The Signature Lecture Series: **E.L. Doctorow**

As the College of Arts & Letters Spring 2012 Signature Lecturer, Doctorow held his sellout audience in rapt attention in Wharton Center’s Pasant Theatre. The author of 10 novels—half of them written since his previous visit to MSU in 1990—followed his lecture with an audience question-and-answer session providing insights into his inspiration and his craft.
E.L. Doctorow says that it was difficult to believe it had been 22 years since he was last at MSU—such were the fond memories of his first visit, and of lecturing on campus. Edgar (as his friends call him—he was named for Edgar Allen Poe) and Helen, his wife of 57 years, say they enjoyed everything about his encore performance.
A master of fiction in a wide range of formats, E.L. Doctorow’s work covers historical, western, science fiction, and mystery in novels, short stories, screenplays and plays. All invite—in fact, nearly compel—readers and viewers to explore and engage through the lens of critical thought.


NUMEROUS HONORS AND AWARDS

Over the years, E.L. Doctorow has won critical and popular acclaim. His work has been translated into more than 30 languages, and been adapted to five films and a hit Broadway musical, “Ragtime.” His honors include the National Book Award; two Pen/Faulkner Awards; three National Book Critics Circle Awards, including the first year of the award, 1975, for “Ragtime,” the Edith Wharton Citation for fiction; and the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

E.L. Doctorow is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1998, he was awarded the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal at the White House. Currently, Doctorow holds the Lewis and Loretta Glucksman chair in English and American Letters at New York University.

STUDENT SESSION AND WORKSHOP

Mr. Doctorow also enjoyed meeting with and working with students while on the MSU campus. Prior to his lecture, he conducted an interactive student workshop at the Kellogg Center, organized by CAL English Professors Stephen Arch and Patrick O’Donnell. The event opened with a round-table discussion followed by an open-mic session with students.

THE SIGNATURE LECTURE SERIES

E.L. Doctorow’s lecture in the Pasant Theatre was part of a series produced by the College of Arts & Letters that has provided opportunities for noted figures to interact with students, faculty and the greater Michigan State University community for 25 years.

The College of Arts & Letters Signature Lecture Series, and its predecessor, the Celebrity Lecture Series, have featured some of the most illustrious scholars, critics, novelists, poets, playwrights, filmmakers and creative artists of our time. Previous lecturers include Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks; Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Ken Burns; Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk; Academy Award-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone; two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author Norman Mailer; and Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning playwright Arthur Miller, to name a few.
Initially in your career, you were a book editor working with other authors. As you became a writer yourself, did you find that helped you? When you turn in your manuscripts are they much more edited than those you received from other authors?

Oh, yes, it was very, very useful for me as an editor, breaking manuscripts down, seeing what works, cutting stuff out. And, by the time I gave all that up for writing, I found I could deal with my own work as objectively as I’d dealt with others. So, that sort of editorial mindset turned out to be very, very useful to me in my own work.

You were talking last night about how you write and how you come up with the story. And that the story tends to come out once you begin writing. For instance, when you were writing the “Homer and Langley” story, it was the first sentence that got you going. Has that been typical throughout your career?

Yes, the books usually begin with some sort of impulse that I don’t quite understand; something evocative that intrigues me. It doesn’t always turn out to be a book. But every once in a while it goes on, and it’s the beginning of a book.

I didn’t mention one of the things, last night, about “The Waterworks.” That began as kind of a dream story; a 2½ page story that I published in a book called “The Lives of the Poets” in which two men are standing on the banks of a reservoir, and it’s a stormy day and they’re watching a toy schooner bobbing around in the water. And it goes under, capsizes and sinks. And they rush into the adjoining waterworks building and find the owner of the boat, a boy—a child—has been drowned, and his body is pressed up against the sluice gate. And that image led to “The Waterworks” novel.

In the workshop that Professor O’Donnell and Steve Arch did, they were talking about what does something mean, and you were saying that as long as someone had thought it out, that’s what it could mean. In this respect some have seen “The March” as echoing the Bush march into Afghanistan and Iraq.

It must have had something to do with the war we had got into. I had first understood that “The March”—I’d read about it 20 years before in a topical history about Sherman’s campaign by Joseph Glatthaar, who teaches now at the UNC Chapel Hill campus—and I remember thinking that the March could be the armature for a novel.

But I didn’t do anything about it for 20 years. I was very casually reading about the war and Sherman’s memoirs and Grant’s memoirs with no particular purpose in mind. Then, one day in 2004, I saw a photograph of Sherman and his staff sitting in front of a field tent. And that was it. I started to write the novel. But what you feel like is that when something like that happens, it’s the only thing you can write. That’s the moment that you’re locked into that particular book. And of course it had something to do with our invasion of Iraq.

When you write about a specific place like Sherman’s March or the “Homer and Langley” story, do you feel more at home if you are writing in the story’s location?

I’ve always felt at home wherever the book is.

Do you have a favorite?
The one I’m working on now.

Do you have a set process as far as writing in a certain place or a certain amount every day?

You go to work every day like everyone else does.

You know the story about John Cheever? Cheever lived in an apartment building, and he’d get up in the morning, put on his suit and tie, and coat and hat, and take the elevator downstairs with all the other people going to business. But, he kept going to the basement where he’d take off his coat and tie and hat. He had a little office down in the basement, but he liked to get the sense of going to work like everyone else even though he never left the building.

And, that’s what you have to do, because the writing generates the writing. If you don’t work at it every day, you lose the energy.

Have you always written the same way? Do you write longhand or use a typewriter, or do you use a computer?

I’ve never written longhand. I have terrible handwriting, so it’s always been typewriters or computers. Sometimes, with the computer, I wish we were back with typewriters. But, it’s too late. There are some people who still use them. Robert Caro, the great biographer of Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses, will not use anything but a typewriter.
Edgar (E.L.) Doctorow discusses his career as an author with MUSES staff. Says Doctorow, “You go to work every day like every one else.”
Reviewing your play “Drinks Before Dinner,” and speaking specifically to the character Edgar—your own name, in fact—the critic Richard Eder wrote: “He is the group’s domesticated ‘character,’ and when he proceeds to denounce their sleek and respectable habits, the others take it as an only slightly excessive play of wit, and they match it with their own. Until, casually, he takes out a gun.” How did you come to write this?

I was reading Gertrude Stein, and I happened to read also a transliteration of a speech Mao Tse Tung was giving to his troops, and it occurred to me that he sounded just like Gertrude Stein. And I sort of analyzed it, and I saw that within a paragraph there were slow changes. It was like phase music, and the meaning of what they were saying would not become clear until the accumulated variations of the sentences arrived at the end of the paragraph.

And I thought I would try that. And I found myself writing about someone speaking very angrily and despairingly about their life and making these claims and assertions. Then, I found myself writing answers to these claims and assertions. And suddenly I realized this was a play. So, I suppose it’s more a philosophical dialogue than a real play.

But, oddly enough, that type of production gave the illusion of a different sort of play than I had intended. “Drinks before Dinner” is really a theater of ideas, and is perhaps best done as a stage reading or a radio play, so you’re not burdened with the actual physical nature of the occasion. BBC did it on radio, and it’s been done in various college and regional theatres. But it’s not your usual play. The characters take their identity from their positions in the argument. So, I suppose it’s more a philosophical dialogue than a real play.

Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns told us that he feels like he’s made the same film over and over again. And that he feels like he is trying to answer two questions: “Who are we? And who am I?” Do you have similar feelings?

I’ve never taken these thoughts that far. You get into a book, and you sort of live in the sentences. Somehow in the coded nature of a book, you do hope you’re dealing with something serious. That somehow you are addressing issues that are sort of embedded or incorporated in the specific story you are telling. But you stay inside of that story.

You have to respect the integrity of the occasion. You cannot impress on a book any ideas that don’t come out of it.

When you are writing a novel, and you are in it, you just have to trust the act of writing to scan your ideas and principles and views. But, it must come out of the work organically. You cannot be a cookie cutter.

Do you put much symbolism in your writing?

Well, there’s another example of the same issue. If you are aware of a symbol, you’re dead in the water.

This is going to sound peculiar, but you can’t know too well what you are doing. You write to find out what you’re writing. It’s really an act of exploration. You don’t know in advance what you are going to do, because that’s not going to work.

I was trying to explain this to someone, years ago, and came up with an image that people seem to understand: That Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights can light up the road, but you can make the whole trip that way.

So, for a young student starting out, would you recommend this as a career?

I don’t look at my work as a career. I think it’s a calling. And if he or she has that, I have nothing to tell them, and if they don’t, I don’t know what I could tell them.
Do you ever get a feeling when you’re writing that, “Oh, I’ve got this one,” where others are more difficult to write?

Each book has its own career in you, and some need to be written one way, and some another way. Some books are straight linear narratives; others are constructed more like collages. You never know how difficult or easy it’s going to be.

*When you go into a period piece like “Ragtime,” how do you get into the cadences, the language and all of that? Is that part of the research?*

No, it just happens. You just listen.

The problem that critics saw with the movie “Ragtime” was that the filmmakers were trying to be so genuine in showing everything about the period that the story ended up not being front and center. Would you agree with that?

Yes, the director, Miloš Forman, left out too much of substance. I think he was really interested in only one thread of that tapestry: the story of Coalhouse Walker. That’s really the only thing that interested him. So, he slighted everything else, and that was his mistake.

*I see that you had written some screenplays of your own.*

I have. I wrote a screenplay for “Ragtime” when Robert Altman was going to direct it. It was an immense screenplay. He wanted to do 10 hours of film, two three-hour theatrical productions, and four hours for television. I think the producer was so frightened by that, it was the end of Altman.

Your first novel, “Welcome to Hard Times,” has been said to be your send-up of Western movies. How did that come about?

Well, I was a reader for a film company in New York, and in those days, Westerns were very popular, so it was my job to read a lot of these lousy Westerns. It drove me crazy. So, in a fit of rebellion one day, I sat down and wrote a story, a parody of the genre. And the man I worked for, the story editor, read it and said, “You know, this is really good. Maybe there’s a novel here.”

So I crossed out the title of the story and I wrote Chapter One, and that story became the first chapter of this book. And, of course, as I moved on, I began to think not as a parodist, but as someone who might write something serious and take these disreputable materials and do something serious with them.

So, the only parody that remains is structural parody. But, the tone of it is more grim. When the book was published, it was my first novel, in 1960-61, and one critic read it as a parable of the nuclear war. That’s an example of what I was saying last night about how people find things in your book that you weren’t conscious you were doing.

*Your wife, Helen, accompanied you to East Lansing. Having heard you two conversing, it’s obvious that you and she are very much a “we.” Has that been important in your life?*

You need someone you can argue with for your life. You want to have an arguing partner. Sometimes your position is so familiar to your partner that you need only say one or two things and the gist of the argument becomes clear. I think it’s a good marriage because we disagree about almost everything.