

# Q&A with Anthony Doerr

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## **What inspired you to write *All the Light We Cannot See*?**

One afternoon, I took a train into New York City to visit my publisher's office. I had just finished the novel *About Grace* and I was scratching around for a new idea. We were riding into Penn Station, and the man in the seat in front of me was talking to someone on his cell phone about the sequel to *The Matrix*. I remember that very clearly. As we pulled into the tunnels underground and sixty feet of steel and concrete started flowing above us, his call dropped.

And he got angry! He started swearing and rapping his phone with his knuckles. After briefly worrying for my own safety, I started thinking, we've forgotten something here. We've forgotten that this is a beautiful miracle. You can be in a train car in New York City, and as long as you're not sixty feet underground, you can talk to someone in, say, Tibet or Timbuktu. It's a little transmitter and a little receiver and this electromagnetic radiation that's all around us that's carrying these messages. That's amazing, and that was not available to humans for the whole history of humanity. I wanted to recapture that sense of wonder.

## **Did you get to spend time in Europe researching the background – and if so where did you visit and how successful was it for your purposes?**

I made trips to Germany and France and took lots of notes. The usefulness of travel for research in fiction writing is – at least for me – hard to quantify. You want to try to get the light

right, the birds right, the feel of the people, the architecture, the skies, so in that way seeing places is invaluable. And travel is also important because of the many things you discover that you didn't come to discover: you're walking to see a war memorial, and suddenly you see a priest smoking a cigarette alone in a little Peugeot. That moment might derail your day, or it might blow oxygen into the stove of your imagination.

**You visited Saint-Malo. What was it about the place you found so inspiring?**

My first night there, I found myself standing atop the massive stone ramparts that encircle the whole city. At night, the sea breeze is divine, especially in May. A beach glimmered in the moonlight; the lights of a couple of ships bobbed in distant swells. To my right, hundreds of tall windows glowed yellow. I breathed in the ocean, I peered into the third-floor windows of flats – I remember seeing a pair of women at a little round table drinking wine and laughing – and somehow the combined effects of jet lag, fatigue and three glasses of Muscadet all made me wonder if I might be dreaming.

It all seemed so medieval and abiding and indelible. But when, like a foolish American, I mentioned this to my French editor, he informed me that the entire city had been levelled by American artillery at the end of World War II, and had to be painstakingly rebuilt, block by granite block. That's when I knew I'd found the setting for my next book.

**Marie-Laure's father makes models of their neighbourhoods in Paris and Saint-Malo so she can learn to navigate her environment. What is it about these small, intricate constructions that fascinate you?**

I've always loved scale models of towns; Paris's museums, for example, are full of amazing maquettes once you start looking for them. And saints (including Saint Malo) were often

rendered in paintings and sculpture holding little buildings, perhaps suggesting that they held their parishes in the palms of their hands. In all my work, I love to tinker around with scale: on the scale of bacteria we are inconceivably large, but on the scale of the universe we are inconceivably small.

**In *All the Light We Cannot See* you write very short chapters, and each one ends with enough tension that the reader can't help but read another. How and why did you choose to do this, and how easy is it to manage?**

For the past decade or so, I've been trying to build narratives out of short, titled sections; I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe it's a way of tricking myself into writing big novels by working on very small things? Each day I only have to tell myself that I'm writing something manageable, a little thing that won't hurt too much if it turns out I need to dispose of it.

Or maybe it's just because I like working on miniatures, trying to make these little things clean and functional and elegant. And then one day you start laying them out on the carpet and trying to assemble them into a larger structure. There were months when I would lay out all the chapters I'd written on the floor (probably over 200 at that point), and start reading them in various sequences, trying to find a chronology that I thought would work best.

In *All the Light*, I liked the effect because I was playing around with puzzles in the book, and had conceived of Marie-Laure's father as a puzzle-builder. So I began to feel, at least in this case, that form ran alongside content.

**Is there a real life equivalent of the *Sea of Flames* that inspired that part of the novel?**

Not exactly. When the idea was coming together, I had started reading about the Nazi invasion of Paris in 1940. When the

invasion began, the people at the Louvre in Paris had very little warning. So, to protect all of these important cultural artefacts, they started boxing everything up as quickly as they could and shipping them out of the city. They're moving Rembrandts and the *Mona Lisa*, and the whole of the Louvre becomes this packing yard filled crates and twine.

But it wasn't just the art at the Louvre. What about the National Museum of Natural History? They have all kinds of incredible treasures: there's incalculable gold, diamonds, sapphires, all kind of lapis lazuli. Then of course there are paleontological treasures, botanical treasures, and these all have to be kept locked up or moved out of the city before the invasion. And I thought, there it is! So no, I don't believe there's an actual diamond in the museum that is cursed, but that mission to protect France's most important artefacts is definitely real.

### **Which writers do you admire, and how have they influenced your work?**

Andrea Barrett's books taught me that you can be passionate about science and storytelling; W. G. Sebald's books taught me that history and memory can interpenetrate in amazing ways; Cormac McCarthy taught me about narrative pressure and landscape; Stephen Millhauser taught me how to weave fable with the familiar; J. M. Coetzee taught me not to be afraid of taking on big questions; Virginia Woolf taught me that a writer can take wild risks and be extremely meticulous at the same time. I could go on for a while on this one ...