

The Light of Love

The compelling title of Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See* introduces the reader to a world beyond sense. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas agree that all human knowledge necessarily begins in sense; what, then, can man do without this fundamental element? The protagonist of the novel, Marie-Laure, is deprived entirely of the sense of sight, but nevertheless perdures in resourceful ways, such as reading braille, as well as in profound ways, such as resisting despair after the war. This disability is a microcosm of the war itself. In the wake of the war, men lose their lives and limbs on a massive scale. The scale of loss is so great as to surpass human understanding; mankind even loses his own sense of loss. However, in the face of such unfathomable atrocities on a mass scale, there exists equally mystifying selflessness in particular acts. Doerr shows through his characters that, when man is lost in incomprehensible degradation, he can find himself in acts of selflessness and achieve transcendental connection.

Marie-Laure embodies this spirit of endurance, because she cultivates a tremendous interior strength supported by the selfless acts of those around her. One of the first steps her father takes when her blindness befalls her is the construction of street models in order that she might orient herself. Literally, her father's kindness helps Marie-Laure find her place in a senseless world. Helping Marie-Laure, however, is not always easy. In order to build her fortitude, her father forces her to walk the streets of Paris unaided, despite her fear and exasperation (36). He demands that she undergo the difficult process of shaping her own perception. However, Marie-Laure cannot always orient herself unguided. As Marie-Laure relates, Werner saved her life three times, and the last was by leading her by hand out of the city (515). Though she has cultivated an interior strength, she could not have survived without a spontaneous act of kindness. This compassion is what saves her life. Her life as she becomes an

adult is one of anxiety defeated by happiness – the bigness of her postwar “revulsion” (512) and despair is overcome by singular encounters with others, especially her students and her family. Despite the immensity of her loss, she is the character who exemplifies strength; at the end of the novel, Doerr says, “She lives to see the century turn. She lives still” (527). Doerr’s use of the present tense suggests that Marie-Laure will, in a way, always live on, persisting in life by depending on both interior strength and singular acts of great love.

Werner perpetuates the enormous horrors of the war, but nevertheless redeems himself in minute acts of generosity. More than any other character, Werner is the image of moral conflict. When diagnosing his soul, Marie-Laure says of him, “It was hard for him not to do what was expected of him” (515). Werner’s dependence on an external code of morality instead of his correctly formed internal conscience weakens him in critical moments, misleading him to destroy the radio and fail Frederick. In Russia and Vienna, he has a comfortable distance from the corpses because he holds the radio instead of the gun, and therefore prolongs his own horror and shame. Ironically, the connection that radio technology allows him effectively disconnects him from humanity. Jutta, his stouthearted sister, and Frau Elena, his generous adoptive mother, are his only hope; he repeatedly turns to the memory of them in his times of distress. The force of their love does not save him entirely, but it does allow him to return to the truth of human compassion such that he is able to atone for his crimes against humanity. Rooted in the memory of familial love, Werner can extend into romantic love of Marie-Laure, a love powerful enough to overcome external expectation and finally integrate his conscience with his actions. Repeatedly saving Marie-Laure’s life resets Werner’s soul; he begins to knit his failures and his repentance together through further last acts of kindness, writing to Jutta and sending the impaired Frederick pictures of his beloved birds. However, he may not totally reintegrate. The

cycle of his redemption necessitates that he atone for his war crimes, and thus, he dies by a bomb “set there by his own army three months before” (483). He does not die at the giant hands of war, though, before he has made peace with his identity by his small acts of kindness.

Jutta, an unflinching woman of character, figures the spirit of endurance through connection and memory; though memory is a dark word in a postwar world, her decision to relive her brother’s kindness allows her to rekindle its brightness in her own life. Even as a child, Jutta persisted in goodness and justice. She is not a soft character. Werner feels the vestiges of her anger for months during his training, because he knows that she is not so gentle as to allow him to betray himself. She calls him to something higher and eventually succeeds. Like Marie-Laure, Jutta perdures, but she lives in an enormity of fear rather than sorrow. When Volkheimer appears in their home, bringing with him memory and pain, Jutta “tucks her hands beneath her thighs to hide their shaking” (502). However, she finds the strength to seek out Marie-Laure. For a brief but significant moment, these women revive the pained yet beautiful memory of Werner. This moment is not isolated, but rather spawns further connection. The original point of connection among Marie-Laure, Werner, and Jutta, the broadcasts of Etienne and his brother, reunites them and extends beyond them to Jutta’s child, Max. Etienne’s broadcast unites the connective and human elements of technology, which generates rather than deadens, as Werner’s military work does. Technology, Doerr shows us, is the magnification of ourselves. It kills as we kill and inspires as we inspire. Etienne’s recordings celebrate the joy of life and thus inspire people beyond its expectation. This inspired Jutta’s meeting with Marie-Laure, which was repaid with regeneration. By risking the revival of an uncontrollable darkness, Jutta gave a fuller memory and life to her son.

Doerr writes characters who, in a world of infinite darkness, find themselves by illuminated motes of goodness. By plunging his reader into the world of war, Doerr gives us a scope of destruction beyond our comprehension. His very writing style – asyndetic fragments of destruction and fear – build our anxiety. We know that death is beyond our control. However, Doerr does not leave us in the dark; man, he tells us, may not be able to control his circumstances, but he can control his actions. The minutiae of goodness – the “angel” who passes on the letters of Marie-Laure’s father, Madame Manec leading a resistance through bread loaves, Werner sending ripped-out pages of birds to Frederick – overcome the enormity of sorrow. Doerr shows us that man’s most memorable act is his act of compassion. His characters risk themselves in inexplicable ways, all for the sake of helping their fellow man, even if our fellow man does not understand it. This compassion, more than varying frequencies on the electromagnetic scale, is the light we cannot see.