

The enduring power of story

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Anthony Doerr (“All the Light We Cannot See”) didn’t need any help from this book review column to ensure that his latest book, “Cloud Cuckoo Land,” got attention. When the book came out this autumn, it was an instant best-seller, accompanied by plenty of rave reviews. So — call me a reverse snob — I didn’t rush to jump on the bandwagon.

But Doerr does live in Boise, and sections of this new book do take place in the interior Pacific Northwest, so when a hole unexpectedly opened up in my review schedule, I eyed the “Cloud Cuckoo Land” book cover with its enticing golden towers and fluttering pennants and spangles of birds and distant stars. I weighed the heft of the book in my hand, and wondered if it were even possible to get through the 600 plus pages in time to write a review.

I needn’t have worried. The first night, I consumed 100 pages easily, drawn in by this complex weave of a story, which takes place in 15th century Constantinople, as well as during the Korean War, in present-day Idaho and on a spaceship that — decades in the future — is hurtling away from a ruined Earth and toward the uncertain hope of finding another livable exoplanet some 4.2399 light-years away.

The next day, I sat back down with the book and didn’t get up, except to refresh my cup of tea, until I finished the remaining more than 530 pages. Simply put, “Cloud Cuckoo Land” had me spellbound.

Doerr has created a treasure chest of stories, loosely bound together by the frayed but still-glimmering thread of an actual, ancient Greek romance. Although only fragments remain of the original text of Antonius

This week’s book

‘Cloud Cuckoo Land’ by Anthony Doerr

Scribner – 640 pp – \$30

Diogenes’ “The Wonders Beyond Thule,” the tale has been translated and retold and passed down through the ages by scholars and librarians and lovers of story.

It is about Aethon, a simple shepherd who, after seeing a magical land portrayed in a play by Aristophanes, abandons his duties to go in search of that place — “far from the troubles of men and accessible only to those with wings, where no one ever suffered and everyone was wise.”

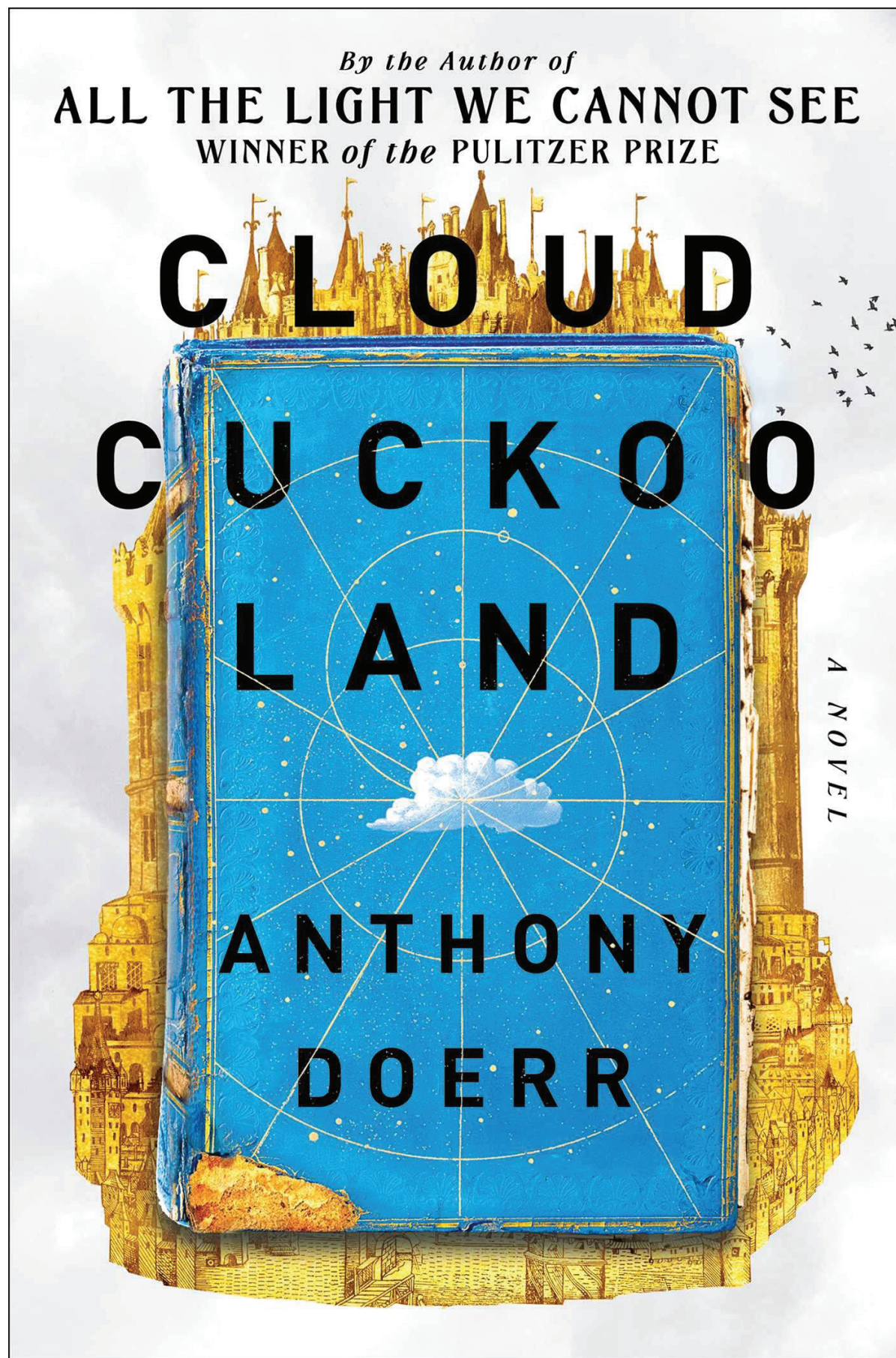
Now Doerr imagines how that original tale could plant seeds of imagination and perseverance in youth who have been, are or will be forced to navigate troubled times in the centuries since then.

Taking Diogenes’ original tale, Doerr introduces it to characters in new stories that he has created and intertwined: of orphaned sisters and a boy coward who are about to get caught up in the 15th century siege of Constantinople; of 20th and 21st century witnesses to war and environmental catastrophe; and of a young, lone survivor of a plague that breaks out amidst a group of interstellar pioneers traveling through space.

Ultimately, each of these characters derives solace and meaning from Diogenes’ ancient tale.

As will readers of this novel. “Cloud Cuckoo Land” is a paean to the enduring power of story.

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