



The Shell Collector

Anthony Doerr

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The exquisitely crafted stories in Anthony Doerr's acclaimed debut collection take readers from the African coast to the pine forests of Montana to the damp moors of Lapland, charting a vast physical and emotional landscape. Doerr explores the human condition in all its varieties-metamorphosis, grief, fractured relationships, and slowly mending hearts-and conjures nature in both its beautiful abundance and crushing power. Some of his characters contend with tremendous hardship; some discover unique gifts; all are united by their ultimate deference to the mysteries of the universe outside themselves.

The Shell Collector Details

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From Reader Review The Shell Collector for online ebook

Julie Parks says

Anthony Doerr's stories always spark interest in the most unusual things.

These are two of my favorite stories from this collection.

THE SHELL COLLECTOR is a heartwarming tale about a blind man who on a verge of losing his eyesight develops the love for smooth and delicate shells on the beach of Florida. He then decides to devote his entire life to searching and studying various kinds of shells all around the world, becoming thus one of the wisest men in the field. Until he accidentally discovers the healing powers of the supposedly deadly cone snails that cure two malaria patients, causing a public outburst and landing him in the center of unwanted social attention.

Sometimes the most beautiful things can be the also the deadliest. In nature. And in people.

THE HUNTER'S WIFE was originally published in The Atlantic which is where I first read it and which is also how I discovered Anthony Doerr.

The hunter's wife is an unusual woman who connects with dead animals and people, giving the grieving relatives the chance to say goodbye, to feel the last emotions and insights their beloved had felt through this woman's powers - the hunter's wife. The story climaxes when after years apart the hunter comes to see one of her public appearances and finally understands her magic. Essentially, it's the most basic love story told in an unusually imaginative and metaphorical style.

Sara says

A collection of short stories by Anthony Doerr, whose *All the Light We Cannot See* left a lasting impression on me. I must preface my next comment by saying that I am not always a fan of the short story. I often feel it is just getting interesting and it is gone. This might be why I was less than moved by this collection. The stories were good, the ideas were strong, but the connection just never materialized.

Of the eight stories, I most enjoyed For a Time This Was Griselda's Story. The relationship between the two sisters, though strange, was something I could relate to and also the question that rose to my mind of whether it is best to be the one who goes or the one who is left behind. What, if anything, did Griselda owe to her mother and her sister? Isn't the making of happiness within and not outside us?

The Hunter's Wife was interesting and different. I'm not sure I would want to be able to touch a dead or dying body and feel where it is going and what it sees. And, A Tangle By the Rapid River might just be a

lesson in getting what you deserve (although I doubt that is the lesson Doerr thought to teach with it).

Overall, perfectly satisfactory reading and easily fit in between my longer reads. One or two a night before bed, not a problem.

Emily says

This is a collection of short stories from a pretty young author--really beautiful stuff. Sharon, this is the book I told you about with the story about the hunter's wife who touches the dying animals to feel their pain and their life. It stems from there to get even more dramatic and metaphysical but seriously.....the stories in here absolutely changed me and made me want to become a writer. There's a story in here about a homeless man who cuts out the hearts of beached whales and buries them and then sleeps on the ground above them, only it's not gross, Jen, it's beautiful. I can't even write a literate review for this book because I can't stress enough how much I want one of you three to read it so you can tell me if you like it or not.

Linda says

2.99 today

This was my first book by Anthony Doerr. Each story was made up of rich, dimensional characters and beautiful prose. This collection of short stories tempers hope with despair and you will find yourself thinking about them long after you finish. All The Light We Cannot See has been on my TBR list for sometime, I am looking forward to reading it. This has been an awesome year of reading for me with many new authors! Immediately drawn to this cover!

Violet wells says

It's like Anthony Doerr aspires to be the David Attenborough of literature. Always seeking to inspire us to remain goggle-eyed by the beauties of the natural world. Pretty much every story in this collection has as its theme an individual's relationship with the natural world. And the natural world is always called upon to act as a guru – because Doerr, you suspect, is something of an old hippie at heart. He's deeply attached to ideas of escapism and rainbow endings. Drifting dangerously close to sentimentality at times, or plummeting headlong into it as was the case with his first novel, *About Grace*. I couldn't help feeling while reading this that, if he still wants to write about the natural world, he should write a novel about the damage being done to the environment, to the natural world. If the natural world is a constant source of life-enhancing stimulants, as he's constantly reminding us, how about tackling the more meaty subject of its desecration by human greed?

Another of his favourite subjects is the handicapped outcast groping his or her way towards a soulmate. In this collection he has both a deaf character and a blind character and it's like getting a sneak preview of early drafts of *All the Light*. The more of an author's work you read the more you realise how essentially limited are his/her spheres of influence. They say authors only ever write the same book over and over again and this truism is evident here.

Unlike most books of short stories I didn't feel there were any stand out stories meshed in with lame sub-standard affairs here. All the stories were on about the same level – enjoyable, well-written, well-crafted. Nothing spectacular but nothing poor either. Essentially I had a sense of a writer honing his craft.

Cherie says

I think reading the stories more than once helped me enjoy them a little bit more than my first take on them. I can't say that I have a favorite story, but I think I liked the last one the best. I am looking forward to reading All the Light...

Leon Enciso says

El Rastreador de Conchas 3/5

La Mujer del Cazador 4,5/5

Tantas Oportunidades 5/5 :)

Durante mucho tiempo Griselda fue la comidilla 3/5

Cuatro de Julio 3/5

El Casero 5/5 ;D

Un Laberinto junto al Rapid River 2/5 :/

Mkondo 5/5 ;D

Tim Storm says

Dude can write. True, his tone is often a bit detached. Even though he's capable of great imaginative riffs, his voice doesn't vary much from one story to the other. He doesn't inhabit the voice of his characters. In the first two stories, the protagonists are called "the shell collector" and "the hunter." Not too intimate.

But his narration, which almost always carries with it a sort of omniscience even when he remains in 3rd limited, allows him to do some great things with landscape and with point of view. Doerr's an interesting case study in pov, in fact, because in several of his stories, he jumps into a different protagonist's head well after the "pov contract" has been established. For the most part, he gets away with it since his narration is so detached and so incredibly specific and detailed.

I'm not usually one for poetic description, but Doerr keeps me engaged. "The Shell Collector" is to shells what A.S. Byatt's "A Stone Woman" is to rocks, but Doerr's story is much more engaging since he sees within his shells both beauty and danger.

Lastly, I've got to say that I'm impressed with Doerr's depiction of protagonists of different races. Whenever I'm asked about a white author who can write a black or Latino character, I almost always come up short. Not many attempt it; many fail; I think Doerr succeeds.

Laura says

3.75 stars. These stories all share a common thread, which is that they reveal the power and beauty of nature and the relative frailty of human beings. Every time one seemed to fall into a pattern or became a bit predictable, the author turned it on its head and pulled the rug out from under me. I really enjoyed that.

His writing calls to mind Colum McCann, and if you haven't experienced his stuff yet, you might want to think about it. Doerr's prose is spare and precise. He doesn't waste time getting to the point. At times, I became lulled by their beauty, or became immersed in the disparate worlds and then suddenly *shwoom* out flew the rug and down I tumbled, scratching my head and wondering "Now what was *that* all about?"

I think anyone who has stared at a sunset or an intricate spiderweb in awe would find a lot to appreciate here. Mother Nature is the star of the show. Human beings are sideline characters, even when they seem like major players. That's what I appreciated about this book the most. Maybe because it's what I believe myself.

Matthew says

Utterly fantastic in every regard. Every story is truly special, and many will stay with you long after you've finished them.

Doerr's order here, too, is especially spot-on. The title story hooks you in and "The Hunter's Wife" and "So Many Chances" keep the momentum going. Unlike so many short sorry collections that fizzle out, this one roars to the end. "Mkondo", the final story, is my personal favorite. It is so good, in fact, you will hang on every word, not wanting it to end.

Also impressive -- the fact that Doerr was 29 when this was first published. Many writers would kill to be able to write like this after a lifetime, but Doerr apparently has it. Absolutely incredible prose.

One of the very best short story collections I've ever read. 5/5

Renata says

Doerr is magnificent writer of breathtaking prose, poetic descriptions of nature's beauty and sudden harshness, and evocative characterization of uniquely interesting yet all too human characters. The Shell Collector is one of the richest short stories I've ever read. It has more weight than many a novel. The richness of the points of view, the dynamic between unexpected characters reminds me of Chekhov. I am not a frequent reader of short stories but I picked this up after reading a review of Doerr's new novel All the Light We Cannot See. I immediately purchased it after reading these short stories and feel like it is the best gift of the year. Sublime writing, intriguing characters all set in WWII. And shells.

Reminiscent of Andrea Barrett's short stories in the way they connect characters to the natural world.

Libby says

This collection of short stories is lifeless. It's everything I hate about writing: boring stories that take place in "exotic" locations, featuring "interesting" characters, written by a 29 year old white guy invested in authenticity. Uggh.

Dianne says

Very well done collection of short stories by Anthony Doerr, written a dozen years before his Pulitzer Prize winner "All The Light We Cannot See." If you read "All The Light," you will recognize little bits and pieces of that lovely book in some of these stories, especially the title story. Remember Marie-Laure's fascination with shells and mollusks? Straight from "The Shell Collector."

All of the stories are engrossing and quite different from one another. They are all written in his signature lyrical style that is almost poetry. I loved them all but one, "July Fourth," which was strangely sardonic and didn't fit in well with the others. One facet that stood out for me in this collection was how beautifully he creates his physical environments. There is such vivid imagery in all of his natural environments - forests, rivers, oceans, the changing of the seasons. You hear it, you see it, you live it, you FEEL it.

I recommend this highly to lovers of short stories and to those who enjoyed "All The Light We Cannot See."

Tara Lynn says

This is one of my all-time favorite short story collections. I bought the paperback back when I had very little income. I was browsing in the bookstore (my cheap entertainment) and found this book. I read the first sentence: "The shell collector was scrubbing limpets at his sink when he heard the water taxi come scraping over the reef. He cringed to hear it . . ." and I just had to buy it. The only new book I had purchased for some years. But I couldn't pass it up, and wanted to own it.

It did not disappoint. Every story is brilliant. Doerr manages to write about nature with microscopic clarity in the same way that he can write about human interaction. Many writers can do one or the other, but he achieves both. I think the final story in the collection, "Mkondo," though previously unpublished, seems to stand above the others in that it brings all his philosophies on nature, life, and love into one story with perfect balance and execution.

I am in awe of his ability to weave in research and to lyrically capture setting. Even his dialog rings true. It's not a book to be rushed through. You have to savor every line, reread lines, pause between them. If that's how you enjoy reading the best books, you'll love this one.

Teresa says

Maybe not all the stories in this collection are as brilliant as "The Caretaker" and "Mkondo" (a perfect ending to the book), or maybe it only seems that way because these two set the bar so high. In any case, all of them are beautifully crafted and lovely to read, some taking you to remote worlds you most likely will never go to yourself.

Along with the much larger theme of the force of life in both nature and mankind, other subtle threads run through each story: the different manifestations of the color blue and the feeling of existing outside one's own head or body were a couple of my favorites.

"The Caretaker" reminded me of the best of Jhumpa Lahiri combined with, say, a less-innocent version of Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, while standing completely on its own merits and even surpassing others. I recommend this story as highly as possible to all my short-story-loving friends.

Alice Lippart says

A good collection with some really strong stories, especially in the beginning. Lovely atmosphere and writing. Unfortunately though, by the end, the stories got a bit repetitive and I felt myself getting a little bored.

Bettie? says

Description: *A remarkable collection of stories from a young American writer of huge potential: 'A show-stopping debut, as close to faultless as any writer could wish for' Los Angeles Times 'His fingers dug the shell up, he felt the sleek egg of its body, the toothy gap of its aperture. It was the most elegant thing he'd ever held. "That's a mouse cowry," the doctor said.*

"A lovely find. It has brown spots, and darker stripes at its base, like tiger stripes. You can't see it, can you?" But he could. He'd never seen anything so clearly in his life.' In this assured, exquisite debut, Anthony Doerr takes readers from the African coast to the suburbs of Ohio, from sideshow pageantry to harsh wilderness survival, conjuring nature in both its beautiful abundance and its crushing power.

The blind hero of the title story spends his days roaming the beaches of Kenya, his fingers ploughing through sandy granules of grace and intrigue, his German shepherd at his side. And then there are whale-watchers and fishermen, hunters and mystics, living lives uncompleted or undone, caught, memorably, as they turn toward the reader.

*A natural storyteller, Doerr explores the human dilemma in all its manifestations: longing, grief, indecision, heartbreak and slow, slow recuperation. Shimmering with elegance and invention, *The Shell Collector* is an enchanting and imaginative book by a young writer just setting off on what will surely be a hugely compelling literary odyssey.*

Chapter 1: The Shell Collector

Opening: **The shell collector was scrubbing limpets at his sink when he heard the water taxi come scraping over the reef. He cringed to hear it—its hull grinding the calices of finger corals and the tiny tubes of pipe organ corals, tearing the flower and fern shapes of soft corals, and damaging shells too: punching holes in olives and murexes and spiny whelks, in Hydatina physis and Turris babylonia. It was not the first time people tried to seek him out.**

geography cone snail

Lamu, Kenya

***Choroideremia** /k??r??d??ri?mi.?/ (CHM) is a rare, X-linked recessive form of hereditary retinal degeneration that affects roughly 1 in 50,000 males. The disease causes a gradual loss of vision, starting with childhood night blindness, followed by peripheral vision loss, and progressing to loss of central vision later in life. Progression continues throughout the individual's life, but both the rate of change and the degree of visual loss are variable among those affected, even within the same family. Source*

Chapter 2: The Hunter's Wife

Opening: **It was the hunter's first time outside of Montana. He woke, stricken still with the hours-old vision of ascending through rose-lit cumulus, of houses and barns like specks deep in the snowed-in valleys, all the scrolling country below looking December— brown and black hills streaked with snow, flashes of iced-over lakes, the long braids of a river gleaming at the bottom of a canyon. Above the wing the sky had deepened to a blue so pure he knew it would bring tears to his eyes if he looked long enough.**

He rolled onto his back and watched shadows shift across the ceiling. Winter is getting to you, he said. In the morning he resolved to make sure she went out every day. It was something he'd long believed: go out every day in winter or your mind will slip. Every winter the paper was full of stories about ranchers' wives, snowed in and crazed with cabin fever, who had dispatched their husbands with cleavers or awls.

Chapter 3: So Many Chances

Opening: **Dorotea San Juan, a fourteen year old in a brown cardigan. The janitor's daughter. Walks with her head down, wears cheap sneakers, never lipstick. Picks at salads during lunch. Tacks maps to her bedroom walls. Holds her breath when she gets nervous. Years of being the janitor's daughter teach her to blend in, look down, be nobody.**

Chapter 4: For a Long Time This Was Griselda's Story:

Opening **1979 Griselda Drown** was a senior volleyballer at Boise High, a terrifically tall girl with trunky thighs, slender arms and a volleyball serve that won an Idaho State Championship despite T-shirts claiming it was a team effort. She was a gray-eyed growth spurt, orange-haired, an early bloomer, and there were rumors about how she took boys two at a time in the dusty band closet where the dented tubas and ruptured drums were kept, about how she straddled the physics teacher, about her escapades during study hall with ice cubes. They were rumors; whether they were true or not didn't matter. We all knew them. They might as well have been true.

Chapter 5: July Fourth:

Opening: **By July fourth** it was all but over. The Americans went to fish the River Neris one last time. They boarded a trolleybus outside the Balatonas Hotel, squeezed shoulder to shoulder with grim Lithuanians—whiskered old ladies, sullen-faced men in thin ties, a miniskirted girl with a cluster of nose rings—and stood in their rubber waders, holding their bamboo poles out the windows to keep them from being snapped. The trolley rolled past the green market stalls and awning-fronted shops on Pilies Street, past the cathedral and belfry below the castle on the promontory. It rattled to a stop at the Zaliasis Bridge and the Americans pushed off and slumped down the slick grassless slope underneath the arches where the river slogged between concrete banks. They spread out along the cobbles, impaled cubes of bread on their hooks, and pitched them into the current.

Žaliasis bridge: Vilnius bridge Soviet sculptures

Chapter 6: The Caretaker:

For his first thirty-five years, Joseph Saleeby's mother makes his bed and each of his meals; each morning she makes him read a column of the English dictionary, selected at random, before he is allowed to set foot outside. They live in a small collapsing house in the hills outside Monrovia in Liberia, West Africa. Joseph is tall and quiet and often sick; beneath the lenses of his oversized eyeglasses, the whites of his eyes are a pale yellow. His mother is tiny and vigorous; twice a week she stacks two baskets of vegetables on her head and hikes six miles to sell them in her stall at the market in Mazien Town. When the neighbors come to compliment her garden, she smiles and offers them Coca-Cola. "Joseph is resting," she tells them, and they sip their Cokes, and gaze over her shoulder at the dark shuttered windows of the house, behind which, they imagine, the boy lies sweating and delirious on his cot.

Chapter 7: A Tangle by the Rapid:

Mulligan gathers his things: his fly rod, a coffee-browned thermos, Ziplocs plumped with potato sticks, deer jerky, ginger-snaps, extra socks in a knapsack. A fly box from the basement. Breakfast: sausage sizzled in oil, two slabs of pumpernickel slathered with margarine, coffee in a chipped mug. He chews

in the worn door frame between the kitchen and bedroom and watches his wife sleep. Her bulk rounded under blankets. Her gray undergarments on the wooden chair. Ever since their first night she has slept like this, like an ox. Since that fine and giddy wedding night, when he held her long after she slept, and told her things and she did not wake up. He told her once that it was as if some huntsman with his hounds comes to drag her into the night and hold her until dawn. Some wraithy night huntsman with slaverous hounds on tethers. Mulligan says her name. She sleeps her hard vacant sleep. Before he leaves he stokes the fire.

Chapter 8: Mkondo:

mkondo, noun. Current, flow, rush, passage, run, e.g., of water in a river or poured on the ground; of air through a door or window, i.e., a draft; of the wake of a ship, a track, the run of an animal.]

In October of 1983, an American named Ward Beach was sent to Tanzania by the Ohio Museum of Natural History to obtain the fossil of a prehistoric bird. Teams of European paleontologists had found something like the Chinese caudipteryx—a small, feathered reptile—in the limestone hills west of Tanga and the museum was eager to get one for itself. Ward was not a paleontologist (halfway to his doctorate he had given up) but he was a competent fossil hunter and an ambitious man. He did not like the work itself—backbreaking hours with a chisel and sifting pan, blind alleys, dead ends, disappointments—but he liked the idea behind the work. To discover fossils, he told himself, was to reclaim answers to important questions.

Larry Bassett says

I was lead to *The Shell Collector* directly by the author's current best seller *All the Light We Cannot See*. On a certain level, the books have similarities: blindness and nature and objects with magic properties. But I found my interaction with the two books to be very different. With *Light* I was easily drawn in by the language and the story whereas with *Collector* I was immediately put off by the story, confused by the details and uncertain where I was being led. The language was similarly mesmerizing in both but the meaning of the stories in *Collector* was hidden to me. *Light* is a relatively long novel while *Collector* is a collection of short stories. But they are not all truly "short" stories, some going to 30 and 40 pages.

I do not know much about magical realism in fiction and the non-religious part of me (admittedly a sizeable part of me) wants to hold it at some distance. But I do not think that Anthony Doerr can be best enjoyed without some willingness to suspend disbelief. The skill of his writing makes me want to grudgingly say, "Well, I suppose I could go that far ..." And, once on the slippery slope, I am subject to the obviously real force of gravity. In *Light* there is open debate about the likelihood that the diamond actually has real magic properties. And in *Collector* I understand that there is some real discussion of the potential medicinal benefits from the poison of cone shells. I am susceptible to the belief that Nature does have some truly astounding aspects; the concept of a soul has a certain appeal.

I can begin to see how reading Anthony Doerr could be addictive. Even when I am not fully understanding a

story – which happens regularly – I am immensely enjoying the words and the writing. Even with the air filled with question marks, I am still experiencing “wow”! He has his magic hooks that are like fly fishing with no real bait. His regular immersion in nature makes the natural world sparkle.

I like short stories in part because you can easily survive a “clunker” that does not do much for you by simply going on to the next story. Take what you like and leave the rest, they say in AA. With Doerr there are some stories I like better than others and most have some moments of perplexity where I sputter along in uncertainty. But Doerr stories have a strength in their readability and re-readability. They grow on you as you experience the nuances and eddies and rip tides. There might be a surprise on the very next page even in the story that you have already read once.

I had an experience in reading this particular book of short stories. As you may know, I especially like very short stories – maybe just a half dozen pages – and books with chapters that are similarly short. Well, Doerr does not really do short, short stories. He runs on a bit at times with a story and, especially when you might be struggling for a meaning, you can be hoping for an ending. And, yet, if you are like me reading in the eBook format, your little note at the bottom left of the page is telling you that you still have a ways to go. Well, so here I am, reading along with bedtime approaching but my Kindle is telling me I still have over an hour to go in this story. Do I stop and pick this up the next day?

I have to get up relatively early to get my daughter to school. I am reading the last story in the book, *Mkondo*, and for once I think I am actually understanding the allegory, where the story is taking me, and I want to know if there is going to be a happy or puzzling or sad ending. I won't be able to go to sleep with that hanging over me! But, guess what? The story pulls me along and the hour rushes by and, before I know it, I have successfully navigated the rapids and have reached the conclusion with an unexpected happy (or is it?) ending. Or maybe I need to read this medium-length story again in a day or two to see what I think the second time. But that night I can go to sleep satisfied but with the knowledge that Doerr has only finished with me temporarily and will be glad to welcome me back at a future moment. I am left with a wonderful uncertainty that is simultaneously a conclusion yet also an open door.

Sometimes you will read a review in which the reader lets you know that s/he had to let the book rest before a review could be considered. This is that kind of a book for me. But I am not patient with my own writing to allow for that resting period. This is my second experience with Doerr and I have not yet been able to rest from the first one. When you read this review a month from now and Like it (Thank you so much!), I will come back to it as a result of your Like and think about it again. Or maybe in six months or a year.

I think I will come back to Doerr sooner or later and maybe even do some rereading. That would be unusual for me since I do not commonly do much rereading. But I am going to give *The Shell Collector* only four stars as a challenge to my future self to come back one day and convince myself that there is ample reason to shift to five. This may be a great book that just needs a little time to grow on me!

The story *Mkondo* did that to me! Left me relentlessly pursued...

[mkondo, noun . Current, flow, rush, passage, run, e.g., of water in a river or poured on the ground; of air through a door or window, i.e., a draft; of the wake of a ship, a track, the run of an animal.]

Maybe living was no more than getting swept over a riverbed and eventually out to sea, no choices to make, only the vast, formless ocean ahead, the frothing waves, the lightless tomb of its depths.

Stunning? Or stunned?

Jessica says

Man, this guy can write like he's an octogenarian. Bastard. Seriously. Like an octogenarian of the Wallace Stegner-class. Who does he think he is, writing timeless stories that will hold up way past the superficial, self-conscious Study of Self dreck that seems to stream from writing workshops these days. If I have to wallow through one more witless and hapless protagonist who washes his or her grief in some kind of pop culture balm, I will merely think of one of Doerr's stories to refrain from bashing my head in with a peen hammer.

Regan says

3.75
