

*All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doer.

Review by Matthew Dumas, 2017

*All The Light We Cannot See* was the bestselling book of 2015, written by Australian author Anthony Doer. It has earned many awards, including even the famed Pulitzer Prize and sold many times more copies than any other book that year. For all of that praise, surely it would be a nearly flawless masterpiece? Well, it isn't. Quite the contrary. It isn't by any means a bad book but for by far the most praised book of the past few years, it's very underwhelming.

The plot takes place in WWII and features 2 main protagonists: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl during the siege of Paris, and Werner Pfennig, a German boy who is a gifted engineer. I love these two. They are believable, kind and compassionate and you can relate to their struggles. They shift between the two characters' points of view but also dabble in another: Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel, who is a slowly dying Nazi gemologist in search of the legendary gem, the Sea of Flames. It is famed for its foretold magical properties and it's deadly curse, which grants the user immortality, at the expense of the user's loved ones, who all shall meet a grim fate.

This is where the problems really come in. Von Rumpel acts as the stories antagonist, which in itself is a problem, as the story doesn't need an antagonist. The conflict lies in the war, so having an antagonist rids the story of it's inherent charm. I could forgive this if Von Rumpel were a memorable villain, but he's far from it. His parts are unpleasant to read and his motivations are cliché and uninteresting. He's dull and so are his actions and he doesn't even interact with the protagonists until the very end, which makes him very underwhelming.

This book is written in the 'first person', as I mentioned and it takes advantage of that, showing us the story through the eyes of three characters, and nearly every chapter is a different point of view to the last, with only one or two exceptions. Generally I would rather enjoy this but unfortunately in this case it was a serious detriment to the book for one reason. The author had a strong taste for cliff hangers. I love cliff hangers, because you're always right back into the action once the feeling of excitement peaks, however, you must remember that in this book, nearly every chapter rotates between characters, which means that if there is, say, a Marie-Laure cliff hanger, I'll have to unwillingly choke down Werner, or worse, Von Rumpel's part and vice versa. Given that the cliff hangers were so common, often I'd be disinterested in what I so wanted before because of another cliff hanger, which was a perpetual cycle that made a large portion of the book unpleasant.

Not only that but I couldn't enjoy a single Von Rumpel part. It was very difficult not to skip them lest I miss part of the plot, because his parts were so painfully monotonous. His search for the Sea of Flames desecrated an otherwise good book. The Sea of Flames, though not confirmed to have it's reputed properties, is strongly hinted to, and in a down to earth book taking place in the gritty reality of WWII, a magical gemstone is horribly out of place. I'm sure the book would have been far better off if Von Rumpel got his hands on The Sea of Flames, yet in his final hours realised that it was just a pretty crystal and that he was going to die. However he is defeated by our protagonists at the climax of the story, which instead of empowering them, seemed out of character and unnecessary.

Marie-Laure's parts had to be my favourites. She was, though often too innocent or childish, rather clever and very loveable and strangely relatable, despite her predicament. Her family is where the book shines however. Her father is a very good man, who would teach her how to live blind, guide her through life, and he would love her always. He would give her puzzles and love, and go to the end of the earth to indulge her love of literature and find Braille books for her despite their rarity. Her Great Uncle was the highlight of the book in my opinion. Fleeing a besieged Paris, Marie-Laure and her father live with her Great Uncle Ettienne, who suffers from severe agoraphobia and shell shock since he fought in WWI. He instantly forms a bond with Marie-Laure and they push each other to become greater. He's just such a loving, sweet old man and any chapter with him is such a joy to read.

Another flaw of the book however is it's flash forwards. It starts every separate part of the book with a flash forward into the future, then the following part shows the events leading up to it. Firstly, it isn't clarified that they are flash forwards, which before you get used to it is very confusing, and even caught me out a few times once I realised. But the biggest problem is that once again, because the author loves cliff hangers, it creates a lot of fake tension which isn't believable because we know they turn out fine. It comes across as a cheap attempt at conflict.

Overall, the book is an enjoyable read. If you want a good read, this one is worth picking up, but for the bestselling, Pulitzer Prize winning, highly appraised beacon of 2015, *All the Light We Cannot See* is underwhelming. I consider it a very average book.