

## All the light we cannot see

Everything is teaching us—such as a good movie, a good adaptation of a prize-winning novel. It teaches us about true reality. For me, who loves reading and learning about how we understand true reality and what it means for us, such a movie inspires me with joyful faith that there are those who have this vision of goodness and true reality, that is, *all the light we cannot see*.

### Best seller

It is the title of a book published in 2014, and was clearly the best book of that year, or perhaps even the book of the century. The novel won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize and a number of other illustrious book prizes. A few weeks after publication, it was on *The New York Times* Best Seller List for 200 weeks. This is American author Anthony Doerr's (born 1973) *All the Light We Cannot See* (Scribner, 2014).

A remarkable feature of the book to me was the book's lyrical language. The story is told in the historical present with short chapters and sentences. This certainly appeals to many readers, especially school students and those for whom English is not their first language. This appearance of simplicity is purposeful: it allows simple details to show and tell interesting points, such as battlefields and beaches. It also gives clear guides for movie-makers to magically transform this classic into a memorable movie.

### Blind but perceptive

The story or stories are told from the key characters' viewpoints in a non-linear manner (like in a dream), but we are able to perceive the story in its proper sequence. The story is set mainly in Saint Malo (a historic port in Ille-et-Vilaine, Brittany) in 1940 when Nazi Germany invades France. From blind **Marie-Laure LeBlanc's** (the female protagonist's) viewpoint, we feel how she sharply senses and responds to the presence and details of sound, touch, and smell.

**Daniel LeBlanc** (Marie's father) hurriedly leaves Paris with her as the Germans enter the city. They arrive in Saint Malo where they find refuge in the home of **Etienne** (a reclusive shell-shocked World War 1 hero). Etienne daily broadcasts educational audio recordings done by his late brother. In due course, Marie realizes that Etienne is the "professor" transmitting the educational programmes. Marie herself clandestinely transmits coded messages to the Allies by reading passages from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (a braille version).

### Seeing with sound

In Nazi Germany, **Werner Pfennig** is an orphan in the city of Essen in the coal-mining coalition of states known as the Zollverein. He is exceptionally bright with a natural skill for building, repairing and using radios. At the age of 8 (in 1934), he finds a broken radio with his sister Jutta, fixes it, and uses it to hear science and music programmes transmitted across Europe. Werner, like Marie, is fascinated by the learning transmitted by "the professor." (See, for example, "The Professor," digital pages 36 f.)

In 1940, Werner's skill earns him a place at an elite but draconian state boarding school teaching Nazi values. Despite his youth, Werner is then conscripted into a Wehrmacht squad that specializes in tracking illegal radio signals and executing those using them. Werner becomes increasingly disillusioned with his position, especially after his squad kills an innocent young girl after he incorrectly traces a signal.

When the squad reaches Saint Malo, Werner traces Etienne's signal. Recognizing the voice and music to be from the "professor's" science programs he listened to at the orphanage. Werner tracks it to Etienne's house and becomes entranced by Marie when he sees her heading to the bakery. Werner decides to conceal the signal's existence from the rest of the squad.

### **Meeting of sound and sight**

As the story climaxes with the Allies' bombing of Saint Malo (August 1944), Werner meets Marie and saves her life. In the movie version,<sup>1</sup> they go on to learn of their same passion for science and learning, and their fascination with radios and sounds. They emerge happily together with the ending of the war.

In the book, Werner is captured and sent to a US prisoner-of-war camp, where he becomes gravely ill. One night, in a fit of delirium, Werner leaves the hospital tent and accidentally steps on a German landmine, which kills him instantly. Such a tragic and abrupt end to the young male protagonist can be unpalatable in the movie version. Hence, in the limited TV series, the 2 young protagonists are happy together. This happy adaptation meets with very positive approval from Doerr himself.

### **"All the light we cannot see"**

We may be tempted to think that "all the light we cannot see" refers to Marie's blindness, and also to Werner's being forced to see things the Nazi way, but he refuses to see that. Doerr explains how the story's inspiration came to him in a 2004 train ride to meet his publisher. When the train passed through a tunnel, a passenger became flustered when his telephone call was disconnected. Doerr thought the passenger did not appreciate the "miracle" of long-distance communication, of the invisible waves, "all the light we cannot see," but can hear.

For informed Buddhists, too, the phrase is deeply significant: we are unawakened on account of "all the light that we cannot see." Awakening wisdom gives us the sight to see all the light that is not just radio transmission and invisible waves, but true reality itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* was made into an American historical drama 4-episode TV series, directed by Shawn Levy and developed by Steven Knight for Netflix. It stars Aria Mia Loberti (as Marie), Mark Ruffalo (Daniel) and Hugh Laurie (Etienne), and was released on 2 Nov 2023. Loberti is herself visually handicapped due to genetic eye condition achromatopsia.