

AMERICAN HISTORY AS A RAGTIME TUNE:  
E. L. DOCTOROW'S *RAGTIME* \*

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ABSTRACT

E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) offers a very sophisticated version of an American popular history: the text includes numerous reminders of real social and political issues, allusions to other literary texts and writers (among others, this paper deals with John Dos Passos and James Weldon Johnson), and references to the ways in which other media work. In *Ragtime*, some of the rather general, limited, and frequently gossipy pieces of information on historical personalities could be read as ironic commentaries on the popular, conventional, textbook knowledge of history that most people do not go beyond. In the novel, ragtime is recognized as an important cultural phenomenon with the capacity to become a symbolic expression of its time; it can also be read as a tribute to the contribution of African Americans to the national culture. Moreover, the very form of ragtime seems to be imposed on the telling of the story, and popular music turns out to be a vehicle capable of conveying something vital and important about a historical period and experience.

KEYWORDS

E. L. Doctorow; *Ragtime*; multiraciality; American music; American history; fiction and non-fiction; John Dos Passos; James Weldon Johnson

Ragtime enjoyed immense popularity in the former Czechoslovakia. In saying this I am thinking, of course, of the novel by E. L. Doctorow, which was a great success when it appeared in both Czech and Slovak translations at the beginning of the 1980s (the first Slovak edition appeared in 1981, the Czech one in 1982, followed by reprints in 1985, 1989, 2000, and 2005) and sold 37,000 and 20,000 copies, respectively, within a few days. Speaking of the popularity of ragtime in Central Europe, we might also think of the great impact the musical fashion and form had during the initial decades of the twentieth century—of which there are still numerous records available in our musical archives; there is even an extant recording of a piece called “Rhapsody Rag” performed, so it is believed, by a Czech Viennese cafeteria band called Salonkapelle Hladisch from about 1913.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, we heard that the novel was made into a movie in 1981 and, to our great

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1. See Antonín Matzner, Ivan Poledňák, and Igor Wasserberger, eds., *Encyklopedie jazzu a moderní populární hudby*, vol. 1 (Praha: Supraphon, 1980), 322.

surprise, the director was nobody less than the popular Czech film director, Miloš Forman. But in those years the Czechoslovak audience, except for a few prominent individuals who attended one of two non-public screenings Forman himself organized in Prague in 1982, had no chance to see the film. Forman left the country after the Warsaw Pact's military suppression of the Prague Spring and the consequent Soviet occupation, and none of his U.S. films, except *Amadeus*, shot in Czech co-production, were officially shown in Czechoslovakia, especially not *Ragtime*, in which two blacklisted emigrant Czech actors, Jan Tříska and Pavel Landovský, appeared in minor roles.<sup>2</sup> Frankly, when the film, along with other works by Forman, finally made it home in 1994,<sup>3</sup> five long years after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and only on videocassette, the post-revolutionary minds of the public were too busy with other ideas and burdened with other interests to pay much attention to formerly inaccessible films or books.

As for the film itself, I personally had a feeling that Forman could not decide how to cope with the intricacy of the material and, therefore, simplified it to basically one narrative line. Strong though he made it, one would perhaps expect more formal inventiveness from a filmmaker of Forman's reputation and experience. And so, as it is, the film, though not a failure, seems to have lost some of the richness of color and ideas, some of the distinctive rhythmical rendition and stylistic charm of the fiction on which it was based.

In any event, as a result of the publication of *Ragtime* (1975) in both our languages (and also the appearance of *Welcome to Hard Times* in Czech in 1987 and *Loon Lake* in Slovak in 1984), and the author's prolific production in the years that followed, of which most appeared in both Czech and Slovak translations, E. L. Doctorow established himself as one of the best-known and most widely read representatives of modern American fiction, the reputation of which was and still is high among Czech readers, as the most recent success of the author's *Homer and Langley* (2009, in Czech translation 2010) again confirmed. As I understand it, *Ragtime* was received by most readers as good reading that provides an interesting blend of entertainment, excitement, and enlightenment, especially as regards the drama of the birth of American culture; Robert F. Kiernan even called it "a marvelous anthology of Americana."<sup>4</sup> A few took notice of the deceptive simplicity of the form and narrative style; some, myself included, see the novel as an achievement of the attempts to bring closer together "high" and "low" literature<sup>5</sup> and to bridge the

2. See Petra Mandová, "Československá produkční historie *Amadea*," master's thesis, Charles University, 2012, 16.

3. See vd [Vidů Peterka] and mim [Michael Málek], "Ragtime," *Filmový přehled*, no. 4 (1994): 29–30.

4. Robert F. Kiernan, *American Writing since 1945: A Critical Survey* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 36.

5. For example, Frederick R. Karl calls the novel "musical comedy, lightly parodic, an entertainment." *American Fictions, 1940–1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 515.

gap between the two, which was growing ominously in the 1970s. The reading of *Ragtime* offers special pleasures but the text also includes, sometimes covertly, numerous reminders of real social and political issues and serious problems, allusions to other literary texts and writers, and references to the ways in which other media work. The intended irony in the remark of the critic Jonathan Raban notwithstanding, the novel has also proved to be a “splendid book to talk about.”<sup>6</sup>

One line in the complicated plot concerns the lives of an affluent white American family from New Rochelle, consisting of the nameless Father, Mother, Mother’s Younger Brother, Grandfather, and Little Boy, who made their wealth from producing flags and bunting, thus exploiting the widespread sentiment of patriotism in the early twentieth century. Another line deals with an immigrant Jewish family from Eastern Europe (Tateh, Mameh, and Little Girl). And the third line brings in the sad and dramatic life stories of three African Americans, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., Sarah, and their baby. Not only are the stories of these fictional characters intertwined, but real-life personalities slip into and out of their world. They range from escape artist Harry Houdini, anarchist feminist Emma Goldman, and the renowned artist’s model and chorus singer Evelyn Nesbit, to the polar explorer Robert Edwin Peary, Sigmund Freud, and the banker and philanthropist John Pierpont Morgan.

A great many discussions, some quite controversial, concern the historical accuracy of the novel. Did Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit really meet? And if they did, or rather whether they did or not, could their encounter have taken the shape of the scene in the book? But in Doctorow, facts that are historically verifiable and those that are unverifiable seem to enjoy the same importance, though it might be more accurate to speak of the same unimportance; what remains more relevant is the capacity to identify, define, or, at least, feel the forces that would make the “could have beens” in the course of human events, as imagined by the author, possible. “We have it in us,” Doctorow himself said when speaking of writers, “to compose false documents more valid, more real, more truthful than the ‘true’ documents of the politicians or the journalists or the psychologists.”<sup>7</sup>

There are, undoubtedly, some hazards involved in such an approach to a specific historical period and situation but what we witness in *Ragtime* (and other novels of E. L. Doctorow) is not whimsicality as regards historical truth, only an ostensible playfulness in dealing with some historical facts. I feel that though the research into the factual background that preceded the writing of *Ragtime* must have been qualified and thorough, it was overshadowed by the writer’s search for images vital enough to carry and convey the meaning of the place and time depicted. There may also be capriciousness involved in the

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6. Jonathan Raban, “Easy Virtue: On Doctorow’s *Ragtime*,” *Encounter*, February 1976: 74.

7. E. L. Doctorow, “False Documents,” in *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983), 26.

plot construction—though never without a special purpose, for example, to function as a teasing comment on the overseriousness and yet occasional if not basic inadequacy of official historical records. I also tend to believe that some of the rather general, limited, and frequently gossipy pieces of information on historical personalities that the author worked with could be read as ironic commentaries on the popular, conventional, textbook knowledge of history that most people do not go beyond. As a matter of fact, *Ragtime* appears, besides other things, to be a parody of journalistic histories; the passage below can serve as an illustration of the free transition from a statement of grave significance to an assertion of hilarious inconsequentiality:

One hundred Negroes a year were lynched. One hundred miners were buried alive. One hundred children were mutilated. There seemed to be quotas for these things. There seemed to be quotas for death by starvation. There were oil trusts and banking trusts and railroad trusts and steel trusts. It became fashionable to honor the poor. At palaces in New York and Chicago people gave poverty balls. Guests came dressed in rags and ate from tin plates and drank from chipped mugs. Ballrooms were decorated to look like mines with beams, iron tracks and miner's lamps. Theatrical scenery firms were hired to make outdoor gardens look like dirt farms and dining rooms like cotton mills. Guests smoked cigar butts offered to them on silver trays.<sup>8</sup>

In his novel, Doctorow never pretended that he was trying to establish a fact-by-fact restoration of the U.S. history of the earliest decades of the twentieth century. (How could this be done, anyway?) Unlike John Dos Passos, another “pseudo-historical”<sup>9</sup> novelist but from the previous generation, whom Doctorow greatly admired, he did not want to imitate the mechanism of the historical process. His *Ragtime*, though a magical recreation of a chosen period from the past, was based on the author's perspective and retrospective of the twentieth-century American history and resulted from his understanding of its due direction, that is, in harmony with the basic principles of the American dream. There is, in the novelist's vision, some nostalgia for values that could and should have been the basis of social life in the United States—because of some expectations and promises—and there is disillusionment and bitterness ensuing from observations of real developments; as for hope, it is not entirely missing from the writer's view of the world, but it seems to be the least convincing of the items in *Ragtime*, should the novel be taken as an argument. One example is the quite unlikely notion, given the social reality of the time, of a happy childhood shared by the Little Boy, the Little Girl, and the Black Boy, which sounds more like a wishful thought than the American reality at the start of the twentieth century.

From a comparison with John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, and especially its first part, *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), which covers more or less the same years as *Ragtime* (1900–1917), it becomes clear that something of the older writer's “all right we are two nations” (i.e., the poor and the rich) idea seems to

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8. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York: Random House, 1975), 37–38. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text.

9. Raymond Sokolov, review of *Ragtime*, by E. L. Doctorow, *Washington Post*, July 13, 1975: 1.

have survived into Doctorow's novel.<sup>10</sup> Some critics labeled it sentimentality and a manifestation of left-wing pastoral.<sup>11</sup> What is surprising, however, is not that the two writers could share some social feelings and sympathies but the fact that though Dos Passos focused his "camera eye" (and here I am not thinking of one of the technical devices but the whole montage paradigm) somewhat lower on the social scale of the American society than Doctorow, he could still remain practically blind to the steadily growing ethnic variety and the consequential racial tensions. In *Ragtime*, on the other hand, ethnic and racial issues become not only important but central, and they are seen with an intensity that must have been informed as well by the experience of the following decades, above all the 1960s. Through the story of Coalhouse Walker, Jr., it is suggested that racial and ethnic consciousness and pride, which became so visible during the Civil Rights Movement of the era of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Eldridge Cleaver, were not born then from scratch but had already started to show some life before the concept of the New Negro appeared and the Harlem Renaissance set in.<sup>12</sup> What deserves special notice is not so much that Coalhouse assumes the semblance of a Black Panther before his historical time has come but the novelist's own general sensitivity to the phenomena of multiraciality and multiethnicity as important facts generating forces that have shaped American social and cultural history.

Doctorow's selection of ragtime as a meaningful motif and a powerful image, as well as the title for his novel, has proved to be an eloquent strategy. Firstly, it shows the author's recognition of ragtime as an important cultural phenomenon with the capacity to become a symbolic expression of its time; secondly, it can be read as a tribute to the contribution of African Americans to the national culture. In this regard it may be of note again that Dos Passos, who in his "newsreels" tried to recreate the social, cultural, and musical atmosphere of the years he covered, never let one ragtime song enter the pages of *The 42nd Parallel*; the few lines from Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" quoted there were not a satisfactory representation of the highly popular musical phenomenon of the time.<sup>13</sup>

Historically speaking, ragtime can serve as a wonderful metaphor for both the process of "Americanization" (for instance, marches polkas, and other popular or folk dances, and even classical musical forms were subject to the catchy continuous syncopations), as well as the "ethnicization" of American culture. In 1921, the pioneering African American artist and

10. John Dos Passos, *The Big Money*, in *U.S.A.: The 42nd Parallel. 1919. The Big Money* (1936; New York: Library of America, 1996), 1157.

11. See Jeffrey Hart, "Doctorow Time," *National Review*, August 15, 1975: 892–93.

12. The concept of the New Negro was made known through Alain Locke's eponymous anthology published in 1925, which is generally seen as the climax of the Harlem Renaissance. See Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: A. and C. Boni, 1925).

13. John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*, in *U.S.A.: The 42nd Parallel. 1919. The Big Money* (1930; New York: Library of America, 1996), 28.

intellectual James Weldon Johnson expressed his deep conviction when he wrote: "Ragtime has not only influenced American music, it has influenced American life; indeed, it has saturated American life."<sup>14</sup> While maintaining that "it is the one artistic production by which America is known the world over," and calling it "now national rather than racial," Johnson did not forget to put the whole matter into the right perspective and added: "But that does not abolish in any way the claim of the American Negro as its originator."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, James Weldon Johnson's own novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* of 1912, could also have been titled "Ragtime." Whether intentionally or unwittingly, it is hard to say, but Doctorow's novel undoubtedly offers an interesting parallel to the black writer's fictional work. In both books the protagonists are talented black pianists who can play rags as well as classical music. Though differently, both novels indict the world of racism where a black man's dilemma permits nothing but adaptation or destruction; some of the ironic complexities involved in his situation at the turn of the century were expressed in the statement that came from the white patron of Johnson's protagonist, who claimed that he could imagine "no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured and refined colored man in the United States."<sup>16</sup>

The nameless narrator of the earlier novel, like Doctorow's Coalhouse Walker, Jr., is capable and ambitious, and both protagonists insist on being taken seriously as citizens, professionals, and human beings. It was the resolution and consistency with which they sought and defended their dignity that undid their strivings—to save this humanity, Johnson's anonymous main character eventually gave up all the dreams of his future as a black musician and turned his back both on his musical career and on his blackness, though not without a feeling of guilt and loss. In many ways *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was well ahead of its time. Although "composed of most of the same ingredients as the popular fiction that was produced around it," as the critic Roger Rosenblatt observed, the book was still "a misfit in its era."<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, it made more sense and had a wider appeal when it was republished in the age and context of the Harlem Renaissance in 1927. It proved to be, in fact, a true precursor of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and functioned as a sensitive probe into the potentialities of black culture and the black artist who gathers the best that he gives to the world "from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius."<sup>18</sup>

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14. James Weldon Johnson, preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), xv.

15. Johnson, preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, x.

16. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Boston: Sherman, French, 1912), 142.

17. Roger Rosenblatt, *Black Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 174.

18. Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 97.

To have called *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* “a conservative document, leaning heavily toward the ideology of the black middle class,”<sup>19</sup> as Addison Gayle, Jr., did, using the language of the black aesthetics of the 1960s, was a misreading of the priority of the issues included and dealt with in the book, and it can also be seen as a corollary of the blunt application of the racial and social protest strategy in the field of art. In his interpretation, Gayle was reading Johnson’s novel outside its historical and cultural context and, consequently, missed its political message, namely, the vital relevance of the variety of black folk culture for black life. It can be said that topicality dictated and partly distorted the critic’s vision.

Doctorow’s protagonist, however, is not inspired by any real or fictional black character but by the story of a German classical writer, Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811), called “Michael Kohlhaas.”<sup>20</sup> Like the hero in the older model story, Coalhouse Walker, Jr., carried his protest against injustice in a seemingly desperate but politically and morally meaningful private war to a final and deadly confrontation with ruthless power. In their highly principled and dedicated fight for justice neither Kleist’s nor Doctorow’s justly outraged protagonists could be dissuaded from the use of violence, even by contemporary high authorities, such as Martin Luther and Booker T. Washington, respectively.

What is not advisable for a critic or scholar is quite possible and can be fruitful and meaningful in the work of a fiction writer, even if history is the subject or background. Doctorow’s Coalhouse, too, was made topical—not only when compared with his contemporary from Johnson’s novel but also when seen as having been shaped after the originator of ragtime music, Scott Joplin, whose features, biographical facts, and even destiny he brings to mind. Coalhouse was, however, not just a representative black artist with aspirations and, like Joplin himself, a victim of racism; as if informed by later historical developments, he also put his revenge into practice: he “militarized his mourning” (181) after his wife Sarah’s death and organized a private commando that appeared “so transformed as to speak of themselves collectively as Coalhouse” (183). In the story and the character of his fictitious protagonist, Doctorow managed to telescope a few decades of experience and also the very process of the transformation of acts of artistic affirmation into acts of physical and violent rebellion. The spontaneous creativity of an artist was replaced by the military rules of an avenging terrorist—Coalhouse “wanted no music in the basement quarters. No instrument of any kind. They embraced every discipline” (182).

But there is even topicality involved in the use of cultural facts and atmosphere in Doctorow’s novel. It is important to realize that the novelist

19. Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975), 111.

20. See Heinrich von Kleist, “Michael Kohlhaas,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. David Constantine (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 209–80.

did not turn to ragtime because of any forced or artificial nostalgia; in the early 1970s ragtime enjoyed an unexpected revival during which even Scott Joplin's forgotten and practically never performed opera, *Treemonisha*, made it onto the stage and was given a professional recording. One almost feels tempted to ask mischievously why the author of *Ragtime* missed the chance of having Joplin's opera performed within the time span of the novel, but then there comes the realization that in his own little way he did, in fact, have it enacted. In *Treemonisha*, like in Doctorow's book, a black baby is found under a tree, which is not a common way for any individual to enter life, not even if the individual is black.

When defining ragtime as a term and concept, the black writer Clarence Major had to state that it "has come to be known in the 1970s as 'the sound of the black experience' or 'the black experience in sound,'"<sup>21</sup> which was an idea that was hardly lost on Doctorow when he was writing his novel. Indeed, the very form of ragtime seems to be imposed on the telling of the story, as a few critics have noticed. Frequent anaphoras make for an impression of strong rhythms in successive phrases—as if the story should start anew with each of them—and as most of the sentences are rather short, the text pulses quite vividly. It consists of a seemingly endless sequence of sentence-rags organized into visually impenetrable paragraphs, a flow of words with no punctuation for dialogs or quotations. (The notion of continuity found its origin, of course, as much in popular music as it did in the art of the movies.) The rhythmical beats in the text help to give it some unity, but they also seem to be pushing the story or the stories from one meaningful event to another; they can even be identified as the heartbeats of the social organism which was fed on the ideals of social and racial justice and of humanism and democracy, or their distortions, as in the following excerpt using anaphora, reflecting the hatred the wave of new immigrants faced:

They were despised by New Yorkers. They were filthy and illiterate. They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honor and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. They killed each other casually  
(13)

The moment the novel reaches its conclusion, the ragtime tune contained in the narrative also comes to its end, as the narrator informs us just before it happens: "The era of ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of the machine, as if history were no more than a tune on a player piano" (236).

Certainly, one assumes, Doctorow believes that history is more than just a ragtime tune, but the point is that he also trusts the form of popular music and other images of a similar nature as vehicles capable of conveying something vital and important about a historical period and experience. The author has been justly praised for his capacity to create "powerful distillations,"<sup>22</sup> for his

21. Clarence Major, *Black Slang: A Dictionary of Afro-American Talk* (London: Routledge, 1971), 96.

22. Stanley Kauffmann, "A Central Vision," *Saturday Review*, July 26, 1975: 20.



talent to find, select, and recreate telling cultural details—and his novel offers quite a few of those, though not too many. If, for instance, it is compared in this respect with Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), which comes repeatedly to mind when we read *Ragtime*, Doctorow's technique appears as a performance of literary "minimalism" against the "maximalism" in the black writer's use of cultural facts and images. In addition, Reed's novel presents an open story, and as an open form, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., characterizes it, "it figures and glorifies *indeterminacy*,"<sup>23</sup> which is a quality derived from jazz that gave an incentive to the book, whereas *Ragtime*, like the musical form it took its inspiration from, proffers a closed form. With all the firmly-phrased sentences in the text of the novel, an appearance of definitiveness is achieved—though of the kind to be found not in factual accounts but rather in romances, and even in fairy tales.<sup>24</sup> The characters are mostly types rather than individualized people and most of them are not even given a name. The motivation for their behavior and being is anything but deep; admittedly, the book deals with generalized and simplified life stories, with the surface of historical experience to which the storyteller, as a private perceiver, adds an elegant finish.

The question is how much of the complex truth can be conveyed in the form of ragtime and to what extent the simplification is also a distortion. One cannot help being reminded of Herman Melville's observation that the "symmetry of form attainable in pure fiction cannot so readily be achieved in a narration essentially having less to do with fable than with fact," but also of his subsequent warning that truth "uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges."<sup>25</sup> Doctorow tries to belittle the whole issue when he proposes to see both fiction and non-fiction as "only narrative."<sup>26</sup> Still the novelist is apparently aware of the possible distinction between the two kinds of prose, as well as of the power at the narrator's disposal when he uses images as short-cuts to expressing complexity and when he creates the spell of the yarn. A part of Doctorow's success in *Ragtime*, then, lies in the representative quality of details which have made it to the surface in the writer's narrative—in their function as important carriers of both information and meaning, which applies not only to the application of imagery pertaining to music and other forms of popular culture (e.g., the movies, baseball, muckraking journalism, the world of thrills and excitement, and the new "religion" of psychoanalysis) to the sphere of politics and social life, but which is also true of short statements and comments in the text. For

23. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (1983): 709. Gates's italics.

24. See E. Miller Budick, "The Origins of American Historical Romance," in *The Early Republic: The Making of a Nation, the Making of Culture*, ed. Steve Ickringill, Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, and Aladár Sarbu (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988), 299–305.

25. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, in *Billy Budd, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 380–81.

26. Doctorow, "False Documents," 26.

example, a very simple remark by the family doctor, who pronounces his “These people” monologue (58) after giving a check-up to the black foundling, defines succinctly the whole racial and social situation in the house and in the society and expresses at the same time the doctor’s own views on such matters. Similarly, one single reference to Grandfather’s childhood meeting with John Brown, of which he never tires of boasting in later years, may help explain the otherwise surprising liberal attitude of his children (i.e., Mother and Younger Brother) towards Coalhouse, Sarah, and their baby (56–58).

We see what we see in *Ragtime* as observers rather than analysts; we learn about the world mostly through the eyes and from the memory (and collected and saved documents) of Little Boy. This special and distanced view seems to have enhanced the novelist’s fascination with the surface of discourse. Like Kurt Vonnegut’s popular works of fiction, here, too, some means of surface communication are used for more ambitious goals. Fredric Jameson believes that “by turning the past into something which is obviously a black simulacrum [Doctorow] suddenly makes us realize that his is the only image of the past we have, in truth a projection on the wall of Plato’s cave.” The critic describes the novelist’s method as “an insistence on the very flatness and depthlessness of the thing which makes what isn’t there very vivid,” and maintains that what Doctorow’s novel aims for “is not the reinvention of some sense of the past wherein one would fantasize about a healthier age of deeper historical sense” because “the use of these very limited instruments shows their limits.”<sup>27</sup> Jameson does not find any irony involved in Doctorow’s writing, but I would assume that in *Ragtime*, like in the novels of Vonnegut, means of popular discourse are not only used and displayed but occasionally they are also being taken revenge on. What else, for instance, does the very ending of the novel present if not a subtly ridiculed “poeticized” example of journalese?

We had fought and won the war. The anarchist Emma Goldman had been deported. The beautiful and passionate Evelyn Nesbit had lost her looks and fallen into obscurity. And Harry K. Thaw, having obtained his release from the insane asylum, marched annually at Newport in the Armistice Day parade. (236)

Obviously, Doctorow’s *Ragtime* offers a very sophisticated version of an American popular history. In a more retrospective view it also reads like a modern sample of a historical romance, and in Fredric Jameson’s judgment it most probably even qualifies as a postmodern species of the genre. This notion is one I do not feel it is necessary to subscribe to, but in disagreement with those that might say the book does not stand a rereading I have to say it did with me, as do most of the works that the author has written since *Ragtime*.

In 2007 Doctorow published a collection of essays from the years 1993–2006 which he called *Creationists*. It is reassuring that on the list of creative individuals deserving the author’s special respect we find the names of Heinrich von Kleist and John Dos Passos, of whose trilogy *U.S.A.*

27. Anders Stephanson, “Regarding Postmodernism—A Conversation with Fredric Jameson,” *Social Text*, no. 17 (1987): 44.

Doctorow gives a new, contemporary, reading. In the “Introduction,” however, he enlarges his speculations as regards the durability of books, including his own. He ponders: “The few monumental works that change our thinking, our seeing, rise from the chatter of what is temporal, imitative, foolish, and easily forgettable. The writer will never know if his work will flash forth a light from his own time and place across orders and through the ages. His own time and place clutching and pulling at his feet of clay every day of his working life, he will know only how faint a light it is, and how easily doused.”<sup>28</sup> The author’s *Ragtime*, the history presented in the stories, the era when the novel was written, and the history of the novel’s reception all serve as a good illustration of the novelist’s more general reflection.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

*Richard A. Voeltz*

Love and Death in 1950s Suburbia:  
The Novel and Film *Revolutionary Road* ..... 5

*Radek Glabazňa*

National and Transnational Identities  
in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* ..... 19

*Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis*

Ethnic Diaspora through the Kitchen: Foodways in the Postcolonial  
Feminist Discourse of Gurinder Chadha's *What's Cooking?* ..... 35

*Waldemar Zacharasiewicz*

Consumption and Communion in a Changing South:  
Food and Feasting in the Fiction of Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty,  
and Three Southern Writers of the Next Generation ..... 55

*Josef Jařab*

American History as a Ragtime Tune: E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* ..... 71

### BOOK REVIEWS

*Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, edited by Jørgen

Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen  
(reviewed by Elżbieta Rokosz-Piejko) ..... 83

*Narcoepics: A Global Aesthetics of Sobriety*, by Hermann Herlinghaus

(reviewed by Markéta Riebová) ..... 87

*'Forever Young'? The Changing Images of America*,

edited by Philip Coleman and Stephen Matterson  
(reviewed by Helena Šváchová) ..... 92