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Stories from
the #1 Bestselling
author of
*All the Light We
Cannot See*

THE
SHELL
COLLECTOR
STORIES

'A SHOW-STOPPING DEBUT, AS CLOSE TO
FAULTLESS AS ANY WRITER COULD WISH FOR'

LA TIMES



The Shell Collector

Anthony Doerr

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All but one of the stories in this collection have appeared elsewhere, in slightly different form: 'The Hunter's Wife' in *Atlantic Monthly*; 'So Many Chances' in the *Sycamore Review* and *Fly Rod & Reel*; 'For a Long Time This Was Griselda's Story' in the *North American Review*; 'July Fourth' in the *Black Warrior Review*; 'The Caretaker' in the *Paris Review*; 'A Tangle by the Rapid River' in the *Sewanee Review*; and 'The Shell Collector' in the *Chicago Review*.

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Praise

‘These complex, resonant, beautifully realised stories sing. An entire world unfolds in each, memorable and rich; together, they form a remarkable first collection.’

ANDREA BARRETT, author of *The Voyage of the Narwhal* and *Ship Fever*

‘Doerr bears witness to history here – not the traditional history of big events or great people, but the small, anonymous corners from which the best stories can be told. Here is that rare and brave thing, a writer who doesn’t succumb to any of the easy temptations, but still manages to make a unique, powerful, and accessible music. Quite simply, this is the best collection of short stories that I’ve read in years.’

COLUM MCCANN, author of *Dancer*

‘An impressive first collection...Doerr’s stories evoke the ecstatic feeling that comes from loving something or someone very much.’

TLS

‘Excellent stories...Doerr makes miraculous happenings seem natural because of his clean, classic style, an impressive achievement.’

Sunday Times

‘This assured literary debut has an almost ethereal quality about it: eerie and otherworldly in atmosphere, yet lucid, crisp and graceful in style. These short stories are linked by the overall themes of the complicated profundities of human emotion, the awe-inspiring beauty of nature and the numinous miracles of love...Doerr’s characters will hang around in your dreams long after you’ve finished the book.’

Venue

‘Doerr is fascinated by the way that the shape of things we can hold in our hands might be analogous to the shape of things we struggle harder to understand: love, loss, memory...When Doerr combines his talent for vivid observation with an understated look at some of the trials of being human he manages to move us far more often than not.’

Hampstead & Highgate Express

‘Loss, estrangement and distance are the collection’s keynotes. Doerr frames and executes these stories with seemingly effortless panache.’

Economist

‘The shell collector of the title is a blind man who roams the beaches of Kenya, feeling his way through the sand in search of smooth prizes. He’s just one of the enigmatic characters who populate the short stories in this strange, beautifully written collection.’

Sunday Tribune

‘Quite simply amazing. Not since Rick Bass’s *The Watch* has a first collection roamed so far in both language and landscape, presenting the natural and human-made worlds with equal beauty and awe.’

TOM FRANKLIN, author of *Poachers*

for Shauna

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THE SHELL COLLECTOR

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.

He heard their feet splash ashore and the taxi motor off, back to Lamu, and the light singsong pattern of their knock. Tumaini, his German shepherd, let out a low whine from where she was crouched under his sleeping cot. He dropped a limpet into the sink, wiped his hands and went, reluctantly, to greet them.

They were both named Jim, overweight reporters from a New York tabloid. Their handshakes were slick and hot. He poured them chai. They occupied a surprising amount of space in the kitchen. They said they were there to write about him: they would stay only two nights, pay him well. How did \$10,000 American sound? He pulled a shell from his shirt pocket—a cerith—and rolled it in his fingers. They asked about his childhood: did he really shoot caribou as a boy? Didn't he need good eyes for that?

He gave them truthful answers. It all held the air of whim, of unreality. These two big Jims could not actually be at his table, asking him these questions, complaining of the stench of dead shellfish. Finally they asked him about cone shells and the strength of cone venom, about how many visitors had come. They asked nothing about his son.

All night it was hot. Lightning marbled the sky beyond the reef. From his cot he heard siafu feasting on the big men and heard them claw themselves in their sleeping bags. Before dawn he told them to shake out their shoes for scorpions and when they did one tumbled out. It made tiny scraping sounds as it skittered under the refrigerator.

He took his collecting bucket and clipped Tumaini into her harness, and she led them down the path to the reef. The air smelled like lightning. The Jims huffed to keep up. They told him they were impressed he moved so quickly.

“Why?”

“Well,” they murmured, “you’re blind. This path ain’t easy. All these thorns.”

Far off, he heard the high, amplified voice of the muezzin in Lamu

calling prayer. “It’s Ramadan,” he told the Jims. “The people don’t eat when the sun is above the horizon. They drink only chai until sundown. They will be eating now. Tonight we can go out if you like. They grill meat in the streets.”

By noon they had waded a kilometer out, onto the great curved spine of the reef, the lagoon slopping quietly behind them, a low sea breaking in front. The tide was coming up. Unharnessed now, Tumaini stood panting, half out of the water on a mushroom-shaped dais of rock. The shell collector was stooped, his fingers middling, quivering, whisking for shells in a sandy trench. He snatched up a broken spindle shell, ran a fingernail over its incised spirals. “*Fusinus colus*,” he said.

Automatically, as the next wave came, the shell collector raised his collecting bucket so it would not be swamped. As soon as the wave passed he plunged his arms back into sand, his fingers probing an alcove between anemones, pausing to identify a clump of brain coral, running after a snail as it burrowed away.

One of the Jims had a snorkeling mask and was using it to look underwater. “Lookit these blue fish,” he gasped. “Lookit that *blue*.”

The shell collector was thinking, just then, of the indifference of nematocysts. Even after death the tiny cells will discharge their poison—a single dried tentacle on the shore, severed eight days, stung a village boy last year and swelled his legs. A weeverfish bite bloated a man’s entire right side, blacked his eyes, turned him dark purple. A stone fish sting corroded the skin off the sole of the shell collector’s own heel, years ago, left the skin smooth and printless. How many urchin spikes, broken but still spurting venom, had he squeezed from Tumaini’s paw? What would happen to these Jims if a banded sea snake came slipping up between their fat legs? If a lion fish was dropped down their collars?

“Here is what you came to see,” he announced, and pulled the snail—a cone—from its collapsing tunnel. He spun it and balanced its flat end on two fingers. Even now its poisoned proboscis was nosing forward, searching him out. The Jims waded noisily over.

“This is a geography cone,” he said. “It eats fish.”

“*That* eats fish?” one of the Jims asked. “But my pinkie’s bigger.”

“This animal,” said the shell collector, dropping it into his bucket, “has twelve kinds of venom in its teeth. It could paralyze you and drown you right here.”

This all started when a malarial Seattle-born Buddhist named Nancy was stung by a cone shell in the shell collector’s kitchen. It crawled in from the