

'Cloud Cuckoo Land' by Anthony Doerr

Follow-up to his Pulitzer winner book is bigger and more ambitious

By Chris Hewitt
Star Tribune

Think of Anthony Doerr's new novel as "All the Plot Connections You Cannot See."

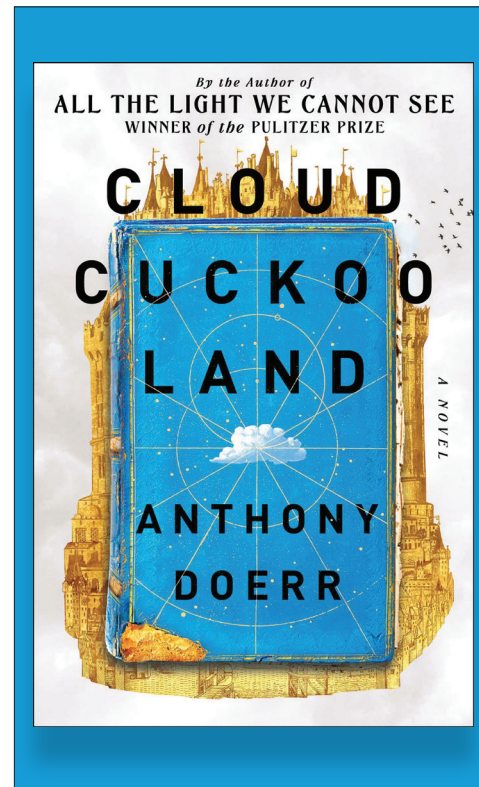
Like Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning "All the Light You Cannot See," his "Cloud Cuckoo Land" (\$30) includes two characters — on opposite sides of a war, divided by a fortress wall — whose separate stories gradually join. Instead of World War II, this battle is the 1453 siege of Constantinople and the pair are Omeir, a boy born into poverty, and Anna, resident of a convent whose sisters struggle to finish a tapestry that illuminates an epic tale while she becomes obsessed with an ancient codex.

Bibliophilia is a central motif of "Cloud Cuckoo Land" (which is dedicated to librarians), along with gray owls, the perils of translating literature and climate crisis. A 21st-century man named Zeno labors

over a translation of Antonius Diogenes' mythic "Cloud Cuckoo Land." Anna becomes the guardian of that ancient text. Children in a present-day library in Idaho create a play that contains elements of "Cloud Cuckoo Land." A boy named Seymour orients his life around a guru's dangerous words. Konstance, traveling to another planet in the future, becomes fascinated by glimpses of a mysterious manuscript.

Like "All the Light You Cannot See" — or "A Prayer for Owen Meany," a more skillful novel it occasionally recalls — the distinct stories all wind around each other at the end. But "Cloud" is a more ambitious book than "Light" and it experiences more growing pains as it grows and grows across 626 pages.

Whereas Doerr's previous novel was so enthralling that we didn't mind shifting between its equally fascinating protagonists, "Cloud" wants us to be charmed by half a dozen main characters. I wasn't



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and, as a result, chunks of the novel — the Konstance parts, mostly — had me wishing that Doerr would get back to the more captivating people.

Doerr also misses an opportunity with the children who are creating the play. Zeno — who, like Diogenes' protagonist, Aethon, isn't sure he can complete the task he has set himself — ultimately realizes that the kids' unfettered imagina-

tions can free him from self-doubt. But Doerr, perhaps aware that he's already invented more characters than any book not by James Michener can accommodate, doesn't tell us much about those lively children.

Doerr has not lost the gift for making us love his characters, though. Elderly Zeno, who views his entire life as a series of missed opportunities, becomes the kind of hero we need now, the kind who plants seeds of trees he hopes others will enjoy.

Omeir, born with a cleft palate that earns him early scorn but may destine him for greatness, is so modestly lovable that, even as you sense his story about to blend with Anna's, you'll want to slow down to enjoy every suspenseful word.

With apologies to Sir Mix-a-Lot, it's hard to argue with the logic of a minor "Cuckoo" character who is glimpsed wearing a shirt that says, "I Like Big Books and I Cannot Lie." Doerr's excesses are part of this novel's big-hearted, sprawling appeal. At its best, this big book is not unlike what Anna experiences when she encounters a box containing folios from a manuscript:

"Open the box, walk the lines of sentences: the singer steps out, and breathes a world of color and noise into the space inside your head."

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