When Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2015, it was that rare occasion when everyone—readers, critics, other writers—nodded and said, “Yes, of course.” This may not seem strange, but in the subtle back-and-forth between “literary” fiction and “popular” fiction, *All the Light* was one of those rare books that pleased almost everyone. And I do mean, everyone. In my home, this was a book that was received on Christmas Eve, 2014 and passed around from father to mother to fifteen-year-old to twelve-year-old. Only the youngest, then nine, declined to engage. And then it was given to two brothers and a mother-in-law as birthday gifts. It was the subject of numerous Sunday phone conversations, multiple Face Book posts, part of an expanding ripple of recommendations: aunts, friends, distant book clubs. A copy was left at the family cabin in the north woods, where some visitor picked it up after breakfast, thumbing its pages, reached the mid-point by bedtime, read through the night, and absent-mindedly—or not—dropped it into their suitcase as they packed to leave the next day. Always, it was received and read with pleasure.

Critics were also nearly unanimous in their praise: the *New York Times* celebrated one character, *The Guardian* another. Everyone commented on the lyrical prose, the almost-mosaic-like use of short chapters to create fleeting impressions that paradoxically deepened our understanding of place, time, character, mood, moment. All of it seems effortless, which, of course, is the sign of a truly great writer: backbreaking work, polished and refined to the point that the words actually disappear. We open the book, we read a sentence, and we’re in the world.

This is, in my mind, the true power of Doerr’s novel, particularly as it relates to his construction of his characters. With just a few words, Doerr brings us into the mind and emotions of a young girl who is still adjusting to her loss of sight as her father attempts to teach her to orient herself in the busy streets of Paris:

> The world pivots and rumbles. Crows shout, brakes hiss, someone to her left bangs something metal with what might be a hammer. She shuffles forward until the tip of her cane floats in space. The edge of a curb? A pond, a staircase, a cliff? . . . A roar of noise—an exterminator just leaving a house, pump bellowing—overtakes them. Marie-Laure drops her cane and starts to cry. Her father cradles her.

> “It’s so big,” she whispers.

> “You can do this, Marie.”

> She cannot.

There’s so much here: the sense details; the thought process (a curb, a pond, a cliff?); the artful word choice (“shuffles”); the rhythm of the sentences, staccato images and phrases banging up against longer rambling descriptions that capture her confusion. And then those two words: “She cannot.” In any other setting, they fall flat. Here, though, landing at the end of these rich descriptions of both the exterior and interior worlds, they cause us to physically experience Marie’s despair as it drops through her (and us) like a coin.

Then there’s Werner, particularly, but not limited to, his obsession with electronics. Here again, some very complicated stagecraft simply disappears:
Werner sits alone in his upstairs dormer, experimenting with the radio receiver. In a week he can dismantle and rebuild it with his eyes closed. Capacitor, inductor, tuning coil, earpiece... He harvests parts from supply sheds: snips of copper wire, screws, a bent screwdriver. He charms the druggist’s wife into giving him a broken earphone; he salvages a solenoid from a discarded doorbell, solders it to a resistor and makes a loudspeaker.

The same is true later in the book. When, for instance, Werner accompanies his schoolmate Frederick home—knowing, of course, that he’s failed him as a friend—and listens to Frederick gush over a book of birds illustrated by Audubon:

> Werner tries to see what Frederick sees: a time before photography, before binoculars. And here was someone willing to tramp out into a wilderness brimming with the unknown and bring back paintings. A book not so much full of birds as full of evanescence, of blue-winged, trumpeting mysteries. He thinks of the Frenchman’s radio program, of Heinrich Hertz’s Principles of Mechanics—doesn’t he recognize the thrill in Frederick’s voice?

The power here comes not from the research behind the writing—anyone can, of course, look up Audubon’s paintings, or the parts of a radio, circa 1930’s Germany—or even in the poetry of the language (when’s the last time any of us used “evanescence” in a sentence?) No, the power of this work is in Doerr’s imagination, in his ability to put himself in the emotional realities of his characters, to fully occupy them—and then to bring those realities to us in a few, uncomplicated sentences. This, in my mind, is the draw of *All the Light We Cannot See*: it allows us to see fully, to live fully, the lives of these characters. What a gift. What a book. How fortunate are we?

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