

a CONVERSATION WITH ANTHONY DOERR

Dina Greenberg

Just a few months before the release of his second novel, *All the Light We Cannot See* (Scribner, May 2014), Anthony Doerr spoke with *Chautauqua* about this masterwork—ten years in the making—and about the deep and enduring passion he brings to each of his writing projects. Doerr is the author of two short story collections, *The Shell Collector* and *Memory Wall*, the memoir *Four Seasons in Rome*, as well as his 2004 novel, *About Grace*. And though Doerr is one of America's most highly decorated short story writers—three Pushcart prizes, four O. Henry Prizes, and the Story Prize to his credit, among others—he is also a remarkably generous and compassionate teacher of writing. Case in point: Doerr arrived to the 2013 Chautauqua Writers' Festival, more than a day late, having spent nearly all of that lost day and night encamped at various airports as wild storms delayed flights across a huge swath of the nation. While in transit from Boise, Idaho, where Doerr lives with his wife Shauna and their twin sons, the author/teacher maintained a steady email correspondence with his Writers' Festival students and the Festival's directors, assuring his eventual arrival and relaying meticulous instructions for his (one-day) substitute teacher—Festival co-director George Looney; as a participant in Doerr's ensuing fiction workshop, I can assure you, it was well worth the wait. The same can be said of Doerr's second novel.

DINA GREENBERG: ON THE FLYLEAF OF YOUR 2007 MEMOIR, *FOUR SEASONS IN ROME*, A BLURB FROM SANDRA CISNEROS READS: "DOERR'S JOURNAL IS A LOVE LETTER . . . ROME IS THE CHOSEN BELOVED, BUT DOERR'S TRUE SUBJECT IS WRITING."

I THINK THIS INSIGHT IS CORRECT, BUT THERE IS SOMETHING ELSE. IN THE OPENING CHAPTER OF THE MEMOIR, YOU AND SHAUNA ARRIVE IN ROME WITH YOUR INFANT SONS, HENRY AND OWEN, AT THE OUTSET OF YOUR AMERICAN ACADEMY FELLOWSHIP IN 2004. THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE YOU BEGIN RESEARCH ON *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*.

CHAUTAUQUA

SO YOU ARE WRITING A NOVEL AND LEARNING TO BE A NEW FATHER (OF TWINS!), AND A SUPPORTIVE PARTNER TO SHAUNA. IT'S DURING THAT INITIAL PERIOD, WHEN YOU ARE BOTH PERPETUALLY EXHAUSTED, YOU WRITE IN THE MEMOIR, "OCCASIONALLY I'D BE LUCID ENOUGH TO THINK: THIS IS NOT NORMAL. I SHOULD NOT BE TRYING TO WRITE A BOOK DURING THIS."

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE INTERSECTION OF THESE TWO ASPECTS OF YOUR LIFE—BECOMING A FATHER, BEING A WRITER? HOW HAVE THESE TWO IDENTITIES INFORMED ONE ANOTHER?

Anthony Doerr: Before I had kids, I was someone who needed order to write well. I liked having a clean desk, the bills paid, several open hours ahead of me. And because, for the first years of my career, it was just two of us in a little apartment, order was easy to establish. I had time to cook, to exercise, to read, to sort my books between nonfiction and fiction... Then suddenly we had two babies crawling around all over the place, grabbing pens off tables and shoving them into each other's mouths.

And *then* we moved to Rome, the biggest city I'd ever lived in. Car alarms were screeching all night, our babies were howling, baby food was sold in a different currency and language, and our stroller didn't fit through our front door. I had to learn to be more efficient, to be more patient, to be more flexible, and to work whenever I could squeeze it in.

Being a good parent, I'm learning (and relearning) is essentially egoless. It's about being there: listening, being generous, downplaying your own needs, being upbeat, not complaining. Our kids might be asking for stuff like an "X-Box One and a food dispenser for our fort" this Christmas, but what they really want is our time.

In some ways, this also defines a good fiction writer. You need to be generous (to your reader); you need to serve as witness (to your characters' lives); and you need to put in your hours every day. And for all that work, in both writing and parenting, there are amazing rewards: you see this child/book you care about go out into the world and interact with people.

Maybe that's really what it means to be a parent—to be continually reminded that you are taking part in something much larger than your

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own terrifyingly short life. And that's something I think about with my work all the time: where does this one story I'm telling fit into the long string of stories that have been told and will be told?

YOUR WORK—WHETHER IN THE FORM OF SHORT STORY, ESSAY, OR NOVEL—IS TIGHTLY ENMESHED IN THE NATURAL WORLD; IN STORIES LIKE “THE SHELL COLLECTOR,” WHERE YOUR BLIND PROTAGONIST IS A RETIRED PROFESSOR OF MALACOLOGY (THE STUDY OF MOLLUSKS), AND CERTAINLY IN *ABOUT GRACE*, WHERE THE NOVEL'S PROTAGONIST IS A HYDROLOGIST (A PERSON WHO STUDIES MOVEMENT, DISTRIBUTION, AND QUALITY OF WATER ON EARTH AND OTHER PLANETS), IT SEEMS YOUR RENDERING OF METICULOUS SCIENTIFIC DETAIL IS A VITAL INGREDIENT. INDEED, IN YOUR NEW NOVEL, THE PROTAGONIST'S FATHER IS THE MASTER OF THE LOCKS IN THE MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IN PARIS. CAN YOU SPEAK TO THIS ASPECT OF YOUR WRITING? HOW DO THESE BRANCHES OF SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY INTO THE NATURAL WORLD WORK THEIR WAY INTO YOUR FICTION?

Science composes a whole host of ways to investigate the world, to probe mysteries, and the best scientists are comfortable working with uncertainty, operating in the unknown. This seems to me very similar to what fiction writers do. We find something/someone/some place we're vitally interested in, and we pursue that interest through language.

So I don't see science and literature as separable entities, buildings that should be built on opposite sides of a college campus. I see them both as useful ways to try to understand what we're doing here in the appallingly brief time we have. For me, that natural world is not something separate from the human world; the outside is not something we shuttle ourselves out into for an hour a day, before hurrying back indoors to our hand sanitizer and indoor plumbing. We are the natural world and it is us.

CLEARLY, ALL OF YOUR WORK IS HEAVILY RESEARCHED. YOUR SHORT STORIES—OFTEN VERY LONG, ALWAYS VERY INTRICATE—TAKE PLACE ALL OVER THE WORLD: AFRICA, THE CARIBBEAN, CHINA. THERE IS ALWAYS A SENSE THAT YOU KNOW THESE PLACES INTIMATELY.

AND THEN IN YOUR RESEARCH FOR *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*, YOU TAKE ON THE ENORMOUS BACKDROP OF WORLD WAR II EUROPE WITH CHARACTERS SCATTERED FROM PARIS, TO SAINT-MALO ON THE BRITTANY COAST, TO GERMANY, AND RUSSIA. THIS IS A BROAD SCOPE!

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS WITH *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE*, IN PARTICULAR, AND WITH YOUR WRITING, IN GENERAL? HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE TIME YOU SPEND DOING RESEARCH WITH THE TIME YOU SPEND WRITING? WAS THERE ANYTHING IN ROME THAT YOU DISCOVERED (ABOUT YOUR CHARACTERS, GEOGRAPHIC OR HISTORICAL DETAIL, ETC.) THAT MAY NOT HAVE SURFACED OTHERWISE?

I come to fiction to learn. I put a book aside if I feel I'm not learning anything from it. From novels I've learned about how people dress in Afghanistan, how to harpoon whales, what the deep Pacific looks like at midnight, what storms feel like on the Mississippi, what it feels like to be a slave, the conditions on Neptune, that a woman falling in love in the nineteenth century felt much the same way I felt when I was falling in love...

When I'm working on a project I'm bored if I'm not learning. I think a lot of readers feel the same way. So I'm researching all the time. I research by reading, by looking at photographs, by walking through in the air and light and tree-shadow of various places, by talking to people, and by imagining. The new novel took me so long to write because every time I had a character walk into a kitchen, or a drugstore, or a paramilitary school, I needed to be able to fully imagine what those places would have looked like in 1938 or 1942 or 1944. I wanted to see those places clearly so that my reader could see those places clearly.

Practically that means you have to do a lot of work, of course, but there are fascinating benefits from research. While you're looking for photos of 1940s French kitchens, or reading a memoir from the '30s that describes a drugstore, serendipitous, magical things happen. You might be looking for photos of bombings and you notice a girl in a corner of a photograph wearing a beret and carrying what might be a rifle. And suddenly you get an idea for a girl working in the Resistance.

Or you're trying to understand about how keys worked in natural history museums before the automation of locks, and you come across a story about a cursed sapphire in the British Museum. Each bit of research you do offers a network of wormholes that might lead into new and potentially fertile ideas.

As for Rome, more than anything, it deepened my sense of historical time. Living in the mountains, and having a science teacher for a mom, I grew up with a decent handle on geologic time, on fossils, on the age of the earth. But it wasn't until living in Rome that I realized how both recent and distant two-thousand-year-old buildings can feel. How both knowable and unknowable were those lives that we call ancient. "Ancient" Romans got diarrhea and wrote their names on buildings and loved strawberries and fought with their spouses, just like we do. But their children died far more often than ours, they were far more accustomed to seeing subjugated people, public hygiene was radically different, and mystery and magic hovered just outside the margins of every map.

WHAT I FIND INTERESTING—ESPECIALLY WHEN THINKING ABOUT THE PANORAMIC SCOPE OF YOUR WRITING—IS HOW YOU ALSO INSIST ON PERFECTION ON THE MICROSCOPIC LEVEL (WORD CHOICE AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE, FOR INSTANCE). IN ONE PASSAGE IN *FOUR SEASONS IN ROME* YOU RESOLVE TO "TEST EACH SENTENCE FOR FRACTURES IN THE DREAM."

HOW DO YOU WRITE AN ENTIRE NOVEL WITH THIS DEGREE OF ATTENTION? DO YOU FIRST (OR EVER) ALLOW YOURSELF TO WRITE A SLOPPY, UNWIELDY SENTENCE IN ORDER TO SIMPLY CAPTURE THE NUGGET OF THOUGHT, A SWEEPING CONCEPT THAT YOU HAVEN'T YET WORKED THROUGH?

Yes, yes, of course, the early drafts of my sentences are always a mess. (Often the later drafts are, too!)

Time and sleep, those are the keys. It doesn't matter if you're writing a five-hundred-page novel or a thousand-word essay. You need to write sentences, go to bed, wake up the next day and reread the thing you're trying to make. You tug, squeeze, adjust, tweak, twist; you listen to the music you made the day before.

Only through the slow accretion of days can you begin to shape the sounds and shapes of your sentences around the intangible, barely articulable thing you're trying to say. Often you might not even know, at least at the outset, what you're trying to say, what kind of image you're trying to make, what kind of narrative you're shaping. The language itself suggests it.

That's what writing is. You end up condensing a few hundred (or, in the case of the new novel, several thousand) mornings of thinking and tinkering and researching and backtracking and wondering into your paragraphs, and then you give them to your reader and hope you've been generous enough that they will reward her attention.

IT REALLY IS ASTOUNDING TO THINK OF THIS LATEST NOVEL ON BOTH THE MICRO AND THE MACRO LEVELS. YOU'VE CREATED TWO COMPELLING AND IDIOSYNCRATIC CHARACTERS—A BLIND FRENCH GIRL AND A GERMAN BOY, AN ORPHAN, WHO IS SWEEPED UP IN THE HITLER YOUTH. HE BECOMES AN EXPERT AT TRACKING RADIO TRANSMISSIONS AMONG THE RESISTANCE. THEIR LIVES INTERSECT DRAMATICALLY THOUGH BY NO CONTRIVED COINCIDENCE.

CAN YOU DISCUSS THE ORIGINAL SPARK (STORY KERNEL) THAT LED YOU TO YOUR CREATION OF MARIE-LAURE AND WERNER? DID THESE CHARACTERS HELP LEAD YOU TO DETERMINING PLOT OR WAS IT MORE THE OTHER WAY AROUND?

The very original spark? I was on the train heading from Princeton into New York City. This was in 2003. We were rattling into Penn Station, a good seventy feet below street level, still probably going thirty miles an hour, when the guy in the seat in front of me lost a call on his cell phone. He started whacking his phone against the seatback in frustration.

And I remember thinking: that little device you're beating up, Mister, is a miracle! And we've forgotten that it's a miracle!

Look at your phone. It's got a receiver and a transmitter inside it, it's the size of a deck of cards, and it can connect you with someone in Tibet, or Madagascar, or Portland. People in Australia right now are calling people in the Caribbean and they're doing it with handheld devices and

invisible light. Ten generations ago, people in the Caribbean didn't even believe Australia existed.

We've become habitualized to so many things! Daily doses of protein, hot water coming out of a faucet with the turn of a tap, the ability to step onto an airplane and teleport across the world in a half a day.

That day on the train, I realized that we'd all become habitualized to the magic of radio, and I wanted to remind folks of its power. That night I conceived of a story where a boy was trapped somewhere underground, and could hear the voice of a girl on a radio, and that she was his only connection to the outside world. Even in the very earliest drafts, she was reading him a story.

After years of reading and thinking and lousy writing, that boy eventually became Werner, the girl became Marie-Laure, and the story became *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.

IN THE EXQUISITE TITLE STORY OF *THE SHELL COLLECTOR*, THE PROTAGONIST IS ALSO BLIND. THIS SEEMS INTEGRAL TO HIS CHOSEN FIELD—MALACOLOGY, THE STUDY OF MOLLUSKS—AND HIS ABILITY TO IDENTIFY WITH SUCH EXACTITUDE THE VARIETY OF SHELLS HE COLLECTS. THE MINUTE DIFFERENTIATIONS IN THE PHYSICAL SPECIMENS ARE A KIND OF BRAILLE HE READS WITH HIS FINGERTIPS.

IT SEEMS NO ACCIDENT THAT MARIE-LAURE IS ALSO FASCINATED WITH THE SHELLS SHE COLLECTS ALONG THE BRITTANY COAST. IT ALSO SEEMS CLEAR THAT, IN BOTH OF THESE CHARACTERS, YOU ARE INTERESTED IN HIGHLY EVOLVED FORMS OF PERCEPTION. EVEN AS A CHILD, WERNER IS ABLE TO PERCEIVE SOUND IN A SIMILARLY EXCEPTIONAL WAY AS A RESULT OF HIS UNCANNY UNDERSTANDING OF RADIO COMMUNICATION. THIS, TOO, IS INTEGRAL TO THE WAY HIS CHARACTER DEVELOPS THROUGHOUT THE NOVEL.

CAN YOU SPEAK A BIT ABOUT HOW THIS ALL TIES TOGETHER FOR YOU?

Hmm, that's interesting! I've thought about those connections before, but not in a conscious or determined way. I think it's true that, yes, my protagonists often have heightened senses of perceptions. I think of the hunter's wife in "The Hunter's Wife," or Winkler in *About Grace* or Esther

in "Afterworld." But in truth those are not conscious decisions; I just sketch things out that feel right about my characters, reread them, refine them, and finally let them go.

I'm drawn to writers like Annie Dillard, or Bruce Chatwin, or Nabokov, or W. G. Sebald, who display extremely fine sensory perception, so perhaps that's part of it?

In truth, like so many things about writing, it's a mystery. Which is why it continues to be the most engaging thing I've yet found to do with my life.