

By the Author of
ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE
WINNER of the PULITZER PRIZE

C C L O U D

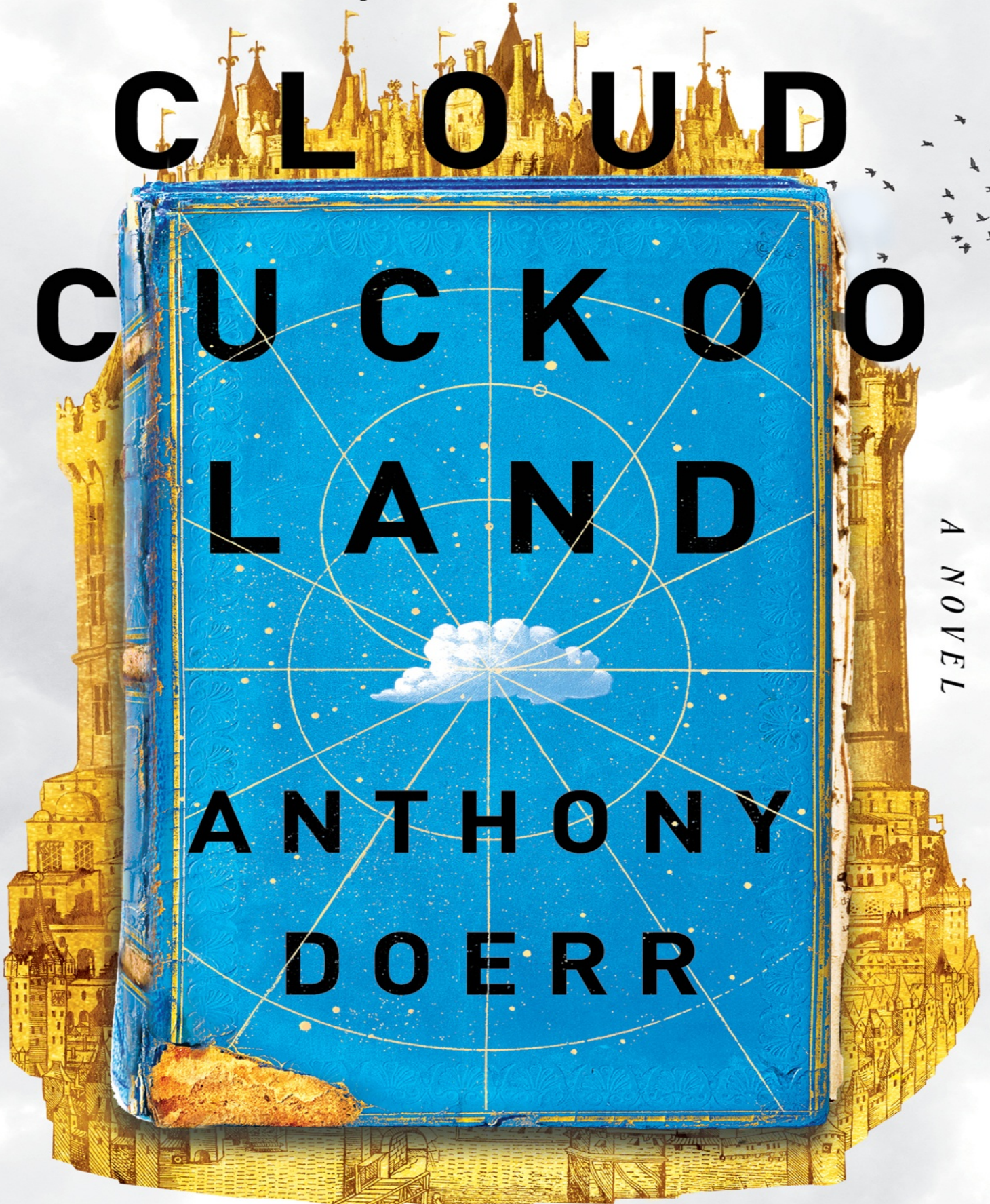
C U C K O O

L A N D

A N T H O N Y

D O E R R

A NOVEL



**CLOUD
CUCKOO
LAND**

A NOVEL

**ANTHONY
DOERR**

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*For the librarians
then, now, and in the years to come*

Chorus Leader: To work, men. How do you propose to name our city?

Peisetairos: How about Sparta? That's a grand old name with a fine pretentious ring.

Euelpides: Great Hercules, call my city Sparta? I wouldn't even insult my mattress by giving it a name like Sparta.

Peisetairos: Well, what do you suggest instead?

Chorus Leader: Something big, smacking of the clouds. A pinch of fluff and rare air, a swollen sound.

Peisetairos: I've got it! Listen—Cloud Cuckoo Land!

—Aristophanes, *The Birds*, 414 B.C.E.

PROLOGUE

**TO MY DEAREST NIECE WITH HOPE THAT THIS
BRINGS YOU HEALTH AND LIGHT**

THE ARGOS

MISSION YEAR 65

DAY 307 INSIDE VAULT ONE

Konstance

A fourteen-year-old girl sits cross-legged on the floor of a circular vault. A mass of curls haloes her head; her socks are full of holes. This is Konstance.

Behind her, inside a translucent cylinder that rises sixteen feet from floor to ceiling, hangs a machine composed of trillions of golden threads, none thicker than a human hair. Each filament twines around thousands of others in entanglements of astonishing intricacy. Occasionally a bundle somewhere along the surface of the machine pulses with light: now here, now there. This is Sybil.

Elsewhere in the room there's an inflatable cot, a recycling toilet, a food printer, eleven sacks of Nourish powder, and a multidirectional treadmill the size and shape of an automobile tire called a Perambulator. Light comes from a ring of diodes in the ceiling; there is no visible exit.

Arranged in a grid on the floor lie almost one hundred rectangular scraps Konstance has torn from empty Nourish powder sacks and written on with homemade ink. Some are dense with her handwriting; others accommodate a single word. One, for example, contains the twenty-four letters of the ancient Greek alphabet. Another reads:

In the millennium leading up to 1453, the city of Constantinople was besieged twenty-three times, but no army ever breached its land walls.

She leans forward and lifts three scraps from the puzzle in front of her. The machine behind her flickers.

It is late, Konstance, and you have not eaten all day.

"I'm not hungry."

How about some nice risotto? Or roast lamb with mashed potatoes? There are still many combinations you have not tried.

"No thank you, Sybil." She looks down at the first scrap and reads:

The lost Greek prose tale *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, by the writer Antonius Diogenes, relating a shepherd's journey to a utopian city in the sky, was probably written around the end of the first century C.E.

The second:

We know from a ninth-century Byzantine summary of the book that it opened with a short prologue in which Diogenes addressed an ailing niece and declared that he had not invented the comical story which followed, but instead discovered it in a tomb in the ancient city of Tyre.

The third:

The tomb, Diogenes wrote to his niece, was marked *Aethon: Lived 80 Years a Man, 1 Year a Donkey, 1 Year a Sea Bass, 1 Year a Crow*. Inside, Diogenes claimed to have discovered a wooden chest bearing the inscription, *Stranger, whoever you are, open this to learn what will amaze you*. When he opened the chest, he found twenty-four cypress-wood tablets upon which were written Aethon's story.

Konstance shuts her eyes, sees the writer descend into the dark of the tombs. Sees him study the strange chest in the torchlight. The diodes in the ceiling dim and the walls soften from white to amber and Sybil says, *It will be NoLight soon, Konstance*.

She picks her way through the scraps on the floor and retrieves what's left of an empty sack from beneath her cot. Using her teeth and fingers, she tears away a blank rectangle. She places a little scoop of Nourish powder into the food printer, pushes buttons, and the device spits an ounce of dark liquid into its bowl. Then she takes a length of polyethylene tubing, the tip of which she has carved into a nib, dips her makeshift pen into the makeshift ink, leans over the blank scrap, and draws a cloud.

She dips again.

Atop the cloud she draws the towers of a city, then little dots of birds soaring around the turrets. The room darkens further. Sybil flickers. *Konstance, I must insist that you eat*.

"I'm not hungry, thank you, Sybil."

She picks up a rectangle inscribed with a date—*February 20, 2020*—and sets it

beside another that reads, *Folio A*. Then she places her drawing of a cloud city on the left. For a breath, in the dying light, the three scraps seem almost to rise up and glow.

Konstance sits back on her heels. She has not left this room for almost a year.

ONE

**STRANGER, WHOEVER YOU ARE, OPEN THIS TO
LEARN WHAT WILL AMAZE YOU**

Cloud Cuckoo Land by Antonius Diogenes, Folio A

The Diognes codex measures 30 cm x 22 cm. Holed by worms and significantly effaced by mold, only twenty-four folios, labeled here from A to Ω, were recovered. All were damaged to some degree. The hand is tidy and leftward sloping. From the 2020 translation by Zeno Nisis.

... how long had those tablets moldered inside that chest, waiting for eyes to read them? While I'm sure you will doubt the truth of the outlandish events they relate, my dear niece, in my transcription, I do not leave out a word. Maybe in the old days men did walk the earth as beasts, and a city of birds floated in the heavens between the realms of men and gods. Or maybe, like all lunatics, the shepherd made his own truth, and so for him, true it was. But let us turn to his story now, and decide his sanity for ourselves.

THE LAKEPORT PUBLIC LIBRARY

FEBRUARY 20, 2020

4:30 P.M.

Zeno

He escorts five fifth graders from the elementary school to the public library through curtains of falling snow. He is an octogenarian in a canvas coat; his boots are fastened with Velcro; cartoon penguins skate across his necktie. All day, joy has steadily inflated inside his chest, and now, this afternoon, at 4:30 p.m. on a Thursday in February, watching the children run ahead down the sidewalk—Alex Hess wearing his papier-mâché donkey head, Rachel Wilson carrying a plastic torch, Natalie Hernandez lugging a portable speaker—the feeling threatens to capsize him.

They pass the police station, the Parks Department, Eden's Gate Realty. The Lakeport Public Library is a high-gabled two-story gingerbread Victorian on the corner of Lake and Park that was donated to the town after the First World War. Its chimney leans; its gutters sag; packing tape holds together cracks in three of the four front-facing windows. Several inches of snow have already settled on the junipers flanking the walk and atop the book drop box on the corner, which has been painted to look like an owl.

The kids charge up the front walk, bound onto the porch, and high-five Sharif, the children's librarian, who has stepped outside to help Zeno navigate the stairs. Sharif has lime-green earbuds in his ears and craft glitter twinkles in the hair on his arms. His T-shirt says, *I LIKE BIG BOOKS AND I CANNOT LIE*.

Inside, Zeno wipes fog from his eyeglasses. Construction paper hearts are taped to the front of the welcome desk; a framed needlepoint on the wall behind it reads, *Questions Answered Here*.

On the computer table, on all three monitors, screen-saver spirals twist in synchrony. Between the audiobook shelf and two shabby armchairs, a radiator leak seeps through the ceiling tiles and drips into a seven-gallon trash can.

Plip. Plop. Plip.

The kids scatter snow everywhere as they stampede upstairs, heading for the Children’s Section, and Zeno and Sharif share a smile as they listen to their footfalls reach the top of the staircase and stop.

“Whoa,” says the voice of Olivia Ott.

“Holy magoley,” says the voice of Christopher Dee.

Sharif takes Zeno’s elbow as they ascend. The entrance to the second story has been blocked with a plywood wall spray-painted gold, and in its center, over a small arched door, Zeno has written:

Ὦ ξένε, ὅστις εἶ, ἄνοιξον, ἵνα μάθῃς ἃ θαυμάζεις

The fifth graders cluster against the plywood and snow melts on their jackets and backpacks and everyone looks at Zeno and Zeno waits for his breath to catch up with the rest of him.

“Does everyone remember what it says?”

“Of course,” says Rachel.

“Duh,” says Christopher.

On her tiptoes, Natalie runs a finger beneath each word. “*Stranger, whoever you are, open this to learn what will amaze you.*”

“Oh my flipping gosh,” says Alex, his donkey head under his arm. “It’s like we’re about to walk *into* the book.”

Sharif switches off the stairwell light and the children crowd around the little door in the red glow of the *EXIT* sign. “Ready?” calls Zeno, and from the other side of the plywood, Marian, the library director, calls, “Ready.”

One by one the fifth graders pass through the little arched doorway into the Children’s Section. The shelves, tables, and beanbags that normally fill the space have been pushed against the walls and in their places stand thirty folding chairs. Above the chairs, dozens of cardboard clouds, coated with glitter, hang from the rafters by threads. In front of the chairs is a small stage, and behind the stage, on a canvas sheet hung across the entire rear wall, Marian has painted a city in the clouds.

Golden towers, cut by hundreds of little windows and crowned by pennants, rise in clusters. Around their spires whirl dense flights of birds—little brown buntings and big silver eagles, birds with long curving tails and others with long curving bills, birds of the world and birds of the imagination. Marian has shut off

the overhead lights, and in the beam of a single karaoke light on a stand, the clouds sparkle and the flocks shimmer and the towers seem illuminated from within.

“It’s—” says Olivia.

“—better than I—” says Christopher.

“Cloud Cuckoo Land,” whispers Rachel.

Natalie sets down her speaker and Alex leaps onstage and Marian calls, “Careful, some of the paint may still be wet.”

Zeno lowers himself into a chair in the front row. Every time he blinks, a memory ripples across the undersides of his eyelids: his father pratfalls into a snowbank; a librarian slides open the drawer of a card catalogue; a man in a prison camp scratches Greek characters into the dust.

Sharif shows the kids the backstage area that he has created behind three bookshelves, packed with props and costumes, and Olivia pulls a latex cap over her hair to make herself look bald and Christopher drags a microwave box painted to look like a marble sarcophagus to the center of the stage and Alex reaches to touch a tower of the painted city and Natalie slides a laptop from her backpack.

Marian’s phone buzzes. “Pizzas are ready,” she says into Zeno’s good ear. “I’ll walk over and pick them up. Be back in a jiff.”

“Mr. Ninis?” Rachel is tapping Zeno’s shoulder. Her red hair is pulled back in braided pigtailed and snow has melted to droplets on her shoulders and her eyes are wide and bright. “You built all this? For us?”

Seymour

One block away, inside a Pontiac Grand Am mantled in three inches of snow, a gray-eyed seventeen-year-old named Seymour Stuhlman drowns with a backpack in his lap. The backpack is an oversize dark green JanSport and contains two Presto pressure cookers, each of which is packed with roofing nails, ball bearings, an igniter, and nineteen ounces of a high explosive called Composition B. Twin wires run from the body of each cooker to the lid, where they plug into the circuit board of a cellular phone.

In a dream Seymour walks beneath trees toward a cluster of white tents, but every time he takes a step forward, the trail twists and the tents recede, and a terrible confusion presses down on him. He wakes with a start.

The dashboard clock says 4:42 p.m. How long did he sleep? Fifteen minutes. Twenty at most. Stupid. Careless. He has been in the car for more than four hours and his toes are numb and he has to pee.

With a sleeve he clears vapor from the inside of the windshield. He risks the wipers once and they brush a slab of snow off the glass. No cars parked in front of the library. No one on the sidewalk. The only car in the gravel parking lot to the west is Marian the Librarian's Subaru, humped with snow.

4:43 p.m.

Six inches before dark, says the radio, twelve to fourteen overnight.

Inhale for four, hold for four, exhale for four. Recall things you know. Owls have three eyelids. Their eyeballs are not spheres but elongated tubes. A group of owls is called a parliament.

All he needs to do is stroll in, hide the backpack in the southeast corner of the library, as close as possible to the Eden's Gate Realty office, and stroll out. Drive north, wait until the library closes at 6 p.m., dial the numbers. Wait five rings.

Boom.

Easy.

At 4:51, a figure in a cherry-red parka exits the library, pulls up her hood, and pushes a snow shovel up and down the front walk. Marian.

Seymour shuts off the car radio and slips lower in his seat. In a memory he is seven or eight years old, in Adult Nonfiction, somewhere in the 598s, and Marian retrieves a field guide to owls from a high shelf. Her cheeks are a sandstorm of freckles; she smells like cinnamon gum; she sits beside him on a rolling stool. On the pages she shows him, owls stand outside burrows, owls sit on branches, owls soar over fields.

He pushes the memory aside. What does Bishop say? *A warrior, truly engaged, does not experience guilt, fear, or remorse. A warrior, truly engaged, becomes something more than human.*

Marian runs the shovel up the wheelchair ramp, scatters some salt, walks down Park Street, and is swallowed by the snow.

4:54.

All afternoon Seymour has waited for the library to be empty and now it is. He unzips the backpack, switches on the cell phones taped to the lids of the pressure cookers, removes a pair of rifle-range ear defenders, and rezipt the backpack. In the right pocket of his windbreaker is a Beretta 92 semiautomatic pistol he found in his great-uncle's toolshed. In the left: a cell phone with three phone numbers written on the back.

Stroll in, hide the backpack, stroll out. Drive north, wait until the library closes, dial the top two numbers. Wait five rings. Boom.

4:55.

A plow scrapes through the intersection, lights flashing. A gray pickup passes, *King Construction* on the door. The *OPEN* sign glows in the library's first-floor window. Marian is probably running an errand; she won't be gone long.

Go. Get out of the car.

4:56.

Each crystal that strikes the windshield makes a barely audible tap, yet the sound seems to penetrate all the way to the roots of his molars. Tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap. Owls have three eyelids. Their eyeballs are not spheres but elongated tubes. A group of owls is called a parliament.

He clamps the ear defenders over his ears. Pulls up his hood. Sets a hand on the door handle.

4:57.

A warrior, truly engaged, becomes something more than human.

He gets out of the car.

Zeno

Christopher arranges Styrofoam tombstones around the stage and angles the microwave-box-turned-sarcophagus so the audience can read its epitaph: *Aethon: Lived 80 Years a Man, 1 Year a Donkey, 1 Year a Sea Bass, 1 Year a Crow*. Rachel picks up her plastic torch and Olivia emerges from behind the bookshelves with a laurel wreath crammed over her latex cap and Alex laughs.

Zeno claps once. “A dress rehearsal is a practice we pretend is real, remember? Tomorrow night, your grandma in the audience might sneeze, or someone’s baby might cry, or one of you might forget a line, but whatever happens, we’ll keep the story going, right?”

“Right, Mr. Ninis.”

“Places, please. Natalie, the music.”

Natalie pokes her laptop and her speaker plays a spooky organ fugue. Behind the organ, gates creak, crows caw, owls hoot. Christopher unrolls a few yards of white satin across the front of the stage and kneels at one end, and Natalie kneels at the other, and they wave the satin up and down.

Rachel strides into the center of the stage in her rubber boots. “It’s a foggy night on the island kingdom of Tyre”—she glances down at her script, then back up—“and the writer Antonius Diogenes is leaving the archives. Look, here he comes now, tired and troubled, fretting over his dying niece, but wait until I show him the strange thing I have discovered among the tombs.” The satin billows, the organ plays, Rachel’s torch flickers, and Olivia marches into the light.

Seymour

Snow crystals catch in his eyelashes and he blinks them away. The backpack on his shoulder is a boulder, a continent. The big yellow owl eyes painted on the book drop box seem to track him as he passes.

Hood up, ear defenders on, Seymour ascends the five granite steps to the library's porch. Taped to the inside of the glass on the entry door, in a child's handwriting, a sign reads:

TOMORROW
ONE NITE ONLY
CLOUD CUCKOO LAND

There's no one behind the welcome desk, no one at the chessboard. No one at the computer table, no one browsing magazines. The storm must be keeping everyone away.

The framed needlepoint behind the desk says, *Questions Answered Here*. The clock says one minute past five. On the computer monitors, three screen-saver spirals bore ever deeper.

Seymour walks to the southeast corner and kneels in the aisle between Languages and Linguistics. From a bottom shelf he removes *English Made Easy* and *501 English Verbs* and *Get Started in Dutch*, wedges the backpack into the dusty space behind, and replaces the books.

When he stands, purple streaks cascade down his vision. His heart thuds in his ears, his knees tremble, his bladder aches, he can't feel his feet, and he has tracked snow all the way down the row. But he has done it.

Now stroll out.

As he travels back through Nonfiction, everything seems to tilt uphill. His sneakers feel leaden, his muscles unwilling. Titles tumble past, *Lost Languages* and *Empires of the Word* and *7 Steps to Raising a Bilingual Child*; he makes it past Social