



## Memory Wall: Stories

By Anthony Doerr

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In the wise and beautiful second collection from the acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-winning #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *All the Light We Cannot See*, "Doerr writes about the big questions, the imponderables, the major metaphysical dreads, and he does it fearlessly" (*The New York Times Book Review*).

Set on four continents, Anthony Doerr's new stories are about memory, the source of meaning and coherence in our lives, the fragile thread that connects us to ourselves and to others. Every hour, says Doerr, all over the globe, an infinite number of memories disappear. Yet at the same time children, surveying territory that is entirely new to them, push back the darkness, form fresh memories, and remake the world.

In the luminous and beautiful title story, a young boy in South Africa comes to possess an old woman's secret, a piece of the past with the power to redeem a life. In "The River Nemunas," a teenage orphan moves from Kansas to Lithuania to live with her grandfather, and discovers a world in which myth becomes real. "Village 113," winner of an O'Henry Prize, is about the building of the Three Gorges Dam and the seed keeper who guards the history of a village soon to be submerged. And in "Afterworld," the radiant, cathartic final story, a woman who escaped the Holocaust is haunted by visions of her childhood friends in Germany, yet finds solace in the tender ministrations of her grandson.

Every story in *Memory Wall* is a reminder of the grandeur of life--of the mysterious beauty of seeds, of fossils, of sturgeon, of clouds, of radios, of leaves, of the breathtaking fortune of living in this universe. Doerr's language, his witness, his imagination, and his humanity are unparalleled in fiction today.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

**Amazon Best Books of the Month, July 2010:** Books made of linked stories, like recent award-winning favorites *Olive Kitteridge* and *Let the Great World Spin*, are usually connected by shared places and people. The tender and lyrical stories in Anthony Doerr's *Memory Wall* are linked no less strongly, but, as if Oliver Sacks had turned to fiction, by a neurological theme. Set as far apart as South Africa and the Korean DMZ, Doerr's stories circle around the central pull of memory, both the struggle against memory's loss and the weight of memories that remain. In the long and brilliantly intricate title story, as memories fade from an aging white woman in suburban Cape Town, they are stored for her (and for anyone else with compatible ports installed in their head) in replayable cartridges. In the final story, "Afterworld," girls from a Jewish orphanage who were murdered by Nazis survive decades later as ghosts in the visionary epileptic seizures of the one girl who survived them. If memories in these tales are like the Yangtze River town in "Village 113," threatened with the forced forgetfulness of a man-made flood, they are also like the legendary sturgeon in "The River Nemunas," which surfaces with an ancient, armor-covered dignity years after it was thought to have vanished. --*Tom Nissley*

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### A Q&A with Anthony Doerr



**Amazon.com:** The title story in your collection grew out of an assignment from *McSweeney's* to "travel somewhere in the world and imagine life there in 2024" (as part of this special issue). I loved how your story dealt with the near future, with just a few small but fantastic details that seem like they could something of our time. How did you like writing fiction to an assignment like that?

**Doerr:** I loved it. It gave me permission to take a risk I had wanted to take, but worried I couldn't pull off: namely, the idea that someone's memories could someday be harvested, stored, and traded. A couple of years ago, I reviewed a book for the *Boston Globe* called *What We Believe but Cannot Prove* in which a neuroscientist named Terrence Sejnowski speculates that someday soon we might be able to locate specific memories in the "extracellular machinery" of our heads and stain them. I had been fascinated by that idea for months, primarily because it reminded me of hunting fossils: looking for one record in a world that generally

does not allow such records. I had simultaneously been writing some (lousy) essays about my own memories of my grandmother's descent into dementia. It wasn't until *McSweeney's* came calling that I gave myself permission to try to braid together a story all these enthusiasms: Alzheimer's and grandma and fossils and South Africa.

**Amazon.com:** South Africa isn't the only far-flung place you write about in this book, much like your previous collection, *The Shell Collector*: you also set stories in China, Korea, Germany, and Estonia (and, yes, Wyoming). Do you always have to visit a place to imagine a story there, and to imagine the memories its inhabitants might hold?

**Doerr:** Not always. Sometimes a place can be so real, so brimming-over with color and noise and detail, that trying to figure out which details to select for a piece of fiction can be overwhelming. Ultimately I'm trying to write stories inside which a reader is transported; I want readers to have an experience that allows them to enter the time and place and life of someone else. And I want that experience of empathy to be continuous; I don't want the dream of the fiction to be broken by any carelessness on my part. That's the most I can hope for: that a reader might leave his or her world for an hour or two and enter the world of one of my characters. And if a reader is going to be nice enough to read one of my stories, it's up to me to make that world as convincing and seamless as possible. So, certainly, travel can help bring a place to life: its smells, its skies, its birds, its light. In the best case scenario, I start a story set somewhere I have visited previously, and then, once the story is mostly drafted, I return to the place to harvest whatever last details I can find.

**Amazon.com:** Many of your stories are about very private and personal experiences of some of our most public and collective dramas: the Holocaust, the aftermath of apartheid, the flooding of the Yangtze. Is that gap between public and private memory one of the engines for your fiction?

**Doerr:** Yes, yes, yes. We tend to believe history is about collective memory, about voiceovers and textbooks and pop quizzes, but for me history is about individuals. The glory and genius of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, for example, is in the ordinary, quotidian day-to-day detailing of the writing: the things they eat, the jokes they tell. The horror comes through because of the mundanity. I read that book when I was fourteen, the same age as Anne, and the lessons of that little diary have stayed with me: first, that through books, the memories of the dead can live; and second, that the path to the universal is through the individual. Only through the smallest details, through the sights and smells and sounds of one person's moment-by-moment experience, can a writer convey the immensity that is a human life.

**Amazon.com:** Publishers don't quite know what to do with novellas, but many of my very favorite stories fall into that in-between length. What do you like about working within its boundaries? Are there novellas you love? Perhaps the great novella of the English language, Joyce's "The Dead," is also one of the great memory tales. Is there something about that size that suits storytelling about memory?

**Doerr:** I love long stories and novellas. They can manage to be bigger than slice-of-life short stories, stories that compress or truncate lives as so many contemporary short stories tend to. In a novella you can work with bigger scales, with a character's birth and death, and with his or her memories. And, yet, because of their relative brevity, because a reader can read a novella in a single day, on a single airplane flight, they can often be more intense, more involving, and more shattering than novels.

That said, you're right, writing them can be scary, because only a very brave publisher is going to produce a book that's less than 150 pages long, and only a very brave magazine is going to run a story longer than 30 pages. So as a writer you feel yourself plunge off a small cliff when you hit about 10,000 words and realize you have 10,000 to go.

At first you might be scared, anyway, but soon afterward there's a certain release. You think: This thing I'm making is not going to sell for a pile of money, this is not my Big Novel; it's just a novella, and I'm going to take whatever risks I want to with it.

I'm actually very interested in how e-readers like the Kindle are going to change the way writers work and readers read. Theoretically, it could be much easier for a publishing house to take a chance on a novella if they don't have to pay for the production costs. Who knows, maybe short stories and novellas are tailor-made for the electronic medium?

Novellas I love? My absolute favorite is Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (though, interestingly, in her introduction to her collected stories, Porter insists that "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" be called a "long story"). And of course Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, which everyone should read once every ten years. And of course, "The Dead", as you mentioned. As for living writers, I love Andrea Barrett's "Ship Fever" and "Servants of the Map" and a little known one by Denis Johnson called "Train Dreams" that I encountered in the 2003 *O. Henry Prize Stories*.

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From Publishers Weekly

In multiple O. Henry Prize–winner Doerr's latest (after *Four Seasons in Rome*), the presence and persistence of memory thematically binds stories set apart by vast distances of time and space. The title story finds a South African woman at the end of her life, taking part in a procedure that records her memories on cassettes; meanwhile, a pair of thieves rifles through the recordings, hoping to discover a secret her husband took to his grave. Bookending the collection is Afterword, about a woman in her final days whose seizures take her back to her youth in a Nazi-era Hamburg orphanage. In between are a couple of domestic stories, one about a village's impending erasure by flood, and another about a teenage orphan adapting to life with her grandfather. Doerr has an incredible sense of language and a skill for crafting beautiful phrases and apt metaphors, but he doesn't always connect with his characters, a shortcoming most obvious in the first-person pieces. For the bulk of the collection, though, Doerr's prose brings home the weight of his troubling thesis, that every hour... an infinite number of memories disappear, whole glowing atlases dragged into graves.

(July)

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From [Booklist](#)

In the half-dozen luminous stories collected here, Doerr explores the way memory shapes individual lives. In the deeply affecting title story, a South African woman suffering from dementia has had portals inserted into her skull. She is able to access her memories by plugging into cassette tapes of her experiences, which allows her to re-remember her past. She spends whole days plugged into her past, which becomes more real to her than the colorless present, but she is beset by a band of thieves out to steal her memories and sell them on the black market. In "Afterworld," a woman at the end of her life suffers seizures that viscerally connect her to the girls she spent her childhood with in a Hamburg orphanage during the Nazi era. The way Doerr combines wondrous descriptions of the natural world with a rather bleak view of the human heart is a thread throughout these stories, all of which contain beautiful passages and vivid imagery. Both readers hungry for unconventional narratives and lovers of fine writing will find much to savor in this impressive collection. -- Joanne Wilkinson

## Users Review

**From reader reviews:**

### **Anita Pfeifer:**

As people who live in often the modest era should be change about what going on or facts even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era that is always change and move forward. Some of you maybe can update themselves by studying books. It is a good choice in your case but the problems coming to a person is you don't know what type you should start with. This Memory Wall: Stories is our recommendation so you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and need in this era.

### **Jimmy Torres:**

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### **Elsie Hawkins:**

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