

Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **All the Light We Cannot See** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Ten years in the writing, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is an epic work of historical fiction. With richly detailed language and characters who are both brave and heartbreaking, Doerr weaves together the stories of a French girl named Marie-Laure who has lost her eyesight and a German orphan named Werner. As Hitler's occupied territory grows, Marie-Laure and Werner's lives and families are torn apart by the war, yet this gorgeous novel is the story of people who, against the odds, find good in one another.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene for the rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and the time period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with the impact of the Internet on today's society?
2. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think the experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?
3. Whose story did you enjoy the most? Was there any character you wanted more insight into?
4. When Werner and Jutta first hear the Frenchman on the radio, he concludes his broadcast by saying "*Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever*" (pages 48–49), and Werner recalls these words throughout the book (pages 86, 264, and 409). How do you think this phrase relates to the overall message of the story? How does it relate to Madame Manec's question: "Don't you want to be alive before you die?" (page 270)?
5. On page 160, Marie-Laure realizes "This . . . is the basis of his fear, all fear. That a light you are powerless to stop will turn on you and usher a bullet to its mark." How does this image constitute the most general basis of all fear? Do you agree?
6. Reread Madame Manec's boiling frog analogy on page 284. Etienne later asks Marie-Laure, "Who was supposed to be the frog? Her? Or the Germans?" (page 328) Who did you think Madame Manec meant? Could it have been someone other than herself or the Germans? What does it say about Etienne that he doesn't consider himself to be the frog?
7. On page 368, Werner thinks, "That is how things are . . . with everybody in this unit, in this army, in this world, they do as they're told, they get scared, they move about with only themselves in mind. *Name me someone who does not.*" But in fact many of the characters show great courage and selflessness throughout the story in some way, big or small. Talk about the different ways they put themselves at risk in order to do what they think is right. What do you think were some shining moments? Who did you admire most?
8. On page 390, the author writes, "To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness." What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Laure's perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?

9. One of Werner's bravest moments is when he confronts von Rumpel: "All your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and are you ready?" (page 465) Have you ever had a moment like that? Were you ready? What would you say that moment is for some of the other characters?
10. Why do you think Marie-Laure gave Werner the little iron key? Why might Werner have gone back for the wooden house but left the Sea of Flames?
11. Von Rumpel seemed to believe in the power of the Sea of Flames, but was it truly a supernatural object or was it merely a gemstone at the center of coincidence? Do you think it brought any protection to Marie-Laure and/or bad luck to those she loved?
12. When Werner and Marie-Laure discuss the unknown fate of Captain Nemo at the end of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Marie-Laure suggests the open-endedness is intentional and meant to make us wonder (page 472). Are there any unanswered questions from this story that you think are meant to make us wonder?
13. The 1970s image of Jutta is one of a woman deeply guilt-ridden and self-conscious about her identity as a German. Why do you think she feels so much guilt over the crimes of others? Can you relate to this? Do you think she should feel any shame about her identity?
14. What do you think of the author's decision to flash forward at the end of the book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characters? Did anything surprise you?
15. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." *All the Light We Cannot See* is filled with examples of human nature at its best and worst. Discuss the themes of good versus evil throughout the story. How do they drive each other? What do you think are the ultimate lessons that these characters and the resolution of their stories teach us?

Enhance Your Book Club

To learn more about the Battle of Normandy, find maps, timelines, photographs, and recommendations for films and books on the subject. Visit www.dday-overlord.com/eng/index.htm.

Take another look at Werner's redacted letter to Jutta on page 283. There's so much blacked out that it's hard to take any meaning from his message. What do you imagine he might have been writing about? Try to fill in the blanks with your best guess.

Radio was such an important part of Werner's and Marie-Laure's stories, and WWII in general. Visit the BBC archive collections at www.bbc.co.uk/archive/collections.shtml to listen to clips of Nazi propaganda, news reports, and personal accounts of World War II.

Have you ever read any Jules Verne? Pick up a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (or view the 1954 film adaptation) and talk about why you think Anthony Doerr decided to make Verne's fiction such a big part of his own.

See more at: http://books.simonandschuster.com/All-the-Light-We-Cannot-See/Anthony-Doerr/9781476746586/reading_group_guide