

*Cloud Cuckoo Land*, Anthony Doerr (2021, Scribner)

If you enjoyed Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, I think you'll want to read his *Cloud Cuckoo Land*. The books are similar in having children in peril as the principal protagonists, in dealing with 'outsider' individuals, in making the love between a father and daughter an important part of the story, and in skipping back and forth between different sets of characters and different times. But the stories the two novels tell are very different.

*Cloud Cuckoo Land* is the name of a tale supposedly written by Antonius Diogenes, a second-century Greek author, for his dying niece. He has based it on Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, in which men leave earth to find a better life in a land in the sky. An orphan girl in mid-15th-century Constantinople finds a copy of the tale in the library of a wrecked monastery, and takes it with her when she flees the Ottoman attack on the city. An orphaned boy in 20th-century Idaho who joins the army learns about it from a man he meets as a fellow prisoner of war in North Korea, and, in his old age, translates it into English. A girl in a spaceship leaving the devastation on earth for a distant planet toward the end of our current century hears the story from her father. Doerr is writing about the power of narrative to console, to create a better world for its reader. And also about the joys of libraries, refuges for many of the novel's children.

But he's writing about a great deal besides. The connections among the three sets of characters are surprisingly many, and many interesting characters accompany the principals. There is the autistic boy determined to avenge the death of his beloved owl, killed when a voracious company destroys its habitat to build luxury housing. There is the 15th-century Bulgarian boy with a harelip, outcast because the villagers think him a devil, conscripted into the Ottoman army with his beloved pair of bullocks. Although there are no animals on the spaceship for the girl to love, the ship's library is equipped with all-embracing and beautiful virtual-reality pictures of places on earth, in a contemporary version of Diogenes' avian paradise. So beyond libraries and stories, the novel is about the beauty of the earth, about its violation by human greed and aggression, about love across species and among humans, and about the persistent determination to find a better kind of life. In Diogenes' narrative, the shepherd who has found the birds' paradise still decides to return to earth. Doerr reminds us that "paradise" comes from a word meaning "garden."