

## The facts of life

### E.L. Doctorow talks about fact, fiction and the process of turning the two into great literature

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If American novelist E.L. Doctorow turned heads among the literary community with his *Welcome to Hard Times* debut in 1960, he left them spinning with 1971's *The Book of Daniel*. Based on the famous criminal trials and executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for nuclear espionage, his breakout opus found broad critical acclaim and a National Book Award nomination (he'd win that one 15 years later) for its blending of the mysterious with the familiar and for the innovative fashion in which he lent human faces to cold historical facts. Just like that, a signature style was born. The decades and novels that followed -- including *Ragtime* (later adapted into a very successful film and Broadway musical), *Billy Bathgate* and *The March* -- would catapult Doctorow into the top rank of latter-20th-century American writers.

His latest work of historical fiction may well be his weirdest. *Homer & Langley* (2009, Random House) imagines the lives of the infamous Collyer Brothers, privileged members of early 20th-century New York City high society who, over the years, grew alienated from it to the point of tragedy: In 1947, police found their decaying bodies in the 5th Avenue brownstone they almost never left, surrounded by more than 100 tons of garbage. Doctorow recently talked to *CityLife* about what that story has meant to him and the discoveries he made while telling it, as well as the past, present and murky future of the novel-writing craft.

**CityLife:** About Homer, the brother who's lost his sight ... you didn't do any of that blindfolding yourself stuff in the course of researching this novel did you?

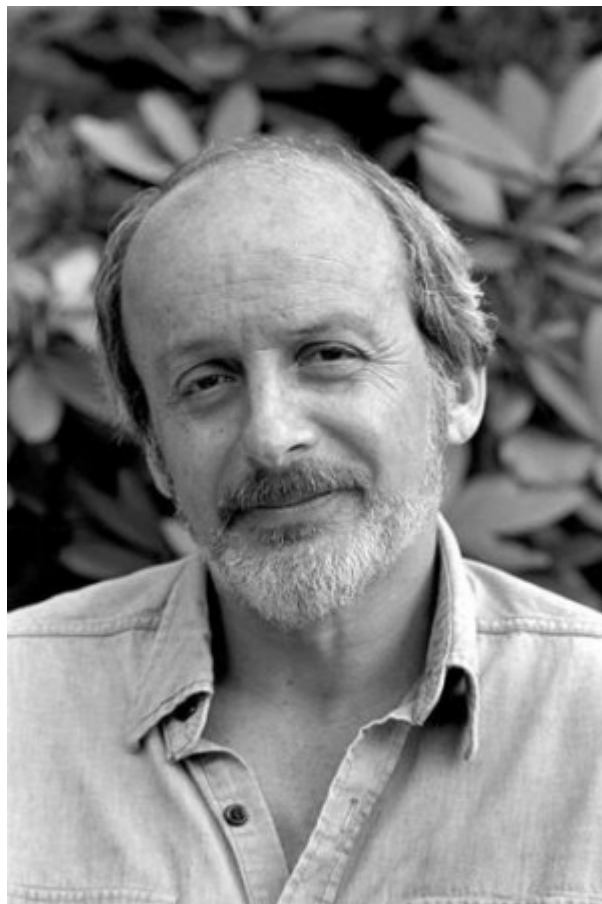
**E.L. Doctorow:** No, no. The game is just to project your imagination into the situation and to be the people whom you're not, into a time when you couldn't possibly have been there.

**CL:** There is the slow-developing yet powerful theme of reclusion in *Homer & Langley*, and a madness that's associated with it. Is that inevitable, in your mind? Could these brothers have somehow made a choice to withdraw from society and done it more responsibly, more sanely?

**ELD:** Well, your question touches on what got me going in this book. The fact that they were considered eccentrics and mad for living the way they did ... Well, there were always people in this city who scavenged things from the streets, hoarded things, lived oddly, so that wasn't the key thing. The key thing was that they opted out. These brothers came from well-to-do backgrounds, from an established family, yet at a certain point they went into the house and closed the doors. That was the question, in my mind, that made it all very mysterious ... the fact that they'd opted out and were doing this kind of thing, this withdrawing from society. That does happen periodically in American history. Certainly the Beats did it. They were more flamboyant, but they opted out. The Amish and other religious groups, the people who decided to live in communes ... it's all that kind of withdrawal.

**CL:** With the brothers, then, you were exploring the intent behind the opting out?

**ELD:** I wanted to sort of break into that house, into their minds, figure out what was going on. What happened [historically] was that it was a very gradual thing. Somehow, little by little, the servants left the house, then the



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temporary cleaning people left, then the cook. So they were alone, but the world kept intruding. The final step [in the novel], of course, is Homer being left with only his own consciousness and asking at the end where his brother is. That's what it was about in my mind ... a course of action that led to the fact that, when they were dead, the cops came and threw out tons of material through the windows and crowds gathered outside.

**CL: And that ending image in the historical account inspired you quite a bit.**

**ELD:** What got me going, specifically, was a piece in the *New York Times* a few years ago ... What happened was, the city had pulled down the house and made a little park there, and a few years ago, the people of the neighborhood -- beautiful rows of brownstones -- objected to the park being named after the Collyer Brothers. The disreputability, the hoarding and the dirt ... they felt it was a slander of a very nice neighborhood. But the city didn't do anything. It's still called Collyer Brothers Park, and I don't think anyone is hurt by that fact. But I thought, if they could still disturb people 60 years after their deaths, then we were dealing with an American myth, dealing at the level of folklore. So it wasn't a matter of writing a political account of the actual loss of these guys, it was dealing with the myth. The idea of them.

**CL: In the process of writing this and tracing the arc these guys followed in becoming more and more isolated, were there any unexpected angles that came around? Any new understanding of the brothers that surprised you?**

**ELD:** Well, I never write with an outline. Every book is an act of improvisation. If I need something, it'll come to me at the moment I need it, one way or another. If the work is going well, whatever you need comes to hand somehow, like you're a magnet. What came to the book, is that I felt I was writing a road novel ... which is very odd, you know? The great road novels are always conversations between two people. I felt these brothers were having a lifelong conversation, but clearly they were more or less housebound, never more than a block or two out from their home ... but they were having adventures and people were coming through, so it was as if the road was moving through them. That was a surprise. That, and the fact that, in this reclusive life, there was an increased sense of being embattled, of trying to establish a meaningful life, as we all do, yet somehow the world doesn't let them. Toward the end, the water is cut off, they've alienated the utilities, the electric company, the phone ... all gone, so they collect water from the park and kids throw rocks at the house. There was a sense of being embattled, assaulted somehow, being at war, in order to live the way they wanted to live.

**CL: Did you find yourself pulling back a little bit while learning these things about the brothers? Feeling a little more isolated in the course of writing the novel?**

**ELD:** [Laughs] You seem to be more interested in my life than in the lives of these characters.

**CL: I do like to ask people how they've been personally affected by what they've created.**

**ELD:** Well, OK ... you remember what Flaubert said when they asked him about *Madame Bovary*? Asked him how he knew everything about that woman? He said, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." Madame Bovary, that's me. That's what happens. You do participate, you do live their life. Whatever book you're writing, you live the lives of the people in it. It's a very strange thing, because the minute you write a sentence, you're the instant reader of it. You find surprise in the sentence just as your reader will. So it's a complex thing. One of the ways to think about it is, it's having a knack for ventriloquism. You're speaking in other voices and thinking in other minds.

**CL: Which is something taught in college creative writing programs. Students are often warned that it's bad to exert too much control over their characters. That it should be more of a channeling process or, like you say, an act of improvisation.**

**ELD:** Yeah, you have to trust the act of writing something that will deliver what you want. The amount of calculation is really quite small, but at a certain point in the book, your editorial mind kicks in. You realize what your premises are, and you have to make good on them. But certainly in the beginning, you're at a level that's quite different. To me, the seed of [*Homer & Langley*] is the first line: "I'm Homer, the blind brother." That was so evocative to me, that I just flew 40 or 50 pages on that line before I sat down to look and see what I had.

**CL: How often do you usually do that? Stop and see what you've got so far?**

**ELD:** You have to do it often. The act of reading what you've written is a very important moment. You have to look out for little tiny things [because] it's almost imperceptible when you're doing something wrong. Then the manuscript will tell you. It won't raise a flag, so you have to pay attention to the smallest signal that you're somehow off the track ...

**CL: Which is also something that comes up in the workshops. I wanted to ask you about that, about the ongoing debate over the value of creative writing instruction. What can you really teach someone that they haven't already either intuited themselves or picked up just from reading other great writers?**

**ELD:** Well, it depends. The programs are of use to some people and not to others, but you can't lay down a universal critique of the idea that these things are good or bad. The fact of the matter is that you can't instill talent, of course,

but you can save the writer a lot of time dealing with craft issues. The fact that there's an established writer teaching one of these workshops means that your paying attention is very important. It can be very useful to people who are not sure of themselves. It can basically give people the courage to do the work, to see what they have. For others who prefer to go it alone, it won't work.

**CL: It does seem that a lot of the best writers, or at least the most interesting, are the ones breaking some of the same rules of craft that are taught in these programs.**

**ELD:** There are examples of people who've done that well, where the program has not worked ... but some good writers have come out of this. I'm talking about [Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate] Flannery O'Connor. But it's hard to generalize. The university did become the major patron of literary work right after World War II. With the G.I. Bill, a lot of people who wouldn't have gotten to go to college, did. Some were poets who took their Ph.D.s and began to teach, but also wrote their poetry and invited poets they knew to their campuses, and so the reading circuits began. Out of that came the [poetry] writing programs, and the fiction writers got into that a little later.

**CL: So, what are we looking at for the future of this kind of writing? This idea that our increasingly fast-paced, instant gratification society means fewer and fewer people are reading literary fiction -- how true is it? Have the goals or responsibilities of the novelist shifted in recent years because of this?**

**ELD:** People have been saying the novel is dead almost from the very first novel that was published. Actually, the percentage of readers in every society has always been quite small, and yet literature has flourished. I don't think any of the new media are going to do any real damage. The telling of stories is very important, not just an embellishment of society, and not susceptible, in my mind, to the general attention deficit disorder that might be a result of the media and the interactivity and Twitter and all the rest of that stuff. A coherent story is not just a story, it's a system of knowledge. Stories were the first systems of knowledge, before we had anything else. Before academic disciplines, people needed stories to survive. I think people do compose their lives as narratives, and that will never go out of fashion. That can never be destroyed.

***E.L. Doctorow*** delivers the closing keynote of the book festival 7 p.m. Nov. 8 at the Clark County Library Theater, 1401 E. Flamingo Road.