

Boise's Anthony Doerr wins the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

BY DANA OLAND

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“How cool that the nicest man I’ve ever met wins a Pulitzer,” said Britt Udesen, executive director of [The Cabin](#), which showcases and supports authors and other literary events in the Treasure Valley.

That sums up the local literary community’s reaction to the news that one of its own received one of the highest literary honors in the world Monday.

[The Pulitzer](#)

[organization](#) honored [Anthony “Tony” Doerr](#) with the prize for fiction for his book, “All the Light We Cannot See” (Scribner). The Pulitzer board lauded the book as an “imaginative and intricate novel inspired by the horrors of World War II and written in short, elegant chapters that explore human nature and the contradictory power of technology.”

Doerr’s book was a finalist for the [National Book Award](#) in November and was one of 1,400 submitted for the Pulitzer prize. Judging the Pulitzer book entries is a two-tiered effort. The first involves a nominating jury that culls through the submitted books. The jury then puts forward the finalists to the Pulitzer board. There must be a majority on the board in agreement on the top prize. If not, no prize is given.

This is believed to be Idaho’s first official Pulitzer prize for fiction, although past winners and finalists have had ties to the state.

Idaho native Marilynne Robinson won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for “Gilead,” but she was already living in Iowa, where she teaches at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She also was a finalist in 1982 for “Housekeeping,” a novel set in North Idaho. Robinson was born and raised in Sandpoint.

University of Idaho professor Kim Barnes became a Pulitzer biography finalist in 1997 for her first book, the memoir “In the Wilderness” about her life growing up in Idaho, and Idaho native and Harvard University professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich won a 1991 Pulitzer in history with her book “The Midwife’s Tale.” Ulrich was born and raised in Sugar City.

Ernest Hemingway won in 1953 for “The Old Man and the Sea.” He regularly spent time in Idaho but didn’t become an Idahoan until the late 1950s.

Doerr learned that he is part of the 99th class of Pulitzer winners while in Paris, where he and his family are living while he makes appearances for the book’s release throughout Europe. The book, which is set in France, comes out in that country in May.

“I was trying not to pay attention to it,” Doerr said over the phone. “I was eating ice cream with (my son) Owen in one room and (my wife) Shauna was watching the announcement in the other room on YouTube. She came into the room shaking, and my phone started ringing within about nine seconds.”

That’s when Doerr learned he was on a list that includes Ernest Hemingway and Toni Morrison. He took it all in with his typical humor and humility.

“It’s hard to think that I really belong on that list,” he said. “I really haven’t had a chance to understand what this means. It’s so overwhelming. My editor worked with a bunch of great writers and told me that when Frank McCourt (‘Angela’s Ashes’ in 1997) won he told her, ‘Now you know the first line of my obituary.’ And that’s true. It’s this thing that will be forever attached to my name. You know, ‘Pulitzer Prize-winner Tony Doerr does something stupid at a BSU football game ...’ Can’t do that anymore.”

Doerr worked on — and sometimes agonized over — “All the Light We Cannot See” for a decade in his Downtown Boise office. He took a few breaks to write short stories, such as “The Memory Wall,” which won The Story Prize in 2011, and “The Deep,” which landed him the London Times Story Prize in 2012.

As with much of his work, critics immediately embraced “All the Light” after its release in May 2014. As readers discovered it, the book’s popularity grew, landing it on the New York Times best-seller list and other lists since June, much of the time in the top 10.

The novel weaves the stories of Marie, a young blind French girl, and Werner, a young German soldier, whose paths collide in occupied France as both try to survive the devastation of World War II. It also involves the development of radio — something that fascinates Doerr.

The book is organized into short chapters that toggle back and forth between his two story lines.

“I just didn’t want to lead the reader away from either one of the narratives for too long,” he said in an earlier interview with the Statesman. “And it was a great space for me to work in. I could work on a chapter for a two- to three-hour stint, before I had to go pick up the kids or something.”

That structure helped with the book’s success, Udesen says. “It gives you an opportunity to breathe in between each exchange and chapter, and a chance to appreciate the beautiful language you’ve read. It was really very graceful.”

Doerr grew up in Cleveland and moved to the hometown of his wife, Shauna, in 2003. The couple are raising their 10-year-old twin boys in the Boise Highlands. Doerr coaches flag football and takes his boys skiing and on nature hikes from their backyard gate.

“This is completely huge,” said writer Alan Heathcock (“Volt: A Story Collection”), who has known Doerr since they met in graduate school at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Doerr is the reason Heathcock moved to Boise. “I remember playing pool and talking about having a meaningful book come out someday. Our aspirations were much more meager then. Now, he’s an international best seller and an official part of the canon of literature. I’m so proud of him. Man, my buddy, he needs a parade or something.”

Boise Mayor Dave Bieter, a big fan of Doerr’s book and of Doerr, is very excited for the author, according to city spokesman Mike Journee. “It’s a big day for Tony and a big day for Boise,” Journee said. He said the city will have some kind of celebration in the future.

Doerr says he appreciates the moment, but still doesn’t know what to think.

“I just want to go to bed and read a book,” he said at about midnight Paris time. “Now I feel I need to take a walk and clear my head. I really wish I was in Boise with my friends, and I could hold my dogs and celebrate.”

This award and the book’s overall success will give Doerr the time and space to write, with less pressure to produce something great, he said.

Doerr plans to return for the awards banquet on May 28 in New York City and then home to Boise in June.

The other 2015 Pulitzer for Fiction finalists are Richard Ford for “Let Me Be Frank With You” (Ecco), Laila Lalami for “The Moors Account” (Pantheon) and Joyce Carol Oates for “Lovely, Dark, Deep” (Ecco).

Read more here: http://www.idahostatesman.com/2015/04/20/3762300_boises-anthony-doerr-wins-the.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy