

## E. L. DOCTOROW: A WRITER OF HISTORICAL FICTION

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**Abstract:** Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (January 6, 1931—July 21, 2015) was one of the most celebrated American novelists of the twentieth century. He was well-known for his works of historical fiction. Doctorow wrote twelve novels, including 'The Book of Daniel' (1971), 'Ragtime' (1975), 'Billy Bathgate' (1989), and 'The March' (2005). He also wrote a stage drama, 'Drinks before Dinner', three volumes of short fiction, and published hundreds of articles on literary and political issues from a left-liberal standpoint. Doctorow's historical vision was broadened by two wars: The Cold War and the Vietnam War. As a writer he focused on wars in his historical novels. His 'The Book of Daniel' (1971) was a powerful novel. It was a fictionalized account of the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953, who gave information about the atomic bomb to the USSR during the Cold War. Doctorow was deeply hurt by one of the most terrible events in American history, the Civil War. 'The March' (2005), a historical novel by Doctorow, was written about this war when General William Tecumseh Sherman marched his Union troops through the South in late 1864 and early 1865, leaving a trail of death, destruction and chaos.

**Keywords:** Civil War, Cold War, Fiction, History.

**Introduction:** Edgar Lawrence Doctorow (January 6, 1931—July 21, 2015) was one of the most celebrated American novelists of the twentieth century. He was well-known for his works of historical fiction. Doctorow wrote twelve novels, including 'The Book of Daniel' (1971), 'Ragtime' (1975), 'Billy Bathgate' (1989), and 'The March' (2005). He also wrote a stage drama, 'Drinks before Dinner', three volumes of short fiction, and published hundreds of articles on literary and political issues from a left-liberal standpoint.

Several of Doctorow's novels were adapted for the screen. In 1967, his first novel 'Welcome to Hard Times', was filmed by Burt Kennedy with Henry Fonda and Janice Rule in the lead roles. Milos Forman made a film version of his novel 'Ragtime' in 1981 starring Howard E. Rollins Jr. as Coalhouse Walker. A version of his novel 'The Book of Daniel', simply entitled 'Daniel', directed by Sydney Lumet, was released in 1983 featuring Timothy Hutton. Doctorow himself did the screenplay for this film but it was neither a critical nor a commercial success. Dustin Hoffman played the role of Dutch Schultz in the film version of 'Billy Bathgate', that was adapted for the screen in 1991 by Robert Benton.

As a writer, Doctorow was the recipient of numerous awards. With the publication of 'Ragtime', he became one of the most renowned authors of literary fiction. He received the National Book Critics Circle Award for 'Ragtime' in 1975, the National Book Award for 'World's Fair' in 1986, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award for 'Billy Bathgate' in 1989. E. L. Doctorow was inducted into the New York State Writers Hall of Fame in 2012. He received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation the following year, and the Library of Congress Prize

for American Fiction in 2014. He taught at the Yale School of Drama, the University of California, and Princeton University. He also held the Lewis and Loretta Glucksman Chair of English and American Letters at New York University.

Doctorow, born in the Bronx, north of Manhattan, was the grandson of Jewish immigrants who arrived from Belarus in 1880s. He was the child of second-generation Americans of Russian-Jewish ancestry that named him after Edgar Allan Poe, supposedly his father's favorite writer. He attended the Bronx High School of Science where he published his first literary effort in the school magazine 'Dynamo', and then Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio where he studied with the poet and New Critic John Crowe Ransom. After graduating with honors in 1952, he studied English drama at Columbia University. He was drafted into the United States Army and spent two years in Germany as a corporal in the signal corps during the Allied occupation. In 1959, after his military service, he took a job as a script-reader for a motion picture company. Later on, he toiled for years as an editor at New American Library in the beginning, and from 1964 as editor-in-chief at the Dial Press. He left publishing in 1969 to pursue his writing career.

Like John Updike and Philip Roth, Doctorow belonged to the postwar generation. It was a period when socialist milieu was part of life in New York City, especially in Jewish community. Doctorow was influenced by City's concert halls, and its cultural surroundings as he himself remarked, "As I grew up I was a beneficiary of the incredible energies of European émigrés in every field—all those great minds hounded out of Europe by Hitler." In a career spanning five decades, he depicted something honest in American literature. As a writer he was concerned

about America that continued from Lincoln to Truman, the America that crushed its Confederate States but left the unsolved problem of slavery, the America of Industrial growth and of labor problems.

He rejected the idea that he was a political novelist. He stated, "My premise is that the language of politics can't accommodate the complexity of fiction, which as a mode of thought is intuitive, metaphysical, mythic" (Navasky 61). Likewise, he did not want to be known as an autobiographical writer. "Every book is an act of composition," he asserted in 1989, "and if you ...use memories or materials from your own mind, they are like any other resource.... And the act of composition has no regard where the material comes from. So when it's all done it's all autobiographical and none of it is" (Hombberger 93).

Doctorow composed the most influential historical fiction of the past fifty years. Historical fiction, a genre in literature, is a piece of writing that reconstructs the past. A writer of this genre incorporates past events or people into his fictitious stories. He conducts extensive research into the story's time period so that the story may not lose its believability. Historical fiction, thus, combines fictional characters and stories with historical facts and settings. A realistic historical setting is the first and foremost characteristic of a historical fiction. These novels are often set fifty or more years in the past.

Another characteristic of historical fiction is that of authentic characters. The novels may deal with actual historical personages, or they may contain a blend of fictional and historical characters. Historical fiction usually portrays a broad view of the past society in which great historical events are represented by their impact on the lives of characters. As Abrams remarks, "The historical novel not only takes its setting and some characters and events from history, but makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters and the course of the narrative" (199).

In his novels, Doctorow kept his fictional characters in recognizable historical settings, and often with known historical personages. He regarded history as literature. Hombberger mentioned, 'Doctorow felt that history was, in the end, literature. And that it was literature, 'intuitive, metaphysical, mythic', which takes us to the heart of the social reality of American life" (93). He was of the view that the past was never dead but always linked with present day realities. As he stated, "History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew". The range of historical fiction was, therefore, expanded by his capability of writing about the past in such a way that made a close connection with the present.

Moreover, he was interested in the idea of improving on the historical record. For his novel 'The March' (2005), as Hombberger remarked, "...he did little

research, freely inventing when the historical record seemed somehow incomplete" (93). In this novel, there is a touching letter sent to a Confederate general by General William Tecumseh Sherman, but such letter was never written. He fabricated in his 'Ragtime' (1975), the story of Freud and Jung who shared a ride at Coney Island.

Doctorow's historical vision was broadened by two wars: The Cold War and the Vietnam War. As a writer he focused on wars in his historical novels. His 'The Book of Daniel' (1971) was a powerful novel. It was a fictionalized account of the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953, who gave information about the atomic bomb to the USSR during the Cold War. The writer laid emphasis on his favorite theme - the return of the oppressed - in this novel. During the Cold War, McCarthyism crushed the other political movements of the nation. In 1960s, it came to the fore in other guises. Doctorow told the story of radical upheavals of the late 60s through the eyes of Daniel.

The central character Daniel, an orphan, was the son of the Isaacsons who were fictionalized re-creations of the Rosenbergs. It was through this character that the novelist gave full vent to the anger and political confusion of the time. Doctorow wrote that the McCarthy anti-communist era of 1950s made a profound impact on him but the Rosenberg story did not affect him, "as a subject for a novel until we were all going through Vietnam" (English 1). The protagonist, in the course of the time, became deeply involved in one of the main historical events of his day, the fight against the Vietnam War. The book did not draw any conclusions about whether or not the Isaacsons, Doctorow's fictional couple, were traitors. Actually, Doctorow did not write about the Rosenbergs, he used all the narrative possibilities of shifting freely between the 1950s and the 1960s. An encyclopedic and detailed description of both of these political periods are delineated in the novel.

Doctorow was deeply hurt by one of the most terrible events in American history, the Civil War. 'The March' (2005), a historical novel by Doctorow, was written about this war when General William Tecumseh Sherman marched his Union troops through the South in late 1864 and early 1865, leaving a trail of death, destruction and chaos. The characters depicted in the novel are --Union and Confederate officers, soldiers, doctors in the army, freed slaves and displaced well-to-do whites. The novelist attempted a recreation of the pillage, cruelty and destruction carried out by the Union Army and the dislocation of the Southern civilians.

In the novel, the madness of war was described by Doctorow as, "This was not war as adventure, nor war for a solemn cause, it was war at its purest, a mindless mass rage severed from any cause, ideal, or moral

principle'. It is important to note that the idea for the novel came to Doctorow when the Iraq War kept the country in uproar. It was the period of the American invasion and possession of Iraq. The novel, therefore, was his sad commentary on this war and on the progress of the nation as a society. Doctorow was unsparing in his treatment of Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas. As a critic of the

Iraq War, he was also worried about the civilians who were struggling to cope with the invasion of America. For Doctorow, history was a continuous war between order and disorder, orientation and disorientation. In his writings, he tried to explore and establish a successful relationship between history and fiction. He was indeed a writer of the past but he made every effort to change the future of literature.

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