All the Light We Cannot See

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANTHONY DOERR

Anthony Doerr was born in Cleveland, and studied history at Bowdoin College in Maine. After graduating in 1995, he went on to the MFA program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Doerr earned much attention at Bowling Green for his short stories, and in 2002 he succeeded in publishing a collection of his work, *The Shell Collector*. He followed this collection with *Memory Wall*, another story collection. Doerr's stories won many impressive honors during the 2000s, including four O. Henry Prizes—often thought to be the most prestigious awards given for short fiction in the United States. Doer also wrote a novel during the 2000s, *About Grace*, which was well received, but didn't sell particularly well. In 2014, he published his second novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, his most critically acclaimed and commercially successful book. The novel was a national bestseller for many weeks, and won Doerr the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014. At the moment, Doerr is a writer in residence at Iowa University, usually considered America's best creative writing school. He has a wife and two twin sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is too much history in *All the Light We Cannot See* to describe in much detail. However, the most important historical event in the novel is World War II. Between 1939 and 1945, Europe was locked in a long and brutal war between the Axis Powers—the Fascist states of Germany and Italy—and the Allied Powers, including England, France, and eventually the U.S. During this period, Italy and Germany ruled their own people with an iron fist. The most infamous example of Fascist authoritarianism remains the Holocaust. Beginning in the late 1930s, Germany began isolating Jews, Romani people, disabled people, and homosexuals, first forcing them to wear identification at all times, then forcing them to live in designated areas, and finally, in 1942, sending them to labor camps to be murdered. Germans in particular were taught to celebrate the racial ideal: the tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan. (In the novel, Werner Pfennig is much praised for his piercing blue eyes and light blond hair.) In all, as many as 21 million people were killed in the Holocaust, including at least 6 million Jews. To this day, the legacy of Fascism and the Holocaust remain the cause of tremendous trauma, guilt, and shame for Germany, and for Europe as a whole. Another side of World War II that's worth discussing in the context of the novel is the French Resistance. In 1940, Germany invaded France, forcing French citizens to submit to German authority. While most French citizens agreed to abide by German laws, largely out of fear for their safety and their families' safety, there were resistance groups (many of whom were led by Charles de Gaulle, still celebrated as a hero in France) who used force to fight the Germans in France. While the French Resistance remains a point of great pride for France to this day, France didn't succeed in defeating the German invaders until after 1944, when the United States and England invaded France and sent an army through the country to fight the Germans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

All the Light We Cannot See explicitly alludes to many novels, most notably Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* (1973), and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1970). Jules Verne is often considered one of the founders of modern science fiction, and his books are characterized by an unshakeable optimism in the power of science and technology, an optimism which Marie-Laure comes to share after reading Verne's books. Doerr's book also alludes to many other important literary works via its structure. The novel has "two plots"—one with Werner Pfennig as the main character, and one with Marie-Laure LeBlanc as the main character—that come together toward the end. In this regard, the novel has been compared to such 19th century Victorian works as Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), both of which feature two loosely connected plots. Doerr's interest in complexly interconnecting stories has also been studied in the context of other similarly structured books written in the 21st century, such as Khaled Hosseini's *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), which, coincidentally, also chronicles the experiences of a group of people over the course of a tumultuous historical era, and ends with a young girl growing into an old woman.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** All the Light We Cannot See
- **Where Written:** Ohio and New Zealand
- **When Published:** May 6, 2014
- **Literary Period:** The "everything is connected" trend of 21st century fiction
- **Genre:** Historical drama, "two-plot" novel
- **Setting:** Saint-Malo and Paris (France), and Berlin and Essen (Germany), between the 1930s and 2014.
- **Climax:** Werner Pfennig meets Marie-Laure LeBlanc in the wardrobe and saves her life.
- **Point of View:** Third person, mostly present tense

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Money: On top of winning critical and popular acclaim for *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr has won the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award, which features the single largest prize given for short story writing: 45,000 dollars.

Look out, Hollywood: In May 2015, a major Hollywood studio "optioned" *All the Light We Cannot See*, meaning that the story is likely to be made into a feature film in the next few years.

PLOT SUMMARY

All the Light We Cannot See is told in almost 200 short chapters, and constantly cuts back and forth between two main characters: Werner Pfennig, a young German boy with an aptitude for radio engineering, and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a young, blind French girl who excels at reading and studying science. The story is told un-chronologically, but the timeline is simplified for the purposes of this summary.

In 1934, Marie-Laure is a 6-year-old with a loving father, Daniel LeBlanc, who works in the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Marie-Laure begins to lose her eyesight, and goes blind. Adapting to this, Daniel teaches Marie-Laure Braille and makes beautiful models of the city of Paris, training her until she's gradually ready to navigate her way around the actual city. On each of Marie-Laure's birthdays, Daniel gives her a small "puzzle-box." Marie-Laure becomes adept at solving these puzzles. As the years go on, Marie-Laure also learns of a diamond called the Sea of Flames that's kept at the museum. The diamond is rumored to bring eternal life to its owner, but also to kill the owner's loved ones. Marie-Laure becomes concerned that her father will die from the curse, but Daniel assures her the curse is a myth.

In 1934, Werner Pfennig is an 8-year-old boy who lives with his sister, Jutta, at an orphanage in Germany. Werner is an intelligent boy, though he fears that he'll be sent to work in the mines when he turns fifteen. The head of the orphanage, a Frenchwoman named Frau Elena, teaches him to speak French as well as German, and encourages him to explore his interests in science. One day, Werner stumbles upon a radio. He and Jutta experiment with the radio, and are amazed to discover a broadcast coming from miles away. The broadcast consists of a series of fascinating lectures on science. Werner develops a reputation for being a great repairman. One day, he repairs the radio of a powerful official named Herr Siedler, who shows his gratitude by recommending him to a prestigious Nazi school, the National Institute. Werner passes his exams with flying colors. Around this time, Jutta begins to grow more distant from Werner.

In 1940, the Germans invade Paris, and Marie-Laure and her father decide to leave the city. Daniel LeBlanc has been tasked with hiding the Sea of Flames from the Nazi invaders. He and three other employees have been given diamonds (three of which are fake, one of which is real) and sent to different parts of the country. Daniel decides to travel to the coastal town of Saint-Malo, to live with his uncle, Etienne LeBlanc. Marie-Laure discovers that Etienne is an eccentric but highly likeable man. Although he's extremely reclusive, he charms Marie-Laure with his vast knowledge of science and radio.

Werner begins his time as a student at the National Institute, where he's taught Nazi ideology. Werner wins the favor of Dr. Hauptmann, a professor who gives Werner challenging physics assignments. Before long, Werner is working with Hauptmann to design a complex radar system that will one day be used to find enemy soldiers. Werner also befriends a thoughtful, gentle student named Frederick. Werner learns that Frederick is only in the National Institute because his parents are rich.

In Saint-Malo, Daniel builds Marie-Laure a model of the city so that she can train herself to walk through the streets. Marie-Laure also befriends Etienne's cook and maid, Madame Manec. She eventually learns that Etienne's brother, Henri LeBlanc—her own grandfather—made a series of radio broadcasts on science (the same broadcasts that, we realize, entertained Werner and Jutta as children) from the secret radio room in the attic of the house.

One day, Daniel tells Marie-Laure that he has to leave immediately. He promises her that he'll be back, but after months, Daniel still hasn't returned. Occasionally, he sends Marie-Laure a letter, in which he claims that he's in a "good place." Meanwhile, the German presence in Saint-Malo becomes intolerable—food grows scarce, and the German soldiers arrest innocent people. Madame Manec and her elderly friends work together to undermine the Nazis in small ways. Also, an old man named Harold Bazin gives Marie-Laure the key to a secret hiding place—a grotto in the city wall, at the edge of the sea.

Madame Manec grows sick and dies. Inspired by her bravery, Etienne and Marie-Laure decide to fight the Germans together. Etienne launches a series of secret radio broadcasts, and every day, Marie-Laure buys a loaf of bread from the bakery, which contains a scroll with important resistance information.

At the National Institute, Werner begins to resent his teachers while also enjoying their sadistic games. One day, the teachers order all the students to torture a prisoner. Werner obliges, but Frederick refuses. Soon afterwards, Frederick is savagely beaten—it's not clear if the students or the teachers are responsible—and he loses most of his mental faculties. Werner loses Dr. Hauptmann's favor when he asks leaving the school—as punishment, Dr. Hauptmann tells the army that Werner is old enough for military service, and Werner is shipped off to fight. During his time in the army, Werner uses radios to track down enemy broadcasters in Russia, and his fellow soldiers then murder them.

It is now the early 1940s, and a greedy Nazi official named Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel tries to track down the Sea of Flames diamond. He determines that the real diamond is probably in Saint-Malo, where Daniel LeBlanc's family is staying. Von Rumpel arrives in Saint-Malo around the same time that Werner and his fellow troops are shipped there. Von Rumpel learns that Marie-Laure will know where the diamond is. At the same time, Werner is ordered to find the location of a resistance broadcast network. He determines that the network is located in Etienne's house, but when he realizes that it's the same broadcast he loved as a child, he decides to let it continue.

In 1944, the Allies prepare to bomb Saint-Malo. German soldiers, including Werner and his superior, Frank Volkheimer, prepare for an air raid by hiding beneath a hotel. Etienne is arrested as a resistance fighter and sent to jail, leaving Marie-Laure alone in his house. In August, American airplanes drop leaflets ordering all French citizens to leave the town. Marie-Laure, blind, is unable to understand, and stays behind. Late at night, the airplanes bomb the city. Marie-Laure realizes that her father has been hiding something in the model of Saint-Malo: inside the model of Etienne's house, she finds the Sea of Flames. In the bombing, Marie-Laure is able to survive, but Werner and Volkheimer are trapped in a cellar under the hotel with only a radio.

The Allies continue bombing Saint-Malo. While Werner and Volkheimer try to find a way out of the cellar, von Rumpel goes to Etienne's house in search of the diamond. Afraid, Marie-Laure goes to hide in the secret radio room. Von Rumpel searches the house but finds nothing—Marie-Laure has taken the diamond with her. In the radio room, Marie-Laure makes her own broadcasts, in which she reads aloud from her favorite book, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Werner hears the broadcast on his radio. He also hears Marie-Laure say that the man in her house is trying kill her.

Volkheimer and Werner decide to use a grenade to bomb their way out of the cellar—amazingly, the plan works. Werner then goes to Etienne's house to save Marie-Laure. Inside, von Rumpel tries to shoot Werner (wrongly assuming that he's trying to get the diamond for himself), but Werner manages to overpower and kill von Rumpel. He then calls for Marie-Laure, saying that he's been listening to her broadcast. Marie-Laure decides to trust Werner, and climbs out. Werner, recognizing that Marie-Laure is blind, leads her to safety. In gratitude, Marie-Laure hides the diamond in Bazin's grotto, and gives Werner the model house with the key to the grotto hidden inside (Werner has no idea that the diamond exists).

In the following weeks, American soldiers arrest Werner, and Marie-Laure is reunited with Etienne. Marie-Laure and Etienne move back to Paris, and over the next ten years they remain close. After Etienne dies, Marie-Laure becomes a noted scientist specializing in the study of mollusks and whelks. Werner is not so lucky: he's sent to prison, and dies when he inadvertently steps on a landmine planted by the German troops a few weeks earlier.

In the 1970s, Frank Volkheimer tracks down Jutta, now married with a young child. Volkheimer gives Jutta the tiny model house, in which Jutta finds the key to the grotto. Jutta then finds Marie-Laure, now a middle-aged scientist with a daughter, and gives her the model house. We learn that before Etienne died, he hired a private investigator to determine what happened to Daniel: as it turns out, Daniel was arrested and died of influenza while he was in prison. It also becomes clear that Marie-Laure has left the Sea of Flames in the grotto.

In 2014, Marie-Laure is an old woman with a distinguished career behind her. One day, she goes walking through Paris with her grandson, Michel. She thinks about the people in her life who have become "spirits": Etienne, Manec, and above all, her father.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marie-Laure LeBlanc – One of the two protagonists of *All the Light We Cannot See*, Marie-Laure LeBlanc is an inquisitive, intellectually adventurous girl. She became blind at the age of six, but learns to adapt to this and continues to explore and discover. For most of the novel, Marie-Laure is a teenager, but by the end of the novel she's an old woman. Marie-Laure is a warm, loving girl: at the beginning of the book, she loves her father, Daniel LeBlanc, before anyone else. After 1941, when Daniel leads her to the seaside town of Saint-Malo, she becomes close with her great-uncle, Etienne LeBlanc, and her cook, Madame Manec. Marie-Laure is capable of feats of great daring. With Daniel's help, she trains herself to walk through large cities using only her cane, and when the conflict between France and Germany escalates, she volunteers to participate in the French resistance. In spite of the joy she gets from reading and exploring, Marie-Laure's life is full of tragedy: the people she loves most disappear from her life, beginning with her father. As she grows older and becomes a scientist of mollusks, Marie-Laure comes to appreciate the paradox of her life: while she sometimes wants to be as stoic and "closed up" as the clams and whelks she studies, she secretly desires to reconnect with her loved ones.

Werner Pfennig – Werner Pfennig is a young, intelligent German boy, and one of the two protagonists of *All the Light We Cannot See*. Werner has whitish-blond hair, blue eyes, and is strikingly intelligent, so he seems like a model of the Nazis' "Aryan ideal"—except that he has a stronger moral compass and a lesser sense of racial superiority than most of his peers. During his adolescence, Werner is close with his sister, Jutta Pfennig, with whom he lives at an orphanage (their father died in a mining accident, and their mother's fate is unknown). As a

respite from their oppressive surroundings, Werner and Jutta develop a love for science and the broadcasts they hear via their radio (broadcasts being made, unbeknownst to either of them, by Marie-Laure LeBlanc's own grandfather Henri). As Werner grows older, he develops an aptitude for engineering and science, but is morally challenged when he is accepted into the National Institute (a prestigious Nazi school) and then during his stint in the German army. Werner uses his skills to help Volkheimer and other soldiers murder hundreds of people—some of them civilians—and wonders, again and again, if he'll be able to live with his choices. Throughout his time in the army, Werner remains devoted to his sister, Jutta, and often thinks back to their carefree days together in the orphanage. His favorite memory of Jutta—listening to radio broadcasts in the orphanage—ultimately contributes to his decision to spare Marie-Laure's life when he realizes that she is connected to these broadcasts.

Daniel LeBlanc – Marie Laure's father, Daniel LeBlanc, is selflessly devoted to his daughter—indeed, he spends long hours teaching her Braille and crafting elaborate models of Paris (and later Saint-Malo) to teach her how to walk through the city without her eyesight. In general, Daniel is clever and good with his hands—a talent that makes him an accomplished locksmith at the Museum of Natural History before he's forced to flee the Germans along with his daughter. Because his employers at the Museum have tasked him with the protection of a priceless diamond, the Sea of Flames, Daniel leaves his daughter in Saint-Malo, is later imprisoned, and eventually dies of influenza. Daniel's absence in Marie-Laure's life is one of the defining and most tragic themes of the novel—a sign of their sincere love for one another.

Frank Volkheimer – Frank Volkheimer is the huge, intimidating, and morally ambiguous staff sergeant who works as an assistant at Werner Pfennig's school, the National Institute, and later commands Werner through his time in the German army. He can be tough and cruel, especially with prisoners of the German army, but he's always gentle with Werner, and saves Werner's life on more than one occasion. It's left unclear how loyal Volkheimer is to the German army—it's suggested that he's willing to ignore orders from his commanders because he values his friendship with Werner more highly. In spite of his sins during World War II, Volkheimer is arguably "good" at heart, and his loyalty to Werner motivates much of the action in the final 100 pages of the book.

Jutta Pfennig – Werner Pfennig's beloved sister Jutta is the moral constant against which Werner measures his own sins. When Werner is recruited for the prestigious National Institute—a Fascist school—Jutta begins to ignore him, and when he's sent off to fight in the Nazi army, she cools to him even more. Nevertheless, Jutta and Werner remain extremely close with one another, and throughout World War II, they think of each other and remember their carefree days as children. Years after Werner's death, Jutta continues to love and remember her brother, and his lasting influence leads her to eventually make contact with Marie-Laure.

Frau Elena – Frau Elena is the head of the orphanage where Jutta and Werner Pfennig grow up. She's a gentle, kind woman, and treats all her children well, despite a severe lack of resources. When the Nazis rise to power in Germany, she's bullied for being a Frenchwoman—but her decision to teach all her children to speak French leads (years later) to the thematic center of the novel: the encounter between Werner and Marie-Laure in Saint-Malo.

Great-Uncle Etienne LeBlanc – Etienne LeBlanc is an old, eccentric, and extremely reclusive (it's implied he has post-traumatic stress disorder from World War I) man who lives in the seaside town of Saint-Malo, France. When his nephew, Daniel Leblanc, and his grandniece, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, come to live with him following the Nazi invasion of Paris, he becomes close with Marie-Laure, often spending long chunks of time reading books to her. As time passes, Marie-Laure's courage inspires Etienne to take his own actions against the German soldiers, and he bravely aids the French resistance by broadcasting important information about the German troops on his radio. Etienne's love for Marie-Laure is confirmed when, frightened that she's been arrested, he overcomes his terror of going outside and rushes out of his house to find her. He later tells his grandniece, "You're the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Madame Manec – Madame Manec is a brave, resourceful, and kindly maid and cook for Etienne LeBlanc. When Daniel and Marie-Laure LeBlanc arrive in Saint-Malo, Madame Manec dotes on Marie-Laure, and their friendship becomes an important influence on Marie-Laure's development in the coming years. Manec comforts Marie-Laure during times of crisis, and ultimately inspires Marie-Laure to become a French resistance fighter, delivering loaves of bread stuffed with secret messages that undermine the Germans' power. Even after Manec succumbs to illness and dies, her bravery and integrity continue to inspire Marie-Laure.

Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel – Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel is a cruel, greedy German military commander, who uses a mixture of torture, sadism, manipulation, and blackmail in order to track down the legendary Sea of Flames—a valuable diamond housed in the Natural History Museum of Paris. Von Rumpel's desire for the diamond leads him to cross paths with Marie-Laure and Werner Pfennig in Saint-Malo, and in the end we see that he's willing to commit murder to get what he wants. Nevertheless, von Rumpel isn't entirely an unsympathetic character: we come to see that he's dying of cancer, and wants the diamond in order to save his own life.

Dr. Hauptmann – An intelligent and powerful professor at the National Institute school that Werner attends, Dr. Hauptmann

is at first a powerful ally for Werner, giving his bright student science projects and special assignments that win him the good graces of the entire faculty. But when Werner begins to express his doubts about the morality of the Nazi regime, Hauptmann exposes his true pettiness and spitefulness: he lies about Werner's age, forcing him to be sent to fight in the German army.

Frederick – An intelligent, shy student at the National Institute, who befriends Werner Pfennig. Frederick is an avid scholar of birds, and idolizes Audubon, the great American naturalist. When he begins to fall behind in his studies and athletic performances, Frederick is increasingly bullied by the students and teachers, and Werner begins to distance himself him Frederick. Eventually, Frederick is beaten by the other students—so savagely that he loses his long-term memory, and spends the rest of his life as an invalid—something that inspires tremendous guilt in Werner.

Henri LeBlanc – Marie-Laure LeBlanc's grandfather and Etienne LeBlanc's brother, Henri LeBlanc was a bright, intelligent young man who was killed in World War I. Although he's rarely mentioned in the novel, he exerts a powerful influence on both of the main characters: his radio broadcasts on scientific topics inspire Werner to become a scientist, while his commitment to broadcasting information partly inspires Marie-Laure to enter the French Resistance and bravely oppose the Nazis in her city.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Walter Bernd – An engineer in the German army and an associate of Werner Pfennig and Frank Volkheimer, killed during the Allies' bombing of the town of Saint-Malo.

Dr. Geffard – An elderly, intellectual Frenchman living in Paris, who tutors Marie-Laure while she's a young girl.

Monsieur Giannot – An associate of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, Monsieur Giannot is supposed to give aid to Daniel LeBlanc, but is forced to leave for London when his situation in France becomes too dangerous.

Herr Rudolph Siedler – A powerful German official stationed in Essen. When Werner is a young man, Siedler recognizes his scientific temperament and sharp mind (after Werner fixes his radio), and arranges for him to attend the National Institute, setting in motion most of the important events of Werner's life.

Reiner Schicker – A German soldier—possibly imaginary—who's celebrated among the Nazi troops for bravely sacrificing his life for his country.

Claude Levitte – A greedy perfumer living in Saint-Malo, Claude Levitte stays "on top" by acting as an informer—first for the German troops who invade France, and later for Reinhold von Rumpel, who's come to the town to track down the Sea of Flames.

Bastian – A sadistic instructor at the National Institute, who bullies many of Werner's peers, and eventually Werner himself.

Ernst – A weak student and athlete, who's bullied and eventually dismissed from the National Institute while Werner is also a student there.

Professor Hublin – An important administrator at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Von Rumpel bullies and intimidates him into divulging information about the Sea of Flames.

Helmut Rödel – A tough, unkind student at the National Institute, who bullies and beats Werner's friend Frederick.

Frau Schwartzenberger – An elderly Jewish woman who lives in the same building as Frederick's family, and, it's strongly implied, is sent to a concentration camp to die when the Nazis consolidate their power.

Dupont – The talented jeweler who designed the three fake versions of the Sea of Flames.

Neumann One – A soldier in the German army, with whom Werner Pfennig travels and fights.

Neumann Two – A soldier in the German army, with whom Werner Pfennig travels and fights. Neumann Two is responsible for one of the most gruesome crimes depicted in the novel, the murder of a tiny child.

Madame Blanchard – An elderly woman in Saint-Malo, and a friend of Madame Manec. She is a participant in the French resistance in the town.

Jean Brignon – A Frenchman who tells Sergeant Major von Rumpel about the whereabouts of Daniel LeBlanc.

Madame Ruelle – An elderly woman in Saint-Malo, and a friend of Madame Manec. She participates in the French resistance by concealing secret messages in loaves of bread and giving them to Marie-Laure LeBlanc.

Veronika – One of the young daughters of Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel.

Albert Wette – The man who eventually marries Jutta Pfennig. Not coincidentally, Albert is a few years younger than Jutta, meaning that he's too young to have had his morals seriously challenged by World War II.

Hélène – Marie-Laure's daughter.

Michel – Marie-Laure's grandson.

John – Marie-Laure's one-time lover, and the father of her child, Hélène.

Harold Bazin – An old homeless man who lives in Saint-Malo, and shows Marie-Laure the grotto where she later hides the Sea of Flames diamond.

Hans Schilzer – A large bully at Frau Elena's orphanage.

Max – Jutta's son.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WORLD WAR II, THE NAZIS, AND THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

The vast majority of *All the Light We Cannot See* takes place during World War II. Although the novel itself covers many of the major European events of the era—the Holocaust, the Russian sieges, the invasion of Paris, the Allied invasion of France, etc.—Doerr doesn't do much summarizing, and he assumes that his readers have a certain amount of knowledge of World War II. With this in mind, it's important to consider more details about the war and how it relates to the lives of the novel's characters.

In the 1930s, Germany fell under the control of the National Socialist (Nazi) party, a Fascist group that believed in strict government control, a strong military, and the racial purity of the German race. The Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, blamed the Jews of Europe (along with Communists and other minorities) for causing all of Germany's social and economic problems. Hitler quickly rose to become the unquestioned leader—the "*führer*"—of Germany. In September 1939, Hitler launched a full-scale war, with the stated aim of conquering Europe and reclaiming Germany's rightful place as the leader of the world. Hitler's armies succeeded in conquering Poland and France, and, together with their Italian allies, waged war on Russia and the United Kingdom. The tide began to turn in 1944, when Russia won a series of key victories against Germany, and the United States entered the war on the side of Russia and the United Kingdom (collectively, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S.A. were the "Allied Powers). By 1945, Germany's forces had been pushed back to Berlin, and American bombers had destroyed Germany's most important military outposts in Europe. The war in Europe ended with Germany's surrender in May of 1945. Needless to say, World War II impacts the lives of the two protagonists of *All the Light We Cannot See*, Werner and Marie-Laure, in many ways. Marie-Laure and her father Daniel are forced to leave Paris after the Germans invade, and Werner is caught up in the Nazi cause, but then begins to question his side's morality after witnessing some of the horrors of war on the Russian front. Both protagonists then endure the bombing of Saint-Malo, where the Allies ruthlessly attacked the French town precisely because it was a key outpost for the German occupation.

Another important aspect of World War II for the novel is the French Resistance. Although Germany invaded and conquered France in 1940, there were many in France who opposed the German invasion in ways both large and small. Some resistance fighters, led by Charles de Gaulle, succeeded in assassinating key German officials in France, thereby weakening the German war effort. Even so, the French Resistance remains a topic of much debate among historians. It's unclear how much of an effect the Resistance had on fighting the Germans, and it's even been suggested that most of the victims of the Resistance fighters were minor Nazi soldiers with no real loyalty to Hitler. The moral ambiguity of the French Resistance—on the surface an unambiguously good thing—is captured in *All the Light We Cannot See* when Etienne LeBlanc, a reluctant Resistance fighter, admits that he's not always sure who, or what, he's fighting for. At the same time, however, the novel shows how all kinds of people—even children like Marie-Laure and old women like Madame Ruelle—could find ways of fighting against oppression and participating in the Resistance against the Germans.

While World War II is often presented—at least in the United States—as a simple distinction between good people and evil people, Doerr shows that the war blurred many of the moral distinctions that we take for granted. As *All the Light We Cannot See* suggests, World War II forced people to make extraordinary decisions, and drove everyday civilians to choose sides in the vast conflict between the Nazis and the Allies (or, more often, between complicity and resistance). European civilians—in Doerr's novel, Werner and Marie-Laure—felt their lives being pushed and shaped by the enormous political forces in their countries, and they had to react to these forces with their own personal decisions.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND SEPARATION

All the Light We Cannot See is written in an unusual style. The novel consists of almost two hundred chapters (no more than two or three pages each), narrated in the present tense, usually from the perspectives of Werner Pfennig, a German boy, or Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a French girl. For the majority of the book, these two plots aren't connected in any strong way—it's only toward the end that Werner and Marie-Laure meet, and even then, their meeting is surprisingly short. It's worth thinking about the implications of Doerr's style, and how it echoes the content of the novel itself.

One reason that Doerr writes his novel in this way is to modestly acknowledge the impossibility of telling a story "about" World War II. The novel makes clear that Werner and Marie-Laure are just two people out of millions who lived through the war, each with a unique story to tell. The lives of Marie-Laure and Werner are important, of course, but they're not the entire story of the war. In fact, the small, intimate nature of Werner and Marie-Laure's experiences—the fact that their lives are relatively unimportant to history—makes the two

plots more poignant. When an explosion kills Werner at the end of the novel, we experience this as a tragedy, while *also* recognizing that Werner's cruel, meaningless death is only a microscopic part of the total tragedy of the war.

This points to another important reason why Doerr chooses to write a "two-plot novel": such a book is simply a more realistic depiction of what life is like. In an ordinary book, a small number of characters interact with one another: there are main characters, secondary characters, etc. In this novel, however, the distinction between main and secondary breaks down. A character who's important to Marie-Laure's story, such as Etienne, her great-uncle, is relatively unimportant to Werner's story, and vice-versa. By the same token, small details in one person's life can be hugely important in another person's life. In general, all people—even distant strangers—are connected with one another via these small details, in ways that are too complicated to be understood easily. Doerr's novel climaxes when Marie-Laure and Werner—two people who come from different countries, and don't know each other at all—realize that they do have something in common: years before, Werner fell in love with the radio broadcasts made by Marie-Laure's grandfather, Henri. In a large, complicated universe, coincidences like this are likely to occur, even if we don't see most of them.

By the time Marie-Laure and Werner meet each other, we've been anticipating the event for hundreds of pages—but the emotional connection between Werner and Marie-Laure is spare and short-lived. The tragic irony of *All the Light We Cannot See* is that Werner and Marie-Laure part ways almost as soon as they've introduced themselves. We as readers want them to get to know each other, but the circumstances simply don't allow it. Soon afterwards, Werner is killed by a land mine. Marie-Laure lives a long, productive life, but she shows no signs of *knowing* Werner—indeed, in the final chapter of the book, set in 2014, she thinks of him as a spirit walking the streets of Paris, unable to communicate with her.

From the beginning, Doerr suggests that his characters' lives may be insignificant in the grand scheme of history, but that doesn't make them any less important or powerful as human stories. Furthermore, Doerr implies that Werner's life is also relatively unimportant in the "grand scheme" of Marie-Laure's life, and vice versa. Werner may save Marie-Laure's life, but this doesn't mean that Marie-Laure spends the rest of her life contemplating her savior. The brevity and fragility of the emotional bond between Marie-Laure and Werner, then, makes the connection between them even more powerful.

There are many books with multiple storylines, but what distinguishes *All the Light We Cannot See* from most of these books is that the two plots in Doerr's novel largely remain separate. Werner and Marie-Laure live out parallel lives, but in the end they're not united—their lives merely overlap in small, often barely discernible ways. While this may seem frustrating and dramatically unsatisfying, it's a sign of Doerr's commitment to a realistic view of how the world works—even if he achieves this realism through often fantastical ways. The millions of "plots" on the planet may be interconnected, but these connections often go unnoticed, and, in the end, they're still separate.



FATE, DUTY, AND FREE WILL

All the Light We Cannot See poses difficult questions about fate, free will, and making the right choice. The major characters in the novel usually struggle to do the right thing, but they must also face the possibility that their struggles don't amount to anything—in other words, their moral choices ultimately don't matter at all. The questions of free will in the novel are aptly symbolized by the Sea of Flames, a legendary diamond that supposedly protects its owner, but causes its owner's loved ones to die. It's possible that the Sea of Flames is cursed, meaning that the characters' attempts to protect one another are futile—they're going to die, no matter what—but it's also entirely possible that the diamond's curse is a silly myth—in this case, doing the right thing for one's loved ones matters a great deal.

In the early chapters of the novel, the two main characters, Werner Pfennig and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, believe that they have the freedom to make their own choices and shape their own destinies. Werner thinks that his intelligence and quick thinking will save him from his supposed fate—a life spent working in the mines. Although Marie-Laure initially believes that her debilitating blindness will keep her from having a happy, successful life, she trains herself—with her father Daniel's help—to navigate her own way through the streets of cities, and also to read Braille.

At first, *All the Light We Cannot See* seems to be posing a simple division between free will and fate, with the characters trying to assert their own free will. As the novel goes on, however, Doerr complicates these terms with the idea of duty. When Werner's ingenuity earns him a place at the prestigious National Institute, he's indoctrinated into Nazi mythology, taught that the Jews are evil, and ordered to obey Hitler above all else. Werner wants to assert his own beliefs—he doesn't believe in punishing innocents—but he's afraid to disobey. Moreover, Werner is too caught up in his own scientific ambitions to stand up for what's right: when the students are ordered to torture a prisoner, Werner's friend Frederick refuses, but Werner, still eager for a job in Berlin, goes along with the sadistic exercise. Later, when Werner is ordered to track down "enemy" radio broadcasters, he realizes that he's actually using his intelligence to help the Nazis murder innocent people. Werner considers leaving the army, but is simply too frightened and uncertain to give up his duty. In essence, this means that Werner is choosing to remain a Nazi and participate in the murder of innocents. Horrified with his

own actions but also afraid to leave, Werner no longer *wants* to be free—he wants to have no choice but to continue fighting for the Germans, so that he can at least make himself believe that he's being coerced into evil. Free will, he comes to realize, can be challenging—even painful.

And yet *All the Light We Cannot See* doesn't simply call Werner and his peers murderers. Even if Werner makes the wrong choice, he's making a more difficult choice than most people would ever have to consider. Moreover, Werner begins to rebel against the German army in small but important ways, showing that it *is* possible for moral acts to make a difference. When Werner makes the decision to conceal the location of Etienne LeBlanc's broadcasting system—thus saving Marie-Laure's life—Doerr makes it clear that Werner is doing so not only because he's nostalgic for his childhood, but also because his love for his sister, Jutta, has inspired him to be a better man, and because his time in Saint-Malo has given him the confidence and strength to disobey the Nazis.

Ultimately, the novel moves toward a cautiously optimistic conclusion. Marie-Laure chooses to leave the Sea of Flames in an abandoned grotto, symbolically "throwing away" the stranglehold of fate. Doerr suggests that even if it's impossible for human beings to fight off every one of the large, fated events in their lives—the bombing of Saint-Malo, blindness, and World War II itself—they can still assert their free will in crucial ways. By choosing to save Marie-Laure's life, for instance, Werner blesses her with a long life, a successful career, and children and grandchildren—proving that free will can triumph over both destiny and duty.

FAMILY

One of the key similarities between the two plots in *All the Light We Cannot See* is the existence of an exceptionally strong, loving family relationship. Werner Pfennig is extremely close with his sister, Jutta Pfennig, just as Marie-Laure LeBlanc is extremely close with her father, Daniel LeBlanc. In the novel, these family ties are different from other kinds of relationships, and they play unique roles in the characters' lives.

In the case of the novel's characters, an especially close bond between family members often reflects a deeper tragedy in the past. Daniel LeBlanc becomes unusually close with Marie-Laure after his wife dies giving birth to her, and by the same token, Werner and Jutta Pfennig's love for one another seems closely tied to their sadness at having lost their father, a miner, at such an early age. In short, families are subject to pain and tragedy, just like everything else in *All the Light We Cannot See*, and yet families are also uniquely positive forces in the novel—a family can "weather the storm," responding to tragedy with more powerful bonds of love and compassion.

In the novel, family generally represents a source of strength with which to endure the tragedies of the rapidly changing world. In an era when countries go to war and people are forced to move around the continent, family is an important constant in the lives of Werner and Marie-Laure. Even as he becomes more and more invested in the evils of the Nazi state, Werner thinks back to his carefree childhood with Jutta. This is crucial for Werner, because it reminds him of a time when he was happy, inquisitive, and—most importantly—wasn't a part of the Nazi army. Werner's love for Jutta is one of the key reasons why he decides to disobey his commanders and save Marie-Laure's life—as Frank Volkheimer says, it's all "for Jutta." Much the same is true of Marie-Laure's love for her father: even after she's separated from Daniel, Marie-Laure continues to love her father intensely, and this love is crucial in inspiring her to join the French Resistance and oppose German soldiers in Saint-Malo.

Even the most loving family relationships are subject to change, of course—as time goes on, family members die, move away, or develop other, closer relationships. And yet family ties, unlike almost everything else in the novel, don't fade away into oblivion. In an inspiring epilogue, Doerr describes Marie-Laure as an old woman: she has a beloved daughter, Hélène, and an equally beloved grandson, Michel. In the final pages, Marie-Laure wonders if her father's spirit walks on through the streets of Paris. And Doerr makes it clear that Daniel *does* live on: in the feelings and behaviors of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Michel mentions reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the book that Daniel gave to Marie-Laure years before, and in general it's clear that Daniel's commitment to science, education, and quick thinking have passed down through the generations. In all, family may be the closest thing to a "silver lining" in *All the Light We Cannot See*: a powerful force that can often outlast the burdens of war and suffering.



SCIENCE AND "WAYS OF SEEING"

All the important characters in *All the Light We Cannot See* are invested in a certain "way of seeing"—a worldview that allows them to make sense of the complex world. Sometimes, a character chooses one way of seeing in order to compensate for not having access to another. The clearest example of this is Marie-Laure, who turns to marine biology and reading largely because, as a blind person, she doesn't have access to literal sight. But the novel also questions the limits of these ways of seeing—we'll call them sciences—and examines just what they provide for their practitioners.

From early on, we grasp that "science" gives the characters in the novel a sense of confidence, optimism, and self-worth. By studying math and physics, Werner Pfennig thinks he is saving himself from a lifetime of menial labor in the mines of Essen. In

much the same way, Marie-Laure trains herself to adapt to her blindness and walk through the streets by feeling a scale model of the town—an apt symbol for all the "ways of seeing" other than literal sight. In effect, Werner's physics and Marie-Laure's model accomplish the same thing: they train young, frightened children to master their fears by first studying a small-scale version of the universe, and eventually graduating to the universe itself.

But as the novel goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that "science" can be also twisted and manipulated. The Nazi pseudoscience Werner is taught at the National Institute—according to which blonde, blue-eyed Aryans are superior to the Jews—serves precisely the same purpose for the German nation that physics served for Werner. By subscribing to the myths of racial superiority, the people of Germany, led by Hitler, find an easily digestible worldview and a justification for their actions. Moreover, Werner and Marie-Laure discover that even "good" science—science that isn't twisted or biased—has its limitations. Werner thinks that mastering physics and math will help him to understand the mysteries of the world, but as the novel goes on, Doerr shows that the opposite is true: Werner's training in math simply can't prepare him for the horrors of World War II. Indeed, by focusing too exclusively on pure science, Werner has blinded himself to the moral atrocities of the Nazi state: one way of seeing blocks another.

In the end, Doerr suggests that there is no way to achieve certainty through science—rationalism alone is incapable of understanding the world in all its complexity and volatility. Science seeks to explain using detached, idealistic rules, but in the end it can never keep up with the flaws and emotional turmoil of the real world. Doerr provides an apt symbol for this idea at the end of the book, when the town of Saint-Malo is in ruins, but Marie-Laure's tiny model of the town is still standing. The science hasn't changed, but the real world has.

This doesn't mean that the novel suggests that it's pointless to try to use science to understand the world—on the contrary, practicing science is portrayed as one of the quintessential human behaviors, and is the cause of much good. (If Werner hadn't known about radio science, he wouldn't have been able to save Marie-Laure's life.) Rather, the novel suggests that we should accept that no single way of seeing could ever be complete. Science gives Marie-Laure and Werner a way of maturing, a way of conquering their fears, and even a way of escaping from the tragedy of their lives. (Think of Marie-Laure reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as she slowly starves to death.) The danger begins when people treat one kind of science as a rigid truth, or the ultimate solution to their problems.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



VISION

The most obvious symbol in *All the Light We Cannot See* (so obvious it shows up in the title) is vision. From early on, Doerr encourages us to consider the different symbolic ramifications of sight and seeing, and all the different ways in which a person can be said to "see." The protagonist, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, is blind, meaning that she's incapable of literally seeing, and yet her intelligence, strong moral code, and integrity give her a kind of "sight" that allows her to see the German invasion of France for what it really is: a greedy, cruel endeavor that must be opposed at all costs. In contrast, the *other* protagonist of the novel, Werner Pfennig, has perfect vision (if he didn't have it, he wouldn't be admitted to the prestigious National Institute), but struggles to see through the propaganda of the Nazi Party. In general, Doerr associates vision with knowledge, and just as there are many kinds of vision, there are many kinds of knowledge: scientific, moral, ethical, practical, etc. In the end, Doerr suggests that no vision is perfect and true. In the grand scheme of things, all human beings are at least partly "blind," in the sense that their knowledge of their beliefs, their loved ones, and their selves is always flawed and incomplete.



RADIO

For the majority of *All the Light We* Cannot See, the only connection between the two major storylines (that of Marie-Laure and that of Werner) is the radio that Werner owns as a child. As the story goes on, we realize that Werner's favorite broadcast is being narrated by Marie-Laure's own grandfather, Henri LeBlanc. When Marie-Laure and Werner finally meet in the last 100 pages of the book, it's partially Werner's memories of the radio broadcast that impel him to save Marie-Laure's life and guide her to safety. In a sense, the radio as a symbol is then a kind of "flip side" of vision as a symbol. In the absence of "vision"—that is, perfect knowledge of each other and ourselves—we must depend upon unpredictable, unstable, and tenuous ways of forming connections with other people.

Radio is a kind of tentative reaching out to others—there is a speaker, but the existence of a listener is always in question. Etienne is a recluse and afraid to leave the house, but he still finds a connection to the outside world through his radio—both listening and broadcasting. Likewise Marie-Laure, trapped in the attic, sends out broadcasts of herself reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, hoping to comfort, entertain, or connect

with someone, but she wonders if anyone is listening or cares. And yet Werner is listening, just as he listened to Marie-Laure's grandfather years before—and these fragile connections lead to something much more real, when Werner uses Marie-Laure's radio broadcasts to find her and save her life. Ultimately, radio is a rather lovely symbol of how vital it is to seek connection with others, and how even the most unstable and fleeting methods of communication can be life-saving in a world of chaos, blindness, and alienation.



THE SEA OF FLAMES

The beautiful, priceless diamond known at the Sea of Flames could be termed the "MacGuffin" of *All the Light We Cannot See*: it's an object that drives the plot forward for the simple reason that many characters want it. Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel tracks the diamond—which is rumored to give eternal life to its owner, but to cause all its owner's loved ones to die—all the way to Saint-Malo, and he seems willing to kill anyone who stands in his way. There would thus be no climax in the novel without the diamond—no story arc. And yet Doerr suggests that the Sea of Flames is, at the end of the day, an utterly banal thing—just a random piece of carbon that happens to have cooled and crystallized in a particularly pretty way. We might say, then, that the Sea of Flames symbolizes the two sides of Doerr's story: the chaos and meaningless of existence versus fate, beauty, and science (all things that imply a kind of order or meaning in life). One could argue that the crossed paths of Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig represent nothing but a coincidence ("just a random piece of carbon"), but it could also be said that Marie-Laure and Werner were *destined* to meet in the end, proving the existence of fate (a magical diamond). Wisely, Doerr doesn't really argue for one point of view or the other: the diamond is both ordinary and extraordinary, meaningless and meaningful, just as the plot of the book seems dictated by the laws of chance as well as the laws of fate.



THE MODELS OF PARIS AND SAINT-MALO

Because Marie-Laure is blind, her father, Daniel LeBlanc, builds elaborate models of the cities where she lives—first Paris, then Saint-Malo—to give her a way of training herself to navigate through the city without consulting street signs or using her eyesight at all. In one sense, these models are symbolic of the powerful, intimate love between Marie-Laure and Daniel, but in a broader sense, the city models symbolize humans' attempts to reduce the big, complicated world to a set of predictable laws. We can see this theme again and again in the novel—Werner thinks that he has things "figured out" because he studies physics; Marie-Laure thinks that her faith in her father's love will eventually be rewarded by his return; von Rumpel thinks that he can cure his cancer by finding the Sea of Flames, etc. But in the end, Doerr makes it painfully clear that no amount of intelligence and studiousness can help people survive the world's unpredictability. By the end of the novel, Marie-Laure's beautiful, "reasonable" model of Saint-Malo is still intact, but now useless, as the city itself is in ruins, bombed by Allied airplanes.



WHELKS, MOLLUSKS, AND SHELLS

Throughout the novel, Marie-Laure is associated with mollusks—she studies them and collects them as a child, and when she grows up, she becomes a noted scientist of mollusks. During her time in the French Resistance, Marie-Laure takes the code-name "the Whelk" for herself. The significance of the nickname is interesting: Marie-Laure admires whelks for their beauty, but also for their ability to withstand seagulls' beaks and remain securely attached to rocks and stones. In essence, the whelk is then the perfect symbol for Marie-Laure's desire for peace, constancy and stability in her life—the very things denied to her by the chaos of World War II. In a poignant, symbolic image that proves this point, Doerr shows the whelks and snails of the Saint-Malo grotto continuing to live safely and peacefully (even alongside the possibly-cursed Sea of Flames) while the human city all around them is destroyed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Fourth Estate edition of *All the Light We Cannot See* published in 2015.

Zero (August 7, 1944): Number 4 rue Vauborel Quotes

Marie-Laure twists the chimney of the miniature house ninety degrees. Then she slides off three wooden panels that make up its roof, and turns it over. A stone drops into her palm. It's cold. The size of a pigeon's egg. The shape of a teardrop. Marie-Laure clutches the tiny house in one hand and the stone in the other. The room feels flimsy, tenuous. Giant fingertips seem about to punch through its walls. "Papa?" she whispers.

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc (speaker), Daniel LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Marie-Laure--trapped in a house in a town that's about to be bombed by airplanes--stumbles upon a precious stone, hidden inside a tiny model of the house. The passage is especially confusing, considering that at this point in the book, we have no idea what the stone is, who Marie-Laure's father is, why she's trapped in the house, etc. Essentially, the passage is like a "cold-open" in a TV show--it draws our attention because we need to lean in just to figure out what's going on.

One important thing to notice about the passage, even before we're aware what's going on, is that Marie-Laure draws a connection between the stone and her father; she seems to feel his presence, even when he's nowhere in sight. The ambiguous presence of Marie-Laure's father, Daniel, points to an ongoing theme of the book--the sense of deep, uncertain longing that family members feel for one another. Notice as well the analogy Doerr draws between the tiny house being pried open by Marie-Laure's fingers, and the literal house seeming to be pried open by "giant fingertips." Right away, Doerr is implying a connection between the tiny house and the house itself--perhaps suggesting that Marie-Laure (and we, the readers) can learn about big, complicated historical events by studying tiny, model-size objects like the model house.

One (1934): Key Pound Quotes

❝ He sweeps her hair back from her ears; he swings her above his head. He says she is his émerveillement. He says he will never leave her, not in a million years.

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, Daniel LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this early scene, Daniel, the happy father of Marie-Laure, tells his daughter that he'll never leave her. Because we've read the Prologue to Doerr's novel, however, we know that in just a few years Marie-Laure will be on her own, with her father nowhere nearby. Right away, then, Daniel's promise to his daughter comes across as bittersweet--we know he's not going to be able to keep it.

The quotation is important because it establishes the close bond between father and daughter--a bond that will continue to motivate both characters throughout the book. Even after she loses contact with Daniel, Marie-Laure will try to find him; her love for her father will give her strength throughout some of the darkest years of World War II. Without this initial portrayal of the two's relationship, Marie-Laure's actions later in the novel wouldn't make much sense: we can't understand her unless we recognize that she adores her father.

One (1934): Something Rising Quotes

❝ In the play, the invaders pose as hook-nosed department-store owners, crooked jewelers, dishonorable bankers; they sell glittering trash; they drive established village businessmen out of work. Soon they plot to murder German children in their beds. Eventually a vigilant and humble neighbor catches on. Police are called: big handsome-sounding policemen with splendid voices. They break down the doors. They drag the invaders away. A patriotic march plays. Everyone is happy again.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, told from the perspective of Werner Pfennig, a young German orphan, a theater troupe puts on a "play" for the children at Werner's orphanage. The play, we understand, is Nazi propaganda: designed to teach children, before they know any better, that Jews are frightening, loathsome creatures, who should be beaten and killed for their crimes. The words, "everyone is happy" convey the implausible, vanilla tone of the play: it's unrealistically cheerful in order to disguise the true brutality of anti-Semitism from the children.

The passage is important because it suggests that many of the people growing up in Nazi Germany aren't undeserving of sympathy. Some of those who would go on to fight on behalf of Adolph Hitler had been trained since before they could read to despise the Jews; the cruelty they showed the Jews was as much a product of their own ignorance as their sadism. Doerr certainly isn't trying to excuse the Nazis' actions, but by telling the story of a young, reluctant Nazi--Werner--he makes it clear that painting the Nazis as inhuman demons is overly simplistic--almost as simplistic as the anti-Semitic play from the passage.

One (1934): The Professor Quotes

❝ Open your eyes, concludes the man, and see what you can with them before they close forever, and then a piano comes on, playing a lonely song that sounds to Werner like a golden boat traveling a dark river, a progression of harmonies that transfigures Zollverein: the houses turned to mist, the mines filled in, the smokestacks fallen, an ancient sea spilling through the streets, and the air streaming with possibility.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Henri LeBlanc (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Werner listens to a radio broadcast that he's picked up on a radio he's found. On the broadcast, an old man tells his audience to open their eyes--in other words, to use science and reason to understand the world and seek truth. As Werner, still a young boy, hears these words, he's filled with excitement: he can't wait to use his ingenuity and curiosity to study the world.

In more way than one, the passage is meant to be taken ironically. To begin with, we know full-well that the notion of "opening one's eyes" to see can't apply to everyone in the novel--since Marie-Laure, the other protagonist, is blind. Moreover, the idea that science and experimentation can enlighten is appealing, but ultimately insufficient. As Werner will see first-hand, the Nazi party is full of curious, intelligent young scientists--including some of the greatest scientists of all time, such as Werner Heisenberg. Science itself isn't automatically a tool for good--it can be twisted and manipulated to serve evil causes, such as Fascism. For now, though, Werner is blissfully unaware of the negative implications of what the man is saying: as far as he's concerned, he's headed for a life of limitless success.

One (1934): Open Your Eyes Quotes

❝ The voice, the piano again. Perhaps it's Werner's imagination, but each time he hears one of the programs, the quality seems to degrade a bit more, the sound growing fainter: as though the Frenchman broadcasts from a ship that is slowly traveling farther away.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Henri LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

As Werner listens to the old man's radio broadcast, he has the strange sense that the man's voice is getting a little fainter. Werner has no idea--and neither do we until page 300--that in fact, the man's voice *is* fading away: he's long since died, and the voice Werner is listening to over the radio is being played on the same record, which is slowly deteriorating.

On a metaphorical level, the quotation points to the tragedy of interconnectedness. Werner thinks that he feels a deep, intimate connection with the man--and yet this connection was only ever tenuous at best, and it is now disappearing, very slowly. By the same token, all human connections, it would seem--the connection between a father and son; a brother and sister, etc.--are destined to vanish over time. Doerr leaves it up to the reader to decide if it's true that all connections are short-lived, or if it's possible for a connection between two human beings to somehow stand the tests of troubles and time.

One (1934): Mark of the Beast Quotes

❝ She cannot say how many others are with him. Three or four, perhaps. His is the voice of a twelve or thirteen-year-old. She stands and hugs her huge book against her chest, and she can hear her cane roll along the edge of the bench and clatter to the ground. Someone else says, "They'll probably take the blind girls before they take the gimps." The first boy moans grotesquely. Marie-Laure raises her book as if to shield herself.

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marie-Laure walks though the streets of Paris, something she's learned to do only recently, with the help of her cane. As she walks, she overhears a gang of older boys tease her for her blindness, and even imply that when

the Nazis inevitably invade Paris, they'll kill Marie-Laure because of her disability.

The passage alludes to many of the historical events of World War II. The Nazis did indeed invade Paris in June of 1940--and for the next 5 years, the city was under Fascist control. Beginning in the late 1930s, the Nazis began rounding up so-called undesirables (Jews, homosexuals, the disabled, etc.) and sending them to camps where they were isolated from the rest of society. By 1942, the Nazis had begun systematically murdering the people in these camps.

Marie-Laure can't understand the full extent of the Holocaust, of course, but she's still afraid of the "real world"--a world that, due to her blindness, she can't always understand completely. The 1940s are an especially dangerous time for anyone to grow up--let alone someone who can't see. Thus far, Marie-Laure's father has protected her, and also tried to train her to interact with the real world by building elaborate models, effectively allowing her to master the theoretical before she moves on to reality. In this scene, Marie-Laure tries and fails to protect herself with her book--a clear symbol of the fact that models and learning are no longer going to work for her.

Three (June 1940): Entrance Exam Quotes

On the second morning, there are raciological exams. They require little of Werner except to raise his arms or keep from blinking while an inspector shines a penlight into the tunnels of his pupils. He sweats and shifts. His heart pounds unreasonably. An onion-breathed technician in a lab coat measures the distance between Werner's temples, the circumference of his head, and the thickness and shape of his lips. Calipers are used to evaluate his feet, the length of his fingers, and the distance between his eyes and his navel. They measure his penis. The angle of his nose is quantified with a wooden protractor.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113-114

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Werner is examined for entrance to a prestigious military academy. But as we can see, his examination has little if anything to do with his intelligence or bravery--the focal point of the exam is his Aryan appearance. The Nazis celebrated a certain racial ideal: the blond-haired, blue-eyed German. Werner, an extremely blond, blue-eyed boy, is a natural fit for the academy.

In a broader sense, the passage is important because it suggests that science and curiosity aren't necessarily tools for good. Werner has sought to measure and quantify the world, using the knowledge he's learned over the radio. Here, Werner himself is measured and quantified--an allusion to the way that the Nazis measured millions of German citizens, and (if they weren't Aryan, or didn't measure up in some crucial way) sent them to die in concentration camps. Science divorced from morality is all too easily twisted into Nazi pseudoscience.

Three (June 1940): Don't Tell Lies Quotes

"It's not forever, Jutta. Two years, maybe. Half the boys who get admitted don't manage to graduate. But maybe I'll learn something; maybe they'll teach me to be a proper engineer. Maybe I can learn to fly an airplane, like little Siegfried says. Don't shake your head, we've always wanted to see the inside of an airplane, haven't we? I'll fly us west, you and me, Frau Elena too if she wants. Or we could take a train. We'll ride through forests and villages de montagnes, all those places Frau Elena talked about when we were small. Maybe we could ride all the way to Paris." The burgeoning light. The tender hissing of the grass. Jutta opens her eyes but doesn't look at him. "Don't tell lies. Lie to yourself, Werner, but don't lie to me."

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Jutta Pfennig (speaker), Frau Elena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Werner--who's just been accepted into a prestigious Nazi military academy--tries to justify his attendance at the school to his sister, Jutta, who's going to remain at the orphanage. Werner argues that his military education will be invaluable for his career: he could learn to be an engineer. Werner even suggests that he could use his training to fly Jutta out of the country. Jutta then accuses Werner of lying to himself.

It's important to understand what Jutta means when she calls her brother a liar. Werner seems convinced that he'll become a great engineer, someone who can use his intelligence and training for his own advantage. Jutta suggests that the opposite is true: Werner will be trained to

become a cog in the Nazi military machine--he won't have any more freedom than anyone else in the party.

In an even broader sense, one could say that Werner is so blinded by his scientific curiosity and ambition that he can't see the obvious truth: his scientific training at the academy will imprison him, not set him free. Jutta always acts as Werner's voice of conscience in the novel, and here she points out the fact that science can never be divorced from morality and "real life"—Werner might learn important skills, but he will in the process be using these skills to help an evil cause.

Three (June 1940): The Professor Quotes

"But I wasn't trying to reach England. Or Paris. I thought that if I made the broadcast powerful enough, my brother would hear me. That I could bring him some peace, protect him as he had always protected me."
"You'd play your brother's own voice to him? After he died?"
"And Debussy."
"Did he ever talk back?"
The attic ticks. What ghosts sidle along the walls right now, trying to overhear? She can almost taste her great-uncle's fright in the air.
"No," he says. "He never did."

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, Great-Uncle Etienne LeBlanc (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marie-Laure's Great-Uncle, Etienne explains to Marie-Laure that he once had a brother, Henri, who went away to war. Etienne tried his hardest to get in contact with his brother, despite the fact that he eventually realized that his brother was dead. Etienne then used his radio equipment to broadcast the scientific lectures his brother made years before. We, the readers, recognize that these radio broadcasts are the same ones that Werner heard on his radio, years before.

In short, Etienne's broadcasts have had an impact on the world, but not in the way Etienne wanted them to. Instead of bringing Etienne's brother back from the grave, the broadcasts have sparked curiosity in someone else--a young German child. (It's ironic that during World War II, broadcasts meant for a Frenchman ended up inspiring a German.) The ambiguous "failure" of Etienne's broadcasts points to the unknowability of life. Our actions have enormous consequences (the broadcasts changed the course of Werner's life, after all, and eventually inspire him to save Marie-Laure's life), but these consequences are rarely the ones we envision or intend. All human communication is complex, fragile, and fleeting, but it also leads to connections like those explored in the novel.

Three (June 1940): Weakest Quotes

The fastest cadet is lunging for the back of the boy's shirt. He almost has him. Black-haired Ernst is going to be caught, and Werner wonders if some part of him wants it to happen. But the boy makes it to the commandant a split second before the others come pounding past.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Ernst

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Werner and his peers are training at the Nazi military academy. Their commander, a sadistic man, orders the slowest and weakest of the students--an unfortunate boy named Ernst--to run as fast as he can. Then, the commander orders Werner and the other students to chase Ernst--if Ernst can make it across the field before being caught, he'll be allowed to stay in school; if not he'll be dismissed (and, it's assumed, attacked by the other students).

The scene is important because it shows Werner beginning to be seduced by Nazi propaganda. Werner isn't an evil person, but he gets caught up in the thrill of competition, and even notices himself wanting to catch Ernst, rather than rooting for him to succeed in staying in school. The fact that Ernst is black-haired suggests that Werner has even begun to believe the Nazi myth of Aryan superiority: he's come to think that dark-complexioned people are inferior.

Three (June 1940): Blackbirds Quotes

Why always triangles? What is the purpose of the transceiver they are building? What two points does Hauptmann know, and why does he need to know the third? "It's only numbers, cadet," Hauptmann says, a favorite maxim. "Pure math. You have to accustom yourself to thinking that way."

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Dr. Hauptmann (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Werner works closely with his teacher, Professor Hauptmann. Hauptmann is a talented physicist who takes time out of his schedule to teach Werner the finer points of engineering, recognizing that Werner is a smart, ambitious young man. In the quotation, Hauptmann teaches Werner how to plan coordinates for Nazi soldiers, and ignores Werner's question about what the coordinates are for.

Hauptmann's mantra, "It's only numbers," is his way of telling Werner to ignore the horrors of war itself and focus on his job. In truth, Werner and Hauptmann are using their mathematical training to find enemy radio stations, which the Nazis then proceed to destroy. In short, Werner's intelligence and scientific turn of mind are being corrupted and put to use for the Fascist cause. Hauptmann seems ill-equipped to consider the lives he's endangering by working for the Nazis: he seems not to want to think about the war, either. Generally speaking, the passage shows the fallacy of embracing "pure science"--one must also consider the real-world ends for which science is being used, or risk doing immoral things (such as aiding the Nazis).

Four (8 August 1944): Atelier de Réparation Quotes

Atelier de réparation, thinks Werner, a chamber in which to make reparations. As appropriate a place as any. Certainly there would be people in the world who believe these three have reparations to make.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig (speaker), Frank Volkheimer, Walter Bernd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

In 1944, Werner and his fellow soldiers are stationed in France. During a bombing by the Allied air force, Werner and his peers are trapped below the ground in a small, dark room--the atelier de réparation (basically, a repair room). Werner notes the irony that he's trapped in a room intended for "reparations" (i.e., payments). In a moral sense, Werner and his fellow Nazis certainly have reparations to make--they have to atone for the crimes they've committed against innocent people.

Werner's thinking in this scene suggests that he's fully aware of the sins he's committed as a Nazi. Based on his experiences in the military academy, one might think that Werner truly believed that he was doing the right thing by joining the Nazi army. Instead, it seems that Werner was lying to himself all along: he recognizes that he was committing war crimes by working for the Nazis. Trapped below the ground, Werner seems to be condemned to a version of hell--beneath the earth, he's forced to relive his horrific crimes again and again.

Five (January 1941): January Recess Quotes

"Your problem, Werner," says Frederick, "is that you still believe you own your life."

Related Characters: Frederick (speaker), Werner Pfennig

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Werner's friend Frederick, a fellow student at the Nazi military academy, has a conversation with Werner. Werner tells Frederick that he has ambitions of becoming a great scientist or engineer. Frederick's sad reply, quoted here, suggests that Werner is too willing to believe in his own individual freedom and agency. Werner, we've already seen, believes that he'll be allowed to use his military training and engineering skills for his own ends. Nevertheless, as we've already seen (in the scenes set in 1944), the opposite is true: Werner will be forced to use his abilities for other people's ends: most of all, Hitler's.

Frederick's words in this quotation are supposed to remind us of the speech that Werner's sister Jutta gave him before he left for military school. Just as Jutta accused Werner of lying to himself, Frederick calls out Werner's delusions of control and freedom. Werner is more willing than his peers to believe that he's headed for a bright future, because he's the very image of an Aryan: light blond hair and blue eyes. Frederick, a bespectacled, nerdy boy, isn't so naive about the Nazi regime: he knows that everyone is a slave to Hitler and his Fascist regime.

Five (January 1941): Prisoner Quotes

Bastian steps forward. His face flares scarlet in the cold. "Give him another."
Again Frederick sloshes it onto the ice at his feet. He says in a small voice, "He is already finished, sir."
The upperclassman hands over a third pail. "Throw it," commands Bastian. The night steams, the stars burn, the prisoner sways, the boys watch, the commandant tilts his head. Frederick pours the water onto the ground. "I will not."

Related Characters: Frederick, Bastian (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Frederick and his peers at the Nazi military academy are asked to torture a prisoner. One by one, the boys are ordered to empty a bucket of cold water on the prisoner's shivering, frail body. Each boy--including Werner--follows orders. but when it's time for Frederick to comply, he refuses, dumping his water on the ground.

Frederick's behavior is remarkable because it's one of the few times in the entire novel that a potential Nazi student refuses an order. Sociologists have written thousands of pages on what it must have been like to live in Germany during the 1940s: peer pressure and the fear of disobedience led millions of "normal" Germans to commit or sanction atrocious crimes. But Frederick's actions prove that it *was* possible for normal, everyday people to exercise their own moral values rather than complying with orders—but only if they were willing to deal with the consequences. As we'll see, soon after this Frederick is beaten to the point that he loses his sanity.

Five (January 1941): Intoxicated Quotes

Mostly he misses Jutta: her loyalty, her obstinacy, the way she always seems to recognize what is right.
Though in Werner's weaker moments, he resents those same qualities in his sister. Perhaps she's the impurity in him, the static in his signal that the bullies can sense. Perhaps she's the only thing keeping him from surrendering totally.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Jutta Pfennig (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Werner begins to resent his beloved sister, Jutta. As Werner sees it now, Jutta partly represents everything he is trying to suppress about himself: his natural "weakness" (which we recognize as kindness), his innate sense of right and wrong, etc.

Werner's thoughts in this quotation walk a fine line between ignorance and willful denial. On one hand, Werner seems to genuinely believe that he's doing the "right" thing by trying to become the perfect Nazi--he sees his weakness and compassion as barriers to being a good soldier and a good servant of the Nazi regime. And yet on some level, Werner seems completely aware that what he's doing is morally wrong on every level--it's no coincidence that he thinks of his service to the Reich as a form of "surrender." Werner knows, deep down, that by becoming a Nazi he's surrendering everything that matters to him, including his curiosity and his love for his sister. Not until 1944 will he be brave enough to admit his self-deception.

Five (January 1941): The Frog Cooks Quotes

"Do you know what happens, Etienne," says Madame Manec from the other side of the kitchen, "when you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water?"
"You will tell us, I am sure."
"It jumps out. But do you know what happens when you put the frog in a pot of cool water and then slowly bring it to a boil? You know what happens then?"
Marie-Laure waits. The potatoes steam.
Madame Manec says, "The frog cooks."

Related Characters: Great-Uncle Etienne LeBlanc, Madame Manec (speaker), Marie-Laure LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Etienne's servant, Madame Manec, tries to convince Etienne to help her oppose the Nazis in small but important ways. Manec wants to tamper with Nazi mail, send messages to soldiers fighting the Nazis, etc. Etienne refuses to help Manec--he's too afraid of the consequnces. Manec analogizes Etienne's caution to that of the proverbial

frog in the pot of water. Her point is that human beings, like frogs, can be made to grow accustomed to even the most nightmarish of conditions, as long as things change little by little. In other words, Manec argues, Etienne is going to keep giving his tacit acceptance to Nazi atrocities, because he'll always be able to rationalize his indifference as "caution."

Manec's parable is relevant not only to the "Marie-Laure half" of the book, but also to the "Werner half." Werner is in Etienne's position: as a Nazi soldier, he witnesses increasingly horrific war crimes happening around him. But because he's slowly being acclimatized to such atrocities, Werner never protests what he sees--if, on the other hand, Werner arrived at the Nazi military academy and were immediately ordered to torture a prisoner, he would have left immediately, like a frog leaving a pot of boiling water.

enemy side or not. Indeed, Etienne questions whether he's doing the right thing by opposing the Nazis at all.

Etienne's questions may seem odd--it's easy to say that the French were "good" and the Nazis were "evil." Paradoxically, the very fact that Etienne stops to question his own actions suggests that he really is doing good by opposing the Nazis. The merits of Etienne's approach to Nazi resistance become clear if we contrast his behavior with Werner's. Where Werner is ordered, again and again, to focus on "pure numbers," Etienne knows very well that his radio coordinates are "more than numbers"--they're directions sending human beings to their deaths. And while Werner's commanders never discuss the morality of what they're doing, except in the blandest terms, Etienne is genuinely thoughtful about his service. In short, the very fact that Etienne wonders if he's doing wrong suggests that he's not.

Seven (August 1942): The Bridge Quotes

❝ He says, “The war that killed your grandfather killed sixteen million others. One and a half million French boys alone, most of them younger than I was. Two million on the German side. March the dead in a single-file line, and for eleven days and eleven nights, they’d walk past our door. This is not rearranging street signs, what we’re doing, Marie. This is not misplacing a letter at the post office. These numbers, they’re more than numbers. Do you understand?”
“But we are the good guys. Aren’t we, Uncle?”
“I hope so. I hope we are.”

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, Great-Uncle Etienne LeBlanc (speaker), Henri LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 360

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Etienne takes his place alongside Marie-Laure as an opponent of the Nazi occupation in France. Etienne and Marie-Laure will work together to oppose the Nazis in any way they can. Although their actions may seem small and insignificant, Etienne explains, he and Marie-Laure are actually taking a major step toward defeating the Germans. By sending radio broadcasts to other enemies of the Nazis, Etienne and Marie-Laure will effectively be killing Nazi soldiers.

As the passage shows, Etienne doesn't take his responsibility lightly. As a man who lived through World War One, he's reluctant to kill anyone, whether on the

Seven (August 1942): White City Quotes

❝ Volkheimer who always makes sure there is food for Werner. Who brings him eggs, who shares his broth, whose fondness for Werner remains, it seems, unshakable…

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Frank Volkheimer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 366

Explanation and Analysis

Werner has been shipped out to fight for the Nazi army in Russia. During his time in Russia, Werner witnesses the Nazi soldiers committing terrible crimes against their enemies. And yet Werner also sees Nazis showing remarkable kindness. One soldier, Volkheimer, takes good care of Werner--sacrificing his own happiness for Werner's sake again and again. It's strange to think that the same soldier who's so tender to his friends can be so brutal to his enemies.

Volkheimer's behavior in this passage suggests how thoroughly the Nazis have trained their soldiers to do evil. Even Volkheimer, someone who seems like a highly moral, responsible man, shows no signs of protesting when he's ordered to kill women and children on the opposing side of the war. Nazi propaganda is so strong and pervasive that it compels its soldiers to do evil while believing that they're doing good.

Werner waits for the child to blink. Blink, he thinks, blink blink blink. Already Volkheimer is closing the closet door, though it won't close all the way because the girl's foot is sticking out of it, and Bernd is covering the woman on the bed with a blanket, and how could Neumann Two not have known, but of course he didn't, because that is how things are with Neumann Two, 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.

Related Characters: Werner Pfennig, Frank Volkheimer, Neumann Two

Related Themes:

Page Number: 368

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Werner has directed his fellow soldiers to a house, where, he believes, a family is hiding a radio. When Werner and his fellow troops arrive at the house, they find no evidence of a radio of any kind. Before the troops leave, a soldier, Neumann Two, is startled and shoots a child. Werner then watches the body of the dead child in horror.

Werner's behavior in this scene makes it clear that he feels personally responsible for the child's death. By calculating the location of the secret radio--a location that, it quickly becomes clear, was improperly calculated--Werner allows Neumann Two and the other soldiers to murder innocent women and children. If there is a silver lining in this scene, it's the fact that Werner seems totally *aware* of his situation: he's aware that as a Nazi soldier, he's ordered to obey, look out for himself, and repress any feelings of guilt or compassion. In short, the Nazi "facade" is cracking--Werner is beginning to see how corrupt and hypocritical his Fascist orders have been all along.

Nine (May 1944): The Girl Quotes

Neumann One raises a single steady hand. His mouth is expressionless, but in the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, Werner can see despair. "In the end," murmurs Volkheimer as the truck heaves away, "none of us will avoid it."

Related Characters: Frank Volkheimer (speaker), Werner Pfennig, Neumann One

Related Themes:

Page Number: 424

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Volkheimer, the commander of Werner's corp, sends Neumann One and Neumann Two to the front line, where the German army badly needs reinforcements. The soldiers are terrified, but Volkheimer insists that they're going to face the same fate that everyone will experience in the end.

Volkheimer, it would seem, is saying that Neumann One and Neumann Two are going to the front lines to die--a fate that everybody experiences in the end, and which Volkheimer and Werner will probably experience very shortly. The mood of the passage is quiet and hopeless: the fact that the German front lines are now begging for reinforcements is a sign that the German war effort is crumbling away--it's pretty clear now that the Allies are going to win the war. In no small part, the passage is so hopeless because it conveys a sense of fatalism: the idea that people have no control over their destinies. Werner began his military career believing that he could use his engineering training to freely choose a future for himself. But now, at the end of the war, his traumatizing experiences in battle have taught him that there's no such thing as freedom--people have no choice in the face of the vast movements of war and history.

Nine (May 1944): Sea of Flames Quotes

"Marie-Laure," he says without hesitation. He squeezes her hand with both of his. "You are the best thing that has ever come into my life."

Related Characters: Great-Uncle Etienne LeBlanc (speaker), Marie-Laure LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 431

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Etienne is about to go out of the house. Marie-Laure is aware that there's going to be an air raid very soon--therefore, Etienne is risking the possibility of becoming separated from Marie-Laure. Before Etienne leaves the house, Marie-Laure asks him if he regrets having to take care of her for so long, and Etienne replies that she's the best thing that ever happened to him.

It's worth asking why, precisely, Marie-Laure has been so good for Etienne. In part, Marie-Laure's energy, curiosity, and devotion to the French Resistance have given Etienne something to live for: a new sense of wonder, and a noble cause to fight for. Prior to receiving Marie-Laure, Etienne

was a lonely, paranoid old man, obsessed with the memory of his dead brother and afraid to go outside. Inspired by Marie-Laure, Etienne has become a passionate opponent of the Nazis in France. Etienne has chosen to fight the Nazis largely because he wants to set a good example for Marie-Laure--it's only because of her encouragement that he decides to make anti-Nazi radio broadcasts after Madame Manec's death. The link between Etienne's newfound bravery and Marie-Laure's presence is made crystal clear when Etienne discovers that Marie-Laure is missing from the house--although he's a major agoraphobe, he summons the courage to leave the house and goes looking for her.

Ten (12 August 1944): Comrades Quotes

"The cease-fire is scheduled for noon, or so they say," von Rumpel says in an empty voice. "No need to rush. Plenty of time." He jogs the fingers of one hand down a miniature street. "We want the same thing, you and I, Private. But only one of us can have it. And only I know where it is. Which presents a problem for you. Is it here or here or here or here?"

Related Characters: Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel (speaker), Werner Pfennig

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 464

Explanation and Analysis

In this climactic scene, the villainous von Rumpel surprises Werner Pfennig inside Etienne's house. Von Rumpel has come to the house to find the famous jewel, the Sea of Flames, that's supposedly hidden somewhere inside. Although Werner has only come to the house to save Marie-Laure's life, von Rumpel naturally assumes that he's looking for the jewel, too.

The contrast between von Rumpel and Werner in this scene--the former a parody of Fascist greed, the latter a heroic individual, endangering his life to save Marie-Laure's--makes it clear how much Werner has changed since arriving in France. For a long time, Werner appeared to be headed down the path of corruption: he seemed to be enjoying being a Nazi, are at least felt that he has "surrendered" his will to the cause. But recently, Werner has remembered his youthful innocence--a mental transformation caused when he rediscovers the radio broadcasts he listened to as a child. Reminded of a time in his life when he was neither a soldier nor a murderer, he summons the courage to protect other people.

Ten (12 August 1944): Cease-fire Quotes

She reaches for his hand, sets something in his palm, and squeezes his hand into a fist. "Goodbye, Werner."
"Goodbye, Marie-Laure."
Then she goes. Every few paces, the tip of her cane strikes a broken stone in the street, and it takes a while to pick her way around it. Step step pause. Step step again. Her cane testing, the wet hem of her dress swinging, the white pillowcase held aloft. He does not look away until she is through the intersection, down the next block, and out of sight.

Related Characters: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, Werner Pfennig (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 477

Explanation and Analysis

In this beautiful but frustrating scene, Werner--who's just saved Marie-Laure from being murdered by the villainous von Rumpel, leads Marie-Laure through the city to an area where she'll hopefully be safer. After more than 500 pages, the two "halves" of the novel--Werner's half and Marie-Laure's half--have finally merged into one story. But instead of staying together, Werner and Marie-Laure separate almost immediately, and never see one another again.

In this passage Doerr teases us, frustrating our expectations for how "two-plot" novels are supposed to end. Instead of culminating in a happy reunion between the two protagonists, his novel splits in half once again. Doerr's point seems to be that interpersonal connection and unity is always temporary and unpredictable. If even a close relationship between a father and his daughter is subject to the chaos of World War II, then there's simply no reason that a chance encounter between Werner and Marie-Laure should span out into anything more. Moreover, the passage challenges our notions of fate. In this "two-plot" novel, Doerr has implied that Marie-Laure and Werner are "destined" to meet one another and stay together--such an ending would be satisfying in a conventional narrative way. But because Doerr wants to challenge our ideas about destiny, he doesn't offer anything like a predictable ending. Werner and Marie-Laure meet once, and that's all--in a chaotic world, there's no reason they should ever meet again.

Twelve (1974): Sea of Flames Quotes

It is cut, polished; for a breath, it passes between the hands of men.
Another hour, another day, another year. Lump of carbon no larger than a chestnut. Mantled with algae, bedecked with barnacles. Crawled over by snails. It stirs among the pebbles.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 520

Explanation and Analysis

In this lyrical quotation, Doerr describes the Sea of Flames, the priceless gemstone that has inspired von Rumpel, among others, to travel great distances and commit horrible deeds in order to possess it. Although it's been claimed that the Sea of Flames has a magical power (it keeps the owner alive while killing everyone the owner loves), Doerr never confirms this legend to be either true or false. As Marie-Laure points out many times, it's impossible to tell whether the gemstone is "special" or not--whether it's just a lump of carbon or whether it's fated to bring eternal life to its owner.

The two ways of looking at the gemstone (ordinary or special) correspond to two competing views of fate that the novel offers up--fate may either be a reality or a myth. During World War II, it often seems that the universe is a chaotic, random place. Yet there are times when the universe appears to have a "destiny"--for instance, when Werner saves Marie-Laure's life. Similarly, in this quotation, Doerr describes the gemstone as a mere "lump of carbon"—and yet also as something with a seeming life of its own, as it "stirs among the pebbles."

Thirteen (2014) Quotes

He kisses her once on each cheek. "Until next week, Mamie."
She listens until his footsteps fade. Until all she can hear are the sighs of cars and the rumble of trains and the sounds of everyone hurrying through the cold.

Related Characters: Michel (speaker), Marie-Laure LeBlanc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 530

Explanation and Analysis

In the final scene of the novel, Marie-Laure, now an old woman, meets with her beloved grandson, Michel, and they spend the day together in Paris. Eventually, Michel says goodbye to his grandmother and walks away into the distance. Because Marie-Laure is blind, she listens carefully until she can't hear him any longer.

It's important to note that the novel ends with a scene of interpersonal disconnection *and* connection. After a few moments, Marie-Laure can no longer sense her beloved grandson at all. And yet her memories of her grandson--and the certainty that she'll see him again soon--live on even after he's far away from her. Marie-Laure is both close and far away from Michel.

By pairing connection and disconnection, the novel ends on a note of ambiguity. Many of the relationships between characters in the novel have "faded away," like the noise of Michel's footsteps fading into the distance. And yet the characters' memories of these relationships have remained strong: Marie-Laure continues to remember her father; Jutta remembers Werner, etc. Perhaps Doerr's point is that while human beings will always be distanced from one another, thanks to war, tragedy, and the basic unpredictability of life, they will also always be *close* to one another, so long as they have their memories and the methods of communication and connection.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): LEAFLETS

It is the evening of August 7, 1944. A cloud of paper leaflets falls from the sky and blows through the city below. The leaflets say, "Depart immediately to open country." By nightfall, American soldiers are preparing to drop bombs on the city.

With this beginning, we see how important form is to the content of Doerr's novel. The "leaflets" inform the plot, but also echo the style of all the chapters to come—remarkably short and (usually) to the point. It's also important that the book begins with the seemingly inevitable doom of violence—the bombers are going to drop their bombs, and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): BOMBERS

Later in the night, a dozen American airplanes fly across the English Channel toward France. Slowly, the airplanes drift toward their destination—a city that looks like "an unholy tooth" that they're about to "pull out."

Doerr is assuming some knowledge of World War II history here—the Americans are bombing a French town because it was occupied at the time by the Germans, the primary aggressors of the war. From the perspective of the airplanes, the city is just an object—a tooth—that needs to be secured (or pulled) for military purposes. But Doerr will spend the next 500 pages showing us why the individual lives of the people in this city (or any city) matter so much.

ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): THE GIRL

Late at night on August 7, there is girl living in the French city that's about to be bombed. She sits inside her home, next to a beautiful model of the city. Her name is Marie-Laure, and she runs her hands over the model, feeling the streets and buildings.

Doerr introduces his main characters rather cryptically. The appearance of the model city feels like an echo of the leaflets dropped from the planes—something fragile that precedes the brute force of an inevitable bombing.

When the American bombers are three miles away, Marie-Laure hears them. Then, she hears something else—the faint rattle of a piece of paper blowing in the wind. She goes to her window and feels one of the leaflets (it's implied that she is blind). She runs her fingers over the paper, and then goes to sit down in her chair, where her cane and a large novel written in Braille are waiting for her.

It becomes clear here that Marie-Laure is blind, meaning that she can't read the leaflets dropped from the sky (although she obviously knows how to read Braille). This at least helps explain why she is still present in an otherwise evacuated city. Marie-Laure's blindness is a simple fact of life for her, and part of her character, but it also brings up the idea of "ways of seeing" and vision as a symbol (and refers back to the novel's title).

ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): THE BOY

At the same time that Marie-Laure is sitting in her home, an 18-year-old German soldier named Werner Pfennig is sitting in a hotel, the so-called "Hotel of Bees," five streets north. The hotel used to be a popular, lively destination for tourists. Now it's become a fortress for Austrian soldiers. Werner and his fellow soldiers have equipped the hotel with a huge cannon that they nickname "Her Majesty."

In this chapter, we begin to understand the structure of the book. Marie-Laure has her storyline, and Werner Pfennig has his. At first, there seems to be no connection between Werner and Marie-Laure aside from their age and location—but the rest of the novel is about establishing this connection, however fragile it might be.



Werner prepares to fire Her Majesty. He hears the airplanes approaching, and he fires—the cannon gives a deafening roar. Werner shouts, "They're really coming?" but no one answers him.

The chapter ends on a note of isolation—not only between Werner and his enemies, but also between Werner and his supposed friends.



ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): SAINT-MALO

In other parts of the city, people are desperately trying to leave before the bombing begins. These are the people who've been too weak or slow to get out earlier—most are very old, and some are drunk, disabled, or blind. There's been a general feeling among the people of the city—Saint-Malo, one of the Germans' most important strongholds on the French coast—that the Germans are going to lose the war soon.

Doerr paints a picture of a massive, boisterous crowd—the crowds that the German army has been trying to control ever since its invasion of France in 1940. The image adds pathos to Marie-Laure's situation, as she doesn't even know she's supposed to escape. Although this is a novel about two individuals in World War II, Doerr makes it clear that they're only two examples of the devastation caused by the war—two drops in a bucket, their stories only two leaflets in a swarm of thousands.



For three thousand years, the city of Saint-Malo has played an important part in holding out invaders. Now, late at night, after four years of German occupation, the city is about to be attacked by the allies of France.

Doerr's novel is full of tragic images like this one, and also moments of "stepping back" and seeing the larger scheme of things. In the long history of the city, this attack is only the latest (and most devastating) invasion among many. But this historical viewpoint is then contrasted with the brief, fragile, individual lives of the thousands of people who have lived and died in the city itself.



ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): NUMBER 4 RUE VAUBOREL

We return to Marie-Laure (whose last name, we're told, is LeBlanc), sitting alone in her bedroom feeling a leaflet she can't read. The city is full of loud noises—the noises of sirens and aircraft engines. Marie-Laure feels the city model in her bedroom, as the dozen bombers roar toward her city.

The disparity between the city model and the chaotic city around Marie-Laure is heartbreaking, and one of Doerr's most powerful images. It also brings up the theme of "science" (in this analysis, basically meaning any ordered way of making sense of an unordered world), as the scientific model of Saint-Malo remains pristine and ideal, while the real Saint-Malo collapses into madness.



As the sound of the aircraft grows louder, Marie-Laure feels for one of the miniature houses in her model. She takes off the "roof" of the tiny house, and finds a small stone underneath it. She whispers, "Papa?"

At this point, we're still not meant to understand what's going on plot-wise, but rather should just make note of the various images Doerr presents to us, as they will be keys to the rest of the story. Doerr begins "en media res" (in the middle of the action) and then gradually unfolds all the events that led up this point, and those that follow it.



ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): CELLAR

Werner Pfennig sits in the Hotel of Bees, manning Her Majesty. His staff sergeant, Frank Volkheimer, walks by him and shouts, "it's starting." The military engineer, a man named Bernd, rushes in and shuts the door behind him—here, in the most secure part of the hotel, they'll be safe from the bombs.

The two images of confinement—both Werner's and Marie-Laure's—only highlight how disconnected these two protagonists seem to be at this moment. Even if they were somehow connected, they would have no way of reaching each other at this point.



Werner closes his eyes—in spite of himself, he thinks of his childhood, long ago. He imagines his sister, Jutta, and the fields of sunflowers near his house. He remembers something he heard on the radio decades ago: "Only through the hottest fire can purification be achieved."

It's characteristic of Doerr's style and his balanced view of the world that he juxtaposes images of destruction with those of lovely, fleeting things—and also with scientific principles. Jutta is also introduced as Werner's sister here. Though she rarely appears in person in the novel, Werner's relationship with her is the most important of his life. The idea that only "hot fire" can lead to purification also symbolizes how hardship and adversity—like that faced by Werner and Marie-Laure—can lead to greater strength and even a kind of enlightenment.



ZERO (AUGUST 7, 1944): BOMBS AWAY

Meanwhile Marie-Laure's great-uncle Etienne is cowering inside the Fort National, just outside of the city. The bombs are seconds away from being dropped. Suddenly, there's a loud roar—loud enough to turn people deaf. Werner and the Austrians fire their guns, but hit nothing. In her room, Marie-Laure cowers and holds the tiny stone close to her chest. In the cellar where Werner is sitting, the light bulb in the ceiling goes out.

The first part of the novel ends with a poignant image: a light bulb going out. It's fitting that this is the last image in the prologue, as Doerr has created an impression of characters who are, symbolically or literally, "blind" to much of reality. The title of the novel suggests a similar thing—a chaotic world in which nobody is able to understand what's going on. There might be "light," hope, and connection after all, but we usually can't see it.



ONE (1934): MUSÉUM NATIONAL D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE

As the story begins, Marie-Laure LeBlanc is a tall, pretty 6-year-old living in Paris. She's slowly going blind. Her father Daniel works in the Natural History Museum, and decides to send his daughter on a children's tour. The tour guide, who directs the children with a cane, draws their attention to the wonders of the museum: dinosaur skeletons, stuffed birds, etc.

The contrast between the Prologue and the beginning of Part One is jarring, and now it becomes clear that Doerr is going to give us all the backstory leading up to the bombing of Saint-Malo. It's now 1934, so WWII is still years in the future. The Natural History Museum immediately brings up the idea of science again—an ordered way of looking at the world, and observing slow, gradual change (like dinosaur skeletons, or the history of Saint-Malo).



The tour guide enjoys entertaining the children, and tells them that on the 13th floor of the museum there is a diamond called the "Sea of Flames." He tells the children the story behind it: long ago, in Borneo, there was a prince who was attacked by robbers. The robbers stole the prince's possessions, except for the beautiful blue stone he had clenched in his hand. Amazingly, the prince survived his wounds, and concluded that the stone had miraculous healing powers. He noticed that the stone had a strange red streak inside it—a kind of flame. He decided to call the stone the "Sea of Flames." As time went on, however, the prince discovered something horrible: although the Sea of Flames kept its owner in good health, it caused all of its owner's loved ones to die. The prince decided to keep the stone, even though his entire family died tragically as a result. The prince retreated from public life—some say he became a humble farmer who never grew old.

Doerr introduces us to the theme of fate in explicit terms. The challenge of the Sea of Flames, as we'll see, is to decide whether the "curse" is real or not—or if the idea of a "curse" in fact affects how people act, so that it is essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy. In basic terms, this is a conflict between the idea of fate and free will—a conflict the novel will explore and complicate. The legend of the diamond ends with isolation: the prince becomes a humble farmer, choosing to live apart from other people for fear that he could kill them. Based on the Prologue, we can't help but wonder if this is how Doerr's novel ends, too: all the characters isolated from one another, afraid (or unable) to make connections of any kind. For now the Sea of Flames story seems merely symbolic, but soon the diamond itself will appear as an important object.



The tour guide continues his story. Years after the prince found the stone, traders in India discovered a beautiful diamond. A duke bought the stone from the traders, and soon after he did so, his loved ones began to have tragic accidents and die. The duke was so terrified that his diamond could be the Sea of Flames that he decided to donate it to the museum. To this day, the stone is kept on the 13th floor, far from visitors' eyes. Marie-Laure asks the tour guide why he doesn't just throw the stone away. The tour guide replies that the stone is simply too valuable to throw away.

Doerr wants us to note the paradox of the diamond: it's extremely dangerous, but it's also incredibly beautiful and valuable. One obvious point to take away from this is that some humans are controlled by their own selfishness (although, tellingly, Marie-Laure doesn't seem to be). But perhaps a more important lesson of the Sea of Flames story is that humans often cling to the concept of fate, even when it's dangerous and destructive. There are times when humans want to be controlled by fate. Even if it is a negative force, it is still a way of making sense of the world and giving meaning to the meaningless.



After the tour, Marie-Laure thinks about what the guide has told her. She wonders if it would be hard to find the Sea of Flames. A month later, she goes totally blind.

We can't help but associate these two facts: Marie-Laure going blind and Marie-Laure learning about the stone that brings misfortune. Even if there's no evidence that we should associate these two facts, Doerr places them side by side for a reason. In this "two-plot" novel, such placement is very important. It's also noteworthy that Marie-Laure isn't born blind—she has a certain conception of the world, and then goes blind and is forced to construct a new one from scratch.



ONE (1934): ZOLLVEREIN

Werner Pfennig grows up in a town called Zollverein, near the city of Essen, Germany, with his younger sister, Jutta. Werner and his sister are raised in an orphanage, full of sick children and overworked adults. As a boy, he's sickly but highly inquisitive—he loves to ask Frau Elena, his nurse and the head of the orphanage, impossible questions about the world. Werner and Jutta enjoy drawing and telling each other stories. Jutta likes to draw pictures of Paris—a city she's heard lots about.

The disparity between Werner's life and Marie-Laure's couldn't be clearer. And yet Doerr makes sure that we see some small links, such as Jutta's drawings of Paris and Werner's fondness for telling fanciful stories. Werner and Marie-Laure seem like equally inquisitive, intelligent children—unfortunately, they will soon be caught on opposite sides of a world war.



As Werner grows up, he begins walking by the nearby mines. One day, he takes Jutta to the mines, points down into the darkness, and says, "That's where Father died."

One immediate similarity between Werner and Marie-Laure is that they've both lost someone very important to them—Marie-Laure seems to have no mother, and Werner has lost a father (and seemingly a mother as well, since he is in an orphanage—but her fate is unexplained).

ONE (1934): KEY POUND

As a young girl, Marie-Laure loses her sight. The doctors can do nothing for her. Everyone in Marie-Laure's community pities her—indeed, they even pity her Marie-Laure's father, who's had a tough life. His own father died in World War I, and his wife died in childbirth.

It's implied that Marie-Laure and her father have an especially close relationship in part because of shared tragedy and hardship, particularly the loss of Marie-Laure's mother. These two non-traditional nuclear family units—Marie-Laure and her father, and Werner and Jutta—will be the most important and powerful relationships of the book.

Marie-Laure's father tries to stay optimistic about Marie-Laure's condition. He trains her to guide herself without the need of sight, equipping her with a small cane. Marie-Laure's father works as a locksmith for the Natural History Museum, and he's very good with his hands. Every day, he appears at the museum and gives the employees their keys (no one is allowed to leave the building with a key). He spends huge chunks of time teaching Marie-Laure to read Braille and walk with her cane.

Marie-Laure's father (whose name, we later learn, is Daniel) is an intelligent and enterprising man—he wants to train his daughter to be as independent and capable as possible. Above all, Daniel is clearly devoted to Marie-Laure, and there's a strong, seemingly unbreakable bond between father and daughter. Yet we can't help but think of the Prologue, in which Marie-Laure is on her own—where is her father?



Marie-Laure's father makes sure that his daughter is given as good an education as he can get for her. He takes her to spend time with an aged doctor named Geffard, who's spent time studying shells and coral reefs across the world. Marie-Laure loves to feel the contours of Geffard's shells.

Marie-Laure seems to be developing an aptitude for science. Her love for shells and coral seems to fit with her interest in the Natural History Museum: she loves beautiful things that form slowly and gradually. This also fits with the theme of science as a way of seeing the world, and of small, ordered versions of a larger, chaotic reality (like the ordered, labeled exhibits at a museum).



On weekends, Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father walk around Paris, enjoying all the things in it that cannot be seen: delicious smells (there are bakeries everywhere), sounds of children playing, etc. Marie-Laure's father tells her that he'll never leave her—not in a million years.

We end the chapter on a note of unambiguous love and affection between Marie-Laure and her father. This naturally leads us to wonder what causes Marie-Laure to be all alone, without her father, as she is in the Prologue.



ONE (1934): RADIO

Meanwhile Werner is eight years old, and Jutta is six. One day, they find a radio near an old storage shed. Werner sneaks the radio back to the orphanage, and he spends the next few weeks secretly listening to it with his sister. At first, Werner can hear only static. But he plays with the wires in the radio until he's succeeded in making it work properly again. The first noises Werner hears from the repaired radio are those of classical music: beautiful violin and piano melodies.

Like Marie-Laure, Werner has a clear aptitude for and interest in science. His love for radio is almost instantaneous—as soon as he's listening to the radio, he's appreciating its beauty and complexity. The radio is something of an escape for Werner: a way for him to get in contact with things beyond the walls of his orphanage and oppressive mining community.



ONE (1934): TAKE US HOME

Growing up, Marie-Laure loves to solve the puzzles her father (Daniel) gives her on her birthdays. Each puzzle is a beautifully carved wooden object—often a box, or a toy house. Each year, her father keeps track of how long it takes Marie-Laure to solve the puzzle and find the treat he's left inside the box (usually chocolate).

We remember that in the Prologue Marie-Laure opens a small puzzle box and finds a stone inside it. We're starting to put things together: the stone might be the Sea of Flames, and Marie-Laure probably knows to open the box because of her father's birthday games. Daniel and Marie-Laure's world is immediately portrayed as one of small, lovely, and cleverly-made objects—beautiful and fragile things that might not survive the brutal forces of history.



One day, Marie-Laure's father presents her with a beautiful model of Paris. He instructs her to study the model carefully, and she does so for months. Then, he takes Marie-Laure to an unfamiliar part of the city, spins her around, and tells her to lead them home. Marie-Laure is terrified that she'll lose her way, but her father encourages her to remember the model he made her. Her father whispers encouragement to her, but ultimately Marie-Laure cannot find her way home.

The model of the city is a way for Marie-Laure to "see" Paris without actually being able to see. In the absence of perfect information (i.e., the inability to see where she's going), Marie-Laure has to depend upon other forms of knowledge to navigate her way around. This helps us understand Marie-Laure's fondness for science—science is, after all, a way for people to understand the universe, and to rationalize the chaotic.



ONE (1934): SOMETHING RISING

Werner is lonely as a child—while the other children play outside, Werner learns how to build radios, using as his model the radio he found. He finds the supplies he needs, such as wire and screws, and uses them to improve his radio, substituting one piece at a time. Werner shares his radio with the other orphans, and entertains the head of the orphanage, Frau Elena, with music and news reports. One day, the radio issues a broadcast about "the courage, confidence, and optimism" of the "German people."

Here we're introduced to a new aspect of the novel: the rise of Fascism in Germany (which ultimately led to WWII). Werner is living in Germany at the same time that Hitler was coming into power. Here Hitler is still relatively powerless, and so his message is more moderate, hidden beneath the veil of an almost corny patriotism. But because we know what is to come, even Hitler's seemingly inane platitudes sound ominous.

One evening, Werner turns on his radio and shares it with the other orphans. It is 1936, and the radio broadcasts a state-sponsored play from Berlin, about a group of "hook-nosed" bankers and jewelers who cheat honest villagers out of their money and murder German children. The chapter ends, "Everyone is happy again."

The anti-Semitism of German society is plain in this section. The disturbing part about this scene is that the radio play is just another "story"—like the stories that Werner tells Jutta, or the legend of the Sea of Flames—designed to help people make sense of the world. As a result of this racist story, German children grow up believing that the Jews are evil. These scenes also show how "science" is not always a positive force—Werner learns to fix radios as part of his innate curiosity and to educate himself, but radios can also be the vehicle for hateful ideas like these.

ONE (1934): LIGHT

Over the following weeks, Marie-Laure's father forces her to practice moving about the city with her cane. She studies the model of the city and then tries to walk around the actual city, but finds it almost impossible to do so. One day in March, Marie-Laure has a breakthrough—she finds she's no longer scared of moving on her own. She guides her father through the streets, all the way back to their home. When she reaches home, her father laughs—a beautiful laugh that Marie-Laure will remember all her life.

It's important to understand that Doerr characterizes the relationship between Marie-Laure and her father (still unnamed in the narrative) as being long-lasting—he notes that Marie-Laure will remember her father's laugh for the rest of her life. There's a sadness in this sentence as well, however, the suggestion being that Marie-Laure will lose her father and be left with only happy memories of him.

ONE (1934): OUR FLAG FLUTTERS BEFORE US

The year when Werner turns ten, the two oldest boys in his orphanage leave to join the Hitler Youth program. They are excited about fighting on behalf of the Nazis. Things begin to change at the orphanage, too—children are punished for reading or enjoying anything that's not German: British books, French candies, etc. Frau Elena, who is French, speaks German more and more, and notices her neighbors looking at her strangely.

Doerr describes the changes in German society at the time by studying one small orphanage—something of a microcosm for the country as a whole. Weak students are bullied, foreigners are threatened, and there's a growing sense of national and racial pride. The same was true in Germany as a whole.

Werner continues to develop an interest in the science of sound. He reads science magazines when he can find them, and constantly plays with his radio. Meanwhile, government officials visit the orphanage to tell the children about work opportunities in the mines. The officials tell the boys that they'll be sent to work in mines at the age of fifteen. Werner thinks fearfully about his father, who died in the mines years ago.

The association between the mines and death is clear, especially since Werner's father literally died in the mines. There's also a symbolic kind of death that Werner sees in the mines: the death of his curiosity, his ambition, and his ability to explore the world beyond his orphanage in Essen.



ONE (1934): AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS

Confident in her abilities to navigate the city, Marie-Laure counts her number of paces for every street. As she grows older, other children ask her lots of questions about her blindness. She answers these questions calmly and sensibly. As time goes on, she continues to think about her mother, whom she's never known. She also starts to imagine everyone and everything in her life in a different color. Marie-Laure's father is olive-green, her mother is white, the kitchen in her house is red, etc.

Marie-Laure is displaying signs of synesthesia—the mental condition in which people associate colors (or sometimes numbers) with particular people, sounds, or ideas. Synesthesia is often seen as the mark of a first-rate creative mind (famous synesthetes include the writer Vladimir Nabokov and the painter Wassily Kandinsky)—a promising sign for Marie-Laure.



When Marie-Laure turns nine, she wakes up to find two gifts waiting for her. The first is a wooden box-puzzle. This she solves easily, and inside, there's a square of delicious cheese, which she eats. The second gift is a large Braille book: *Around the World in 80 Days*, by Jules Verne. In the following days, Marie-Laure spends her time working her way through Verne's novel, savoring its fanciful plot and charismatic characters, like Phileas Fogg and Jean Passepartout. Because Marie-Laure's father is too poor to buy her many other books, she reads *Around the World in 80 Days* again and again, loving it every time.

In this section, we see Marie-Laure's ambitions to explore and understand the world—ambitions matched only by Werner Pfennig's, hundreds of miles away. Jules Verne, often called the father of science fiction, wrote a series of popular novels in which brave, intelligent, scientific protagonists—here, Phileas Fogg—use their ingenuity to understand the world and embark upon remarkable adventures. Marie-Laure apparently aspires to do exactly this.



ONE (1934): THE PROFESSOR

Jutta shows Werner that she's discovered ten yards of copper wire lying in the mud near their orphanage. Werner is delighted—he uses the wire to extend the reach of his radio. As a result, he's able to listen to radio broadcasts in languages other than German, such as Hungarian and even English.

Werner's growing mental capacity reflects the growing reach of his radio—he's absorbing lots of information, and in disobedience to the social norms of Nazi Germany, he's not limiting himself to only German culture or language. The radio is also Doerr's powerful symbol for human connection—however tenuous such a connection might be, Werner can now experience the larger world even in his relative isolation.



One night, Werner uses his newly powerful radio to listen to a broadcast about the history of coal. Fascinated, Werner listens as the broadcaster, a Frenchman, describes the life cycle of a piece of coal. It begins as a plant, an animal, or a tree, millions of years ago. Over time, the living creature's remains decay into carbon, which is compressed into coal, which is used to power houses and engines. The French broadcaster ends his lecture by encouraging his listeners, "Open your eyes and see what you can before they close forever." This inspires Werner to become more inquisitive.

Like Marie-Laure, Werner seems fascinated by slow, gradual processes—here, the life cycle of a piece of coal (we should also note that a piece of coal is produced in more or less the same way a diamond like the Sea of Flames is made: heat, pressure, and carbon). It's more explicitly suggested here that Werner and Marie-Laure have a shared temperament of inquisitiveness. The Frenchman's words also clearly reference the theme and symbol of vision—even if "seeing" doesn't mean literally seeing with the eyes, it is important to seek out the truth and to try to understand the world as best as possible.

ONE (1934): SEA OF FLAMES

There is excitement in Paris: there are rumors that the Museum of Natural History is going to display a rare diamond. The stone, Marie-Laure overhears a man telling his friend, has been in the museum's collection for many years, but for mysterious reasons, it hasn't been shown until now. Marie-Laure is now ten years old, and her blindness has given her an active imagination—she can visualize anything. She reads whatever she can find, and especially enjoys the last book her father Daniel bought her: *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas.

As Marie-Laure grows, she continues to read and study the world around her. The return of the Sea of Flames—clearly the stone that the museum is going to display—presents a challenge: will Marie-Laure continue to fear the diamond irrationally, or will her scientific turn of mind convince her to ignore the gem's supposed curse?

Marie-Laure, remembering the stories of the cursed Sea of Flames, asks her father Daniel if he believes the curse is real. Marie-Laure's father replies that he doesn't believe it at all. Marie-Laure also asks Dr. Geffard what he thinks, but he gives her a very technical answer about how diamonds are produced from coal. Nevertheless, Marie-Laure confesses to Dr. Geffard that she hopes her father never touches the cursed diamond.

Marie-Laure enjoys science, but she is also still a child, and subject to natural human superstition. She can't help but fear the concept of fate—the idea that humans aren't in control of their own lives, no matter how clever or well-trained they are. Her fears also show just how valuable her father is to her, as she wants to protect him from anything that might harm him.

ONE (1934): OPEN YOUR EYES

After discovering the Frenchman's radio broadcasts on science, Werner and Jutta make every effort to listen to them. Over time, the siblings learn about magnets, the North Pole, eclipses, and the electromagnetic spectrum. They wonder who the Frenchman is, and suspect that he's a rich, bored man who gives broadcasts on science because he has nothing better to do with his time.

Doerr makes an important point here: inquisitiveness can be a way of trying to connect with other people. Even as he ponders the mysteries of science, Werner also thinks about the individual who's broadcasting this information, and has a strong desire to meet this man and talk to him. Later in the book, we will learn that the Frenchman is in fact Marie-Laure's grandfather, Henri LeBlanc.

Every time Werner listens to the Frenchman on the radio, he has the strange sense that the man's voice is getting a little quieter, as if he's moving away from Werner very, very slowly. At night, inspired by the Frenchman's words, Werner goes outside and stares up at the sky, filled with wonder.

We're not yet aware what Doerr means when he writes that the man seems to be drifting away from Werner, but the image is an apt one for the novel—it suggests that relationships between people, like everything else, are subject to the unshakeable laws of entropy and decay. Werner feels a connection to the Frenchman, but it is a fragile one, and seems to be growing ever weaker.



ONE (1934): FADE

In the days leading up to the Sea of Flames' display at the museum, Marie-Laure is terrified that the diamond will curse her beloved father. She tries to convince herself that Dr. Geffard and Marie-Laure's father are right—the diamond is just another rock, albeit a very pretty one.

Marie-Laure is intelligent enough to know that she should *believe that the curse is nonsense, but she's simply not confident enough to believe this—there's still a part of her that accepts that people are powerless to fight destiny.*



On her eleventh birthday, Marie-Laure walks up find two new boxes. The first is a wooden puzzle-box, which she solves easily—Marie-Laure's father is highly impressed. The second box contains her newest book, a copy of Part 1 of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne. Marie-Laure begins reading it at once, and falls in love with the exotic plot. The main character, a biologist named Pierre Aronnax, insists that science and observation are the key to the universe, not "fables and fairy tales."

This chapter consists largely of a contrast between superstition and science. The curse of the diamond is a superstition, while the book by Jules Verne is exemplary of science. And yet even if science seems more "correct" than superstition, there's a sense that science by itself isn't enough. Marie-Laure's life seems to be shaped by forces too large and complex to be understood—forces that we might term Fate. After all, even Verne's work is science fiction*—subject to both the laws of science and the whims and fantasies of its author.*



ONE (1934): THE PRINCIPLES OF MECHANICS

A government official and his wife visit Werner's orphanage. To prepare, all the orphans are washed and carefully dressed to impress their visitors. Frau Elena prepares delicious food, and combs everyone's hair. Werner finds it hard to be excited for the official's visit—he's too engrossed in his copy of *The Principle of Mechanics* by the great scientist Heinrich Hertz. Werner is fascinated by electricity, Hertz's area of expertise.

We can see in this scene that Werner's love for science is somewhat dangerous to the Nazi mindset—because Werner worships science above all else, he's reluctant to accept the arbitrary authority of a government official. The Nazis want to twist science to their own use, and as long as it remains objective, it will work against their oversimplified, hateful ideas.



During the government official's visit, Werner can't help but continue reading his book. Suddenly, the official sees that Werner isn't paying attention. He takes Werner's book from him, inspects it, and describes it as a "Jew book." Werner protests that Hertz was born in Hamburg, but the official doesn't listen. Jutta pipes up that her brother is a brilliant student, and one day he'll become a great scientist in Berlin or Munich. The official smirks and tells Jutta that Werner will end up in the mines, just like everyone else in the orphanage.

The challenge of Werner's life is clear to him: he must master science, or face a life spent in the mines. Werner thinks that he can control his own destiny through hard work and intelligence—a worthwhile idea, but often not the way the world works. It's important to understand what the official means by "Jew book." It was often claimed in Nazi Germany that the Jews practiced a dangerous, radical form of science ("Jewish Physics") designed to upset the natural order of the universe. Albert Einstein and his theory of relativity was always the go-to example of "Jewish science" for the Nazis.

ONE (1934): RUMORS

All through Paris, there are rumors that the Germans will invade France soon. Marie-Laure asks her father if he's concerned about the German invasion. Although the Germans have already invaded Austria, Marie-Laure's father insists that there's nothing to be concerned about. Marie-Laure tries to calm herself by reading Jules Verne. She studies the names of shells with Dr. Geffard. One day Geffard tells her, almost gleefully, that most of the creatures in the oceans have already gone extinct—and mankind is no different. Marie-Laure senses that something dangerous is drawing slowly closer to her.

Geffard's statement about mankind going extinct repeats the idea that everything is subject to decay and destruction over time. This is, naturally, a terrifying concept for a young girl—and also akin to the prophecies of doom in the legend of the Sea of Flames. Overall, it adds to the tone of fate and overwhelming forces beyond one's individual control—like a diamond's curse, or the start of a world war.

ONE (1934): BIGGER FASTER BRIGHTER

As the Nazis gain power, all young boys are required to sign up for membership in the Hitler Youth program. Werner is taught how to march in Nazi parades, and he learns to run fast. Everyone tells him that it's important to fight for his country. In secret, however, Werner continues to study and listen to the radio. He teaches himself complex mathematics. One day, Frau Elena asks Werner to help her repair a neighbor's radio. Werner is able to repair the radio easily, using his training. Before long, Werner has become the local expert on radio repairs.

For the time being, it seems that Werner's intelligence and quick thinking will help him out of his life in the mines—he'll be able to use his ingenuity to improve his lot in life. But based on the Prologue, we know that Werner will eventually be sent to fight in the German army. The Nazi rhetoric of national pride and aggression continues to grow more pervasive.

One day, Jutta tells Werner that a local woman has been kicked out of the pool for being half-Jewish. Jutta asks Werner if she and Werner are "half breeds," too. Werner assures her that they're fully German—they have no Jewish blood.

Werner has done well in the "genetic lottery"—he's blonde and blue-eyed, meaning that he won't be persecuted for his appearance or race as so many others will be. Werner will have to decide whether he himself subscribes to the Nazis' belief that Jews are inferior or evil.

There is a boy named Hans Schilzer in the orphanage. He's the oldest and strongest boy in the building, and he often quarrels with Frau Elena. He starts fistfights, and there are rumors that he burned a car. At times, Werner can hear Hans shouting at Frau Elena.

Again, the orphanage functions as a microcosm for Germany (just as Marie-Laure's father makes literal microcosms—model cities—for Marie-Laure), and even the small world of the orphanage is rapidly becoming full of dangerous bullies like Hans.

ONE (1934): MARK OF THE BEAST

It is November 1939. Marie-Laure is reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in a park. As she reads, she hears a group of older boys (early teenagers) walking by. One of the boys says, "They'll probably take the blind girls before they take the gimps." This episode disturbs Marie-Laure greatly, and she asks Marie-Laure's father what will happen if there's a war in France. Her father tries to reassure her that everything will be fine, but at night, Marie-Laure has nightmares about Nazis walking through the streets of Paris.

Marie-Laure and Werner's storylines are both becoming increasingly influenced by larger political forces, particularly the rise of Fascism. We know that the Germans will eventually invade France and seize Paris, and here, some French children clearly sense that this is about to happen (meaning that there must be plenty of adults who've resigned themselves to the possibility). It is true that part of the Nazi agenda came to involve enforced euthanasia for many people with disabilities ("mercy deaths" for those arbitrarily deemed to be drains on society), so this might be a real danger for Marie-Laure in the future.

ONE (1934): LETTER #1: JUTTA

Jutta writes a letter to the Frenchman who broadcasts about science. Jutta and Werner have discovered that the Frenchman is no longer broadcasting regularly. Jutta asks the Frenchman if he'll start broadcasting again, and adds that it's not a criminal offense for Germans to listen to foreign broadcasts. She also mentions that Werner doesn't know she's sending this letter.

In the first of many letters-as-chapters in the novel, we see the extent of Werner's enthusiasm for the Frenchman's radio broadcasts—he derives so much pleasure from them that Jutta wants to help Werner by bringing them back.

ONE (1934): GOOD EVENING. OR HEIL HITLER IF YOU PREFER

Werner turns fourteen in May of 1940. By this time, the Hitler Youth are a powerful group across Germany. Werner fears the mines, where he'll be sent to work in only a year. Only a few months ago, he'd dreamed of going to Berlin to study with Germany's great scientists. Now he's afraid that the Nazis will put him to hard labor for the rest of his life.

Werner's ambitions are thwarted by the rise of Fascism, and it's not hard to see why. The Third Reich (Nazi Germany) doesn't want objective young men who idolize French scientists—it wants loyal, patriotic Germans who work hard and do as they're told. Werner starts to realize that no matter what he does, he is still subject to forces larger and stronger than his own free will.

ONE (1934): BYE-BYE, BLIND GIRL

The war has spread to France. In the Natural History Museum, the workers are frantically trying to keep their exhibits safe from damage. On the morning that Marie-Laure turns twelve, Marie-Laure's father gives her the second volume of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, but no puzzle-box. Marie senses that her father is afraid, though he'd never admit it. Not too long ago, she had dreamed of living with her father for her entire life—solving puzzles and learning how to read Balzac and Proust. Now she has no idea what the future holds for her.

Just as was the case with Werner, Marie-Laure's world is totally changed by World War II. Marie-Laure had wanted to continue with her studies and eventually move on to explore the world (basically shape her own destiny through intelligence and perseverance), but it now seems that history will overwhelm Marie-Laure's personal goals and decisions, and she will have to run from the Germans, disrupting the only life she's ever known.

ONE (1934): MAKING SOCKS

Werner wakes up one night, and finds Jutta lying next to him. Jutta is drawing, as she often does. These days, Jutta must spend her time making socks for German soldiers—she has to seize the time to draw whenever it's available. Jutta explains that she is drawing but also listening to Werner's radio. Almost angrily, she tells Werner that the Germans have bombed Paris.

The threat of war is disrupting Marie-Laure's usual relationship with her father, and the same seems to be true with Jutta and Werner. The distance between the siblings will grow in the coming chapters. From the very start, Jutta (an almost unrealistically wise child) clings to her firm belief that Nazism and the war itself are wrong.

ONE (1934): FLIGHT

Paris is in a state of chaos. People pack their possessions, trying to flee the city before it's too late. Marie-Laure sits at home, trying to concentrate on *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Suddenly, Marie-Laure's father comes home from the museum and tells her that they need to leave, quickly. He tells her to leave her book behind.

Marie-Laure's father tells Marie-Laure that she has to leave behind her old books—essentially, her old life in Paris. This is a painful passage because Marie-Laure had worked so hard and accomplished so much, and now is forced to leave it all behind because of forces beyond her control.

Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father quickly walk through the streets of Paris. Marie-Laure counts her steps, carefully keeping track of where they're headed. She thinks that she can feel sandbags with her cane. Her father tells her that they're headed for the trains, as they need to leave the city before the Germans arrive. As Marie-Laure walks to the station, she can hear voices talking about France's defeated troops. Her father tells her that the voices around her belong to other people who are hoping to find a seat on the train—just like Marie-Laure and her father.

We end the chapter with another apt symbol of the chaos of World War II, and the chaos of life: a mass of voices in a train station, all belonging to people who are trying to get out of Paris. The image of the train station has unpleasant associations with the Holocaust (which Doerr alludes to several times, but doesn't try to deal with), and we can't help but think of the horrors Europe will experience in the next few years.

ONE (1934): HERR SIEDLER

One evening, a lance corporal wearing a swastika arrives at Werner's orphanage. As the corporal walks through the building, Werner feels a rush of fear and thinks about his secret radio, which he's used to listen to foreign broadcasts. To his surprise, the lance corporal and Frau Elena come to Werner. The soldier explains that his superior officer has a radio that needs quick repair. Werner agrees to help the lance corporal repair his machine, and the man takes Werner to his military base, near the orphanage but past the mines. In the base, the corporal introduces Werner to Rudolph Siedler, the owner of the damaged radio. Siedler lives in a luxurious house, and Werner is awed by his surroundings. Siedler shows Werner the radio, and adds that he's heard good things about Werner's talents. Werner nervously studies the radio for a few minutes, and then repairs it quickly and efficiently.

In this section, we can sense that Werner's intelligence and skill is going to pay off, though we're not sure exactly how. Werner had thought that he'd have to spent the rest of his life working in the mines, but here it seems that he'll have the opportunity of using his training as a radio repairman to impress important people and climb the ladder of success. The luxury in which Siedler lives is already indicative of corruption in the Nazi way of governing—those with authority can take whatever they want with impunity, leaving others (like Werner and the orphans) with nothing.



Herr Siedler is impressed with Werner's quick thinking and obvious intelligence. He offers Werner a piece of delicious cake, which Werner eagerly accepts. As Werner eats, Siedler suggests that Werner is talented enough to come work in Berlin as a scientist—maybe even a rocket scientist. Siedler assures Werner that he's going to recommend Werner for recruitment to a prestigious science school in Berlin. He also gives Werner money for repairing his radio.

Siedler is going to enable Werner to continue his studies of science and mathematics—but he's also going to push Werner further into the Nazi establishment. This is a risky proposition: Werner will get to escape the mines and continue studying what he loves, but he'll have to make difficult decisions about Fascism and his loyalties to the Nazi state.



Werner returns to the orphanage. He explains that he fixed the commander's radio, but doesn't add anything about the science school. He gives Frau Elena all of the money Siedler gave him. Elena is surprised, and gives most of it back to Werner. Werner goes to bed, still dizzied by the events of the day. Before he falls asleep, however, he finds his radio and crushes it with a brick.

This day has been a milestone in Werner's life—the end of an era. The destruction of the radio—a symbol of Werner's life growing up—reinforces this fact. Werner has now had a glimpse of the wider world and the strength of the Nazis. He destroys the radio both because he is now ambitious for bigger and better things (like Siedler's magnificent radio,) but also because he fears being "subordinate" to German authority by listening to foreign stations.



ONE (1934): EXODUS

Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father walk through Paris, trying to find a way out of the city before the Germans invade it. They are only two members of a huge procession of Parisians, all trying to escape. Marie-Laure stays close to her father, frantically wondering if they'll be able to survive. As the morning turns into night, they leave Paris, and walk into the mountains. Marie-Laure's father explains that his boss at the museum has given him the address for a friend in a faraway French town. He assures Marie-Laure that they'll be sleeping in comfortable beds tomorrow night.

As the first part of the book draws to a close, it's worth thinking about everything we've learned about the characters. Marie-Laure and her father have an undeniably close relationship, but we're not sure how it'll be affected by the war. For the time being, however, Marie-Laure's father continues to reassure her that everything will be fine—an obvious lie that we can see through, even if Marie-Laure can't (or refuses to).



That night, Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father sleep outside in the woods. When Marie-Laure falls asleep, her father takes out a small object he's taken from the museum: seemingly a diamond. The director of the museum has arranged for a "decoy" diamond to be placed in the museum, while the real diamond is taken to another location. There are also other decoy diamonds being taken to other French cities. Marie-Laure's father wonders if he's been trusted with the real diamond, or if his is only one of the decoys.

The plot thickens—in addition to his high-minded meditations on entropy, ways of seeing, and human connection, Doerr includes a plot based around a precious diamond—something more commonly found in an adventure novel than a Pulitzer Prize-winner. But this is the delight of the book—it's complex, subtle, and long, but uses elements of the mystery and the thriller along the way.

TWO (8 AUGUST 1944): SAINT-MALO

It is 1944, and in the city of Saint-Malo, the Americans have just finishing their bombing. The city is mostly in ruins—buildings have been reduced to ash, and there is fire everywhere. Even the mighty Hotel of Bees has been destroyed.

We now jump back to the scene of the prologue, as Doerr tells his story both through two storylines and two timelines. We're reminded of Dr. Geffard's words: everything goes extinct in the end, even a city that's defended France for thousands of years.

TWO (8 AUGUST 1944): NUMBER 4 RUE VAUBOREL

Marie-Laure sits alone in her room, clutching the stone in her fist. She calls her father's name, Daniel, and wonders if her great-uncle Etienne has managed to survive the bombing as well. She tries to tell herself, "this is not real."

Marie-Laure retreats into fantasy—she can't handle the harsh reality of the bombing all around her. We can also see that, through all the odds, she remains fiercely loyal to her father, wherever he might be.

TWO (8 AUGUST 1944): HOTEL OF BEES

Werner lies on the floor in the secure area of the Hotel of Bees. The bombing has thrown him to the ground, and the lights have gone out. He feels that the room is very hot—even if he and his friends have survived the explosion, they could be killed by the resulting fire. He cries, half to himself, "Have we died?"

Once again, we see Werner asking a question to no one in particular and going unanswered, reinforcing the themes of alienation and loneliness at this stage in the book.

TWO (8 AUGUST 1944): DOWN SIX FLIGHTS

Marie-Laure forces herself to stand up and make her way out of her house. She puts the stone back inside the model house, puts the house in her dress pocket, and looks for her shoes. Unable to find them, she decides to leave bare-footed. She also takes her great-uncle's coat and a loaf of bread. She walks from the house, dazed, as the sounds of the airplanes fade away. Using her cane, she walks to the cellar underneath her house, pushes open the heavy metal door, and climbs down. She feels for the model house in her pocket, and is relieved to find that it's still there.

Marie-Laure's instincts of survival don't fail her. While someone used to relying on their vision might be disoriented by the bombing, Marie-Laure's training with navigating her way through complex places gives her a huge advantage. She uses her cane to navigate to the cellar, find bread, and keep herself safe and alive.

TWO (8 AUGUST 1944): TRAPPED

Werner is still lying on the floor in the Hotel of Bees. Slowly, a light emerges, though he's not sure how, or from where. Werner is shocked to see Bernd, the engineer, screaming. Bernd's face is covered with dust, and he seems terrified. Volkheimer, lying close by, gently closes Bernd's mouth. Werner realizes that Volkheimer is using his military-issued electric light to illuminate the room. Werner looks up and realizes that the door has been blocked by falling debris. Werner whispers to Volkheimer that they need to get out, but Volkheimer shakes his head—there is no other way out.

Volkheimer and Werner's fate is both incredibly lucky and incredibly unfortunate: they've been saved from the agony of being crushed under the weight of the hotel, but they face the very real possibility of starving to death because they can't get out from under the rubble. Volkheimer's fatalistic despair sets the tone for this part of the book: there's simply no way out—no way of escaping one's ultimate destiny.



THREE (JUNE 1940): CHÂTEAU

Two days have gone by since Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father fled Paris. They enter the town of Evreux, which is in a state of chaos. Houses have been abandoned, but the hotels are overbooked. Marie-Laure cries that she can smell smoke, and her father explains that people are burning down houses and "stealing things." Marie-Laure's father tries to find one particular house—the house he's been sent by the museum director to find. Unfortunately, he realizes that this house has been burned down. He asks passersby if they've seen Monsieur Giannot, and he learns that Giannot has left for London.

Again Doerr jumps back to his previous timeline. Marie-Laure's perspective as a blind girl is particularly interesting during all of this. She can't see the chaos around her, but she grasps it in other ways—smelling the smoke, for example. Her bond with her father continues to be the dominant relationship in her life: she can't imagine what she'd do if he were to disappear.



Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father continue walking through the city. They decide to go to a hotel on the outskirts of Evreux. Marie-Laure's father, who can feel the diamond in his pocket, tries to tell himself that it's only a decoy, made of glass. He tries not to think about the curse of the stone.

In this section, the novel's perspective changes ever so slightly—instead of narrating from the point of view of Marie-Laure, the narrator gives us information that Marie-Laure can't process: her father has the Sea of Flames. This is a clever way of showing how the diamond distances Marie-Laure from her father—the narrative is literally creating this distance of perspective.



Marie-Laure's father explains to Marie-Laure that they're trying to find his uncle, Etienne, Marie-Laure's great-uncle. Etienne is "76% crazy," Marie-Laure's father claims.

A new character is about to enter the book—Etienne has already been referenced in the prologue, but the nature of his "craziness" is still unclear.



THREE (JUNE 1940): ENTRANCE EXAM

Werner is sitting at his entrance exam for the National Political Institute of Education. He and 100 other boys in Essen will complete a rigorous examination that lasts many hours. The first part of the examination concerns the boys' parentage. Werner is forced to answer written questions about his mother and father, both of whom were from Germany. In the afternoon, he has to complete physical challenges—pushups and obstacle courses. On the second day, Werner is examined for his race—doctors examine his body to make sure he's "pure" German. In the evening of the second day, Werner answers patriotic questions like, "Who is our greatest writer?" and "what is the Führer's birthday?" The most difficult challenge comes on the seventh day. Werner must climb a tall ladder and jump without hesitation, to be caught by a flag held by the other recruits. Though many fail this test, Werner succeeds in this challenge—showing no fear of heights whatsoever.

The description of the exam is as interesting for what Doerr shows us as what he doesn't show us. In other words, we see Werner being examined for his bravery, his hair color, etc. but we see no evidence that he's examined for his knowledge or intelligence—the thing that caused Siedler to recommend him in the first place. It's as if the Nazi state is so obsessed with race that it overlooks what really distinguishes people—their minds, characters, and personalities. It's chilling that the only non-race-related challenge that Werner faces is jumping from a tall ladder: apparently, the only quality the Reich values in its soldiers is an unhesitating willingness to die.



THREE (JUNE 1940): BRITTANY

Marie-Laure and Marie-Laure's father make their way to the town of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's Great-Uncle Etienne lives. As the chapter begins, they're almost at the sea, meaning that Saint-Malo is very close. Eventually they arrive at the building where Etienne is supposed to live. Marie-Laure is so tired she can barely stand. Her father leads her to the house.

The chapter begins with a poignant image of the love between Marie-Laure and her father: her father is virtually carrying her to safety. We now reach Saint-Malo, the seaside town where the events of the 1944 bombing sections of the novel take place.

THREE (JUNE 1940): MADAME MANEC

As the chapter begins, Marie-Laure's father is introducing her to an old woman named Madame Manec. Manec seems overjoyed to meet Marie-Laure, and she lets them both inside.

Our first impressions of the house are unambiguously cheery: things finally seem to be looking up for Marie-Laure and her father.



Inside, Madame Manec feeds Marie-Laure delicious food—eggs and peaches. Marie-Laure is so famished that she eats everything she's given in only a few minutes. Meanwhile, Marie-Laure's father discusses Etienne with Manec. Marie-Laure comes to understand that Manec is her great-uncle's maid and cook.

Marie-Laure is finally given a delicious meal (peaches will be important later in the book!), but the very pleasure of these scenes makes us apprehensive for Etienne, the supposedly crazy owner of the house—we wonder why he isn't greeting his new guests.



THREE (JUNE 1940): YOU HAVE BEEN CALLED

Werner returns from his rigorous exams, and the children at the orphanage are eager to hear his stories of training. Only a few days later, Werner learns that he has been chosen to study at the National Political Institute. To his amazement, he's going to leave the orphanage and escape a life in the mines.

Werner has seemingly worked his way out of the orphanage and out of the mines—and yet it also seems that he ultimately wasn't selected for his intelligence, but rather for his blonde hair and blue eyes. This is a different kind of "fate" or "chance" holding sway over one's personal free will.



In the months before he starts classes at the Institute, Werner tries to talk to Frau Elena. Elena is sad that Werner is going to the National Institute. She tells Werner that people will "celebrate" Werner's achievement—especially people like the government official who took Werner's book from him. Jutta doesn't congratulate her brother, and in fact she begins ignoring him. Nevertheless, the other children admire Werner for his achievement, and Werner promises that he'll "Show them."

We can see the distance growing between Werner and Jutta. Before, they're enjoyed listening to the radio together, but now, Jutta can barely talk to her brother. We don't know exactly why Jutta is apprehensive, but it seems to be because she has disapproved of the Nazis from the start—she wants Werner to escape the orphanage, but not to become a scientist assisting an immoral cause.



THREE (JUNE 1940): OCCUPIER

Marie-Laure wakes up after a night of resting in Saint-Malo. Madame Manec greets her. Marie-Laure asks her if the entire house belongs to her great-uncle, and Manec says yes. She explains that Etienne lives in the house, but rarely comes out of his room, which is on the fifth floor of his massive house.

The novel now has some elements of the Gothic mystery novel to add to its blend of genres. For example, one Gothic novel trope is that a guest—usually a young girl—comes to stay at a big, intimidating house, and slowly gets to know the owner of the house, often a mysterious older man.



In the following days, Marie-Laure asks Marie-Laure's father about the German invasion of Paris. He explains that the soldiers have occupied the city, and will try to make French people speak German and behave like Germans. Marie-Laure tells her father that everything will be okay—they'll live with Etienne for a while, and then eventually go back to Paris and get her copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

Marie-Laure's father continues to tell his daughter things that can't possibly be true—that they're going to return to Paris to retrieve her book, for example. (In all probability, the house would be ransacked by the time they return to Paris). Marie-Laure's father isn't exactly lying—he's just dealing with tragedy through fantasy. Like his daughter, he wants *to believe that they'll be back soon, so he repeats this to himself and to Marie-Laure.*



THREE (JUNE 1940): DON'T TELL LIES

Werner has been admitted to the National Institute, and is about to leave the orphanage for the next two years. All the other students admire him—the only exception is Jutta, who is furious that he is going away to the Institute. One day, Werner asks Jutta to take a walk with him. To his surprise, Jutta agrees, and they walk past the mines together. Jutta tells Werner that she's afraid that Werner will turn out as brutal and mean as the other boys from the orphanage, who now work in the mines or are members of Hitler's army. Werner promises Jutta that this won't happen to him. He assures her that he only wants to become an engineer and then take Jutta to Paris. Jutta replies, "Don't tell lies. Lie to yourself, Werner, but don't lie to me."

Because Jutta seems unrealistically wise and far-seeing, she becomes almost like a stand-in for us as readers (who have a hindsight's perspective on WWII). Like us, Jutta is nervous that Werner will become a Nazi as a result of his education at the National Institute. Werner still denies this—he thinks that he's going to become a great scientist, and must simply obey the Nazis because they are the ones with influence at the moment. But because we've read the Prologue, we know that it doesn't work out like this—Werner will be a soldier, the same as so many of his peers.



THREE (JUNE 1940): ETIENNE

It takes Marie-Laure three days before she meets Etienne. On the third day, she finds a whelk shell in her new bathroom. To her amazement, she then discovers a long trail of shells, stretching from the bathroom to the fifth floor of the building. A voice calls Marie-Laure to come in to a room. There, Marie-Laure finds her great-uncle.

Before Marie-Laure meets Etienne, she already forms an impression of him. Etienne seems whimsical, clever, and prone to playing games—just like Marie-Laure's father. Etienne also immediately associates himself with shells and whelks, already a source of interest for Marie-Laure and symbolism for the novel itself.

Etienne greets Marie-Laure, and asks her if she'd like to see his collection of radios. He shows her stereos, and radios he's built with his own hands. Marie-Laure instinctively like Etienne—he seems calm, like a great, old tree. Etienne shows Marie-Laure books, including Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*. As Etienne and Marie-Laure get to know each other, Marie-Laure's father is walking down the streets, watching Nazi soldiers keep patrol.

Etienne shares many of his great-niece's interests, including science and exploration, and is clearly clever and skilled with his hands, like Marie-Laure's father. Etienne also owns many radios, reminding us of the connections between Marie-Laure's life and Werner's—radio seems a crucial aspect of this connection. The presence of the Nazi occupiers disrupts this otherwise idyllic scene.

THREE (JUNE 1940): JUNGMÄNNER

Werner has arrived at the National Institute, a huge, imposing building where he'll spend the next two years of his life. The masters at the Institute are aggressive, imposing people. They tell the boys that they'll "breathe nation" for the next two years. Werner, still fourteen years old, makes friends with a bookish boy named Frederick who likes animals.

Werner is both an insider and an outsider at his new school. He's admired for his Aryan appearance, but seems to align himself with the nerdiest and least Nazi-like student there, Frederick. Frederick is similar to Werner—they both have a love for science and understanding how the world works.

In class, Werner and Frederick study biology, and learn from an old "scientist" who tells them about the German's superiority to the Jew. They also study Goethe, and learn science. Everyone is taught how to load and fire a rifle. They rejoice in the glory of the Führer, and of Germany.

The education Werner receives at school is disturbing, because it mixes racist pseudoscience with legitimate facts, so that the students can't tell the difference. For the students, the fact that force equals mass times acceleration is no different from the fact that the German race is superior to others. "Führer" means "leader" in German, but the word is now forever associated with Hitler, as it was his usual title during his rule.

THREE (JUNE 1940): VIENNA

The chapter opens with Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel, a middle-aged soldier. Rumpel is a talented jeweler as well as an official in the German army. During his time as a soldier, he's used his influence to seize important jewelry and send it to the Third Reich in Berlin. Rumpel has heard rumors that the Führer is compiling a list of Europe's greatest treasures. He'll need the help of jewelers like Rumpel to track down the stones, test that they're real, and polish them. Rumpel can't wait to help his leader.

There was a good reason that the museum tried to smuggle the diamond out of Paris—indeed, part of the Nazi agenda involved collecting art and treasure from those who were conquered, arrested, or killed. Von Rumpel appears here as the major antagonist of the book, and also the least complex of Doerr's main characters. He is in many ways a stereotypical Nazi—loyal to Hitler, coldly efficient, and totally ruthless and selfish.

THREE (JUNE 1940): THE BOCHES

Marie-Laure is trying to settle into her life in Saint-Malo. Madame Manec reports surprising news: the German soldiers stationed in their town are *good* for the French in some ways: they buy French champagne and French foods, stimulating the local economy. Nevertheless, Marie-Laure is becoming homesick for Paris. She asks Marie-Laure's father when they'll return—he replies that he doesn't know. Marie-Laure's father also warns her not to enter the room on the sixth floor next to Marie-Laure's own. He explains that this room belonged to his own father, Marie-Laure's grandfather. Naturally, this warning intrigues Marie-Laure enormously.

In Marie-Laure's experience, at least, the German occupation of France is not as bad as it might be. There are Germans everywhere, but they seem more content to enjoy French food than bully the French townspeople. It's also in this section that the novel adds another Gothic trope—as in most Gothic novels, Marie-Laure receives a stern warning not to go looking through the mysterious old house, a warning that, of course, she's going to ignore as soon as she gets a chance.

Marie-Laure eats and sleeps well in her home in Saint-Malo. Madame Manec cooks delicious meals for her, always reminding her that the people in Paris are starving.

Marie-Laure is living a luxurious lifestyle at a time when most people in Europe are miserable. But she's not entirely oblivious to this fact—she understands that she's very lucky.

THREE (JUNE 1940): HAUPTMANN

One day, Werner and his peers are taught by an old doctor named Hauptmann. Hauptmann gives every student a small metal box and tells them to build a simple telegraph generator—he adds that they have only one hour to do so. Werner easily solves this challenge—indeed, it takes him only a minute or two. Hauptmann is impressed. Werner also shows Hauptmann that he can build simple motors using only magnets and wire. Hauptmann plans to give Werner more assignments to train him for engineering work.

It seems that Werner is finally using his intelligence and skill advance his career as a scientist. Even if before Werner was admitted to his school partly because of his race, he'll now *rise within the school due to his intelligence. Hauptmann starts to act like a father-figure for Werner, sponsoring Werner's scientific ambitions with assignments that seem tailor-made for him.*

THREE (JUNE 1940): FLYING COUCH

In Saint-Malo, the Nazis order the French to voluntarily surrender all their weapons. Anyone who doesn't do so will be shot. The townspeople seem to surrender their guns without a fight—there are only about 300 of them, in all. Meanwhile, Marie-Laure bonds with Etienne. They talk about Darwin and joke about the English. Etienne tells Marie-Laure about the places he's studied, such as Borneo, Scotland, Santiago, and Scotland.

So far, we've been given almost no signs that Etienne is "crazy," as Marie-Laure's father had told Marie-Laure. On the contrary, he's just old and eccentric, and his interests in science, travel, and exploration quickly endear him to Marie-Laure. Marie-Laure loses herself in a kind of fantasy—hearing Etienne's stories and thinking about traveling—as her own world gets more oppressive.

THREE (JUNE 1940): THE SUM OF ANGLES

After his spectacular performance as an engineer for Dr. Hauptmann, Werner is summoned to the technical sciences professors, and asked about his interest in the sciences. Werner proudly explains that he'd taught himself trigonometry and physics. Hauptmann tells Werner that he's been assigned to work in the laboratories of the Institute every weekend—information that Werner finds exciting. A little sadly, he remembers how Jutta bragged about his talents to the government official, years before.

Even as Werner rises in prestige at school, he can't help but think back to his time with Jutta. He is doing well by the standards of the authorities, but he seems to feel like Jutta would not approve of his actions. This reminds us why family is so important—in a world where everything is changing, family can act as a constant against which to measure change.



THREE (JUNE 1940): THE PROFESSOR

Etienne and Marie-Laure continue to bond over books. One day Marie-Laure plucks up the courage to ask Etienne a question she's been thinking of for some time: why doesn't he ever go outside? Etienne replies that he gets "uneasy" being outside, and prefers the security of his radios and books. Marie-Laure also asks Etienne about the mysterious locked bedroom where her grandfather Henri supposedly lived. Etienne takes Marie-Laure to the bedroom, and opens the door. He leads her through the room to an attic full of machinery.

Doerr has been preparing us for a big climax regarding the locked room of the hall (if this were truly a Gothic novel, the climax of the novel would be when Marie-Laure finds this room). But he dashes our expectations soon: Etienne takes Marie-Laure to the room, and calmly opens the door. There is no horrifying mystery here, only more links to the radio and potential connections between Marie-Laure and Werner.



Etienne shows Marie-Laure the details of the attic. There is a gramophone there, playing a record. Marie-Laure can hear that the record contains a lecture on the history of coal (which we, the readers, recognize as the same lecture Werner and Jutta listened to years before). Etienne explains that his brother, Henri (Mari-Laure's grandfather) was good at everything. Years ago, during World War I, Etienne and Henri worked in the army, building telegraph lines. It was during this time that Etienne developed his fear of the outdoors—at night, in the snow, Etienne saw the enemy soldiers shoot bright flares into the night, hoping to illuminate French troops. Etienne explains that Henri died in the war, years ago. To honor his brother, Etienne plays the ten science lectures that Henri recorded as a young man. Because Etienne only has one set of records, they get gradually quieter the more they're played. Etienne explains that he thought that by playing his dead brother's voice, he could bring his brother back to life.

We learn several things in this important chapter. Although Henri LeBlanc is Marie-Laure's grandfather, he's seemingly even more important to Werner Pfennig. As we now recognize, Werner grew up listening to Henri LeBlanc's broadcasts on science, unbeknownst to either Henri or Marie-Laure. The interconnectedness of the two storylines in the novel is becoming more and more complex, but also more visible. Moreover, the theme of family is growing more poignant—the characters imagine their loved ones as spirits, who can only be communicated with—and even then, never successfully—via fragile methods like replaying someone's voice on the radio. Here we also understand why the Frenchman's voice seemed to be slowly getting fainter as Werner and Jutta listened to him—the memory of Henri and his recorded voice, like everything else, is subject to the laws of entropy and decay. It is also here that we learn the source of Etienne's agoraphobia (a fear of going outside or into unfamiliar environments)—he possibly has post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in World War I.



THREE (JUNE 1940): LETTERS #2-4: WERNER TO JUTTA

Werner writes a letter to Jutta, telling his sister that Dr. Hauptmann is planning to recommend him to high-ranking Nazi officials, who'll set him up with a good education. The letter is difficult to read because phrases and entire sentences are censored. For instance, Werner tries to describe the projects that Hauptmann has assigned him to research, but his descriptions are blacked out. Nevertheless, Werner suggests that Hauptmann is stimulating his creativity, and urging him to work hard to support the Führer.

We begin to see other forms of blindness in the novel. Marie-Laure is literally blind, but the extreme censorship of the German state is another, more willful kind of blindness. For the time being this censorship is fairly minor—the only notable thing left blacked out is Werner's description of his scientific project But we can sense that this trend will lead to more dangerous situations of censorship and "turning a blind eye" to wrongdoing.



In a second letter to his sister, Werner explains that the Institute has taught the students the story of Reiner Schicker, a soldier who supposedly volunteered to go behind enemy lines in Poland, and was arrested and killed by the Poles for his loyalty to the Nazis. Schicker is rumored to have said, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Frederick, Werner reports, thinks that this story is—but the rest of the sentence is blacked out. Werner ends his letter, "Sieg Heil."

The Nazi propaganda becomes more disturbing here, as Werner is being told that his own life is worthless compared to the value of the German state. Werner cannot yet know about the evils of the Holocaust, but his conscience is clearly already uneasy about Nazism. Frederick already shows himself to be willing to criticize the propaganda, saying things that must be censored by the authorities.



In his final letter to Jutta, Werner describes the field exercises in which he's participated. The other boys are excited for the day when they'll cross the English channel and conquer Britain. In the meantime, Werner takes pleasure in spending time with Frederick, who entertains him by pointing out the different types of birds in the fields.

For the time being, Werner's love for his sister, passion for science, and friendship with Frederick are more powerful than any loyalty to Hitler or nationalistic sense of superiority. However, the blacked out lines of the letter also provide a visible example of how Nazism is weakening the connection between Werner and Jutta—they are now separated by location and ideology, and also have no real way to communicate with each other without being censored.



THREE (JUNE 1940): PERFUMER

There is a man named Claude Levitte—nicknamed Big Claude—who lives just outside of Saint-Malo. He's an enterprising man, and always looking for a way to make money. Lately, he's noticed a mysterious man from Paris—a new arrival in Saint-Malo—staying at the home of Etienne LeBlanc. The man spends his days walking through the streets, making detailed drawings of the buildings. He sometimes carries pieces of wood and whittles them for hours while sitting outside the telegraph office. Claude decides that he could make money by reporting this suspicious person to the Germans.

In this passage full of dramatic (and tragic) irony, we recognize that Marie-Laure's father is preparing to build her another model of the city, just like the one he made in Paris. But although we know this, we also recognize that from Claude's perspective, Marie-Laure's father could be a spy for the French Resistance, trying to record information about the city. While some French people opposed the Nazis in whatever way they could, there were also many who went so far as to actively work alongside their oppressors, reporting on their peers for money or favors. Claude is clearly one of these collaborators.



THREE (JUNE 1940): TIME OF THE OSTRICHES

Time goes by, and still Marie-Laure and her father Daniel don't return to Paris. Marie-Laure is eager to return, and calculates that she's spent about a third of a year away from her home. In the meantime, however, she's become close with Etienne. Her father spends his days making models for her so that she can walk through the streets safely—and in the meantime he won't let Marie-Laure leave the house. Marie-Laure is eager for her father to complete the model, so that she can familiarize herself with the city and then begin exploring it. But she also remembers what the boys said about her months ago: "They'll probably take the blind girls before they take the gimps."

Marie-Laure is still haunted by doubts about her own abilities. She's intelligent and highly capable, but can't escape the fact that she's blind, and therefore considered subhuman by the Nazi German state. We can sense that Marie-Laure is "regressing" because of World War II—she's losing her old confidence and returning to the self-doubt she thought she'd conquered years previously. Meanwhile, Daniel seems to be pouring his frustration and fear into a new project, and a gift for his beloved daughter—the model of Saint-Malo that we have already seen in the prologue.



As time goes on, the mayor of Saint-Malo begins taxing his people more heavily, supposedly on behalf of the Nazis. People look the other way at Nazi cruelty, and Madame Manec mutters that this is the "time of the ostriches"—everyone's head is buried in the sand. All this time, Marie-Laure's father continues whittling models of the buildings.

We end the chapter with a poignant image—the ostrich burying its head in sand, often taken as a symbol for willful ignorance (or a purposeful blindness, to connect to the symbol of vision). This image is seemingly best applied to Werner, not Marie-Laure (as Werner senses that he's surrounded by evil, but simply doesn't want to know about it), but Manec seems to direct it at the townspeople of Saint-Malo—clinging to what is comfortable or familiar and purposefully ignoring the immorality occurring around them. This kind of willful ignorance was crucial to the rise of Nazism, and in allowing the Holocaust itself to occur.



THREE (JUNE 1940): WEAKEST

Werner proceeds with his field exercises. His commander is a cruel man named Bastian, who urges his students to think of themselves as one united body, fighting for the state. He asks one of the students to point to the weakest person in the group—the student points to a boy named Ernst. Bastian orders Ernst to run toward a faraway tree. He gives Ernst a head start, then orders the other boys to chase him down. Werner and his peers chase after Ernst. Ernst realizes that he desperately wants to catch Ernst—proving that he is strong and Ernst is weak. But just as he and his friends are about to catch Ernst, Ernst makes it to the tree.

In this important section, Werner begins to be seduced by the Fascist myths of violence and conflict. He gives in to his natural competitive instinct, and relishes the sensation of defeating a weaker opponent—Ernst. Fascism billed itself as a new kind of morality, in which the powerful made no apologies for their strength, and joyfully defeated all their opponents. It's easy for Werner to get sucked into this mentality, especially when it's what the crowd is doing, and opposing it would mean alienating himself as "weak."



THREE (JUNE 1940): MANDATORY SURRENDER

Marie-Laure's father has just learned that the people of Saint-Malo must surrender their radios immediately—anyone who refuses will be arrested. Marie-Laure wonders what will happen to Etienne's radios. Etienne doesn't open his door to talk to Marie-Laure.

In crisis, Etienne seems to be becoming more "crazy" and irrational—he locks himself up in his room, indulging in his agoraphobia, and refuses to talk, even to the people he loves, such as Marie-Laure.



THREE (JUNE 1940): MUSEUM

Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel rises early and goes to his first assignment of the day. In Paris, he's been sent to examine important collections of jewels and other treasures, and today, he's speaking with Professor Hublin of the Museum of Natural History. The professor sits down with Rumpel and shows him the museum catalog, which contains hundreds of thousands of entries, many of them for priceless gems.

We can sense that von Rumpel is hunting for the Sea of Flames—a diamond which, we already know, will be important to the plot of the novel. It's not clear to us if von Rumpel is interviewing Hublin because it's his job, or because—at least partly—he greedily desires the diamond for himself.



Rumpel asks to see the gems that are not in a catalog. Hublin replies that this would be impossible, and tries to draw Rumpel's attention to the museum's other items. Rumpel will not be distracted, however, and eventually he asks Hublin, in a falsely casual manner, how Hublin's children are doing. Hublin begins to shake, and whispers, "Enough." Hublin takes Rumpel to a large, beautifully designed safe, and produces a "blue stone as pig as a pigeon's egg" from the safe. Rumpel is impressed with the stone and the safe that's kept it hidden.

Here we can sense that von Rumpel will eventually be drawn to tracking down Marie-Laure's father—he's clearly the brilliant craftsman who designed the safe in which the diamond is kept. We can also guess that this particular stone is a clever forgery, designed by the museum to throw the Nazis off. The von Rumpel storyline is the most conventional of the book, as the Sea of Flames acts as the novel's "MacGuffin" (sometimes meaningless object that drives the plot), and von Rumpel's quest for it is a tale of a villain inexorably chasing the unsuspecting hero (Daniel, or Marie-Laure herself).



THREE (JUNE 1940): THE WARDROBE

In Saint-Malo, the Nazis ensure that the people keep a strict "blackout" (not allowing any lights to be on) at night so that the city will be invisible from the sky. One day, Marie-Laure visits Etienne in his room and asks him about his radios. Etienne reveals that while he's surrendered all his other radios, the broadcasting system in his attic continues to function. Marie-Laure points out the obvious—the Nazis will search Etienne's house and find the radio. Etienne asks Marie-Laure for her help: together they go to the attic and push a heavy wardrobe in front of the attic door, blocking it from view.

Etienne shows some signs of resisting the Nazi authority instead of giving into it entirely—but not necessarily because he wants to be part of the resistance. Rather, he seems unwilling to give up the device that is his most powerful link to his lost brother. For the time being, Etienne's disobedience has the gleeful secrecy of a parlor game—it's exciting for the young Marie-Laure.



THREE (JUNE 1940): BLACKBIRDS

Werner has settled into a comfortable routine at the National Institute: he learns phrenology (a pseudoscience concerned with how skull shape affects mental faculty), engineering, and rifle training, and he also participates in military drills. Ernst is dismissed from the academy for his weakness, and slowly other boys follow him. Werner savors his evenings with Dr. Hauptmann, who tells him about relativity, quantum mechanics, and other cutting-edge science. Werner thinks of the letters Jutta has been sending him—mostly casual, and "full of banalities."

It's worth noting that Dr. Hauptmann's interest in relativity would probably be perceived as subversive in Fascist Germany—Einstein, the developer of the Theory of Relativity, was a Jew, and thus the entire science of relativity was called into question. (There's a famous story that a group of Nazi scientists published a book called, "100 Reasons Einstein is Wrong." Einstein wittily replied, "Why 100 reasons? If I'm wrong, one would be enough.")



Werner considers his teachers. There is Volkheimer, "the giant," who is an older teenager and an assistant to the professors. Although he has a reputation for being an intimidating boy, Werner knows that Volkheimer secretly loves classical music, and savors the work of Bach, Mozart, and Vivaldi. In the evenings, Hauptmann puts Werner to work on a transceiver. Werner asks repeatedly what this device is for, but Hauptmann's answer is always the same: just think about the science, not the practical purpose. Werner, who's stayed close friends with Frederick, notices that Frederick is falling behind in his studies and his training. Werner helps Frederick study for exams and improve his marksmanship. Frederick, for his part, seems to obsess over the flight patterns of birds, especially birds that fly south in the winter.

Here, we meet a character we've already seen, Frank Volkheimer. Volkheimer seems to exemplify the ideal Fascist soldier—big, intimidating, and fearless. But Werner recognizes that even Volkheimer has a sensitive side, albeit one that he hides from others. It's telling that Volkheimer listens to Vivaldi, a non-German composer—it suggests that he's not as loyal a Nazi as he seems. While initially the novel seemed to present a simple conflict between fate and free will, in Werner's storyline Doerr now throws the idea of "duty" in to complicate the mix. On his own, Werner wouldn't want to actively be aiding the Nazi cause, but his sense of duty to his country and benefactors acts like a force as inexorable as fate (or a diamond's curse).

THREE (JUNE 1940): LETTER #5: TO DANIEL LEBLANC

On December 10, 1940, a man named Daniel LeBlanc, living in Saint-Malo, receives a telegraph telling him to return to Paris at the end of the month—and to travel "securely."

It's finally explicitly revealed that Daniel LeBlanc is the name of Marie-Laure's father. This telegram will upset the relatively comfortable existence Daniel and Marie-Laure have set up in Saint-Malo, as again larger forces affect the personal lives of Doerr's characters.

THREE (JUNE 1940): BATH

Marie-Laure's father has completed his model of Saint-Malo. The model will serve as a way for Marie-Laure to study the city—eventually she'll be able to move about freely through the streets. Meanwhile Marie-Laure's father (Daniel) has been going through a crisis lately. He obsesses over the diamond he's been carrying from Paris, and wonders if it's real. If so, he suspects that the stone could be cursed, as the legend says—meaning that he's putting his daughter in danger.

We finally get another view inside Daniel's head. For most of the novel so far, Daniel has been a distant character—he loves his daughter, but we've only once seen things from his perspective. Now, we see that Daniel has the same doubts and fears about the Sea of Flames that Marie-Laure does. From the outside, it seems like a silly legend, but when one's life has been upturned so thoroughly as Daniel's, it almost seems like something supernatural is at work.

Marie-Laure's father reveals that he has received a telegraph instructing him to return to Paris as soon as possible. One evening, he helps Marie-Laure bathe on the third floor of Etienne's house. As he washes his beloved daughter's hair, he feels a pang of guilt: he'll be leaving without her. Marie-Laure asks, "You're leaving, aren't you?" Daniel reluctantly replies that he is, and insists that he'll only be gone for about ten days. Marie-Laure is visibly saddened, but she makes Daniel promise that he'll be gone for no more than ten days.

Doerr parallels Daniel's departure with Werner's in the other storyline. Daniel assures Marie-Laure that he'll be back soon enough, but we can sense that he won't be returning in ten days, just as Werner won't retain his innocence and objectivity at the National Institute. In this painful passages, Daniel makes a promise that he simply can't keep—a promise supposed to comfort his daughter, but which winds up haunting her for the rest of her life.

THREE (JUNE 1940): WEAKEST (#2)

In December 1940, Werner participates in more training exercises. One day, Bastian asks Helmut Rödel, a tough, mean child, to point to the weakest boy in the group. To Werner's horror, Helmut points to Frederick. Bastian orders Frederick to run, just as Ernst did—the other boys will have to catch him before he reaches the tree. Frederick runs fairly fast, but not fast enough to beat the rest of his peers.

There's a distance growing between Frederick and Werner. They seem similarly unsure about Nazi ideology, but Werner is excelling at the school, so it's much easier for him to get swept up in his own success and ambition, whereas Frederick is unpopular and "weak," and so has no reason to embrace the ideas that punish and exclude him.

Bastian demands that Frederick prove that he's not the weakest. He orders Helmut to beat Frederick with a heavy hose. Frederick withstands the beating, but only barely. Bastian orders everyone to sing a patriotic German song, and then he dismisses his students. Werner can't force himself to look at Frederick. The narrator notes that Werner is now almost fifteen years old.

It's no coincidence that the chapter ends with the fact that Werner is nearly 15—the age at which he would have been sent to work in the mines, had he remained in Essen. Either way, he is "losing his innocence" at about the same time. Whether it's doing dangerous manual labor or becoming complicit in bullying and violence, either way Werner is no longer a child.

THREE (JUNE 1940): THE ARREST OF THE LOCKSMITH

Daniel LeBlanc is arrested just outside of Paris. Police officers look through his possessions, and find keys, as well as tiny saws. Daniel tries to explain that the saws are for making models for his blind daughter, but he's thrown in jail anyway. The officers accuse him of plotting to blow up buildings in Saint-Malo. Daniel begs to use a telephone to talk to his daughter, but he's denied one. One officer tells Daniel, "We are very close to Germany."

Tragically, Daniel's love for his child leads to his being arrested for espionage—the Germans don't understand or believe that he's trying to help his blind daughter learn to navigate her way. The close families in this novel are starting to drift apart: Jutta is disconnected from Werner, just as Daniel is now separated from Marie-Laure.

FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): THE FORT OF LA CITÉ

In 1944 again, Sergeant Major von Rumpel surveys the city of Saint-Malo with binoculars. Most of the city has been destroyed by bombing, though a few buildings, including "old Etienne's house," are still standing. Von Rumpel thinks about the strict orders he's been given from his military superiors: any German soldier who runs away now will be executed as a deserter. Von Rumpel contemplates going to Etienne's house as soon as he can manage.

We can sense from von Rumpel's furtive manner that he's not supposed to be looking for the diamond in Etienne's house—he should be helping his fellow soldiers to fight the Allies or escape from the bombing. But von Rumpel is clearly following his own agenda now—German authority is breaking down, and he doesn't care about his orders anymore.

FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): ATELIER DE RÉPARATION

Werner looks at Bernd the engineer, horrified. Volkheimer is trying to free everyone from the ruins of the hotel—he's trying to hack through a huge pile of debris in the hopes of making it to the passageway back to street level. Werner stares up at the ceiling and imagines the tons of weight pushing down on them right now. He considers himself, Bernd, and Volkheimer, and wonders if it wouldn't be fairer if they died after all—perhaps they "have reparations to make."

We still aren't sure exactly what has transpired between these 1944 sections and the "backstory" sections (now 1940-41), but Werner has clearly been in the army for some time by now, and has undoubtedly witnessed scenes of great carnage (and maybe even participated in them). Doerr knows that we know about the Holocaust, and the other actions of the German army during World War II—as a result, we can only assume the worst for Werner.



FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): TWO CANS

Marie-Laure wakes up from a delirious sleep in the cellar beneath the house. She finds that she's still holding the model house, and still wearing Etienne's coat. She wonders what's going on outside—if the Germans are still present in the city, or if they've left in a panic. Perhaps Etienne has been killed in the bombing. She feels for supplies in the cellar, and is relieved to find a set of cans. She remembers going to the Panthéon with her father Daniel, years ago. There, they watched Foucault's pendulum spinning across the floor, "grooving and regrooving its inhuman truth."

Even though Etienne and Daniel are (apparently) gone from her life at this point, Marie-Laure is still symbolically protected by both these father figures, as Etienne's coat and Daniel's model house keep her company in her time of need. The reference to Foucault's pendulum needs some explanation: the 19th century scientist Léon Foucault believed that he could prove the Earth's rotation by measuring the changes in the swaying of a pendulum. He hung such a pendulum from the ceiling of the Panthéon, an important, historical building in France (not to be confused with the Pantheon of Rome). For Marie-Laure, the swaying of this pendulum suggests the inevitability of the laws of the world—and the terrors of fate.



FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): NUMBER 4 RUE VAUBOREL

It is six in the evening, the day after the bombing. Sergeant Major von Rumpel slowly walks toward Etienne LeBlanc's house, noticing the ruins of the buildings around him. As he approaches the house, he notices that it's mostly unscathed, except that some of the windows have shattered. He notes that there are two mandated occupants in the house—Etienne, aged 63, and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, aged 16. Von Rumpel thinks about all the dangers he's endured, and walks into the house—the "eye of the hurricane."

We now start to see the climax of the novel developing—all the main characters come together at Etienne's house in Saint-Malo, with the villain (von Rumpel) pursuing the diamond in the possession of one of the heroes (Marie-Laure). The house is indeed like the eye of hurricane—a place surrounded by conflict and chaos, but which somehow remains eerily calm and intact. This goes along with the legend of the Sea of Flames diamond, which is supposed to keep its owner safe, but bring destruction all others.



FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): WHAT THEY HAVE

Under the Hotel of Bees, Volkheimer continues to hack at the debris barring his escape. In between his attempts, Volkheimer offers Bernd some water from his canteen. Werner notes that the soldiers have a few grenades left in their possession, but of course it would be suicidal to try to bomb their way out of the room. Werner notices that Volkheimer is trying to reduce his electric light. He turns it on for a few seconds to see what he's doing, then turns it off and proceeds with hacking. Volkheimer turns to Werner and tells him not to give up hope, saying, "Think of your sister."

Volkheimer's connection with Werner is reiterated in this passage. The gigantic young man is essentially a weapon for the Nazis, but he also has a heart, and seems to have genuine affection for Werner. Here Volkheimer seems to know Werner better than Werner knows himself—he's there to remind Werner of his love for Jutta at the perfect moment. Werner's love for Jutta is great enough that it saves him from despair—even though it seems likely that he's going to die in the cellar.

FOUR (8 AUGUST 1944): TRIP WIRE

Marie-Laure stays in the cellar, trying not to think about the fact that she needs to urinate. Eventually, she can't hold it any longer, and decides to take her chances. Carrying with her two cans, she climbs out of the cellar and is surprised to find that there are no explosions or guns waiting for her on the streets. She urinates back in Etienne's house, and then goes to drink from a bathtub (previously, she and Etienne had filled the tub to ensure a supply of water). She goes to find a knife and a brick to open a can of food. Just as she's about to open the can, she hears the bell ring, followed by footsteps downstairs.

Marie-Laure is a resourceful person, and her resourcefulness is directly tied to her blindness (something often thought of as a "disability"). Daniel has trained Marie-Laure from an early age to take care of herself—to maneuver her way through unfamiliar places. Here, Marie-Laure shows that these lessons have paid off—she can maneuver her way through a war-torn city when most ordinary people would be paralyzed by fear. This ending is a "cliffhanger," as it seems that von Rumpel has finally come for the diamond, but then Doerr (now flirting with the thriller genre) immediately jumps back in time, keeping up the suspense.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): JANUARY RECESS

In January of 1941, Frederick invites Werner to travel to Berlin with him and meet Frederick's family. Frederick has been slow and bruised lately, due to his beating from Helmut. Werner is excited to visit Berlin, which he associates with the brilliance of scientists like Bohr, Einstein, and Bayer. He agrees.

When All the Light We Cannot See *was published, Doerr was criticized for confusing Niels Bohr (a Danish scientist with Jewish blood) with other German scientists. But perhaps this grouping is intentional on Doerr's part—it signifies that Werner groups all scientists together into one community, even at a time when scientists were increasingly being forced to divide along national or political lines. Bohr himself was placed under house arrest before escaping to the U.S.*

Werner and Frederick travel to Berlin by train. In the city, Frederick takes Werner to his home, which is large and beautiful. Werner notices that a Jewish woman named Frau Schwartzenberger lives in a nearby apartment. Inside his apartment, Frederick puts on a pair of eyeglasses, revealing to Werner that he's nearly blind without them. He passed his eye exams by memorizing the eye charts in advance. Frederick also shows Werner his prized collection of bird drawings by the great American artist, Audubon. Werner, impressed, tells Frederick that his sister Jutta would love all this.

One of the most noticeable links between Werner and Frederick is the fact that both boys respect creative and scientific people from outside Germany: Frederick idolizes Audubon, just as Werner idolizes various non-German scientists (including Marie-Laure's grandfather). We're also reminded that Werner is still thinking about his sister all the time—clearly, he continues to love her even if there's a distance growing between them at the moment.

In the evening, Werner meets Frederick's mother and father. More guests come by the house, and everyone has a lavish dinner. During the dinner, someone mentions that Frau Schwartzenberger will "be gone soon enough." Later at night, Werner and Frederick sit down and discuss their futures. Frederick suggests that they don't have to go back to the National Institute. Naturally, Werner disagrees with this, explaining that he and Frederick need education to become an engineer and a birdwatcher, respectively. Frederick smiles sadly and tells Werner, "Your problem is that you still believe you own your life."

Like Jutta, Frederick pities Werner for believing so desperately in his own ambitions, and in his ability to determine his destiny through his own intelligence, skill, or perseverance—he's discounting the role of big, unbeatable forces like the Nazis, WWII, or, still larger, the forces of extinction and entropy that he studies in science class. The mention of Frau Schwartzenberger is the most obvious reference to the Holocaust in a novel that generally avoids the subject—she's the only real Jewish character who appears, and Frederick's neighbors feel sure that she will be evicted or arrested soon. They might not know that her life is in danger, but they are at the very least complicit in institutionalized racism and oppression.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): HE IS NOT COMING BACK

Marie-Laure wakes up one day, thinking that her father Daniel has returned from Paris. But this is only the wind—her father has been gone from Saint-Malo for many, many days. Marie-Laure is devastated by this. Madame Manec tries to cheer Marie-Laure up by telling her that the museum will be searching for her father, but nothing can make Marie-Laure feel better. She begins to hate Etienne for not doing more to track down his nephew, and wishes that she could leave the town to track him down herself.

Marie-Laure is understandably shattered by the disappearance of her father. She reacts by growing angry at Etienne for his agoraphobia, since it renders him virtually incapable of tracking down Daniel. In a way, this is Marie-Laure's way of expressing her own self-hatred—she's blind, and thus just as helpless as Etienne. And even if she could see and he could leave the house, they would still be helpless in the face of chaos that is World War II.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): PRISONER

In February 1941, the students at the National Institute are woken up at two am and sent outside to survey a prisoner. The prisoner, Bastian says, tried to escape from a work camp. Bastian assures the students that the prisoner would kill any of them in a second. Bastian orders every person in the school—both the students and the teachers—to soak the man with a bucket of cold water. It's freezing out, and this will surely cause the prisoner to die eventually. Werner takes his place in line, and soaks the prisoner when it's his turn, even though the man looks pathetic and harmless. When it's Frederick's turn, however, he pours his bucket of water on the ground. Bastian, furious, tells Frederick to soak the prisoner, but Frederick refuses.

This is one of the turning points in Werner's life—a close friend of his, with whom he has a lot in common, chooses to disobey the Nazis, but Werner still goes along with the crowd and does his "duty." The question, then, is why does Frederick disobey, but Werner doesn't? The apparent answer is that Werner has more to lose. He has ambitions of becoming a scientist one day, and can't risk losing his chances by disobeying his authorities at the National Institute—if he's kicked out, he'll be sent to war or back to the mines of Essen. Frederick, on the other hand, has a rich family to go home to, and no illusions about being in control of his life—paradoxically, this gives him more freedom to exercise his own set of moral values. Thus Doerr shows Frederick acting courageously, but also suggests that his actions are less courageous than Werner's would have been (if Werner too had disobeyed, that is).



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): PLAGE DU MÔLE

Marie-Laure's father has been gone from her life for 29 days. One day, Marie-Laure hears Madame Manec and Etienne arguing—Manec says, "I cannot stand by one moment longer." Manec instructs Marie-Laure to take her cane and walk outside. Slowly, Manec teaches Marie-Laure to walk through the streets, all the way to the ocean. Marie-Laure is terrified and awestruck by her sense of the ocean—the roar of the waves and the smell of salt. She's also relieved that she's not being arrested for being blind, as she always feared she'd be. She explores the beach and takes shells from the shore, putting them in her pocket. Manec continues to guide her along the shore for many hours. When they return to Etienne's house, Marie-Laure gives Etienne the shells she collected.

Here we are reminded that Marie-Laure had not left Etienne's house since arriving in Saint-Malo—she hadn't even experienced the ocean yet, even though it's so close by. Daniel had always made sure she stayed inside (at least until he finished his model), and it's only in his extended absence that Manec goes against his wishes. Marie-Laure forces herself to overcome her own fears of being arrested and tortured, and in doing so, she emerges from the episode a stronger, more confident young woman. Once again Marie-Laure is associated with sea shells and mollusks—beautiful, fragile creatures who are nevertheless strong and enduring.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LAPIDARY

For three months, Sergeant Major von Rumpel has traveled through Berlin and other cities, depositing gems and jewels from other nations. He stays in luxurious hotels whenever he travels on behalf of the Reich. His only failure so far is his failure to find the legendary Sea of Flames diamond. The stone he found in the Natural History Museum was a fake—just a piece of glass. Nevertheless, von Rumpel manages to track down the talented jeweler who designed the fake stone: a half-Algerian man named Dupont. Von Rumpel arranges for Dupont to be arrested, and then brings Dupont to speak with him. Von Rumpel, speaking French, begins his interrogation of the man, hoping for names he can use to find the diamond.

The "diamond plot" of the novel is more conventionally enjoyable than the other two plots (Werner's life and Marie-Laure's life). Indeed, in his review of the book, writer William Vollmann compared the diamond plot to stories in the Indiana Jones *films. Von Rumpel is a villainous detective, using intimidation and bribery to hunt down a valuable object. Perhaps it's necessary for Doerr's novel to have a subplot of this kind, however—the thrills and mysteries of these chapters help to balance out the heady themes that Werner and Marie-Laure confront, and keep the story moving at a fast pace.*



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LETTER #6: TO MARIE-LAURE, FROM DANIEL

Daniel LeBlanc sends his daughter a letter. He explains that he is in Germany. He claims that he's being served "wonderful food," and insists that Marie-Laure be polite to Etienne and Madame Manec. He concludes by saying, "I am right beside you."

We have no idea where Daniel is, or how he's managed to send his daughter letters, but it seems that Daniel is concealing information—just as he's done in the past—in order to be more comforting to his daughter. Daniel's closing words highlight both the importance of family, and also the theme of interconnectedness, as he is present as a loving force in Marie-Laure's life even after his physical disappearance.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): ENTROPY

After the death of the prisoner at the National Institute, the prisoner's body is kept outside for a week. Over the next few days, Frederick is picked again and again as the weakest soldier, and each time, he's forced to outrun the rest of the soldiers, then beaten for failing to do so. Werner tries to focus on his work in Hauptmann's laboratory. Hauptmann continues to lavish Werner with praise.

The gruesome display of the prisoner's body could be interpreted as a triumphant sign of German power, but its meaning is also more intimidating—the body seems to say, "obey, or you'll get the same as me." Werner, however, tries to avoid thinking about this, and instead focuses on the objective, ideal world of physics. The problem is that his amoral science will be put to work for immoral purposes.



One evening, Werner and Volkheimer discuss the prisoner who died. Volkheimer claims that the professors bring out the prisoner every year, always claiming he's Polish, Russian, etc. Volkheimer adds, "Decency does not matter to them."

Volkheimer seemingly has more perspective on the matter than Werner does. Volkheimer recognizes the truth about the Nazis' methods (a truth Werner tries to avoid), even if he goes along with these methods himself.



In the coming weeks, the students bully Frederick by leaving dead animals in his bed and pushing him around. Werner tries to look out for Frederick by helping him with work and polishing his boots. One day in class, Hauptmann discusses the principle of entropy with his students. Entropy laws dictate that every process "must by law decay" over time.

Werner is trying his best to be a good person and help out his friend, but even these acts of kindness are a kind of cop-out, a way for Werner to ignore the real, overarching evil at the National Institute: its emphasis on torture, cruelty, and brute force. He will help Frederick in private, but not stand up for him in the face of authority.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): THE ROUNDS

Marie-Laure and Madame Manec continue to walk through the streets together, until Marie-Laure feels fairly comfortable doing so on her own. She collects items from the street—shells, leaves, pinecones, etc. She meets an old man named Crazy Harold Bazin, who fought in World War I and lost much of his face in an explosion. Bazin likes to brag about the history of Saint-Malo—years ago, he claims, it was a fortress against pirates.

Here we meet a new character, Harold Bazin, who fought in World War I, and he, like Etienne, is considered "crazy" because of the trauma he experienced during the war. The fact that Bazin loses his face makes no difference to Marie-Laure—we've already come to recognize that her blindness makes her a better judge of character than many others, since she's not thrown off by outward appearances.



Marie-Laure wonders what has become of Daniel. She feels the model city he built for her, and wonders about the letter he sent her. She hopes he was telling the truth about his delicious meals.

In times of crisis, Marie-Laure turns to her beloved model of the city. In another sense, she's turning to what she knows *to be true. Marie-Laure finds it almost impossible to confront the fact that she doesn't know where her father is, or whether or not he's telling the truth. She finds comfort in the small, idealized model of the city, especially when the "big" version of reality is so uncertain and frightening.*



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): NADEL IM HEUHAUFEN

Late at night, Werner, Volkheimer, and Dr. Hauptmann go outside to test their transceiver. The purpose of the device, Hauptmann finally reveals, is to locate soldiers over large areas. Volkheimer is sent to hide somewhere in the large field outside the National Institute, broadcasting via radio. Working quickly, Werner uses their receiver to locate Volkheimer in the darkness. Hauptmann watches Werner work, and drinks occasionally from a tiny flask. Werner is disturbed—he's never seen Hauptmann look so gleeful and uncontrolled. When Werner has determined Volkheimer's location, Hauptmann tells him to lead them toward his friend. Werner does so, and sees Volkheimer lying down in the darkness. Hauptmann produces a pistol from his pocket, and for a second Werner imagines that Hauptmann is about to shoot Volkheimer. Instead, Hauptmann fires the gun into the air, and a pack of dogs rushes toward Volkheimer—Volkheimer brushes off the dogs easily. Hauptmann laughs contentedly, and Werner is relieved—Hauptmann is back to his old, calm self.

In this long, disturbing episode, Werner sees underneath the veil of even the "good" Nazis. Dr. Hauptmann had seemed to be a kindly, fatherly figure looking out for Werner's interests, but now it becomes more clear that Hauptmann is nothing of the kind—he's just using Werner to advance the Nazi agenda. Furthermore, Hauptmann is using science itself—the objective, universal practice that Werner so adores—for his own twisted purposes. The radio science Werner has been working on has no morality or immorality inherent to it, but it can still be used as a weapon to further an immoral cause—in this case to find and kill those whom the Nazis consider enemies. Werner again tries to avoid this truth, however, and chooses to believe that the calm, friendly side of Hauptmann is his "real" self.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): PROPOSAL

One day in Saint-Malo, Marie-Laure is sitting in her home while Madame Manec and her friends criticize the Nazi tyranny. The Nazis in Saint-Malo tax everything excessively—for instance, Manec's friend's daughter wants to get married, but can't pay the tax for a gold ring. Manec proposes that she and her friends do small things to undermine the Nazi authorities. Many of Manec's friends refuse to help, reasoning that they have responsibilities to their children and grandchildren, and thus don't want to endanger their lives. Marie-Laure listens, fascinated, and wonders who will be brave enough to fight back against the Germans.

At the same time that Werner is giving in to the Nazis' intimidation and authority, Madame Manec is bravely choosing to oppose them in France. Of course, this is an easier choice for Manec than it is for Werner—the Nazis are actively antagonistic to Manec and her peers, and she has very little to lose—she is old and seemingly has no close family she's responsible for. Werner, on the other hand, is being actively praised and pressured by the authorities and his peers, and he is unwilling to give up his dream of becoming a scientist for the sake of his morals. Nevertheless, Manec appears as an inspiring example of the French Resistance, and how people of all ages and walks of life can find small ways of changing things and asserting their agency—if they are brave enough and choose to do so.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): YOU HAVE OTHER FRIENDS

The boys in the National Institute bully Frederick horribly. Werner alone looks out for his friend, helping him whenever he can. Late at night, Werner and Hauptmann test their transceiver with Volkheimer's help.

Werner is performing one good deed to hide the fact that he's refusing to do something more important: in other words, he's helping Frederick in private when he could be standing up for him in public, or even opposing the authorities altogether.

One day Werner asks Frederick why he doesn't just leave the National Institute and return to Berlin. Frederick replies, a little too suddenly, that it might be better if he and Werner weren't friends anymore. Werner, in spite of himself, remembers being with his sister, years ago. He imagines how sad Jutta was when he destroyed their radio. Werner tries to reconcile with Frederick, but Frederick ignores him.

Frederick seems to see through Werner's hypocrisy, and call him out on it. He plays a similar role to Jutta, as a mostly one-note character whose role is primarily to act as a "conscience" for Werner. It makes sense, then, why Werner immediately thinks of Jutta and her disappointment in him when Frederick reacts in a similar way.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): OLD LADIES' RESISTANCE CLUB

Some of the old women of Saint-Malo band up to undermine the Nazis. They learn that a Nazi leader is allergic to goldenrod, so they put goldenrod in his clothes and food. They intentionally send government packages to the wrong people, and delay train schedules. Madame Manec instructs her friend Madame Blanchard to write "Free France now" on money, ensuring that the message will be distributed across the country. While Etienne is morose and uninterested in undermining the authorities, Manec is gleeful, and says that she feels younger than she has in years as a result of her plots.

In the twilight of her life, Madame Manec gains a new sense of liveliness and purpose. Madame Manec is one of the only characters in the book who dares to actively risk her own life in fighting what she sees as evil. Etienne, on the other hand, remains stuck in his narrow, agoraphobic world. He is still frightened by his experiences in World War I, and so seems unwilling to involve himself in any outside affairs now—even if that means turning a blind eye to wrongdoing.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): DIAGNOSIS

Sergeant Major von Rumpel pays a visit to the doctor. Although von Rumpel has been successful in tracking down important gems, he is dismayed to discover that the doctor will need to "take a biopsy" to determine what's wrong with him. Von Rumpel tries not to think about his health issues, and instead thinks about Dupont. Thanks to Dupont's information, he's been able to determine that there are three cunning replicas of the Sea of Flames sent out by the museum authorities, plus the real stone itself.

Von Rumpel's character is made slightly more complicated with the introduction of his health issues. His desire for the diamond now starts to seem more poignant than greedy—in no way would a diamond make a difference to a man who's seriously sick. The problem is that von Rumpel's pursuit of his goal leads him to threaten, steal, and even (possibly) kill.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): WEAKEST (#3)

One day in April, Werner wakes up to find that Frederick is not in his bunk. He's told that the previous night, some of the boys forced Frederick to go outside and prove his eyesight by shooting targets. Unsatisfied with this story, Werner goes to the Institute hospital, where he sees a bunk covered in blood. He asks a nurse where Frederick has gone. The nurse sternly tells him that Frederick is in Leipzig for surgery—then she orders Werner to go to lunch. Werner thinks to himself that he'll never be able to tell Jutta about what's happened to Frederick.

One aspect of the Nazi regime was that it ordered its people to serve the state at all costs, and then chastised them for showing concern for others when they needed help. This is exactly what happens here: the nurse in the National Institute tells Werner not to worry about Frederick—Werner's own closest friend. This shows that the administration condones and even supports what happened to Frederick—he was weak, so it seems only natural for the "strong" to prove their strength by taking advantage of him. Werner clearly feels guilty for not protecting Frederick or standing up for him, and once again Jutta's opinion of him acts as Werner's conscience.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LETTER #7: DANIEL LEBLANC TO HIS DAUGHTER

In this letter, Daniel tells his daughter that the people in his cell are very kind, and entertain him with jokes. He explains that he has an "angel" who is delivering his letters to Marie-Laure. Finally, he tells Marie-Laure that he'll be able to receive packages. He asks Marie-Laure to send him something, and concludes that he is "incredibly safe."

As Daniel sends more letters, it becomes increasingly clear that he's lying to Marie-Laure to keep her from worrying too much. He keeps repeating that he's safe, happy, etc., but this seems unlikely—otherwise, he'd have a better way of delivering letters (and wouldn't be so grateful to send a simple letter to his daughter).

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): GROTTO

In the summer, Marie-Laure spends time with Madame Manec and Crazy Harold Bazin. Bazin says that he wants to show Marie-Laure something. Accompanied by Manec, they go down to an alley far from Etienne's house. Bazin opens a heavy gate and leads Marie-Laure and Manec through. He takes them down a flight of stairs, and Marie-Laure senses that they're very close to the ocean. At the bottom of the stairs, Bazin tells Marie-Laure to run her hands along a curved wall that's covered with snails and dead crabs. He tells Marie-Laure that he used to play in this area, along with Etienne and Marie-Laure's grandfather Henri. Manec insists that they must go back to the house, and Bazin agrees. But he gives Marie-Laure the key to the gate.

We can sense that this grotto will become important in the plot later on, even if we don't know exactly how. The grotto is a good example of a "Chekhov's Gun"—an element of the plot or setting whose importance is heavily foreshadowed. (As Chekhov put it, "if in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.") Doerr's descriptions of the shells and barnacles in the grotto is beautiful, and reminds us that Marie-Laure has always been fascinated by shells, snails, and whelks—in a way, the grotto is distinctly "her" space, because she feels such a strong connection with the creatures there.




FIVE (JANUARY 1941): INTOXICATED

At the National Institute, there are always rumors of Germany's glorious victories against Russia and England. Volkheimer is sent away from the school to become a sergeant in the army. The students whisper that he's been sent to Russia, where he's a great warrior for the Führer. Werner thinks back to his time in the orphanage. He feels that he's being bullied and disliked for being an orphan. He wonders if Jutta represents everything that he doesn't like about himself.

Much as Marie-Laure gets angry at Etienne because of her own self-hatred and frustration, Werner begins to resent his Jutta as a result of his own self-hatred. He wishes he were braver and could have stuck up for Frederick, but he also wishes that he didn't have to go through so much moral agony—he wishes he could be a loyal Nazi, or else never have to face such decisions in the first place.




Werner continues to receive letters from Jutta, though they're almost completely censored. These letters make Werner seem untrustworthy to the teachers—they wonder why Jutta is asking so many questions. Only Werner's work for Hauptmann keeps him safe from bullying and from Bastian. One evening, Werner is working in the laboratory when he remembers something the Frenchman told him years ago via radio: "Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever."

The Frenchman's words become more relevant than ever to Werner's life: he realizes that opening one's eyes doesn't only mean studying science—in fact, focusing too exclusively on pure science is a kind of blindness. Opening one's eyes means seeing the world in its totality: recognizing that the Nazi state is only allowing Werner to study science because they want more efficient ways to kill enemies.






FIVE (JANUARY 1941): THE BLADE AND THE WHELK

In a hotel in the city of Saint-Malo, Madame Manec and Marie-Laure sit with a man named René. He claims that he's taken notice of Manec's maneuvers against the Germans. Marie-Laure listens to René speak with Manec, but senses that he's mouthing things and making gestures that she can't understand.

Marie-Laure can tell that Madame Manec is becoming involved in more serious French Resistance efforts. Manec's courage goes beyond small, everyday rebellious actions—she is now truly risking her life for her cause.



Manec and Marie-Laure go back to their home. Manec suggests that she and Marie-Laure need pseudonyms for their new "work." Marie-Laure suggests a pseudonym for herself: "the Whelk." Manec laughs and gives herself a name: "the Blade."

By choosing a name for herself, Marie-Laure is announcing her role in the French Resistance: an act of considerable bravery for someone so young. It's also no coincidence that Marie-Laure chooses the name of a shell for herself. She's always been interested in mollusks for both their fragile beauty and their patient resilience, and she seems to especially admire the slow process and self-sufficient safety of the whelk.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LETTER #8: JUTTA TO WERNER

In this letter, Jutta asks Werner why he hasn't been writing to her, but the rest of her complaint is censored. She explains that she's been working hard in the orphanage to ensure that the soldiers have enough clothing to fight. She ends her letter by saying that she's sent Werner something that she found under his cot—something he could use right now.

Jutta acts as the moral constant in Werner's life: his education is changing his point of view, but whenever he talks to Jutta, he's reminded of how things used to be. This is incredibly important for Werner, and disruptive for his indoctrination as a Nazi.



Werner finishes reading the letter and looks at what Jutta has sent him: the notebook of "questions" that Werner began writing as a young child. Werner flips through the book and looks at his old designs: designs for elaborate machines to improve life in the orphanage. He's overcome by homesickness.

As a young child, Werner's first instinct was to use his intelligence to improve life for the people around him. Now, Werner realizes that he has essentially sold himself to the Nazi state, where his intelligence is being used to hurt and oppress people.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): ALIVE BEFORE YOU DIE

As Marie-Laure listens carefully from downstairs, Madame Manec goes to talk to Etienne on the fifth floor of the house. Manec tells Etienne that his knowledge of the area—the streets, the tides, the weather—could be very useful to the French resistance in Saint-Malo. Etienne refuses to help Manec, however, pointing out that he'd be arrested immediately. He knows that he's being watched by Claude Levitte, the perfumer who lives nearby. Etienne also points out that the resistance in Saint-Malo will accomplish nothing—the "system" of Fascism will still stand strong. Manec proposes that Etienne transmit secret messages via one of the resistance group's radios. Etienne refuses, and tells Manec to leave him alone.

Etienne represents a middle way between the active collaboration of those like Claude Levitte and the resistance of those like Manec. Etienne argues, not without merit, that he could never defeat the Nazis through any individual action of his own—the forces of history and politics will always be more powerful than his own personal decisions. We can also understand his choice because he's already lost one loved one to the madness of war—his brother, Henri, during World War I. Furthermore, if Etienne were caught, then the Germans would seize his house, endangering Manec and Marie-Laure. Despite all these valid reasons, however, the fact remains that Etienne is choosing passivity, thus making himself complicit in whatever might follow because of his lack of resistance.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): NO OUT

It is January, 1942, and Werner has just asked Dr. Hauptmann to be sent back to his home in the orphanage. Hauptmann is furious with Werner's request. Hauptmann reminds Werner that he's only being treated well because of Hauptmann's influence. He adds that Werner will stay in the school, "serving the Reich," for the foreseeable future. Werner will receive no more special treatment from Hauptmann, he stresses. This is devastating for Werner. He thinks to himself that he can't stay at the Institute any longer.

Werner finally decides to take some action and stand up for what he believes is right (in contrast to Etienne in the last chapter), but it's basically too late now—Werner is too entrenched in the Nazi system, and the authorities have too much control over his future. Hauptmann again shows his true colors—he doesn't care at all about Werner, except as an intelligent assistant to help him in furthering the Nazi cause. The Nazi ideology of strength above all else means that even those who act like friends are quick to turn on each other at the first sign of weakness. This was true even at the highest levels of the Nazi government.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): THE DISAPPEARANCE OF HAROLD BAZIN

Marie-Laure, Madame Manec, and some resistance members are walking through the streets, planning to meet up with Harold Bazin—but they're surprised to find that Bazin is not sitting in his usual place, outside the city library. Manec asks a nearby librarian where Bazin has gone, and the librarian says that she doesn't know. Manec begins to panic, and suggests to her friends that they should ease up on their efforts in the next few weeks. Marie-Laure senses that the city of Saint-Malo is slowly being converted into the model in her room—that is, it's being cleared of all people.

Marie-Laure and Manec face the same challenge that so many resistance fighters faced in France: continue or give up? There was often no indication that the fighters' measures were weakening the German war effort at all. As a result, many people gave up, sure that their efforts were meaningless. Once again a poignant parallel is drawn between the model of Saint-Malo and Saint-Malo itself.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): EVERYTHING POISONED

At the National Institute, Werner surveys the Nazi banners hanging on the wall, ordering everyone to serve the German state. Instructors at the school are slowly disappearing—they're being sent to fight in the army. The new instructors are all wounded or scarred in some way. Nevertheless, the news from the front is always good—the Germans are winning the war, defeating the Russians, etc. Werner's peers tell him that their fathers are dying in battle. Werner also begins to question the school's myths of racial purity—there can be no "purity" in a human being, Werner thinks, especially not a kind of purity that's measurable in hair color or nose size.

It becomes clear that Werner's knowledge of real, objective science actually guards him from being seduced by Nazi pseudoscience. The Nazis used true science in building weapons, but racial myths to further their ideology—essentially twisting anything, even the objective and amoral, to fit their needs. According to Nazism, all life ascends to the master race: the Aryans. Werner recognizes that life simply isn't like this: life is messy and full of complication. If there is a human purity, than it's unrelated to things as superficial as eye or hair color.



In 1942, Dr. Hauptmann calls Werner to his office. Hauptmann reports that he's being called to Berlin to serve the Reich. Werner congratulates Hauptmann, and Hauptmann says nothing more to Werner. Werner walks back from Hauptmann's office, and notices Bastian yelling at the students.

In this terrifying section, we realize that Werner is all on his own now: his one protector, Dr. Hauptmann, is has now turned against him, and is leaving him in the hands of sadists and bullies like Bastian.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): VISITORS

One day at Etienne's house, there is a knock at the door. Marie-Laure, Etienne, and Madame Manec all think they're going to be arrested. But in fact, it is only a group of French police officers. The officers explain that they've been sent from the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Marie-Laure notices that the officers smell like they've "been feasting." They explain that Marie-Laure's father has been convicted of conspiracy and theft, and sent to prison. They add that they believe Marie-Laure's father was sentenced with the "proper tribunal." This seems to give Etienne hope, but Marie-Laure is more suspicious—she wonders if anybody will do anything for her father.

Marie-Laure's lack of sight gives her some interesting insights into the police officers' character. She notes that they smell like a feast, suggesting that they're corrupt, and selfishly hoard food while much of the city is starving. Strangely, Marie-Laure is more realistic about her father's fate than either Manec or Etienne: she alone seems to grasp that it's unlikely that the officers will do anything to help Daniel out of prison. Marie-Laure has been forced to grow up fast.



The officers ask Marie-Laure, Manec, and Etienne more questions. They ask to see the letters that Daniel sent to Marie-Laure. Etienne produces these, and they read them carefully. The officers also ask to search the house, and Etienne obliges. The officers search every floor, and don't notice that the heavy wardrobe on the sixth floor is blocking a door. They advise Etienne to throw away a collection of French flags that he keeps in his room, and then bid him goodbye.

The French officers seem to have split allegiance—they're clearly loyal to Nazi authority, but also seem to be trying to help Etienne, advising him to get rid of French flags. For the time being, Etienne's secret radio room is safe: the wardrobe has served its purpose. This suggests that Etienne could easily get away with making French Resistance broadcasts—only his fear holds him back.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LETTER #9: WERNER TO JUTTA

Werner writes Jutta a letter that's heavily censored (more than 75% of it is blacked out). He says that life is very difficult for him. He mentions Frederick, who once said there is no such thing as free will. He says, "My mistake was …" but the rest of his message is blacked out.

Werner seems to be thrown into fear and anxiety by the absence of Frederick and Hauptmann, and the realization that he actually has very little control over his own destiny. The absence of free will in Werner's life will persist for some time, as he's now controlled by the Nazi state and part of its war machine.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): THE FROG COOKS

In the weeks following the police officers' visit, Madame Manec is unusually formal and polite with Etienne and Marie-Laure, as if she's hiding something. Sometimes, she disappears for long periods of time. One day, at the kitchen table, Etienne mutters to Manec, "Blow up any German tanks?" Manec replies by telling Etienne about the proverbial frog in the pot of water. If you throw a frog into a hot pot of boiling water, it jumps out. But if you put the frog in a cold pot and slowly heat it, the frog will stay until it dies.

Etienne defends his choice by suggesting that participating in the Resistance wouldn't accomplish anything: he wouldn't be blowing up any tanks, for example. Manec's response is ambiguous, and could have several meanings. She could mean that the French Resistance has to start somewhere, and slowly pave the way for more dangerous attacks later on, which the Nazi "frog" will never recognize. On the other hand, she could also be referring to people like Etienne as the "frog"—they have their rights and freedoms taken away slowly, rather than all at once, and by the time they think of fighting back, it's too late.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): ORDERS

Werner is summoned to speak with the commandant at the National Institute. The commandant calls Werner into his office and tells him that something has come to his attention: Werner's age has been recorded incorrectly. Werner is 18, not 16. Werner doesn't understand, as this information is false. The commandant informs Werner that Dr. Hauptmann has pointed out the age discrepancy. Hauptmann has arranged for Werner to be transferred to the special technology division of the German army. The commandant tells Werner that he is "very lucky."

Instead of being sent to study rocket science in Berlin, Werner is instead shipped off to war—all because of bad timing and forces external to his own free will. It's remarkable that Hauptmann could be so spiteful to his former favorite pupil: instead of simply abandoning Werner, Hauptmann has gone out of his way to punish Werner for questioning the Nazi cause—a punishment that is likely to end in Werner's death.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): PNEUMONIA

In the spring in Saint-Malo, Madame Manec gets sick. Marie-Laure takes care of her, and so does Etienne. Etienne is a tender nurse—he even reads to Manec when she's getting tired. Manec becomes very cold, and Etienne covers her with blankets.

It seems that Manec is at the end of her life, and we see that it was partly this fact that gave her such reckless courage—she knew she would die soon anyway, so she decided to at least spend the rest of her life doing something important.

FIVE (JANUARY 1941): LETTER #10: DANIEL LEBLANC TO HIS DAUGHTER

Daniel LeBlanc sends Marie-Laure a letter in which he tells her that her parcels have arrived, containing a toothbrush, soap, etc. Unfortunately, the guards wouldn't let Daniel keep the soap. He tells his daughter that he dreams about being back in the museum. He remembers making Marie-Laure models for her birthday, and ends the letter by thanking the "brave soul" who takes his letters to Saint-Malo.

It's clear that Daniel loves his daughter more than anything, and he doesn't even regret making her the models that got him arrested in the first place. Once again, it's unclear how much of what he's saying is the truth, and how much he's making up so that Marie-Laure won't worry too much.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): TREATMENTS

Von Rumpel has discovered that he has a tumor, probably brought on by his exposure to mustard gas during the war. He takes medicines to reduce the growth of the tumor, but the medicines make him very ill. In spite of his sickness, he researches the history of the Sea of Flames. He reads a book explaining that the stone can make its owner live forever.

We see where Doerr is going with this: von Rumpel seems to be dying because of a growing tumor in his body, and so he's going to hunt down the diamond to try and give himself eternal life. This takes the Sea of Flames plot to a new level, as von Rumpel becomes a more grotesque figure, and the "curse" of the diamond becomes real for all intents and purposes—as long as this man is willing to kill for its "power."



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): HEAVEN

Madame Manec slowly recovers from her illness. In June, she and Marie-Laure walk, very slowly, around the city. Marie-Laure hears that Madame Manec drops off an envelope—she also guesses that Manec has picked up another one. Manec and Marie-Laure sit down to rest for a while. Manec tells Marie-Laure that she must continue to believe that Marie-Laure's father will return to her. Manec insists that people should never stop believing in what's important to them.

Manec gives Marie-Laure some important advice—never stop believing. The importance of hope, love, and belief in the novel is enormous: while the physical world is always in a state of deterioration (bombs are always dropping, species are going extinct, etc.), these qualities (especially among family members) remain uniquely strong and long-lasting. The problem is, this same idea can also be applied to von Rumpel's situation—he clings to his belief in the power of the diamond, and uses this as justification for his actions.



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): FREDERICK

Werner has been transferred to the German army. Before he's shipped out, however, he makes a trip to Berlin, using the last of his savings. In Berlin, he goes to Frederick's house, and meets Frederick's mother for the first time in nearly a year. Frederick's mother tells Werner to be careful when talking to Frederick—Frederick might not remember Werner at all.

Werner goes out of his way (even spending the last of his money) to try and make things better with Frederick. After finally trying to stand up to the Nazis and finding himself powerless, Werner still feels tremendously guilty about betraying his friend. Werner recognizes that even if he himself never bullied Frederick, he didn't stop anyone else from doing it.



Werner goes to see Frederick, who is sitting in bed, being fed his meal. Frederick seems only dimly aware of who Werner is. Werner mentions Frederick's collection of bird drawings, but Frederick doesn't remember this collection at all. He then confuses Werner with his own mother. Upset and uncertain, Werner leaves Frederick's house and walks through Berlin. The city is empty and quiet, not at all like the city Werner dreamed of as a child.

This is an early sign that the scenes of reconciliation and reunion in All the Light We Cannot See *are nearly always anticlimactic, or even tragic. Werner tries to apologize to Frederick, but it's too late—there will never be a true reconciliation between Frederick and Werner, because Frederick no longer remembers who Werner is.*



FIVE (JANUARY 1941): RELAPSE

In June 1942, Marie-Laure wakes up to find that Madame Manec is not in the kitchen as usual. She goes to Manec's room, and is surprised to find her there, lying in bed. Marie-Laure feels Manec's face, and finds that it is very hot. She calls Etienne, who rushes to Manec's room. Etienne touches Manec, then whispers, "Madame is dead."

Marie-Laure basically loses a mother-figure with Madame Manec's death. Furthermore, Manec has been an important influence on Marie-Laure's moral development, inspiring her to undermine the Nazis in France and focus on the things she finds most important.



SIX (8 AUGUST 1944): SOMEONE IN THE HOUSE

Back in 1944, Marie-Laure has just heard someone walk into her home. It is not Etienne—if it were, then he'd already be calling for Marie-Laure. She realizes that the intruder isn't a rescuer, either—a rescuer would be calling for survivors. Terrified, she rushes around the third floor, trying to decide what to do. Noises come from the kitchen. Marie-Laure decides to run to the sixth floor and hide in the radio room behind the wardrobe. She crawls through the wardrobe, open the secret panel on the wardrobe's back, and crawls through. She clutches the stone in her hand, hoping it will keep her safe. She also takes her cans, knife, and brick with her.

Marie-Laure thinks fast—she correctly deduces tat the man walking into her house (whom we can guess to be Reinhold von Rumpel, strolling into the "eye of the hurricane") is not a friend, since he's not calling for survivors. She doesn't have to think twice about where to hide, either—she knows that the safest place is the radio room, protected by the secret door in the back of the wardrobe. Marie-Laure is also quick-thinking enough that she takes supplies and a weapon with her. By now the Sea of Flames has become a mystical object for Marie-Laure as well—she hopes that the stone's "curse" will protect her from her attacker.



SIX (8 AUGUST 1944): THE DEATH OF WALTER BERND

Underneath the hotel, Bernd is muttering gibberish. Suddenly, he stops talking, then sits upright and begs for water. He looks up and stares at Volkheimer and Werner. He explains that he visited his father last year. His father had asked Bernd to stay, rather than leaving to walk through the streets to visit his friends. Bernd had left his father anyway, even though he had nobody to visit.

Berndt is clearly at the end of his life—and not just because the title of this chapter says so. Bernd is expressing his regrets—including the time when he ignored his family when he could have spent time with them. Doerr rather pessimistically suggests that most humans leave behind them a vast quantity of regrets and misdeeds, most of which go unnoticed.



As Bernd's voice fades away, Werner decides to work on the radio beside him. The transceiver is crushed, but he tries to repair it anyway. He remembers his days a radio repairman, back when he lived at the orphanage.

We can imagine that Werner will be able to repair the radio, given how talented he was even as a child—and that this radio will then provide a link between him and Marie-Laure.



SIX (8 AUGUST 1944): SIXTH-FLOOR BEDROOM

Von Rumpel has entered Etienne's house. He looks through the rooms, hoping to find a dollhouse, which he knows contains the diamond for which he's been hunting. Rumpel thinks about his own daughters, and wishes he could have built beautiful models for them, of the kind that Daniel built for his daughter. As he looks for the stone, the city is very quiet.

Von Rumpel seems to be getting greedier and even crazier as the story goes on—he's not even interested in serving the Reich anymore. Doerr partly makes him a more sympathetic character by reminding us that von Rumpel has children, but this fact also shows that if he really does believe the diamond's curse is real, then von Rumpel is willing to doom his family in order to save his own life.



SIX (8 AUGUST 1944): MAKING THE RADIO

Werner tries to repair his radio. He experiments with the wires inside, and tries to press the earphone in more rightly. He has a vision of himself working on a radio at the age of eight, with Jutta sitting next to him. As he works, Volkheimer looks at him, hopeful.

The thought of Jutta no longer makes Werner feel guilty or resentful—now she inspires him to work harder, and gives him something to hope and fight for.



SIX (8 AUGUST 1944): IN THE ATTIC

Marie-Laure can hear a man searching through her house. He opens the wardrobe, but doesn't see the secret panel at the back. As she waits for the man to leave, she begins to become tired. She wonders what she would do if the man found where she was hiding—maybe she'd be capable of attacking the man before he could hurt her.

Unlike Werner, Marie-Laure hasn't yet been put in a situation where she has to use violence against another person—but a climactic encounter now seems inevitable, and she may have to fight von Rumpel soon enough.



Marie-Laure feels around the radio room. She notices Etienne's old records, and his recording machine. She goes over what she has with her: a knife, two cans, and a brick.

Marie-Laure doesn't have enough food to last more than a few days. Unfortunately, we know just how patient and persistent von Rumpel can be.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): PRISONERS

In the summer of 1942, Werner has just begun his tour of the German army. A corporal welcomes Werner—now wearing a helmet and uniform—to the army by saying, "You're little." He's sent to a train which will take him out to the frontlines. On the way, the train passes by another train. To Werner's horror, he sees that the train is carrying huge numbers of naked, hungry-looking men. Another soldier, "Neumann Two," explains that they are prisoners. They've been captured, and now are being sent to be murdered.

Of course Werner is little—he's two years younger than the army believes him to be, and he's always been small for his age as well. Our first impressions of the German army are chilling: the soldiers are blank-faced and seemingly oblivious to the horrific sight of thousands of prisoners being moved around them. Perhaps this was the point of the bucket of water test at the National Institute—training soldiers to become desensitized to suffering.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): THE WARDROBE

After the death of Madame Manec, Etienne remains in his room at all times, and doesn't let Marie-Laure see him. Madame Blanchard, a friend of Manec's, spends time with Marie-Laure and takes her to Manec's funeral service.

At this point, we can guess that Etienne's agoraphobia is partly a reflection of his sadness at having lost so many of his loved ones—whenever something tragic happens, he refuses to leave his room.



Weeks after Madame Manec's funeral, Etienne gets an electric saw from his cellar, and uses it to make modifications to the radio room on the sixth floor of the house. Then he tells Marie-Laure what he's been contemplating. Although Daniel has begged him to keep Marie-Laure safe, Etienne wants Marie-Laure to help him fight alongside the resistance against the Germans. Every day, Marie-Laure will walk to the bakery, ask Madame Ruelle for a loaf, and bring it back to the house. Then Etienne will open the loaf, extract the papers printed with numbers from inside, and broadcast this information over his secret radio. Marie-Laure is eager to participate in this venture: she says that Manec would have wanted her to do so.

In spite of his fears and trauma, Etienne agrees to help Marie-Laure, perhaps inspired by Madame Manec's bravery. Marie-Laure also remains a steadfastly positive character—she is young, but she bravely disobeys the Nazis and does what she knows to be right. We can sense the two storylines getting closer together in this section as well, as Etienne is now broadcasting new information which might reach Werner's ears and be familiar to him.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): EAST

Werner and his fellow soldiers travel east from Germany, toward Russia. From the train, he sees trees and snow, but almost no human beings. His captain refuses to believe that Werner is 18, and mocks him for being puny. Nevertheless, he shows Werner his radio equipment and tells him that he'll be in charge of all of it. At the end of his first day stationed on the Russian front, Werner notices a big man who looks oddly familiar—it's the assistant from the Institute, Volkheimer.

It's extraordinarily lucky that Werner has been assigned to Volkheimer's unit, since it means that he'll have a friend looking out for him at least. It's possible that Volkheimer has arranged for Werner to be sent to his division—but it's also possible that this is a random coincidence. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union was the beginning of the end for Hitler, as he extended his troops too far and became embroiled in conflicts on all fronts. The harsh Russian winter also killed many German troops. It is into this cruel, unforgiving environment that Werner is now heading.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): ONE ORDINARY LOAF

The chapter begins after Marie-Laure has brought back her first loaf of bread from the bakery and presented it to Etienne. Etienne opens the loaf, and finds a small scroll inside. He tries to understand what the scroll says—it's printed with numbers in no clear pattern. Etienne carves a fake panel on the back of the wardrobe on the sixth floor—this allows him to enter the radio room whenever he needs to do so.

In this important expository section, Doerr establishes the pattern of resistance that Marie-Laure and Etienne use: they spend their days picking up source codes for the French, and then transmitting them over the radio. In this way Etienne is able to reach thousands of resistance fighters—accomplishing a great deal, contrary what he claimed earlier to Manec.



In the radio room, Etienne reads off the numbers on the scroll, and tells Marie-Laure that the information has been spread to Paris, and to England. He remembers what Madame Manec said about the frog in the pot of water, and tells Marie-Laure that he's not sure who the "frog" was in Manec's analogy: Manec herself, or the Germans.

Here, Doerr scrambles his own analogy and acknowledges its ambiguity. The frog in the pot of water could be the Germans, or else the French trying to ignore injustice (as discussed earlier), but it could also be Manec herself—either trying to avoid being "boiled," or slowly conditioning herself to acts that may result in the deaths of innocents (the French Resistance was sometimes criticized for killing German civilians, rather than soldiers). Essentially the analogy means that humans can accept or adjust to anything, provided the transition is slow or unnoticeable enough.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): VOLKHEIMER

After reuniting with Volkheimer, Werner meets his other fellow soldiers. There is an engineer named Walter Bernd, who's very taciturn. There's a gap-toothed soldier named Neumann One. Volkheimer is the sergeant, and although he's no older than 20, he seems far older than his years. The new military force travels across the countryside, setting up transceivers that will be used to locate troops in the distance. Werner wonders how the German soldiers using the transceivers will be able to tell the difference between soldiers and civilians. Werner sees an old man cutting a tree, and wonders if he'll survive the war.

Werner's question—how do the Germans tell the difference between civilians and enemies—has an obvious answer: they don't. They come to suspect everyone, and are willing to kill anyone who stands in their way. But it's not clear if Werner wants to admit this to himself—it's as if he's hoping that by denying the truth to himself, he can make the truth go away. He once again feels trapped by duty, and tries to convince himself that this means he no longer has any free will—he is being forced to commit immoral acts.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): FALL

Etienne and Marie-Laure continue undermining the Germans by sending secret messages via the radio. Etienne keeps watch over the exterior of his house, since he's paranoid that soldiers or spies are watching him at all times. He sees a group of people walking out of Claude Levitte's house, and wonders if Claude is watching him.

Etienne' eccentricities give him something of an advantage during the war—where an ordinary person would trust that he's not under surveillance, Etienne, who's paranoid and uncomfortable with being out in the open even under normal circumstances, suspects Claude (correctly) of spying on him and being an informant for the Germans.



Etienne takes pleasure in his radio broadcasts. He even plays music after finishing a broadcast—Debussy, Ravel, Massenet, etc. Every night, Etienne ends his broadcast, wishes Marie-Laure goodnight, and then goes to his room to pray. He prays that the "horseman of death" will avoid hurting him or Marie-Laure.

It now seems clear what will eventually happen—Werner is going to listen to the radio broadcast, hear the music, and remember his childhood. It's also worth noting that the French Resistance is bringing Etienne and Marie-Laure closer together—they're inspiring one another to be brave and act according to their morals.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): SUNFLOWERS

Werner and his peers travel across the Russian front. None of the soldiers seem to take their loyalties to the Führer very seriously—they joke that the "true Aryan" is "as blonde as Hitler, as slim as Goering, and as tall as Goebbels." Only Volkheimer insists that the soldiers stay disciplined.

The German soldiers have clearly become disillusioned with Nazi ideology and even patriotism in general—any glamour disappears in the face of the real horror and drudgery of war. Even looking at the Nazi leaders themselves, it becomes quickly obvious that the idea of Aryan superiority a myth.



One day, the soldiers monitor a transceiver, and Werner detects a signal. He realizes that there is a large, unusual "object" nearby. Volkheimer orders his soldiers to proceed on foot. They reach a house in the middle of the forest. Volkheimer leads the soldiers to attack the house—he tells Werner, the radio technician, to hang back. Werner hears loud shots, and then sees his fellow troops marching back. Volkheimer orders Werner to salvage any equipment in the house, and then orders the troops to burn the house. Werner steps into the house and sees dead Russian soldiers. He thinks of his life as a lover of science—starting when he listened to radio broadcasts. He thinks about his time with Jutta, and his education with Dr. Hauptmann. All this has led him to being a soldier for the German army.

Werner is no braver than he was a year ago, but he's gained a new perspective on things, albeit a depressing perspective. Werner can now see the "arc" of his life, beginning with his love of science and ending with his being sentenced to fight in the army. Werner is feeling hopeless—he thinks he's lost all control over his own life, and instead must carry out the orders of others. Werner now witnesses all sorts of atrocities—here, Russians (some of them civilians) are killed without warning—but doesn't have the courage to run away from the army. Ironically, his hopelessness and despair keeps him fighting for Germany.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): STONES

Sergeant Major von Rumpel, still suffering from his tumor treatments, is summoned to a warehouse in Lodz. There, he meets with a team tasked with inspecting diamonds. The team takes exquisite gems and measures their purity and quality. Von Rumpel is about to ask where the diamonds came from—but then he realizes that he already knows.

Von Rumpel is so caught up in his personal quest that he momentarily forgets where all these diamonds come from—they're stolen from wealthy Jewish families who are then sent to concentration camps to be murdered. Werner probably knows very little or nothing at all about the realities of the Holocaust, but von Rumpel seems more aware—and therefore guiltier.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): GROTTO

Marie-Laure misses Madame Manec. In honor of Manec, she continues visiting the bakery to pick up bread for Etienne. Although she's exhilarated by her participation in the resistance, she can't help but think of Daniel as well. She imagines reuniting with him one day. She remembers him saying, "I will never leave you, not in a million years."

Marie-Laure can't forget her father's words, and deep down, she believes that she'll be reunited with him one day. It's not clear how—or if—this is going to happen, but given Doerr's style and the other characters' track records, a reunion seems rather unlikely.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): HUNTING

It is January, 1943. Werner continues monitoring radio transmissions on the Russian front. Whenever he finds a new radio transmission, Volkheimer and the troops go to kill the broadcasters. The troops travel through Minsk, Prague, and other areas of Eastern Europe.

Werner isn't the man who personally kills enemy soldiers, but he's making this possible by monitoring the radio. Volkheimer might be kind to Werner and seem to have a good heart, but he is still a brutal weapon on behalf of the Nazis, and seems to have no intention of changing that fact.

At times, the troops will be passing by a trainload of prisoners. Sometimes, Volkheimer will have the train stopped, and he will switch boots, shirts, or coats with a prisoner. The prisoners are always reluctant to switch clothes with Volkheimer—especially boots, since this means the prisoner will die of the cold. One day, the troops pass by a young German soldier with twitching eyes—Neumann One explains that frostbite destroyed his eyelids. Werner writes nothing to Jutta.

Here Volkheimer again shows his callousness. At the National Institute, he had acted as if he saw through the "prisoner routine," but here, it seems as if he's learned his lessons after all, and has decided that it's "kill or be killed." Volkheimer takes warm clothes from the prisoners, effectively sentencing them to die of the cold weather.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): THE MESSAGES

In Saint-Malo, the Germans decree that all houses must report their residents. Etienne reports himself, along with Marie-Laure, and posts the names on the front door of the house. In the summer of 1943, Marie-Laure delivers a loaf of bread to Etienne. Etienne, who's learned how to interpret the numbers, interprets the message to say that a man wants his daughter to know that he is recovering well.

Apparently Etienne and Marie-Laure have become very competent in their roles in the French Resistance—Etienne seems to have no qualms or difficulties interpreting French codes and then broadcasting them over the radio for thousands of people to hear. It's also poignant to learn that many of these messages don't involve violent acts of sabotage or resistance, but are simply loved ones trying to communicate with each other. This again shows the radio as a means of connecting people, however briefly.

Marie-Laure receives another letter from Daniel. The letter contains the line, "If you ever wish to understand, look inside Etienne's house, inside the house." Marie-Laure isn't sure what her father means by this. Sometimes, Marie-Laure thinks she can see the ghost of Madame Manec.

Madame Manec's presence clearly does linger in a powerful way, as her bravery and commitment to the Resistance has influenced both Etienne and Marie-Laure to follow her example. Tragically, this is the last letter Marie-Laure receives from her father. We as readers already know the answer to Daniel's riddle (the Sea of Flames is inside the model of Etienne's house), but to Marie-Laure, it just seems like an oddly-phrased sentence.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): LOUDENVIELLE

Sergeant Major von Rumpel makes his way to Paris. A man has been arrested for stealing from the Natural History Museum, and he was discovered to be carrying many gems. Von Rumpel investigates the gems—there are beautiful stones, including one large diamond. Von Rumpel is excited to discover that the diamond resembles the one he's been looking for: the Sea of Flames. But upon closer inspection, he realizes that the diamond is another fake. Von Rumpel has found two fake diamonds—this means that there are only two others, one real and one fake.

The suspense grows as Doerr plots von Rumpel's inexorable journey towards Saint-Malo and the real diamond (we already know he'll make it there because Doerr has already told us). Von Rumpel's quest clearly grows more personal and important to him, as he no longer seems to be following specific orders, but only looking for the object that he thinks will save his life.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): GRAY

It is December, 1943, and Marie-Laure is 15 years old. There's a decree that all non-essential personnel must leave Saint-Malo soon. Etienne tells Marie-Laure that they can't leave, as they're accomplishing too much for the French cause. Marie-Laure isn't sure what to think of Etienne's decision. Her life, she thinks, has become gray—there is no excitement left in fighting for the French resistance. Her only joys come from talking to Etienne and remembering her past.

Marie-Laure seems to have fallen into real depression, especially now that she accepts that her father isn't coming back any time soon. Through it all, however, Marie-Laure continues to be good friends with Etienne—the tragedies of Manec's death and Daniel's disappearance have pushed them closer together.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): FEVER

Werner develops a horrible fever during his time in the army. His fellow soldiers take care of him, and Volkheimer offers him coffee, but Werner declines. Werner continues to find illegal transmissions, about one or two a week. He tries to convince himself that everyone he's monitoring is an enemy of Germany, and wants him dead.

Werner's fever seems like an externalization of his inner turmoil—it's like his body is physically rejecting the hypocrisy he is forcing upon himself in trying to believe that everyone he kills deserves to die.

As the months drag on, Werner thinks more about Jutta and Frau Elena. One day, he and the other soldiers are riding through the mountains on a train. Werner thinks he sees Jutta and Elena sitting at a table in a cabin, surrounded by dead children.

Werner thinks of his behavior in the Germany army as a betrayal of the people he loves most: Frau Elena and Jutta. This guilt then manifests itself in this horrifying hallucination.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): THE THIRD STONE

In Amiens, von Rumpel tracks down a third stone that looks like the Sea of Flames. To his dismay, the stone turns out to be another fake—he has yet to find the real gem. He thinks more and more about what he's read about the diamond—whoever owns it will live forever. He also thinks back to the safe at the museum—it was beautiful, and designed almost like a puzzle box. He wonders who could have designed it.

At this point, it's only a matter of time before von Rumpel figures out the truth and heads to Saint-Malo. It's ironic that it is actually Daniel's cleverness and skill at disguising things that ultimately gives him away.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): THE BRIDGE

South of Saint-Malo, a German car of soldiers is blown up. Germans in Saint-Malo demand that the men of the town do a day's work as penance for the soldiers' deaths. In the meantime, Marie-Laure continues delivering bread. Etienne is surprised that the resistance fighters are still sending messages—he mutters, "I thought they might take a break."

Etienne now shows some signs of being weary of his role as a warrior in the French Resistance. It's exhausting to live in a constant state of tension and fear of being caught.



Etienne tries to explain the resistance to Marie-Laure. He says that World War I killed sixteen million people. The war that France is currently involved in will kill many more people. As part of the resistance, he and Marie-Laure are taking lives. Marie-Laure asks Etienne if they're "the good guys," and Etienne confesses that he doesn't know.

It seems that Etienne's insecurities have changed—he's no longer worried about whether his actions accomplish anything—rather, he knows that he is accomplishing a great deal. Now, however, he's not sure if fighting against the Germans is even the moral thing to do. While it may seem obvious to us that fighting Nazis is a good thing, many German civilians—people who didn't support Hitler at all—were murdered during the French Resistance. It seems that here Etienne is thinking of the unintended consequences of his actions.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): RUE DES PATRIARCHES

Von Rumpel tries to track down the designer of the safe from the Natural History Museum. He finds evidence that the safe's designer stayed in an apartment nearby. He talks with the landlady, who tells him that the man left his apartment in the summer of 1940. She explains that checks for rent are mailed to her every month—the Natural History Museum still pays rent on the man's apartment, even though he's never there. The landlady also mentions that the man had a blind daughter. Inside the apartment, von Rumpel finds tiny models, bottles of glue, and small saws.

We can see von Rumpel getting closer and closer to tracking down Daniel LeBlanc, who, it's now made explicitly clear, is the possessor of the real diamond. It's poignant that von Rumpel doesn't see the model of the city for what it is—a reflection of Daniel's love for Marie-Laure.



Von Rumpel inspects the large model of Paris he sees in the middle of Daniel's apartment. As he stares more closely at the model, he remembers the intricate designs of the safe that held the first false version of the Sea of Flames. Exhilarated, von Rumpel seizes the tiny model of the apartment house in which he's standing. He throws it on the ground and stomps it open with his shoe.

Von Rumpel doesn't even try to understand why Daniel would build a model of the city—he assumes that the house is a treasure chest for the diamond. Instead of using his hands to solve the puzzle and open the house, as Marie-Laure would, von Rumpel simply stomps on it. This is a telling sign of von Rumpel's bluntness, violence, and ravenous greed.



SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): WHITE CITY

It is April, 1944. Werner and the troops travel to Vienna. There, they enjoy the fun of the town—good food and beer, etc. Werner remembers Dr. Hauptmann, and imagines him as a young man in Vienna, enjoying the nightlife. He wonders if Dr. Hauptmann is stationed on the frontlines. He also considers how kind Volkheimer has been to him—Volkheimer always makes sure Werner has enough food.

Werner can't entirely understand why Volkheimer is being so kind to him. It's possible that Volkheimer might have had romantic feelings for Werner—feelings which he could never express (homosexuals were sent to the Holocaust death camps along with the Jews). But it's also possible that Volkheimer is simply a loyal, kind man—which makes it even more difficult to understand how he can be so cruel to prisoners.

After some nights of festivity, Volkheimer calls the soldiers together. They've received rumors of an enemy transmission in the city. Werner uses his equipment to find the house where the enemy signal is being broadcast. Volkheimer orders his troops to storm the building. Inside, the soldiers threaten the woman living there. Werner begins to wonder if his math has been correct—perhaps it's a different house broadcasting the signal. After a long period of searching, Werner hears a gunshot. In another room, Neumann Two's gun is pointed at the closet. Inside, the troops find a child with a bullet in its head. Werner prays that the child is still alive—but it's not.

In this horrific scene, the German soldiers murder a child because of Werner's false information. Werner is flooded with guilt—his poor decision caused a family to be attacked, and a young child to be killed for no good reason. The horror of World War II, Doerr, suggests, is that this horrific story is merely one of thousands of similar stories, in which innocent people are killed by mistake or chance.

The mother of the dead child begins to cry. Werner wonders how Neumann Two could have shot a child. Then he realizes the truth—everybody, himself included, follows orders, even when the orders call for horrific behavior. Quietly, Volkheimer announces, "There's no radio here." Werner and the other troops leave the house and drive away.

Werner struggles to understand how this has happened to him, and realizes the truth: the German state has trained him—and all his comrades—to obey orders at all costs, even if the orders seem immoral. It's entirely possible that the other soldiers in the army are going through the same inner struggle that Werner is experiencing—but like Werner, they've been trained not to express their feelings.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

It is Marie-Laure's 16th birthday, and Etienne presents her with a package. The package contains two books—both parts of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, written in Braille. Marie-Laure is overjoyed—she never finished the second part of the novel, and has always loved Jules Verne. She embraces Etienne, and then begins reading straight away. Etienne tells Marie-Laure that he was able to obtain such an expensive book because Marie-Laure has "made a lot of friends in this town."

It's a sign of Marie-Laure's good nature that when she needs a Braille book, Etienne has no problem recruiting people to donate their money and time so that she gets the book she wants. That the book in question is by Jules Verne reminds us that Etienne is becoming something of a surrogate father to Marie-Laure, in the absence of Daniel LeBlanc. It's suggested that if Marie-Laure can once again escape into the fantastical world of Verne, she may be able to escape her depression.

SEVEN (AUGUST 1942): TELEGRAM

A new garrison commander has been appointed in coastal France. This man is a "true German," who commands the respect of his peers. He sends many telegrams to Berlin. In one, he explains that he suspects "terrorist broadcasts" somewhere nearby, possibly in Saint-Malo.

This new commander seems like the paragon of Nazi values—he's stern, emotionless, and ruthless—but perhaps he, like Werner, is just as uncertain about the morality of his behavior. In any event, we can now see why Werner comes to arrive in Saint-Malo, thus bringing the plot full circle.

EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): FORT NATIONAL

The Allies' bombing of Saint-Malo has died down. The city is in ruins. A final American airplane drops a bomb at the Fort National, where 380 Frenchmen are being held against their will. Nine Frenchmen are killed instantly. Some of these men were playing bridge when they were killed.

Here Doerr comments on the unpredictability of fate, as more innocent civilians are killed by mistake or random chance. Doerr also doesn't make it clear whether or not Etienne is one of those killed.

EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): IN THE ATTIC

Marie-Laure hides in the radio room, desperate to eat something, and hoping that she won't be found. Part of her wants to run out of the house, but she knows that this is foolish—she'll be safest here. She imagines talking to Daniel. In her imagination, her father encourages her to stay where she is, even though she's hungry.

In this passage we see how strong Marie-Laure's relationship with her father is. Unsure of what to do, Marie-Laure summons her father as a kind of icon of wisdom. In the end, inspired by Daniel's calmness and intelligence, she decides to stay inside.

Suddenly, Marie-Laure hears the sound of the intruder. He is urinating in the toilet on the sixth floor. He says something in German, "Das Häuschen fehlt, wo bist du Häuschen?" but Marie-Laure doesn't know what this means. In her imagination, Marie-Laure's father tells her not to open the cans for fear that the intruder will hear her. But suddenly a round of bombs goes off in the streets. Seizing the moment of noise, Marie-Laure uses the knife and brick to open her two cans. She eats beans, and feels better immediately.

In Paris, von Rumpel had instinctively known to look inside the model of the apartment itself, and here he notices that Etienne's house is the only building missing *from the model of Saint-Malo (in German he says," the house is missing, where are you, house?") It's also unclear if he found Daniel's letter about the "house inside the house" somewhere in the house and read it. Fortunately, Marie-Laure has apparently solved the riddle beforehand.*

EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): THE HEADS

Werner, still trapped under the hotel, tries to use his radio to call for help. He can hear only static on the receiver. He turns and sees Volkheimer, sitting in the dark. He asks Volkheimer if he liked being called "the Giant" in school. Volkheimer says it was "not so fun."

Here we get a little more understanding of Frank Volkheimer, one of the most complicated characters in the book. Like Werner, Volkheimer felt like an outsider during his time at the National Institute—perhaps this is why he's drawn to Werner, as a kindred spirit.

Werner contemplates using the electrical wire in Volkheimer's light to repair the radio. This could give them another full day in which to hope for a nearby signal. Werner also thinks about "using the rifle."

Werner is contemplating suicide at this point. He's been full of guilt and self-hatred for so long that he has few reservations about ending his own life now.



EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): DELIRIUM

Von Rumpel stands in Etienne's house. He's been taking morphine for his pain, and wonders if his disease has been getting worse. He imagines that he can save his own life by finding the Sea of Flames. With this in mind, he staggers back to the model of the city—he's sure the stone is there somewhere.

We see that von Rumpel is very near death, and so is especially desperate to find the diamond in time. He seems to transform into an even more monstrous figure the closer he gets to reaching Marie-Laure.



EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): WATER

Marie-Laure hears the intruder walking away from her. She wonders if he is going to leave. She feels very thirsty, and wonders if she should risk crawling out to get water. After some thought, she decides to risk it. She sneaks out of the wardrobe and walks slowly to the bathroom. She can smell the intruder in her house. She passes to the room next door, where Etienne has placed a bucket that collects rainwater. Grateful that there's some water left in the bucket, Marie-Laure drinks it, remembering that drinking lots of water can trick the stomach into thinking that it's full. After drinking, Marie-Laure quietly walks back to the wardrobe, confident that the intruder is still in the house, but a few floors downstairs. Before she closes the wardrobe again, she discovers her prized copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and takes it in with her.

Even in crisis, Marie-Laure knows how to take care of herself—somehow, an old lesson about tricking the brain into feeling full returns to her at the moment when she needs it most. Marie-Laure seems poised to begin reading from Jules Verne, just as she did years ago in Paris. In a sense, Marie-Laure is becoming more and more like one of her beloved whelks—she's cutting herself off from the world, retreating into her "shell" (the radio room) to be safe and at peace. The irony is that Marie-Laure has no particular use for the diamond she's carrying—she could probably be compelled to give it up without much of a fight. We recall her first question about the Sea of Flames, years ago: why don't they just throw it back into the ocean where it belongs?



EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): THE BEAMS

Under the hotel, Werner tries to fix his radio. As he works, Volkheimer mentions that his great-grandfather was a sawyer (person who saws timber) for the navy. Above them, Werner and Volkheimer hear the sounds of more bombs. Volkheimer admits that as a younger man, he was desperate to leave the army—Werner admits that he was, too.

The more Volkheimer and Werner talk, the more they realize they have in common. Outside the environment of rigid discipline, danger, and violence, they finally have the chance to become actual friends. Clearly Werner wasn't alone in feeling trapped by his duty to the army.



EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): THE TRANSMITTER

Marie-Laure feels her way through the radio room, and finds the transmitter that Etienne had used to broadcast previously. She wonders if anybody is listening to Etienne's radio station anymore. She turns on the broadcasting equipment, and begins to read aloud from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

We can see the plots of the book coming together—once again, a LeBlanc is making a broadcast, and Werner Pfennig is going to listen.



EIGHT (9 AUGUST 1944): VOICE

Werner has spent four days beneath the Hotel of Bees. He fiddles with his radio. Suddenly, he hears a voice—the voice is saying, "At three in the morning I was awakened by a violent blow." The voice is that of a French woman—her accent is beautiful. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the broadcast comes to an end.

Werner has no idea that the person reading the broadcast is the granddaughter of Henri LeBlanc, the Frenchman who delivered the science lectures years ago. Doerr invites us to savor these kinds of dramatic ironies: we know so much more about what's going on than either character does, and so can appreciate the poignancy of this moment.



Werner thinks back to Jutta. He remembers hearing about a Nazi rally when he was a young boy. Everyone else in the orphanage was wowed by the idea of a big public parade, and only Jutta saw through the glamour of the Nazis. Werner wonders, "How did Jutta understand so much about how the world worked?"

Marie-Laure's voice immediately makes Werner think of Jutta, and seems to clear his mind to see the truth: Jutta has been the voice of reason all along, at least regarding the absurdity and hypocrisy of the Nazis. Only now does Werner truly realize it.



NINE (MAY 1944): EDGE OF THE WORLD

While touring the army, Werner receives a letter from Jutta. Volkheimer reads the letter to Werner while they ride in a truck. Jutta tells Werner that Herr Siedler, now a powerful mining official, sends Werner congratulations for his success as a soldier. She adds that Frau Elena has had a toothache lately, though she's getting better.

Werner's heartbroken thoughts of Jutta immediately shift into a letter from Jutta herself. The constant presence of Jutta and Frau Elena in Werner's mind are once again crucial to him, helping him keep his conscience and his sanity.



One day, Werner and the troops are sent to see an important colonel (whom we recognize as the same man who's been tasked with hunting down terrorists in Saint-Malo). The colonel explains that there is a terrorist group that sends music over the radio. Werner and his peers are going to France to investigate further. Volkheimer nods and says, "It won't take long."

Despite the conversation we just heard between Volkheimer and Werner (under the Hotel of Bees), here we see that any doubts he might have don't make Volkheimer less capable as a commander—he always carries out his duties to the Nazis efficiently and quickly. This was common, however—after World War II, many "loyal" Nazis confessed that they'd always had doubts about what they were doing, even though they kept following orders.



NINE (MAY 1944): NUMBERS

Von Rumpel goes to see a doctor, who tells him that his throat tumor has grown so serious that he has no more than three or four months to live. Shortly afterwards, von Rumpel receives a call from a man named Jean Brignon. Brignon had previously agreed to tell von Rumpel about Daniel Leblanc, on the condition that von Rumpel help Jean Brignon's cousin. Brignon now tells von Rumpel that LeBlanc was arrested after trying to leave Saint-Malo. Police officers noted that LeBlanc had been making detailed drawings of the city. Jean has learned this information from a man named Claude Levitte. Von Rumpel considers this information. He wonders why LeBlanc would leave Saint-Malo: perhaps he had something valuable to take with him. Von Rumpel hangs up the phone without discussing Brignon's cousin.

At the beginning of the story, von Rumpel seemed like little more than a comic-book villain. By now he's a more complicated character, with his own sympathetic motives, but he still entirely plays the role of the villain in his quest for the Sea of Flames. Here, von Rumpel cruelly ignores his informant, dispensing with him as soon as he's acquired the information he needs. He's heartless, and seems to have almost no respect for other people.

As the war drags on, Saint-Malo falls into disarray. There are always airplanes flying over the city. One day, Etienne goes to Madame Ruelle's bakery. There, Ruelle tells him that the resistance needs the locations of German guns and military outposts. Etienne says that the only way to determine these locations would be by walking through the city with a pencil and paper—an obvious crime for which he'd be shot. Nevertheless, Ruelle insists that Etienne must determine the gun locations tonight—tomorrow, the Germans will be imprisoning everyone who could be a member of the resistance in the Fort National. Reluctantly, Etienne agrees to help.

Etienne faces a moral challenge that's almost as difficult as the one Werner faced in the German army: he has to decide between fighting the Germans and protecting Marie-Laure. Reluctantly, he agrees to fight the Germans, despite knowing that broadcasting gun locations could lead to his arrest or death, thus leaving Marie-Laure alone and in a great deal of danger. But perhaps Etienne's decision reflects his respect for Marie-Laure's independence—and what he knows Marie-Laure herself would want him to do.

NINE (MAY 1944): MAY

In May, 1944, Marie-Laure goes to the bakery to pick up her usual loaf of bread. At the bakery, Madame Ruelle starts crying, touches Marie-Laure's face, and tells her, "You amazing child." She tells Marie-Laure to tell Etienne, "The mermaids have bleached hair." Marie-Laure goes home and passes on this message: Etienne understands that it means the Allied powers are planning to invade Northern France within a week.

The novel has alternated between chapters set in the "present"—August of 1944, and the "past"—the years leading up to this time. Now, the two timeframes are growing closer—soon they'll be one timeline, proceeding in chronological order (but still jumping among different characters and settings).

NINE (MAY 1944): HUNTING (AGAIN)

The soldiers search across the coast of France for evidence of a radio broadcast. Werner and Bernd are sent to the Hotel of Bees, where they spend long hours trying to find the source of the radio signal. During the day, airplanes fly overhead—but the planes are too high for Werner to tell if they're German or foreign.

The image with which Doerr ends this chapter is a highly appropriate one, considering the themes of moral ambiguity he's sketched out recently. Werner isn't sure what side he's on anymore, or just who the enemy is. There seems to be no right or wrong side in the struggle—just a struggle.

NINE (MAY 1944): LETTER #11: FROM WERNER TO JUTTA

Werner apologizes to Jutta for not having written for a few months. He explains that his fever is better, and that's he's been feeling clearheaded. He loves being stationed in Saint-Malo: he can see the ocean. He tells Jutta that when he stares out to sea, he finds it hard to think about his duties as a soldier. Werner concludes by asking Jutta to say hello to Frau Elena "and the children who are left."

If Werner's fever symbolized his inner turmoil, then it's telling that he gets over his fever as he arrives at Saint-Malo. It's as if the spectacle of so much natural beauty is reminding Werner of the good things in the world, and giving him new strength to perhaps stand up to the Nazis again.



NINE (MAY 1944): "CLAIRE DE LUNE"

Werner and the soldiers search through Saint-Malo for the radio signal. One night, while it's raining, Werner hears an enemy signal, making a broadcast about the troops. To his amazement, the broadcast is the same one he listened to as a child: the Frenchman's voice sounds almost the same, and he can remember the classical music playing in the background. Werner remembers in perfect detail the piano piece that now plays in his earpiece. Frantically, he looks around—no one else has noticed the sudden look of excitement on his face. After a few minutes, Volkheimer asks Werner if he's found anything. Werner hesitates, then says that he's found nothing.

In this crucial scene, Werner makes the choice to actively disobey orders—seemingly for the first time in the entire novel. Although Werner chooses to do so in part because he's nostalgic—struck by the Frenchman's voice from his childhood (whom we recognize as Etienne LeBlanc, whose voice apparently sounds like his brother Henri's)—his decision also comes fast on the heels of his disillusionment with the German army, and his revitalization in the town of Saint-Malo. It seems Werner is finally "opening his eyes" and trying to do something about what he sees.



NINE (MAY 1944): ANTENNA

Eight soldiers are permanently installed at the Hotel of Bees, including Werner, Volkheimer, and Bernd. Werner continues to listen to the radio broadcast he remembers from his youth, and never mentions this to his superiors. Although the broadcasts are about French military matters, the music is the same, and Werner thinks back to his childhood in the orphanage as he listens. Werner calculates where the broadcast is coming from—a large, tall house near the water. He decides to visit the building, immediately.

It's not clear what Werner is planning to do at Etienne's house—Werner himself probably doesn't know. It's as if the inexorable forces of fate (and storyline) are finally drawing Werner and Marie-Laure together, and there's nothing he can do to stop it.



NINE (MAY 1944): BIG CLAUDE

Claude Levitte the perfumer has been doing well as an informer—he talks to the Germans, and is rewarded with food and money. When von Rumpel arrives in Saint-Malo, looking for Daniel LeBlanc, he talks to Claude. Claude points von Rumpel to Etienne's house.

Predictably, Claude Levitte is the one to tip off the Germans about Etienne's house. The end of Doerr's novel is filled with satisfying confirmations of this kind, as more plotlines have their loose ends neatly tied up.

NINE (MAY 1944): BOULANGERIE

Werner walks toward Etienne's house, wondering how he can talk his way inside without making the broadcaster think he's being arrested. He has been practicing French very carefully, planning to pose as a Frenchman.

Werner's plan seems far-fetched—it's highly unlikely that Werner, with his extremely Germanic looks and German accent, would be able to pass as a Frenchman. But this shows us how anxious and excited Werner has become.



Werner walks toward the house, and sees a teenaged girl wearing thick glasses. After studying her for a few moments, Werner realizes that she's blind. Werner is incredibly nervous, though he can't say why—he has nothing to fear. The teenager walks right by him, her cane barely missing his shoe.

This is Werner's first meeting with Marie-Laure: the moment toward which the novel has been building for hundreds of pages. On the surface, it's totally anticlimactic: they say nothing to each other, and Marie-Laure doesn't even know that Werner is there. But this kind of delicate, almost nonexistent interaction fits with the overall theme of human connection in the book—all communication is tenuous and incomplete, and even though everything is interconnected, these connections are usually so small that they go unnoticed.



NINE (MAY 1944): GROTTO

Every afternoon, Etienne makes a radio broadcast, and every evening, Marie-Laure reads to Etienne from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. One day, on her way home from the bakery, Marie-Laure walks to the grotto where Harold Bazin took her years ago. There, she finds barnacles and snails on the walls, just as she remembers.

Bazin's grotto has become Marie-Laure's own space—a refuge and symbol of her desire for peace, solitude, and contentment (especially the snails in the grotto, which she feels a special bond with). We sense that the grotto won't stay empty for long, however—von Rumpel is now in town.



Suddenly, Marie-Laure hears a voice, asking, "What's in your sack there?" Marie-Laure can tell that the speaker is German, even though he's speaking French. Marie-Laure feels herself getting nervous—she's still carrying the loaf of bread with the codes inside of it. Marie-Laure lies quickly, and tells the man that she goes to collect snails and shells in this grotto. The man says that Marie-Laure has clearly not collected any snails—she's lying. The man asks Marie-Laure to answer some questions about her father Daniel, and he tells her that Daniel is in prison 500 kilometers away. Marie-Laure's heart sinks. She says, half to herself, half to her father, "I should never have gone outside."

At first, it seems that the man following Marie-Laure to the grotto is Werner—but it quickly becomes clear that it's actually von Rumpel, who's tracked the diamond all the way to Saint-Malo. Marie-Laure's words are disheartening, as she feels like everything she's done, even helping the French Resistance, has been in vain—her father is still in prison, and the Germans still have all the power. She almost seems to take on Etienne's worldview at this point—the outside world is chaotic and full of dangers, so it's better to stay where it's safe and familiar (like a snail in its shell).



The man tells Marie-Laure that he wants to ask her one question—then he'll leave. As the man talks, Marie-Laure remembers her nickname: the Whelk. She is armored, she thinks—impervious.

A whelk is a strong, impervious animal, and for much of Marie-Laure's life, she's aspired to be likewise strong and impervious. By training herself to read and move around the city, she's become basically self-sufficient. and even able to have a large impact on others. Now Marie-Laure finds courage in this image of the whelk, and draws upon hidden reserves of strength that allow her to stand her ground against von Rumpel.



NINE (MAY 1944): AGORAPHOBIA

Etienne is waiting for Marie-Laure to return from the bakery. He always times her trips to and from the shop, and this trip has taken twice as long as usual—and Marie-Laure isn't even back yet. Etienne looks out of the window, but can't see anything. His mind rushes to the worst conclusions—she could have been captured, or the bakery could be in flames.

In this section—which follows Etienne's perspective, for once—we see the extent of his paranoia. Etienne's mind always jumps to the worst conclusion, not only because of his phobia and possible PTSD, but also because he loves Marie-Laure so desperately.



Etienne tries to leave his house to look for Marie-Laure. As he goes to the door, his heart beats quickly, and he develops a headache. Nonetheless, he opens the door, walks to the gate, and goes outside.

Here we recognize Etienne's bravery in the same instant that we recognize the extent of his problem. It is a hugely courageous act for Etienne to go outside, and he is only able to find the strength to do so because of his love for Marie-Laure.



NINE (MAY 1944): NOTHING

Marie-Laure is standing in the grotto, answering the man's questions. He has asked her about what Daniel was doing during his six months in Saint-Malo. As the man talks to her, Marie-Laure slowly reaches her hand into her bag, breaks open the bread, and slips the scroll into her hand. Then, very slowly, she reaches her hand to her mouth and, praying the man can't see what she's doing, slips the paper into her mouth and swallows it.

It's not entirely clear how Marie-Laure manages to swallow the paper without attracting any attention from von Rumpel—maybe she's especially surreptitious, or pretends to be taking a bite of bread, or maybe von Rumpel happens to be looking around the grotto as he's talking to Marie-Laure. Because we're limited to Marie-Laure's perspective, we can't be sure. Ironically enough, however, von Rumpel probably isn't concerned with the French Resistance at this point, and perhaps doesn't ask Marie-Laure about the paper simply because he doesn't care about anything but the diamond anymore.



The man tells Marie-Laure that he's been searching for "treasures" for many years. He wants to know what Daniel left behind for Marie-Laure. Marie-Laure immediately answers, "Nothing." Surprised by Marie-Laure's boldness, the man falls quiet. He decides that he believes her. Marie-Laure says, "You keep your word and go away."

Marie-Laure once again shows surprising reserves of courage and toughness in this section, living up to her nickname, the Whelk. In another example of dramatic irony, Marie-Laure had no idea her father might have the diamond until von Rumpel asks her about it—von Rumpel had assumed she was keeping it secret, but in fact he only ends up revealing it to her.



NINE (MAY 1944): FORTY MINUTES

Etienne walks from his house to the bakery, where he sees Madame Ruelle. Ruelle is amazed to see Etienne outside of his house. Etienne asks Ruelle where Marie-Laure is, and Ruelle is surprised that Marie-Laure hasn't come home yet.

The other people in the town—people who haven't seen Etienne in years—are shocked, and immediately recognize the scope of his love for Marie-Laure through the fact that he's willing to leave his house for her sake.

Etienne stares at his watch—41 minutes have passed since Marie-Laure left the house. He wonders if she's near the beach, but then remembers that the tides are too high that day. Suddenly, he realizes where she must be—the grotto where he played with his brother, Henri, years ago. Etienne runs to the grotto, where he finds Marie-Laure, sitting on the ground, pieces of bread in her lap. Marie-Laure says, "You came, you came…"

In this touching scene, we see—as if for the first time—how much Etienne has come to love Marie-Laura. He is a true father-figure for her now, and she is like the child he never had. This is a touching "reunion scene," in contrast to the many tragic or unsatisfying reunions Doerr usually presents us with.

NINE (MAY 1944): THE GIRL

In the days following his visit to the outside of Etienne's house, Werner can't stop thinking of the blind girl with the cane. He wonders if she's related to the man who broadcast when Werner was a child in the orphanage. Werner senses that his secret will be revealed soon: the colonel will discover that Werner is lying about the broadcasts.

As readers, we know that time is running out for Werner, because soon the Allies will invade France. But Werner, ironically, is concerned with time running out in a different sense—he's afraid he'll be found out by the colonel. His own superiors are his enemies now, not the French or the Americans.

One day, a messenger tells Volkheimer that the army needs two more Germans to come to the front. Volkheimer sends Neumann One and Neumann Two—Werner needs to stay and operate the radio. The Neumanns are terrified of being sent to fight on the front lines, but Volkheimer murmurs, "none of us will avoid it."

With his usual stoicism, Volkheimer makes it clear that he knows the war is ending, and the Nazis are going to lose. Interestingly, Volkheimer is far more realistic about the war than Werner is: Werner is concerned about being punished by the colonel, but Volkheimer is concerned about being killed by the Allies.

NINE (MAY 1944): LITTLE HOUSE

After finding Marie-Laure in the grotto, Etienne tells her that he's forced her to take on too much danger—from now on, she's not allowed to go outside. Etienne will pick up the loaves as well as making the radio broadcasts.

Etienne's new sense of protectiveness for Marie-Laure is a sign of how much has changed in recent months, and how he truly feels like a father to her now.

Marie-Laure notices that she and Etienne have barely any food left to eat—the war has taken a toll on Saint-Malo. She remembers the curse of the Sea of Flames, and the legend that says it kills everyone in the owner's life, while leaving the owner unharmed. She also remembers what her interrogator in the grotto asked her: he wanted to know if Marie-Laure's father was carrying anything for the museum. Finally, Marie-Laure remembers the letters her father sent her. In one letter, he told her to look in the house "inside the house." Suddenly, it becomes obvious to Marie-Laure what this means. She rushes to the model of the city of Saint-Malo that her father designed, picks up the model of Etienne's house, and finds a "pear-shaped stone inside."

At this point in the story, the German war effort has deteriorated to the point where the Germans are running out of supplies, and so the occupied French are starving as well. Significantly, it's only at this time that Marie-Laure remembers the diamond that kills everyone in its owner's life. While von Rumpel is obsessed with the Sea of Flames, it's fairly unimportant to Marie-Laure—she has always assumed that the best thing to be done with it would be throwing it back into the sea—which explains why she has taken so long to solve her father's riddle. Her blindness to the stone's beauty may contribute to this, but Marie-Laure seems like a rare character to be so immune to the seductions of the diamond

NINE (MAY 1944): SEA OF FLAMES

Marie-Laure studies the Sea of Flames, which she has just discovered inside Daniel's model of Saint-Malo. She can tell that the stone is beautiful, but it intimidates her because of its reputation of doom. Marie-Laure tries to convince herself that the diamond's "curse" is just a story—it's no different from any of the other carbon stones in the Earth's mantle.

Throughout the book, there's been a noticeable conflict between the ordinary and extraordinary, or between fate and random chance. The diamond is an apt symbol of this ambiguity. It is a priceless gem but also just a lump of carbon—a cursed object, but also totally powerless and meaningless.

Late at night, Etienne wakes up and goes into Marie-Laure's room. He explains that he's going out, but will be back very soon. Marie-Laure points out that the Allies could begin bombing the city any day now—he could be caught in the middle of an air raid. Marie-Laure then asks him a question that's been disturbing her for some time—does he regret having to take care of her? Without a second of hesitation, Etienne replies, "You are the best thing that has ever come into my life." With this, he leaves the house.

Etienne's words to Marie-Laure are touching—we can sense that he's been feeling these sentiments for a while—but also a little sad. His parting has an elegiac tone, as if this is the last time he's ever going to see his beloved grand-niece. For her part, Marie-Laure's question suggests that she too is now sucked into the idea of the diamond's curse, and wonders if she has doomed Etienne and Saint-Malo itself by possessing the stone.

NINE (MAY 1944): THE ARREST OF ETIENNE LEBLANC

Etienne walks outside his house, and feels strong and happy. Although what he's doing will be dangerous, it will help his friends and allies. Etienne walks through the streets, preparing to calculate the locations of the German guns. As he walks, a "man in uniform" limps toward him.

Sometimes, Doerr's chapter titles preempt or explain the events of the chapter: in this situation, for example, Etienne isn't actually arrested, but the title delivers the main plot point (like the chapter "The Death of Walter Bernd"). It's implied that von Rumpel is the one arresting Etienne—as he knows the house and is hoping to get the diamond—but it could be any other limping Nazi officer as well.

NINE (MAY 1944): 7 AUGUST 1944

Marie-Laure wakes up and hears guns firing. She goes to see if Etienne has returned—he hasn't. Then, she goes to eat some breakfast—the loaf of bread Madame Ruelle gave Etienne yesterday. Marie-Laure picks up the model of the house with the Sea of Flames inside it, and hides it under her pillow.

Etienne had been becoming a sort of surrogate father for Marie-Laure, but now it seems that he's been snatched from her life, just as Daniel was. All this seems to fit in with the curse of the Sea of Flames, lending it more power in Marie-Laure's mind.



In the afternoon of August 7, Marie-Laure hears a knock downstairs. Without unlocking the door, she asks who is there—it's Claude Levitte. Claude explains that Marie-Laure needs to leave "absolutely everything behind" and come with him immediately—all French men are being sent to prison, and all women and children are being sent to the bomb shelters. Marie-Laure refuses to leave her house. At first, Claude tries to convince her to leave, but then he gives up. As he walks away from the house, Marie-Laure wonders if he was telling the truth.

It's not clear to us if Claude is telling the truth or not, but in either case it's impressive that Marie-Laure doesn't give in to him. Marie-Laure is extraordinarily tough and focused—when she knows what she wants to do, she does it. This is an admirable quality, especially at a time when all too many people obeyed orders simply because they were good at doing as they were told.



NINE (MAY 1944): LEAFLETS

In the Hotel of Bees, the soldiers have a dinner of pork and tomatoes. They know that the Allies will bomb them at any moment, but also know that there's no point in running away now. Werner can only think of the young woman who lives in Etienne's house. As he thinks, the other soldiers report that the Allies have dropped leaflets from the skies, telling the inhabitants of the town to depart immediately.

The meal between Werner and his peers has a sense of being a "last meal"—as if the soldiers can sense that they're going to die in the bombing tomorrow. The chapter then ends with the image of leaflets—the title and subject of the book's first chapter. In this way, the novel comes full-circle, and one timeline finally catches up with the other.



TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): ENTOMBED

Confined to the radio room, Marie-Laure broadcasts her readings of Jules Verne. On the other side of the city, Werner listens to Marie-Laure's voice. As Volkheimer listens along with him, Werner admits the truth: he'd discovered Marie-Laure's voice, and the source of the broadcast, weeks ago, and didn't tell his fellow soldiers. To Werner's surprise, Volkheimer says nothing. Though he can't be sure, Werner guesses that Volkheimer knew the truth all along. In between reading Verne, Marie-Laure says that she's confined to her radio room, and adds, "He is here. He will kill me." Werner sees the irony of his situation: he's kept this woman alive through his silence, only to hear her slowly die while he is trapped and helpless.

Even if Werner believes that he's powerless to help Marie-Laure, he clearly still wants to help her. Werner has come a long way since he arrived in Saint-Malo, and he now seems to be acting totally on his own free will, having abandoned any duty to the Nazis—just like von Rumpel, ironically. Once again radio represents a fragile but important connection between people. Even though Marie-Laure and Werner are seemingly isolated from each other, and even both physically trapped and alone, they are still connected by this one small but powerful thread.



TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): FORT NATIONAL

Imprisoned in the Fort National of Saint-Malo, Etienne begs his jailers to save his niece, who is blind, and won't be able to save herself from the air raids. His requests are ignored. An American bombshell hits the Fort, and some of the prisoners are killed in the explosion. Etienne closes his eyes and tries to remember his past. He thinks about his house, about his nephew Daniel, and about Madame Manec. He thinks of Marie-Laure and her love for *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. It occurs to him that every memory he ever made will be "buried" soon.

Etienne's agony in prison is heartbreaking: he knows that his grand-niece will be in great danger, but he's unable to protect her. It's clear that Etienne believes that he's going to die in this moment, as he's thinking back to the highlights of his entire life. It also seems that Etienne was preparing for this possibility when he told Marie-Laure that she was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): CAPTAIN NEMO'S LAST WORDS

It is noon on the 12th of August. Marie-Laure has only two chapters of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* left to read. She can hear the intruder shouting in frustration downstairs. Marie-Laure considers simply giving him the model house with the Sea of Flames in it, but decides that she'll finish reading Verne before she does anything else. She remembers finding whelks in Harold Bazin's grotto—she had noticed that when the whelks were tucked securely into the rocks, the seagulls couldn't rip them away.

Throughout the turbulent years of World War II, Laure-Laure has longed for peace and simplicity—like the life she had in Paris with her father. Again and again, she's been denied this simplicity and security. The whelk is then the perfect symbol of Marie-Laure's childlike desire—she wishes she were as impervious as the mollusk in its shell.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): VISITOR

Von Rumpel sits in the kitchen of Etienne's house. He's been here for four days, trying to find the Sea of Flames. It occurs to him that the Sea of Flames could have been in the Museum of Natural History the entire time. It's also possible that Claude Levitte could have snatched the diamond after taking Marie-Laure away. And of course it's also possible that the diamond itself isn't real—it's just a legend.

It's entirely possible that von Rumpel is about to leave the house altogether, allowing Marie-Laure to climb out of the wardrobe and head for the safety of the Allies. We can sense von Rumpel losing all hope—he knows he's going to die soon, and there's nothing he can do about it.

Suddenly, von Rumpel hears a shout. It is a German soldier, who explains that the Germans are evacuating the town of Saint-Malo immediately. There will be a cease-fire tomorrow at noon, with the purpose of evacuating French civilians safely. Afterwards, the Americans have informed the Germans, the bombing will continue. Von Rumpel nods and dismisses the soldier—he says, "I'm nearly done here."

Just as von Rumpel seems ready to leave, a soldier enters the building, interrupting his days of solitude. Von Rumpel's words to the soldier suggest a dark pun—he's "nearly done" in the sense that he's going to die very soon.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): FINAL SENTENCE

Werner sits in his chamber under the hotel, listening to Marie-Laure read the final chapters of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Suddenly he looks up, and an old woman seems to float down through the ceiling of the chamber. Werner realizes that he's looking at Frau Schwartzenberger, the Jewish woman who lived in Frederick's building. Werner has the sense that he's sinking into the ground, being swallowed up by all the sadness in his life. He remembers how his father died in the mines, and how he's participated in murder as a member of the German army. Then he hears the sound of artillery, and the room shakes. He hears the "shallow defeated breaths" of Volkheimer, who's sitting next to him.

This passage could be the lowest point in Werner's life, and when he's closest to losing all hope. He sees a vision of Frau Schwartzenberger, and seems to grasp more of the reality of what Nazi Germany has been doing to Jews. Werner also seems to be accepting his fate: accepting that he was always doomed to death and misery, just like his father before him. Even Volkheimer, usually so stoic and practical, seems to have given up hope. (Although his "defeated breaths" could be Werner's reading of the situation, not the reality.)

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): MUSIC #1

Marie-Laure has now spent five days in the radio room. She takes a record, and plays it. She imagines dying here in the radio room, and decides to play the record as loud as possible, so that the man downstairs will hear her, find her room, and attack her. The record begins—it's delicate piano music. Slowly, Marie-Laure grabs the knife she's been carrying, and whispers, "Come and get me."

Marie-Laure seems to have given up hope, but she expresses this in a manner very different from Werner's. She thinks that she's going to die, but she's ready to go out in a "blaze of glory"—fighting for her life, armed with a knife and her own courage, and even with a poignant soundtrack.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): MUSIC #2

It is late at night in Saint-Malo. Werner sleeps beneath the hotel—only Volkheimer is awake. He fiddles with the radio, trying to find a clear station. Suddenly, he hears the sound of piano music. He wakes up Werner, who's amazed to hear his favorite music.

Just when Werner has given up, he's inspired by the sound of his favorite music—the music associated with the words that first inspired him to become a scientific thinker.

Volkheimer stands up and begins stacking heavy pieces of timber and masonry into one corner. Then he pulls Werner behind the barrier, and produces a grenade. Volkheimer has decided to do what he and Werner had previously agreed was suicidal—try to bomb their way out. Volkheimer throws the grenade at what used to be the stairwell.

It's as if the inspiration of the music has trickled into the cellar from miles away. Volkheimer realizes that they have no choice—they can either use the grenade or die, but there's no harm in trying at this point. This isn't exactly optimistic, but the fact that they have nothing to lose means that the two young men can be exceptionally brave.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): MUSIC #3

Von Rumpel sits in Etienne's house, thinking about his own two children. He thinks about his daughter, Veronika, who loves to sing, and pictures her sitting in front of him, singing softly. Suddenly, he hears "the voice of a young man speaking in French about coal."

Von Rumpel is confused, and can't grasp the importance of what he's hearing. From his perspective, the only thing that matters is the diamond, while from Werner's perspective the diamond is useless, and the broadcast is priceless. It's especially symbolic that this is the lecture about the creation of coal—a very similar process to the creation of a diamond.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): OUT

Volkheimer has just detonated a grenade. Werner looks up and sees a mound of stone and wood falling down. The barricade that Volkheimer has built for them breaks apart, and pieces of brick hit Werner's helmet. Then, slowly, Werner looks up, and finds that he can see the night sky. Volkheimer, who's apparently unharmed, grabs his rifle and climbs out from under the rubble, pulling Werner with him. They're amazed to find that they're standing in the street, staring at the ruins of the once-beautiful Hotel of Bees.

Miraculously, Volkheimer's plan worked, and he and Werner are seemingly unharmed by the explosion. It could be that it's just a happy coincidence that Werner and Volkheimer weren't hurt, but it could also be a kind of miracle, or fate ensuring that Werner and Marie-Laure should finally meet and communicate with each other. As usual, the ambiguity between the sacred and the banal is apparent throughout All the Light We Cannot See.

Volkheimer and Werner stagger through Saint-Malo, barely able to believe that they're still alive. Volkheimer passes Werner his gun and says, "Go." He tells Werner that he's going to search for food. Werner stares into Volkheimer's eyes—the eyes of a man who's always looked out for Werner, and, it seems, kept secret the fact that Werner knew about the French broadcast in Saint-Malo. Werner senses that Volkheimer wants him to go to protect the girl in the radio building. Werner turns and runs to Etienne's house.

Once again, it's not clear if Werner is accurately interpreting Volkheimer's expression, or if he's only projecting his own feelings onto his friend. In any case, Werner runs off to protect Marie-Laure—an unambiguous gesture of support for the French, the supposed enemies of the Germans. Werner is finally a free agent, acting on his own conscience and free will, and no longer feels any fear of or duty to the Nazis.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): WARDROBE

Von Rumpel has walked up to the sixth floor, where he hears the sound of the radio. He opens the wardrobe and pushes through it, using a candle as a source of light. He bumps his head on the ceiling of the wardrobe, and drops the candle to the floor. Suddenly, he hears the sound of the door of the house creaking open.

Von Rumpel seems like he's falling apart, both dying and devolving as a person, growing more monstrous of a villain—he desperately needs to find the diamond before he gets any worse. Doerr heightens the suspense by cutting away from the scene, just as Werner (we presume) is about to arrive.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): COMRADES

Werner enters Etienne's house, armed with a rifle. He climbs up the stairs, looking for any signs of life. On the sixth floor, he's astounded to find a German officer in field dress: a sergeant major (von Rumpel). The sergeant major, who seems a little drunk, mutters, "Don't mix morphine and wine." Werner looks around, and is terrified to see that the curtain near the sergeant major is on fire. The sergeant major calmly says, "We came for something, you and I. But only one of us can have it." With this, the man draws a pistol and aims it at Werner's chest. (Werner's rifle remains pointed at the ground.) Suddenly, there's a sound of clattering. The sergeant major turns to find the source of the sound, and in this split-second, Werner draws his gun.

This is a riveting scene, and no small part of its emotional impact comes from dramatic irony. As readers, we know who Werner is—we've been watching him for most of his life. We also know who von Rumpel is, relatively speaking. The imbalance between our knowledge of the characters and their knowledge of each other is so enormous that we have to draw the obvious conclusion: the fight between von Rumpel and Werner is a failure of understanding—a failure to understand another person's motivation and character. Werner assumes von Rumpel is there to kill Marie-Laure, while von Rumpel thinks Werner is there to get the Sea of Flames.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): THE SIMULTANEITY OF INSTANTS

Marie-Laure hears the sound of fighting as she sits on the other side of the wardrobe's secret entrance. There is a cry, followed by the smell of smoke and steam. Then, there's silence, followed by hesitant footsteps. Marie-Laure can sense someone standing on the other side of the wardrobe, trying to enter it.

In the climactic moments of the novel, Doerr reminds us of the infinitude of perspectives in the world. In a way, he's reminding us of the challenges he faces as a writer: in a novel with many important characters, he has to choose whose perspective to use to narrate a scene. Doerr, ever ambitious, chooses to narrate this chapter from many different perspectives. Thus we never see exactly what happens to von Rumpel—though it's strongly implied that Werner shoots him here.

At the same instant that Marie-Laure is listening to all this, Volkheimer is walking down the streets of Saint-Malo, looking desperately for food. Also in this instance, Etienne is being marched out of the Fort National by a German soldier, thinking that if he and Marie-Laure survive this day, they'll move to the rainforests. Three hundred miles away, von Rumpel's wife is going to Mass with her two young daughters.

Doerr notes the narrative inconsistency of the world itself: at any given instant, countless stories are being played out at once, some comic, some tragic, some without any plot at all. With this in mind, there can be no real "happy" or "sad" endings—the only emotionally true realism is one that depicts the complexity and chaos of the world, while also showing how humans struggle to make sense of it, and to love and live within it.

We return to the wardrobe. Werner can sense someone just a few inches away from him, on the other side of the wooden barrier. He whispers, in French, "Are you there?"

Doerr ends this chapter—in one sense, a poignant short story hidden in a long novel—with an apt symbol for the divide between all human beings: two strangers, connected through small but vital circumstances, on opposite sides of a heavy physical barrier.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): ARE YOU THERE?

Marie-Laure, sitting in the wardrobe, hears a mysterious person ask, in French, "Are you there?" The mysterious person might as well be Madame Manec, Marie-Laure's father, or Etienne—he symbolizes everyone who's ever abandoned her. The man whispers, in clumsy French, that he doesn't want to kill her—he's been listening to her radio broadcast, and loves the piano music.

Throughout the book, we've been faced with heartbreaking examples of people trying and failing to connect. Here, at the heart of the novel, Doerr gives us one more attempt at connection between two unlike people: the novel's protagonists. We can feel the plot itself pushing Werner and Marie-Laure together, as the two storylines of the book have been building up to this moment for some time now.

The narrator notes that all humans begin as a single, microscopic cell. Over time, this cell divides into many cells—and eventually becomes an entire human body. Suddenly, we cut back to Marie-Laure and Werner. Marie-Laure decides to emerge from the wardrobe, and Werner helps her get out.

At this moment of great pathos, Doerr cuts away from Werner and Marie-Laure for a moment to talk about humanity in the most general terms—stepping back, just as he did in describing the long history of Saint-Malo. We are all made from the same "stuff," he argues—cells and DNA. It's a strangely clinical way to talk about life, but the point is clear: humans are more similar than they're different. It's this appeal to our common nature that justifies Marie-Laure's decision to trust Werner on instinct, and to emerge from the wardrobe.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): SECOND CAN

Werner has just helped Marie-Laure out of the wardrobe. He tells her, "You are very brave." Marie-Laure and Werner then introduce themselves to each other. Werner explains to Marie-Laure that as a child, he and his sister listened to the radio broadcast. Marie-Laure explains that this was her grandfather's voice. She adds that she's very hungry, and Werner agrees. Marie-Laure produces a can of peaches, and Werner opens it with his bayonet. Together, they eat the peaches and slurp up the sweet syrup inside.

This scene is fascinatingly, and sometimes frustratingly, understated. Werner and Marie-Laure talk about the one great commonality in their lives: Marie-Laure's grandfather inspired Werner to study science. And yet they don't talk about anything else, even though (we know) they have a great deal in common. There's the curious tension of so many things left unsaid, even in this rendezvous scene which the whole novel has been building up to.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): BIRDS OF AMERICA

Marie-Laure shows Werner the radio room: there are phonographs and records, including the records that Werner loved so dearly as a child. Werner and Marie-Laure discuss Jules Verne, and the fate of Captain Nemo. In one part of the house, Werner finds a copy of *Birds of America*, a book that Frederick adored.

Doerr suggests that if there is a way for unlike human beings to connect with one another,, it will always be incomplete, but art and literature are the best vehicles possible for such connection. Art is the best way to reach across the boundaries of time, age, and politics: it can say the unspeakable, and tap into the larger complexity of reality. The touching exchange between Werner and Marie-Laure in this chapter proves as much.

There are many hours to go before the ceasefire at noon, Werner tells Marie-Laure. Marie-Laure and Werner decide to sleep in the cellar until this time. They lie down as they hear the sounds of bombs above them. Marie-Laure turns and asks Werner if he knows why the man snuck into her house—Werner suggests that it was because of the radio.

Marie-Laure asks Werner this question as a test, to see if he knows anything at all about the Sea of Flames—and it's clear that he has no idea it even exists. This makes the two characters' brief connection more pure, unsullied by greed or desire for any personal gain. It's as if they have known each other for a long time, and can comfortably take a nap together to recover from their many trials.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): CEASE-FIRE

Werner and Marie-Laure wake up in the cellar and have no idea what time it is. Quickly they climb out the cellar. Werner finds an old white pillowcase and gives it to Marie-Laure, instructing her to wave it when she feels that she's in danger. Together, they walk through the streets, hoping that the ceasefire is still in effect.

Werner takes good care of Marie-Laure, even though she's an almost total stranger to him. It's as if the two can sense that they are more strongly connected than they seem to be, and instinctually recognize that they are kindred spirits—or maybe, in some sense, they are even in love. It also seems to be the case that Werner's connection to Marie-Laure has finally inspired him to break from the Nazis completely.

As Marie-Laure and Werner walk along, Marie-Laure suddenly pulls Werner off the road. She says that she needs to go somewhere, and Werner follows her. Marie-Laure walks toward the beach, until she's standing by Harold Bazin's gate. There, she opens the gate, walks down into the grotto below, and places a small wooden object there. Then, as Werner watches, she climbs back to the gate and locks it behind her.

We can tell what Marie-Laure is up to, even if Werner can't: she's hiding her diamond is a safe place—a place that almost no one knows about. This might also be a way for her to break the "curse"—she has no desire for the diamond because of its beauty or value, and in returning it to the sea, she may be finally fulfilling the legend and freeing herself from any sway it might hold over her.

Werner tells Marie-Laure that it's time for them to part ways. He points her toward the city center, tells her to wave the white pillowcase, and assures her that the Germans won't shoot a girl. Marie-Laure nods and squeezes Werner's hand. She says, "Goodbye, Werner." Werner walks away from Marie-Laure, praying that she'll be safe. Then he realizes that Marie-Laure has given him something when she took his hand—a small iron key.

Almost as soon as Werner and Marie-Laure meet, they're separated yet again—and for the last time. For a few fleeting moments, they felt a connection much bigger than themselves. But this connection by necessity couldn't last forever—the larger forces of history, politics, and war almost immediately push the two apart.

TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): CHOCOLATE

In the evening after the events of the previous chapter, Madame Ruelle finds Marie-Laure, sitting in a school with a group of other French townspeople. The two reunite, joyfully. The morning after, American soldiers invade the town and free the prisoners in the Fort National. The siege of Saint-Malo is finally over.

The reunions in this scene are touching, but they aren't described in remotely as much detail as Doerr invested in the previous chapters. We have the sense that the novel is already past its climax.

On the day the siege ends, Etienne is reunited with Marie-Laure, and they embrace each other. Etienne tells Marie-Laure that they'll travel to Paris, a city he's never visited. Marie-Laure will have to show him how to get around in Paris, he says.

We can appreciate the irony here: throughout her life, Marie-Laure has been escorted through city streets, but now she's going to be the one showing Etienne how to get around. She will finally be returning to her old home, but also seems to have given up on ever seeing her father again. Etienne has become the new father-figure for Marie-Laure.



TEN (12 AUGUST 1944): LIGHT

Werner is captured by French resistance fighters, about a mile south of Saint-Malo. He's sent to a prison for Germans. Werner asks anyone who will listen about Marie-Laure, but no one has seen a blind teenage girl. In prison, Werner is sickly—he knows he needs to eat if he's to live, but eating makes him feel like dying.

Werner's one unambiguously good deed—saving Marie-Laure from von Rumpel—is now behind him, and in the eyes of the Allies at least, he is just another guilty German soldier. He returns to the feverish, guilty state he experienced in Russia.



One night in prison, Werner is rushed to the hospital. In his delirium, Werner thinks he can hear Volkheimer's voice, and he imagines his father standing in front of him. Werner remembers building a tiny sailboat with Jutta, years ago. The sailboat sank, but he assured Jutta that they would make another one.

Werner seems to be reuniting with his family—just as Marie-Laure reunited with Etienne in the previous chapter—but only through a hallucination. Doerr makes no attempt to make his two stories "fair"—Werner is unlucky, and Marie-Laure is (relatively) lucky. Yet Doerr also implies that Werner's hallucinated reunions might be just as "real" and valuable to him as if they had really, physically happened.



The chapter cuts to the perspective of an American guard at the prison. The guard sees a young German prisoner (Werner) walking out of the hospital toward the trees. The guard points a gun at the German and tells him to stop, but the German keeps walking. Before the prisoner can get far, he triggers a land mine that his own army had set there, three months before, and "disappears in a fountain of earth."

Throughout the novel, Werner has been pained and even tortured by the Fascist German state—his fear of it, his duty to it, and his hatred of it. Here, at the end of his life, he's destroyed by the thing that has controlled him: the German army. There's a curiously scientific tone to the way Doerr describes Werner's death—as if the particles in his body are returning to the same place they came from—the earth—to eventually be formed into coal, or perhaps a diamond. (Of course, this also alludes to the Christian "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.") It seems especially tragic that we see the death of one of the protagonists through the eyes of a nameless soldier—Doerr doesn't even give us Werner's last thoughts before the end.



ELEVEN (1945): BERLIN

It is January 1945, and Frau Elena, along with her orphans, is sent to work in a factory. They work hard and are given meager food. Jutta, who still lives with Elena, teaches the younger orphans how to read and write. She has horrible nightmares in which she sees the bodies of dead children. Throughout these months, Jutta remembers playing with Werner as a child.

The bond between Jutta and Werner at times seems almost supernatural. And yet here, we're reminded that there is no automatic connection between family members. Jutta has no idea that Werner has just been killed—from her perspective, he still exists in her memories of childhood.



In the fall of 1944, Jutta had received a letter in which she was told that Werner was killed. As April 1945 begins, Jutta tries to move on with her life, protecting her orphans from the impending Russian invasion that threatens Berlin. The Russians invade in May. Three soldiers come to the factory. The narrator explains that each woman—Frau Elena, Jutta, and even some of the children—are forced to go into a room with each of the soldiers, and "offer moans." After raping the German women, the Russian soldiers leave the factory.

This section is horrifying but also rather perfunctory, as if Doerr felt obligated to briefly include this part of history, and remind us that the Russians who invaded Berlin in 1945 were notoriously cruel to Germans. They thought of themselves as taking revenge for the battles at Leningrad—despite the fact that the women they were supposedly "punishing" had nothing to do with those battles. In reality, many Russian soldiers simply took advantage of the state of anarchy. This section also shows that Jutta has experienced her own trials and horrors even at home—she isn't just an idealistic "conscience" for Werner, but a real person who feels and suffers.



ELEVEN (1945): 177. PARIS

Etienne and Marie-Laure move to Paris, and Etienne rents the same apartment where Marie-Laure used to live. Every day he looks for news of Daniel, but never finds any. Marie-Laure reunites with Dr. Geffard. She thinks about what's become of her father—it's possible that he's dead. She remembers what Madame Manec told her: "You must never stop believing." Marie-Laure tells Etienne that she would like to begin going to school.

As Marie-Laure grows older, she realizes that there's more to Manec's statement about believing than meets the eye. It's not simply that people must always feel the same way about their parents or their loved ones—they must also move on with their lives. Marie-Laure doesn't forget Daniel, but she also doesn't let her grief keep her from pursuing her own education and her own career.



TWELVE (1974): VOLKHEIMER

In 1974, Frank Volkheimer lives in Pforzheim, Germany. He is 51 years old and works as a TV repairman. One day, he receives a strange letter in the mail. The letter explains that the German government is trying to return lost items to the next of kin. Volkheimer, as the commander of a unit, must determine who owned certain items which are photographed in the letter. Volkheimer looks at photographs of a notebook marked with the letters W and P. Immediately, Volkheimer remembers Werner Pfennig. He also sees a photograph of a small model house, which he doesn't recognize.

Doerr now jumps decades ahead, briefly sketching out how the characters deal with their experiences in WWII, and also how they move on from them. We recognize exactly what Werner's few last possessions are: the model house was given to him by Marie-Laure, and the journal contained his inquisitive childhood thoughts. We can sense that Volkheimer will have to return these items to their rightful owner, but it's also unclear who the "rightful" owner really is.



TWELVE (1974): JUTTA

Jutta, now with the last name Wette, teaches students in a school in Essen. She has a husband named Albert Wette, who was a young child during the war, and a child named Max, whose ears stick out, much as Werner's did. One day, Jutta receives a visit from a huge, mean-looking man who reminds her of the bullies of her youth in the orphanage. The man—introducing himself as Volkheimer—informs her that her brother, Werner, died just outside of the town of Saint-Malo. Volkheimer explains, very gently, that he thinks Werner might have fallen in love at the end of his life.

It's easy to read into Jutta's marriage to Albert: Jutta chose to marry someone who was a little too young to absorb the full shock of World War II—someone who wasn't personally complicit in the Holocaust or the war effort, and therefore someone who wouldn't conflict with Jutta's moral code. Max's appearance also obviously alludes to Werner, as if Jutta keeps Werner alive in the form of her own child. Volkheimer's hypothesis—that Werner fell in love—may be off the mark (describing a platonic connection in a romantic way), but it might also show Volkheimer as his usual perceptive self, voicing insights that not even Doerr had previously put into words.

Jutta tells Volkheimer that she needs a moment alone. She goes into the kitchen, and is surprised to see Volkheimer playing with Max, cheering him up. Albert approaches Jutta and tells her, "I love you." Jutta says, "I love you too."

It seems that Jutta has found peace in her life after the death of her brother—she's found a man who loves her, and who isn't haunted, as Werner was, by the war. On the other hand, this also means that Albert can't ever truly understand Jutta, or empathize with the issues she must wrestle with.

TWELVE (1974): DUFFEL

Volkheimer has just left Jutta's house, leaving behind a duffel bag of Werner's possessions. Jutta tries to avoid opening the bag, but she can't concentrate on anything else. Eventually, she opens the duffel bag, and finds Werner's notebook inside. She opens the notebook, and finds a list of questions that Werner wrote for himself as a young boy, such as, "Why does a flag flutter in the wind rather than stand straight out?"

We're reminded of how innocent Werner used to be, and this is surely a heartbreaking moment for Jutta. But as Philip Roth once wrote, "The innocence was *the crime." By turning a blind eye to the atrocities of Germany, and by focusing on the "pure" science, Werner allowed great evils to occur, not recognizing them until it was almost too late.*

TWELVE (1974): SAINT-MALO

Several weeks after the events of the last chapter, Jutta and Max have left Essen by train for Saint-Malo. Jutta is carrying Werner's notebook, along with the tiny model house (which was also in the duffel bag). As the train approaches the town, Jutta is struck by the beauty of the sea. She remembers a letter Werner wrote her, in which he talked about being unable to follow orders while looking at the sea.

Although Jutta recognizes that Werner allowed his pseudo-innocent interest in science to blind him to the evils of the Nazi state, she also sees that he was changing his mind about Fascism toward the end of his short life. Unbeknownst to her, after writing this letter he went on to kill a Nazi officer in order to save the life of an innocent French girl.

Jutta finds a place to stay in Saint-Malo, but can't quite explain to herself why she's in town. Max entertains himself by telling Jutta clever riddles. Jutta asks a local man about a large house that stood before World War II, and the man points her to Etienne LeBlanc's house. Jutta walks to the house, taking Max with her. As they walk, Jutta wonders aloud why anyone would have a miniature model of the house. Max suggests that the house is a puzzle that can be opened.

Max's flash of insight in this scene is, of course, exactly right: there's an object inside the model house, which Jutta must discover. The children in the novel are often more creative, brave, and insightful than their parents—or at least have the right eye for the puzzles and hidden connections that bring the novel together.



TWELVE (1974): LABORATORY

Marie-Laure LeBlanc now works at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. She has spent her adult life studying mollusks, and has been a trailblazer in her field. Etienne has passed away, but before his death he and Marie-Laure tried to determine what happened to Daniel. They hired a private investigator, who learned that Daniel was sent to a labor camp in 1942, and probably died of influenza there in 1943.

It's no surprise that Marie-Laure goes on to study mollusks—she's always been fascinated by them, and aspires to their stability and tranquility. But it's also a shock to read that Daniel died of influenza in a camp. Doerr robs us of an emotional reunion scene, and even a tragic death scene, by including Daniel among the thousands who were unjustly imprisoned and then died meaningless, unrecorded deaths during World War II.



Marie-Laure has a child, Hélène, who's now 19 years old. The girl's father, a man named John, doesn't live with Marie-Laure—when she became pregnant, they separated, "with no flamboyance." Marie-Laure loves her daughter, and is, for the most part, happy with her life. But there are times when she feels a strange anxiety—an emptiness.

The emptiness that Marie-Laure feels is, perhaps, a quintessential part of the human condition. People develop deep emotional bonds with each other, but these bonds don't last forever, and are always fragile at best. Furthermore, no one else can truly understand Marie-Laure's particular experiences (as is the case with every human), and so in one sense, she is always alone.



One day, Marie-Laure learns from her museum assistant that she has a visitor—a woman from Germany. Absent-mindedly, she asks what the woman looks like. The assistant replies that the woman has very white hair, and wants to see her about a "model house." Marie-Laure begins to shake.

Marie-Laure is an elderly woman with her own life and career now, but she still hasn't forgotten Werner, the man who saved her life years before—or her father's models, and the treasure hidden within them.



TWELVE (1974): VISITOR

Marie-Laure has just been introduced to Jutta Pfennig, the sister of Werner. Jutta introduces her son, Max, and explains that she's come to deliver something to Marie-Laure. Jutta reminisces out loud about Werner—the man who saved Marie-Laure's life years ago. As Marie-Laure listens quietly, Jutta remembers that Werner was always small for his age, but very protective of his friends and family.

Although Werner died a seemingly random and meaningless death, we see that some part of him lives on in the hearts and minds of those who remember him. Marie-Laure clearly hasn't forgotten about Werner, and Jutta remembers Werner in gorgeous detail, as she praises him for his kindness and his strong protective instincts. Although they have never met before, the two women can bond over this shared relationship, even if Marie-Laure's time with Werner was incredibly brief.



Marie-Laure and Jutta continue talking about Werner. Marie-Laure explains that she left Werner with the key to the grotto, which guarded the model house. She wants to know how Jutta came to acquire the model house—Jutta doesn't know exactly how the house made its way from the grotto to Volkheimer to her. Nevertheless, she says that she wants Marie-Laure to have the model house—better Marie-Laure than her. Marie-Laure accepts, and tells Jutta that she wants her to have something: a record that Etienne kept in his house, and used to play in the evenings. She promises to mail it to Jutta.

Once again, the interaction of unlike people (here, Jutta and Marie-Laure) is mediated by art, which can say otherwise inexpressible things. Marie-Laure and Jutta don't speak much to one another—they simply wouldn't know where to begin—but they exchange small objects that have beauty and significance for both of them. The radio broadcasts—which we never see Jutta re-experiencing—have an obvious emotional currency for her, and the same is true of Daniel's model house.

TWELVE (1974): PAPER AIRPLANE

After her day in Paris with Marie-Laure, Jutta returns to her hotel, accompanied by Max. Max has had a wonderful day at the Natural History Museum, and finds the skeletons of dinosaurs very exciting. Jutta, now very tired, places a call to her husband.

Doerr gives us the briefest of glimpses into the everyday lives of his characters years later. Here we also return to the contents of the Natural History Museum—a reminder of how arbitrary our system of values can be. For example, the only thing that makes a diamond more valuable than a dinosaur skeleton is a matter of perspective.

TWELVE (1974): THE KEY

Marie-Laure sits in her laboratory at the Natural History Museum, thinking of Werner. She realizes that after she and Werner parted ways in 1944, Werner must have gone back to open the gate to the grotto and find the model house. Marie-Laure takes her model house and twists it open. Inside, she finds an iron key.

Here part of the mystery is revealed—Werner did indeed return to the grotto and find the diamond, but then he made the same choice Marie-Laure did, and left it there. Neither protagonist allowed themselves to be seduced by the glamour or value of the diamond, but simply treated it as another object with symbolic value—an object only useful to them as an aspect of human connection, like a radio or a model house. This also symbolizes both characters casting away the influence of fate (the diamond's curse) and trying to take their destiny into their own hands.

TWELVE (1974): SEA OF FLAMES

The narrator describes the creation of a diamond. The mass of hot carbon rises from the Earth's mantle, very slowly. The mass is cooled by rainwater, and over the centuries it crystallizes into a hard, precious stone. One day, a prince discovers the stone, and polishes it until it's even more beautiful. Years later, the stone is covered by algae and snails.

There's been a long conflict between fate and freedom in this novel. Here, with the abandonment of the diamond symbolizing fate, Doerr suggests that his protagonists have rejected fate altogether—they've exercised free will in their own lives, and have found small, meaningful ways to fight the seemingly inevitable specters of death, war, and tragedy. Once again Doerr steps back to look at the very big picture, and finally makes explicit the comparison between the creation of a diamond and the creation of coal (the subject of one of Henri LeBlanc's lectures)—it is only human perception that has decided one is more beautiful and valuable than the other. Lastly, Doerr ends with another poignant image of snails, as the resilient and lovely creatures reclaim the diamond and render its "curse" powerless.

TWELVE (1974): FREDERICK

The narrator describes Frederick—he's currently living with his mother outside West Berlin. Frederick spends his days making strange drawings of loops. Frederick's mother takes care of him, and tries to appear as happy as possible. But fewer and fewer friends visit her, and she becomes deeply lonely.

Doerr doesn't feel obligated to provide any happy endings. Even his theme of powerful family bonds doesn't always hold true, as Frederick and his mother live together, but neither is fulfilled or at peace. The wounds of the past are too great for both of them.

One day, Frederick receives a letter. The letter has been sent by "a woman from Essen" (whom we recognize to be Jutta), and contains a second letter, from Werner to Frederick. Frederick is uninterested in this letter. Frederick's mother opens it alone, and inside she finds a beautiful print showing birds. She remembers how Frederick used to love studying birds. In the years after his "accident" at the National Institute, Frederick has been unable to make new memories—he's barely conscious of where he is. As Frederick's mother thinks about all this, she hears the "hoot" of an owl. She goes to Frederick's room, where she finds an owl perched on the balcony outside the window. She feels a sudden rush of emotion and points out the owl to Frederick. Frederick finally becomes alert, but only asks, "What are we doing?"

In a conventional novel, the Audubon prints would retrigger Frederick's memory, and he'd emerge from his mental deterioration—but once again Doerr is committed to portraying the harsh realities of life, and so he rarely fulfills the conventional demands of plot and story arc. Art and communication have their limits: as hard as the characters try to connect with one another, their efforts are sometimes—as in this case—in vain. The owl in this scene might have reminded Frederick of his old bird watching hobby, but here it makes no lasting difference to his mental state, and only increases his mother's pain.

THIRTEEN (2014)

Marie-Laure has a long life—she lives into the 21st century. One Saturday in early March, her grandson Michel walks her through Paris. Michel is 12 years old, and loves playing violent video games, something Marie-Laure finds hard to understand. As Marie-Laure and Michel walk through the streets, Michel asks Marie-Laure what she got for her 12th birthday—she replies that she got a copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Michel tells Marie-Laure that his mother (Marie-Laure's daughter Hélène) has read this book to him.

Although the Frederick storyline emphasizes how art and communication are limited in their ability to nurture connection between people, they can still be powerful forces in their own right. Here, we see that Daniel LeBlanc's memory lives on in his descendants. He's passed on, via Marie-Laure, his fondness for reading and creative thinking, just as Marie-Laure will pass on these things to her descendants when she dies.



As Marie-Laure walks with Michel, she wonders about the city of Paris. Here in the 21st century the city is always busy: people make calls on their cell phones, and babble about simple, unimportant things. With so many people walking the streets, Marie-Laure wonders if it's possible that souls could walk the streets as well: the souls of Etienne, Madame Manec, Werner Pfennig, and even Marie-Laure's father. Perhaps their souls *are* walking the streets, but the living just don't know it.

Doerr ends his novel on a note of "optimistic hopelessness." Although it's impossible to truly connect to all the people one loves most—because some of them are dead, or otherwise unreachable—it is possible to feel their spirit in other, more metaphorical ways. Marie-Laure may not be able to hold a conversation with her father, but she can pass on his passions to her children and grandchildren. The same is true of Werner—his physical time with Marie-Laure was very brief, but he is still present in her heart and imagination, and so in some way their connection lives on.



Abruptly, Marie-Laure finds that she and Michel have completed their walk and returned to her house. She bids goodbye to her grandson, kisses him on the cheek, and says she'll see him next week. With this, Michel walks off. Marie-Laure listens to the sound of Michel's footsteps fading away, until she can no longer hear him at all.

The final image of All the Light We Cannot See *is that of a child's footsteps fading into oblivion. This is an apt metaphor for the relationships in this novel: they're wonderful while they last, but they can't last forever. If there's a way to live the "good life" in such a world, it requires that people savor the happiness in their lives* while *they have it. All human connection is fleeting—like youth, happiness, and even life itself—but that doesn't make it any less important.*



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