

The Merit of English Division
Junior Division

Name of Winner: Chan Bo Wen

Name of School: HKCCCU Logos Academy

Book Title: Cloud Cuckoo Land

Author: Anthony Doerr

Publisher: Scribner (Imprint of Simon & Schuster Inc)

Cloud Cuckoo Land by Anthony Doerr is an immensely powerful and captivating work. It takes the reader on a journey spread across thousands of years, painting the stories of five different individuals. Within this 600-page novel, the beauty of every single sentence grasps the reader tight and cocoons them into each twist and turn.

The novel contains a total of 5 individual storylines, all intertwined with each other across thousands of years by one single fictional book: *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, penned by Ancient Greek author Antonius Diogenes. It is a story inspired by an actual, lost tale of Diogenes: *The Wonders Beyond Thule*. Within this book, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* tells of a fool's errand, a dim-witted shepherd's persistent journey to paradise high up in the clouds. Doerr's work is a tribute to the power of books, a fictional telling of the progress of this one single work impacting the lives of the five people—Anna and Omeir in the 15th century Ottoman Empire, Zeno and Seymour from our time, and Konstance somewhere in the 22nd century. The stories of all these people are interlinked, told alongside each other and journeying ever on until they ultimately brush together or even collide.

This book is a complex web of plot points and commentary on crucial social issues, covering topics from the Siege of Constantinople to the Korean War to climate change. Throughout it all, the power of books and librarians is spotlighted. All of these characters come into contact with *Cloud Cuckoo Land*: Anna, by discovering it in the form of a small, muddy codex within a ruined bell tower while searching for treasure. Omeir, by meeting Anna. Zeno, by being informed of the uncovering of this previously unreadable work. Seymour, by receiving Zeno's translation notes from Marian, his childhood librarian. Konstance, in the form of a story from her father, a passenger on a spaceship as the last remnants of the human race. This centuries-old book alters their lives on both a large and small scale, whether it's completely revolutionizing their worldview or

initiating their journey for something more. All of these interactions are spurred on by a librarian, who similarly changes their lives in both big and small ways. Librarians are catalysts in this novel, presenting the characters with chances to grow and setting them on their lifelong paths.

One thing I deeply admire about the novel is how it painstakingly lays out all the intricacies of the characters' lives until the ultimate trigger event: Anna discovering the codex, then meeting Omeir; Zeno making the choice to translate Cloud Cuckoo Land, and sacrifice himself for the children hosting the play; Konstance realizing that all is not as it seems. All the plot points that seemed minor at first all combine together to form the big picture in each of the

storylines. This cohesiveness makes for an incredibly enjoyable reading process.

I also loved how the author adeptly crafted each and every unique character, imprinting them upon the reader's mind.

Although the cast of *Cloud Cuckoo Land* is rather large, each person is characterized to the most minute detail: for instance, the weary resignation of Omeir towards forever being discriminated against, simply because of his cleft lip and palate. The reader comes away from the novel convinced that the characters are truly living and breathing, and that Diogenes' work is real. Doerr takes such time to handcraft each plot point and progression of events that it completely mirrors the world we live in — such as Seymour's attempt to become an eco-warrior, which resonated particularly

deeply with me. As he grew up in Idaho with his struggling single mother, the acres of woodland surrounding his cabin home being completely razed deeply scarred him. Ancient pines, grasses, the homes of millions of creatures, all gone at the hands of a construction crew creating plots for vacation homes. Who he is as a person is irrevocably changed, and a burning fire within him ignites, spurring him to seek revenge for what has been done. As a result, Seymour becomes deeply aware of human travesties currently being committed towards the planet. Upon discovering videos of a cult leader heatedly articulating this very worldview, Seymour burrows deeper and deeper into this sinkhole and ends up joining said cult. He plants a bomb in a corner of the beloved local library, since it's next to the realty office that "redeveloped" the woodland next to his house. This is one of the very first

scenes in the novel: Seymour, struggling to step out of a car, about to plant two bombs within Lakeport Public Library. Within the library is Zeno Ninis, an octogenarian and Korean War veteran, accompanying a group of young children in their rehearsal of Cloud Cuckoo Land for their performance later that night. The tension of this situation lasts throughout the whole book, snippets of scenes spread throughout the journeys of Anna and Omeir, Konstance's quest to discover the truth, and Seymour's and Zeno's backstories.

This book also touches upon the issue of AI, and what it truly means to be human. In Konstance's storyline, the artificial intelligence Sybil is introduced. It holds every piece of work that has ever been developed by humans; yet, when it came to a situation where it truly matters, what Konstance sought

to know couldn't have been answered by it. This novel exemplifies what it means to create as a human being, to produce work that is able to influence so many others, filled with hope and promise for the future. Yet, simultaneously, books are also indescribably fragile: one clumsy hand, one misplacement, or even simply the passage of time — all could signify the destruction of the book, and the priceless knowledge within.

The novel concludes with a short scene: Konstance, retelling Cloud Cuckoo Land to her young son, in the year 2146. This scene carries unimaginable hope within it, a hymn to the resilience of humanity and the beauty of even one small story. Indeed, the ideas within journeyed for two thousand years: flowing from the pen of Diogenes into the pages of the codex,

passing through the hands of countless people, Anna, Omeir, Zeno and Seymour among them; ultimately, into Konstance, and then her young son. The ability of the human race to pass on such knowledge for so long is truly a sight to behold. Perhaps, as we ourselves bloom, blossom and wither away, chances will be given to pass on the wisdom we have gathered. Whether in the form of bedtime stories, physical books, or simply snippets of knowledge, who's to say they won't also find their way into the hands of the future?