he stares at it, he cannot keep his thoughts from the question: *Could it be?***

When they arrive at Uncle Etienne's home in Saint-Malo, they are greeted by his housekeeper, Madame Manec, and Marie-Laure is bombarded with a variety of sensations which the author shares, thereby building up a very real world around us readers.

**[page 120] They step into a narrow entry. Marie-Laure hears the gate clang shut, then the woman latching the door behind them. Two dead bolts, one chain. They are led into**

**a room that smells of herbs and rising dough: a kitchen. Her father unbuttons her coat, helps her sit. "We are very grateful, I understand how late it is," he is saying, and the old woman — Madame Manec — is brisk, efficient, evidently overcoming her initial amazement; she brushes off their thank-yous; she scoots Marie-Laure's chair toward a tabletop. A match is struck; water fills a pot; an icebox clicks open and shut. There is the hum of gas and the tick-tick of heating metal. In another moment, a warm towel is on Marie-Laure's face. A jar of cool, sweet water in front of her. Each sip a blessing.**

Then an amazing breakfast experience unfolds to us.

**[page 121] Eggs crack. Butter pops in a hot pan. Her father is telling an abridged story of their flight, train stations, fearful crowds, omitting the stop in Evreux, but soon all of Marie-Laure's attention is absorbed by the smells blooming around her: egg, spinach, melting cheese.**

**An omelet arrives. She positions her face over its steam. "May I please have a fork?"**

**The old woman laughs: a laugh Marie-Laure warms to immediately. In an instant a fork is fitted into her hand.**

**The eggs taste like clouds. Like spun gold. Madame Manec says, "I think she likes it," and laughs again.**

**A second omelet soon appears. Now it is her father who eats quickly. How about peaches, dear?" murmurs Madame Manec, and Marie-Laure can hear a can opening, juice slopping into a bowl. Seconds later, she's eating wedges of wet sunlight.**

This entire book is like one of Madame Manec's breakfast feasts, one of which is followed by this amazing paragraph full of vibrant metaphors and hypnagogic reverie.

**[page 121, 122] Probably the grown-ups are mouthing more to each other. Probably Marie-Laure should be more curious — about her great-uncle who sees things that are not there, about the fate of everyone and everything she has ever known — but her stomach is full, her blood has become a warm golden flow through her arteries, and out the open window, beyond the walls, the ocean crashes, only a bit of stacked stone left between her and it, the rim of Brittany, the farthest windowsill of France — and maybe the Germans are advancing as inexorably as lava, but Marie-Laure is slipping into something like a dream, or perhaps it's the memory of one: she's six or seven years old, newly blind, and her father is sitting in the chair beside her bed, whittling away at some tiny piece of wood, smoking a cigarette, and evening is settling over the hundred thousand rooftops and chimneys of Paris, and all the walls around her are dissolving, the ceilings too, the whole city is disintegrating into smoke, and at last sleep falls over her like a shadow.**

Anthony Doerr obviously grew up in the age of vacuum tubes in radios as I did. No one under thirty today could have written the details in this simple sentence, the sound of vacuum tubes as they cool right after a radio set is turned off. The tubes also hum when the radio is on, as he mentions in another place. These are details of a radio that a sightless person like Marie-Laure would note, unable to see the radio's dial lit up when it's running, the sounds of a tube radio even when the volume is turned completely down. Another feature of our existence removed by the invention of transistors.

**[page 129] "Everybody has misplaced someone," murmurs Madame Manec, and Marie-Laure's father switches off the wireless, and the tubes click as they cool.**

The model of Saint-Malo her father made for her when they arrived only went as far as the walls of the city. Marie-Laure had memorized the city with her fingers, and her father had never let her go out to the beach. A month after he had gone missing, Madame Manec takes her to the beach. She asks, "What should I do?" "Just walk," Madame Manec replies. And as she does she has an amazing revelation — that Saint-

Malo is greater than her model of Saint-Malo. Just as our world is greater than our model of the world, and someone needs to lead us into that terra incognita, that unknown realm, for us to realize the limits of our models, our paradigms, our very understanding of reality.

**[page 232] She walks. Now there are cold round pebbles beneath her feet. Now crackling weeds. Now something smoother: wet, unwrinkled sand. She bends and spreads her fingers. It's like cold silk. Cold, sumptuous silk onto which the sea has laid offerings: pebbles, shells, barnacles. Tiny slips of wrack. Her fingers dig and reach; the drops of rain touch the back of her neck, the backs of her hands. The sand pulls the heat from her fingertips, from the soles of her feet.**

**A months-old knot inside Marie-Laure begins to loosen. She moves along the tide line, almost crawling at first, and imagines the beach stretching off in either direction, ringing the promontory, embracing the outer islands, the whole filigreed tracery of the Breton coastline with its wild capes and crumbling batteries and vine-choked ruins. She imagines the walled city behind her, its soaring ramparts, its puzzle of streets. All of it suddenly as small as Papa's model. But what surrounds the model is not something her father conveyed to her; what's beyond the model is the most compelling thing.**

Inspired by the last sentence above, I wrote this short poem.

### What is the Use of an Unexplored Life?

We each have a model of the world  
our parents and teachers have  
built up for us,  
built into us,  
a model which we have been carefully taught  
and which we accept as the only world  
there is to explore.

What's the use of exploring  
if we feel we already know the world?

But is there something in the world  
beyond our model of the world?

Is there something worth exploring?

What is the worth of an unexplored life,  
one in which we cease to explore past  
the boundaries we have accepted from others?

What is the worth of an unexplored life,  
a life of models we accept as truths,  
a life in which we do not look  
beyond our models,  
beyond our truths?

For it is only when we explore past the model  
that we can discover  
that *what's beyond the model*  
*is the most compelling thing.*

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What is the most compelling thing that Marie-Laure said to us? "What's beyond the model is the most compelling thing." That is what she said, and she said it rightly. Life is what's the most compelling thing because life lies beyond all the commonly accepted models of the world we live in. "Life" was taken out of our model of world beginning with Lord Bacon in the fifteenth century — it was subtracted from our model and we have starved upon the residue, up until now.

My favorite poet, Samuel Hoffenstein, wrote a splendid quatrain which I memorized when I first encountered it in 1958. I sought, as an unanswered question, to find the faith and fallacy which got fried in Bacon grease and discarded those many centuries ago, and found the answer in the rampant materialism of the world since Bacon's time.

**Little by little we subtract  
Faith and Fallacy from Fact  
The illusory from the True  
And starve upon the reside.**

"Disorder. You hear the commandant say it. You hear your bunk masters say it. There must be order. Life is chaos, gentlemen," Hauptmann instructs the cadets, and finishes up by writing on the blackboard:

*The entropy of a closed system never decreases.  
Every process must by law decay. (Page 240)*

That is true for closed systems, but if it were true for all systems, how could the disorder in the cadets' bunks ever be eliminated? There must be an open system around, one which can *decrease* entropy and create order thereby, mustn't there? Humans are just such an open system, so that, if entropy is found to have decreased anywhere in the world, like if one found a working mechanical watch in a deep jungle, perhaps, there must have been a human being who dropped it there. The components of the watch will not assemble themselves, they will only rust and dissolve into chaos if left alone on a workbench or in a jungle. Life is itself an entropy-decreasing open system, and the components of life in a so-called primordial soup cannot assemble themselves into a living organism any more than the components of a watch can assemble themselves into a watch.

Let me proffer the other side to Hauptmann's writing on blackboard:

*Life is an open system  
in which entropy decreases,  
in which disorder decreases,  
in which order increases.*

Metaphors and similes abound in this novel, making exciting even a short walk by Marie-Laure with Madame Manec in Saint-Malo.

**[page 242] They clomp together through the streets, Marie-Laure's hand on the back of Madame's apron, following the odors of her stews and cakes; in such moments Madame seems like a great moving wall of rosebushes, thorny and fragrant and crackling with bees.**

Madame Manec collects money from all her lady friends and has Madame Blanchard pen the following phrase on each franc note, *Free France Now*. She thus began the Old Ladies' Resistance Club in Saint-



Malo, which would bring peril to Marie-Laure, the child she was helping Etienne to raise. But for now she feels exhilarated! She shares her feeling of freedom with Marie-Laure.

**[page 253] Madame Manec brushes Marie-Laure's hair in long absentminded strokes. "Seventy-six years old," she whispers, "and I can still feel like this? Like a little girl with stars in my eyes?"**

This inspired me to write the following poem:

### **The Spirit of 76**

The feeling of living outside the model,  
outside of the expectations of the world —

An ageless feeling of elation —  
to be 76 and to be free  
to be a freedom-fighter  
at any age  
at any time.

The British are Coming!  
The Germans are Here!

We are free!  
What have we to fear?

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My wife, Del, shortly after she began copy-editing my writing, pointed to a sentence one day and said, "No hairdresser could understand that sentence!" I balked at changing it, but I soon realized that my writing must be accessible to everyone, no matter who they are. I was reminded of this when I read the next passage about Madame Manec's "Old Ladies' Resistance Club". Bad fingernail polish would light a fire under any woman who does manicures. These were not just old ladies, these were wounded souls! Cornered and ready to fight back.

**[page 248 Nine of them sit around the square table, knees pressed to knees. Ration card restrictions, abysmal puddings, the deteriorating quality of fingernail varnish — these they feel in their souls.**

They fight back with Etienne's help. He restores the radio transmitter in the hidden room on the top floor and Marie-Laure goes to the bakery with code words to buy a loaf of french bread with a piece of paper baked inside containing coordinates of targets for the resistance fighters to get to the US and British invading forces. Etienne turns on his radio gives brief messages followed by Vivaldi music. A bit of color in Marie-Laure's gray world.

**[page 353] Now her world has turned gray. Gray faces and gray quiet and a gray nervous terror hanging over the queue at the bakery and the only color in the world briefly kindled when Etienne climbs the stairs to the attic, knees cracking, to read one more string of numbers into the ether, to send another of Madame Ruelle's messages, to play a song. That little attic bursting with magenta and aquamarine and gold for five minutes, and then the radio switches off, and the gray rushes back in. And her uncle stumps back down the stairs.**

Can we believe that Marie-Laure survived the war and is even now reliving these events and thinking of the living souls of those who brought love, meaning, and salvation to her life? She is thinking of teeming life all around her filled with such things as . . .

**[page 529] market updates, jewelry ads, coffee ads, furniture ads flying invisibly over the warrens of Paris, over the battlefields and tombs, over the Ardennes, over the Rhine, over Belgium and Denmark, over the scarred and ever-shifting landscapes we call nations. And is it so hard to believe that souls might also travel those paths? That her father and Etienne and Madame Manec and the German boy named Werner Pfennig might harry the sky in flocks, like egrets, like terns, like starlings? That great shuttles of souls might fly about, faded but audible if you listen closely enough? They flow above the chimneys, ride the sidewalks, slip through your jacket and shirt and breastbone and lungs, and pass out through the other side, the air a library and the record of every life lived, every sentence spoken, every word transmitted still reverberating within it.**

Can we imagine Marie-Laure thinking that *every hour someone for whom the war was memory falls out of the world*? If we can, we will want to read every word of this amazing story which is filled precious memories of the war, how it affected people in Paris and those living on the edge of world on a granite cliff in Brittany, especially the young sightless girl who could see into the human soul and shared her sight with us.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

**Footnote 1.** The riddle is told by a boy to his mother on page 509.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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