

ARRT Literary Book Discussion  
All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr  
Thursday April 21, 2016  
2-3:15pm  
Lisle Library District  
16 participants

Leader: Elizabeth Hopkins  
Notetaker: Becky Spratford

Elizabeth began the discussion by showing the group a moveable display of “War Stories” [on a cart] and talked about how they find that using this cart is a good way to have topical, face out displays regardless of the fact that they are literally out of space in their building. She passed around one of the books to show how they put a bookmark in each book on the display with 3 key appeal terms. Those terms stick out of the book and “speak” for it. Becky added that if you haven’t read the book but want to put it on display this way, you could get those appeal terms from the NoveList entry.

Elizabeth also passed out the “What Should I Read After....” bookmarks their library made for this title. The titles on the bookmark are listed at the end of these notes.

On to the discussion:

- Elizabeth asked for the group to give a “thumbs up,” thumbs down,” or “thumbs in the middle” vote for each book.
  - 11 thumbs up
  - 2 thumbs down
  - 2 thumbs in the middle
  - But last month’s leader, Bill, said-- ALL 3! Elizabeth asked him to start since he had the most interesting vote. He clarified that at various points throughout the book he felt all three ways about it and since that does not normally happen, he thought it was important to mention.
  - Elizabeth told the group how happy she was that there was a range of votes of this title. If everyone liked it, we would have very little to discuss.
- The group went around sharing their initial thoughts on the book and why they voted the way they did.
  - It could have ended better
    - A few people didn’t want the epilogue
  - Others chimed in with their love of the ending-- especially bringing it back to the wooden house.
  - The language in this book is beautiful.
  - I loved the characterization. All of the characters from main to minor were great.
  - I liked the descriptions of a high functioning blind person.

- Someone else mentioned that they did NOT like or believe these. Building models of the city seemed like it wouldn't work to help her get around in reality.
  - The overall sense of fear that accompanied occupation was well done. You could feel the anxiety and fear with every scene, even when the characters were not in immediate danger.
  - I appreciated Werner's disillusionment. His arc from gung-ho radio operator to disillusioned German soldier was believable. It built throughout the novel as he "grew up."
  - The audio was perfect for helping me with the pronunciations.
  - I enjoyed the back and forth structure of the book.
  - I liked how this was a different look at WWII. It was refreshing
- We were having too many positive thoughts, so Elizabeth asked for some of the thumbs down or in the middle to have a chance. Their thoughts:
  - I was bored to tears. There was so much time when nothing happened. I normally like historical fiction but I just couldn't get into this.
  - I didn't like THE BOOK THIEF either and these books are similar in style.
  - The story did not keep me engaged
  - I think I had too high expectations since it was so popular and won so many awards.
    - Yes. It won the Pulitzer. Why didn't love it
  - I think the audio was a bad choice for me. With the changing POV and the short chapters, it felt too broken up.
- Elizabeth asked the group: With the multiple perspectives and storylines, who or what were your favorites?
  - Werner! I liked that he was a "different" type of German. He was an orphan who loved radios. He did not understand the war or Hitler at all.
    - I was frustrated by Werner's storyline. He was too much of an observer and not an actor. I wanted to be in his head more. I liked him the least.
  - Marie-Laure [M-L].
    - Just everything about her.
    - The way she described her first trip to the sea and the beach was amazing. She is blind but she described with perfectly through every other sense.
  - M-L's father. Heart breaking. What happened to him? But not knowing was more plausible than if they found out. Many people were sent away during WWII and never heard from again.
  - The women's resistance in M-L's town. I loved them!
  - The uncle, Werner's teacher and a few others were mentioned by name.
  - I just loved how all of the characters had depth. Even those who weren't with us for long. I found all of them interesting.
- Elizabeth asked: Why did M-L give Werner the key to the tunnel and why did Werner keep the house and the key after throwing the diamond in the ocean?

- M-L gives him the key as a sign of trust. When she gets it back years later, he shows he earned that trust.
- To a locksmith's daughter, a key is a BIG deal.
- When she gives him the key she is also giving him a place to hide. He chooses not to hide though.
- When she gets the house back with the key inside, it shows that Werner could solve the puzzle. He might not have lived through the war, but M-L knows they were of like mind,
- Was being blind and advantage for M-L?
  - German's didn't suspect her.
  - She could help the resistance.
  - Her superior hearing saved her when she was hiding in the house and her life was in mortal danger.
- Elizabeth shared an issue that came up when her group discussed this book. One of her participants described this novel as a Fairy Tale. What do we think?
  - No.
  - Well, maybe. With the diamond at the center of the story, it has a fairy tale feel
  - Yes, the stone's story itself is mystical. It is said that it would take a very special person to hold it and then be able to let it go.
  - Fairy Tales have a morality or ethics center. They were used to teach children a lesson. This novel has that piece.
  - I think it was more like Lord of the Rings than a Fairy Tale
    - An epic quest for a magical diamond. The evil Nazi out to have it who will kill to get it. Werner and Elizabeth together save it by destroying it.
  - The chapter describing what happened to the diamond from the diamond's perspective was weird.
    - Maybe as a fairy tale that chapter makes more sense.
    - I liked that chapter. It was beautiful
    - A few people needed clarification as to what was going on with that chapter and as a group we ran through what actually happened to the diamond.
  - The magic of radio as it is portrayed in the novel also gives the story a Fairy Tale feel.
- Elizabeth asked the group to talk about Werner's death? Was it suicide or a tragic accident?
  - It was so quick. I was shocked. Things were finally improving for him and then he was blown up by a landmine.
  - I think he knew it would happen. He left his things behind and walked into a field knowing there were mines there.
  - But, he was sick and feverish. It could have been a mistake based on his mental state.
  - Yeah, would he have left all of his things behind if suicide.
  - I think that shows it is suicide. His things [which were eventually returned to the right people] were like his suicide note. A private note to each person.

- I don't think it matters why he wandered off, but he had to die. It would have been too neat an ending if he made it and Werner and M-L reunited. Yuck to that book.
- Yes, one of the main themes of this novel is that of "potential lost." There are many instances of this in the novel, from Werner's school friend- Friedrich- to M-L's Dad during war and uncle's lost potential for the years leading up to the war to just the war in general. That is a strength of the book. Werner had great potential, he proves it in the end, but it is still lost.
- When M-L and Werner talk about the novel 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA, they talk about the ending. M-L says the open ending is intentional. This book has many unanswered questions and open endings.
- Speaking of endings. What about this one?
  - 2 flash forwards. One to the 1970s when Werner's sister brings the house to M-L and 2014 with M-L.
  - I was ready for the book to be done before this point, but it was also interesting to see it.
  - I think seeing Werner's sister's POV as a German going to France to connect with M-L was really worth it. Her fear at if they will "hate" her rang true.
  - Yes, but I wish we had more of the two of them talking and sharing.
  - It was clear that neither knew the real Werner. They each knew a part of him. Sister knew who he was before war. M-L knew what war had made him. But no one will know who he was at the time of his death or who would have become.
- Time for final thoughts:
  - Elizabeth asked who had already done this book for discussion. 2 already, 1 coming soon.
  - I loved the scene when Friedrich finally spoke after he got the page from his bird book back and that bird-- an owl-- came to his window.
  - I learned more about what was happening in Germany during WWII through Werner's story than I knew before.
  - I see so many connections for young people today in this novel. Think about the stories we hear about children leaving troubling lives behind to join the army or even ISIS-- to improve their lives.
- Readalikes?
  - On bookmark-- Stones from the River, In the Wolf's Mouth, Crooked Heart, Jacob's Oath, The Nightingale, and The English Patient
  - The Hunger Games
  - Constellation of Vital Phenomenon
  - [Link](#) to Becky's blog with more readalikes.