



American Conversation

E. L. Doctorow

September 25, 2008

Archivist of the United States Allen Weinstein welcomed award-winning novelist E. L. Doctorow for an “American Conversation.” Doctorow’s work depicts various eras and personalities in American history and has been published in 30 languages. His novels include *The March*, *City of God*, *Welcome to Hard Times*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, *Loon Lake*, *World’s Fair*, *Billy Bathgate*, and *The Waterworks*. He currently holds the Lewis and Loretta Glucksman Chair of English and American Letters at New York University. The program took place in the William G. McGowan Theater of the National Archives Building.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN: We're very fortunate, very privileged tonight to have as, uh, our guest one of the country's, one of the world's finest novelists, and I think most of you know at least some of E.L. Doctorow's dozen books, dozen novels: "City of God," "Welcome to Hard Times," "Book of Daniel," "Ragtime," "Loon Lake," "Lives of the Poets," "World's Fair," "Billy Bathgate," "The Waterworks," and of course the extraordinary book "The March," which is his most recently published book. We, uh... we're going to let our guest have a few introductory words on some of the issues that I'd think we'd like to talk to him about, but let me to say to begin with that this is a banner day for the American Conversations discussions that we've been having, and I thank you, sir, for joining them. Edgar Lawrence Doctorow had the good sense to be born in New York City and to live in the Bronx. What more can I say?

[Laughter]

Second-generation American. His father was a fan of Edgar Allan Poe. I assume that's why—where the Edgar comes from.



E.L. DOCTOROW: You're speaking of my youth.

WEINSTEIN: Right, right.

DOCTOROW: Well, um, it was pretty wild. I read all the time, and we had a lot of music in the family. My mother was a pianist, and my father was a proprietor of a music shop. He was something of a musicologist, and he kept it going through the Depression, then finally lost it in 1940, but there was always—there were a lot of books in the house, a lot of music, and no money, and they were readers, my parents. Am I speaking to the point here?

WEINSTEIN: Yes.

DOCTOROW: Yeah? And then I found out I was named after Edgar Allan Poe. There's always an injunction when children are given names in there, and Poe was, uh--my father loved his work. Actually, he liked a lot of bad writers, but, um...

[Laughter]

Poe is our greatest bad writer, so I take some consolation from that. He died many years ago. My mother lived into her 90s, and I remember asking her in her old age--I finally dealt with the question of my name, and I said, "Do you and Dad (know) you named me after a drug-addicted, alcoholic, delusional paranoid with strong necrophiliac tendencies?" And she said, "Edgar, that's not funny."

But I decided I was a writer about the age of 9, and I didn't feel it was necessary to write anything, having made that decision, for some time, but I was reading everything. I was very fortunate in that television really hadn't landed heavily by then, so everything came from books and the public library, comic books, and radio shows for children, and at a certain point, I began to ask another question. The question--a child when reading says, "What's gonna happen next?" I found myself asking the question, "How is this done?" And I think that's the sort of question a writer--a kid who's gonna be a writer would ask, beginning to wonder, "Writers see these lines on the page, and they create so much emotions and put pictures in your mind. How is that done?" I remember being particularly impressed by Jack London. I remember picking a book out of the library called "Mademoiselle de Maupin" by Theophile Gautier that made my ears red. Very sexy book. And picking up a book I liked the title of called--a book called "The Idiot" by someone named Dostoevsky, and that's the way it went from one book to another. And then my father kept an eye on my reading very discreetly I realized later, and he saw me reading a lot of mysteries-- mysteries and ghost stories and that kind of thing, so we were at my grandfather's house, and he--my grandfather had a wonderful library. He picked a book out of my grandfather's library and said, "Here's a book called "The Green Hand." That's really creepy. Maybe you should take a look at this one." And while all the grownups were



having tea and cake on Sunday afternoon, I sat in the corner, and I read this book, and of course, my father had tricked me. It wasn't about a green hand. It was about a novice aboard a ship, a green hand, and by that rouse, I began to read a lot of sea stories, and that got me into Captain Hornblower and all that sort of thing.

WEINSTEIN: There's a story that you've told, Edgar, about an assignment in a writing class at Bronx High School of Science.

DOCTOROW: Oh, yes. Well, I've told this story once or twice before in Washington, but I wanted to write.

At the Bronx High School of Science, I was having a very difficult time. They were all very smart children there and some of them quite insufferable, walking around predicting in some cases correctly that they were gonna win the Nobel Prize in Physics.

[Laughter]

So I fled down the hall to the literary magazine. It was called "Dynamo," and they were my first publishers, and they published a story called "The Beetle." I was reading Kafka at that time, and this was a story of etymological self-defamation in the spirit of Kafka, but then I took a journalism class. I think that's what you meant. Just because it was a chance to write, and it didn't interest me terribly, but then we got an assignment to do an interview, and I really went to town on that interview.

WEINSTEIN: To write about a colorful person.

DOCTOROW: What?

WEINSTEIN: To write about a colorful person is the way you put it.

DOCTOROW: Well, to go out and interview someone, and I gave my interview into the teacher. It was an interview with the stage doorman at Carnegie Hall. He was a German-Jewish refugee named Karl. He'd lost all of his family. He was a dear old man. He'd come to work in mismatching brown trousers and a blue serge jacket, and he'd bring his lunch in the evening in a paper bag and a thermos of tea, and he drank his tea in the Old World style by putting a cube of sugar between his teeth, and he'd drink tea through the sugar. And all the great artists loved him—Horowitz and Toscanini--and they all called him Karl by his first name. Hew was very knowledgeable in music, and so that was my interview with Karl the stage doorman, and the teacher called me up the next day and said, "This is the best interview that I've ever seen come out of this class. We're gonna run it in the school newspaper, but I want one of the photography kids to go down to Carnegie Hall and take Karl's picture to go along with the story." And I said, "I don't think that's a very



good idea." And she said, "Why not?" And I said, "Well, Karl is very shy." And she said, "Shy? Well, he talked to you, didn't he?" I said, "Not exactly."

[Laughter]

"There is no Karl. I made him up." [Louder laughter] It was a bad day at Bronx Science.

WEINSTEIN: We didn't have those problems at DeWitt Clinton.

DOCTOROW: I'm sorry.

WEINSTEIN: We did not have those problems at DeWitt Clinton. Because none of us wrote.

DOCTOROW: Heh heh heh. The teacher--neither the teacher or I understood what a portent that event was, that I just thought it was so much easier to make something up than go out for the tedious business and interview someone, and then of course today, I would give the teacher an entirely different answer. I'd say, "I was just doing what journalists always do."

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: Well, you've said about the same subject in a later period of your life, "I think fiction intrudes on history. Historians know that they're not objective. Where mythology and history converge, that's where I start my novels." Where mythology—Karl was mythology comprised with history.

DOCTOROW: I take the position that if there was no Karl there should have been, and so I filled in a need there.

WEINSTEIN: That's important.

DOCTOROW: Yeah.

WEINSTEIN: People talked this way in the Bronx, and they also went, as you probably did and I probably did--I know I did--to the public libraries. Remember public libraries? That's when you came back with a huge number of books, which were all read by the following day, and took them back, and you just kept building.

DOCTOROW: Well, the public library was very important to me and not only the books but the physical books. Some of those books have been read for such a long time that--they had these library--thick library bindings, and the pages were like cloth they'd been read so many times. They were like holding a page of cloth in your hand. I was very



responsive to--and another good thing. There was a bakery, an industrial bakery a block away from the Washington Avenue branch, the library I went to, and I used to walk through this miasma of baking smells to get to the library. So I managed to conflate bread with books in my mind. There was always a connection there somehow.

WEINSTEIN: If you had parents who owned a delicatessen restaurant, as mine did, you conflated not bread with--as you conflated bagels or--

DOCTOROW: Well, they baked everything, and those breads came out of it. They had those little union labels on them. You know those little stickers they used to put on bread? All that--I don't know why I remember things like that. There was one point at which my loyalty to writing faded a little and I decided I wanted to become an aeronautical engineer, and my older brother looked at me, and he said, "You just like the sound of the words, that's all." I didn't know what an aeronautical engineer was.

WEINSTEIN: How do you get from the Bronx to Kenyon College? Two different worlds.

DOCTOROW: That was very strange. I had read the poetry of John Crowe Ransom, a New Critic and an elegant minor poet. Now we know a minor poet's a very classy thing to be. And I just had the feeling I wanted to go out and study with him, and to my astonishment, I was accepted at Kenyon College, and I remember--you know the way kids today go off to college? They have truckloads of equipment. They have skis, and they have surfboards, and they have computers, and they have speakers, and they have things I don't even understand, and I went down to Penn Station. I had a little suitcase and a paper bag with a sandwich and an apple and a container of milk, and I said good-bye at the old Penn Station to my parents at the age of 16 and got on this train, went overnight. And, um, I finished my sandwich by the time we got to Newark.

[Laughter]

And I got very hungry later on, but it was a wonderful education at Kenyon, and I ended up not being an English major but a philosophy major. There's a great philosopher there--two great--it was the best two-man philosophy department in the country. Philip Blair Rice and Virgil Aldridge were their names, and I did get to study with Ransom, took a couple of courses with him, and I also got interested in theater and started to act in the college productions, but I didn't get any really good roles until one of the old veterans, who was a senior, graduated. His name was Paul Newman.

[Laughter]

I wonder whatever happened to him. But, um, that was Kenyon. It was--poetry. We wrote literary criticism there the way they played football at Ohio State. They're very serious about words. It was probably in those days--I later ran into--found myself talking up in



Connecticut to a writer named Robert Penn Warren, and he was connected to Kenyon in some way and to Ransom. He said that when I was there Kenyon was probably the best undergraduate college in the country. I was very pleased to hear that.

WEINSTEIN: At what point do you begin using history in your fictional work? Is there a particular place at which it just starts, or was this always so natural for you that you never really drew a distinction between injecting it?

DOCTOROW: That's a good question. I think what happened was this. I--a series of creative accidents. I was working as a reader, after I got out of the army, for Columbia Pictures in New York City, and what you did is you read a book a day or a screenplay a day, and you wrote a report about it and made a judgment as to whether a film could possibly be made. In those days, people were--westerns were very popular, and I found myself reading these awful, terrible westerns day after day. I thought I'd become seriously ill, and so one day, I sat down, and I wrote a story that was a parody of all the stuff I'd been reading, and I showed it to my boss Johnny Johnston. He said, "This is good. You ought to turn it into a novel." So I crossed out the title of the story and wrote, "Chapter One," on this material, and then knowing nothing about writing a novel, I started.

Well, it turned out to be a novel about the Dakota Territory in the 1870s, and I started out thinking of a parody, and then I got more interested in the idea of making something serious out of a disreputable genre. So there's a structural parody in that book, but it doesn't make fun of anything, and the book was published, and it got pretty good reviews, and I thought I'd really gotten away with something because, of course, I'd never been west of Ohio, where Kenyon was. In fact, I thought--being a New Yorker, I thought Ohio was the West. And, um--you know, there's a great tradition of this kind of thing. I mean, Kafka wrote a book called "Amerika" without ever having left Prague.

WEINSTEIN: It's filed in the travel sections these days, you know?

DOCTOROW: Yeah. So the reviews were pretty kind, but then I got a letter from a lady in Texas. She was an elderly woman. I could tell by that very fine cursive hand she had, sort of 19th-Century penmanship. She said, "Young man, I was with you until chapter 5 when you had Jenks make his dinner out on the flats--make his dinner out of the roasted haunch of a prairie dog." She said, "At that moment, I knew you'd never been west of Ohio."

[Laughter]

"Because the haunch of a prairie dog wouldn't fill a teaspoon," she said. So I wrote back the only thing I could say. I said, "That may be true of prairie dogs today, madam"...

[Laughter]



But just to show you what Henry James meant when he said, "A fiction writer gets—pulses of the air create revelations for him. He sees into the unseen." When I told this story a while ago, I got an e-mail from a man who was familiar with the Lewis and Clark journals, and he said there was an item about a sergeant killing a prairie dog and making a dinner for two officers out of that prairie dog, so I was right.

[Laughter]

Without knowing it. But you asked how I got into history, but I think it went from genre into history. Growing up in New York, I never felt the city conferred a literary identity on me the way the Midwest would have conferred one on Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis or the South on William Faulkner, and somehow, I stumbled into the idea that a sense of time was as much an organizing principle for a book as a sense of place. And the second book I wrote I won't even talk about. It was a bomb, but then somehow, that informed "The Book of Daniel" and "Ragtime," and on the other hand, I don't think of myself as a writer of historical novels. I object to that modification of the word novelist. Would you like to hear me talk about that?

WEINSTEIN: Yes, I would, except you should note that I did not mention—I did not call you a historical novelist. I called you a novelist from the Bronx.

DOCTOROW: Well, I don't really understand—of course, there's a genre called the historical novel. It's a costume novel where you're made to think what a glorious time it would have been to live in that time, and I'm not talking about that genre, which I think is fairly meretricious, but "The Scarlet Letter," Nathaniel Hawthorne was writing about a period 150 years before his own life. Do we think of that as an historical novel? No. Mark Twain wrote "Tom Sawyer" 40 years later. He was talking about his childhood in the West, in the South in the 1840s. He wrote that book in the late 1870s. We don't think of "Tom Sawyer," "Huck Finn" as historical novels.

And also, if you think about it, every novel is about the past, even if it's written in the present. It's inevitable, but, you say, well, we call it an historical novel not only because it takes place in the past but because you have historical characters in it. On the other hand, we don't think of Tolstoy's "War and Peace" as an historical novel. We don't think of Stendhal's "Charterhouse of Parma" as an historical novel. They have characters that are historically verifiable. In 1985, I published—I published a book called "World's Fair," which used my own family's experiences and myself growing up. That's not an historical novel, but it uses real people who not everyone knows. So what's the ontological difference between a book using historically verifiable people that everyone knows and using one—a book—people that nobody knows? There is no basic ontological difference, so you can write about the past and use historically verifiable characters, and still it's not an historical novel. It finally when the book is written falls away like the author, and there's only the book's own time, its own internal time that matters.



WEINSTEIN: Let me try two other categories to see whether you would except either one or both of them. You mentioned time, measuring by--novelists who burrow into specific segments of time. In your case, it seems to be most of your novels that I've read--and I've read most of them--burrow into the period from roughly the First World War through roughly the Second World War, the twenties and thirties. I can get enough examples that aren't, but you've made that your own. That's your--I think of it as your world.

The second element is that of the nature of your char—the characters and scenes that you're dealing with, and there you are the New York novelist par excellence simply in terms of the range and complexity and absolute fascination of the themes that you've developed. I don't see that as a modest thing. I see that as your uberworld basically.

DOCTOROW: So you think I'm a New York novelist then?

WEINSTEIN: I think you have captured so much of the reality of New York.

DOCTOROW: Thank you. For a while there, people called me a New York novelist. I did publish--a few books take place in New York at different times, but I also--but I also have been called a political novelist, a postmodernist, an historical novelist, a Jewish novelist, and I tend to agree with any interpretation that anyone wants to put on my work as long as its non-exhaustive. Um...

WEINSTEIN: How about this one? "Doctorow is the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past. No one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own political dilemmas in the present."

DOCTOROW: Hmm. You know, I have to admit something here that I don't--I don't usually read serious criticism of my work. I don't want to know too well what I'm doing.

[Laughter]

No. I'm quite serious about that. It's a strange thing. As I mentioned Henry James before, the idea of "the very pulses of the air turn into revelations. You see into the unseen." I've always felt that writing a sentence from your imagination confers a degree of acuity or perception that writing a sentence that's purely factual does not, and there's an endowment in that kind of thing, and you don't feel possessive about what you're writing. You make discoveries just the way the reader does. A matter of fact, you're the instant reader as you put the words down of what you're doing, and so there's that dissociation, and it also means you're not entirely in control.

When the work's going well, you surprise yourself. And people find meanings and things in your books that you did not specifically, consciously intend to put there but which are



there, and to read serious criticism is to sort of screw things up for you. The art is in really not entirely being in control of what comes out. The critics when I grew up used to call something the intentional fallacy, as a writer would intend to write something, and that's not what the book was. So it was a fallacy even to have these intentions. You don't want a degree—you don't want any degree of self-consciousness about what you're doing. You have to respect—you have to really respect the fact that it's not an entirely rational life you're leading. Of course, the people you live with understand that very well.

[Laughter]

I remember my wife Helen was asked to be on a radio program some years ago called "Living With an Author."

[Laughter]

And she was on there, and Rose Styron, Bill Styron's wife, was on there, and I think Nan Talese, married to Gay Talese, was on, and the host of the program began it this way. "It's often said," she says. "It's often said of writers that they are neurotic, self-interested, inconsiderate brutes who have absolutely no degree or gift or quality of living with any other human being because they're so awful." And before she'd even been introduced to the audience, my wife said, "Oh, you know my husband."

[Laughter]

So it is—I don't mean to sound mystical or anything like that, but I'm grateful for serious critical attention, but when someone sends me a book or a piece or something, I thank them, but I don't read it.

WEINSTEIN: I've never heard anyone call you mystical.

DOCTOROW: Yeah.

WEINSTEIN: A nuts and bolts question. Some authors are absolutely categorical about writing one page a day or 2,000 words or whatever it is and stopping and going. Others just go with the flow or whatever their imagination begins. They write long, they write short depending on the day and the topic and the rest. Do you have a pattern that you talk about it, or is that a dumb question?

DOCTOROW: I think the important rule is to go to work like everyone else does every day, and if you miss a day, it usually takes you two days to pick up. There are a lot of little rules. Hemingway was a great psychologist of writing, and he gave an interview in "The Paris Review" many years ago to George Plimpton, and he said, "Always stop when you know what's coming next." Very simple idea. And, "Never read back more than a page or



two before you begin the day's work." So many writers, they've got 50 or 100 pages. They sit down and read all of them before they start to work.

That's a mistake. So, um--so I like to work every day. It's really a very noble profession if you think about it--dedicated, principled, selfish. I should warn you that when writers talk about their books and writing, they're continuing the process of fiction that they live by.

WEINSTEIN: Let me try another quote on you. "On the eve of the 1992 election, Doctorow reminded readers why the bizarre and troubling pageants known as presidential elections matter so deeply."

Quoting you here. "The president we get is the country we get. Thanks in part to mass media suffusion, one 4-year term may find us at reasonable peace with one another and the next trampling on each other for scraps of bread." That was 1992. Would you care to update that quote?

DOCTOROW: I feel that very strongly. This evening's meeting is the second most important in Washington today.

[Laughter]

I actually repeated those lines in a piece I wrote in 2004 protesting the war in Iraq, and I think that piece began, "This president doesn't know what death is." When Eisenhower sent everyone off on June 6, he was thinking about all the young men who were gonna be killed in the invasion. He was in agony. He didn't make jokes. That little piece with those lines sort of caught fire on the Internet to my astonishment. That's when I really learned what the Internet could do. It was all over thousands and thousands of sites, but it is true--the president we get is the country we get, and, um, I think you all know how I feel about this. I think this administration has been the most disastrous in the history of this country.

[Applause]

That's not a particularly keen observation. I think a lot of people feel that way. Almost every area of interest in human life has been somehow deflected in the policies of this administration, whether it's the economy, whether it's the environment, whether it's the war, whether it's civil rights. It's really appalling and a great--I think we should all worry seriously about where our country's going. What other cheerful things should we talk about?

WEINSTEIN: Well, I wanted to talk about one other not-so-cheerful thing, but it was in the news again in the last several weeks. You probably know what I'm referring to. You wrote an eloquent book a number of years ago called "The Book of Daniel," and recognizing as I do that fiction is fiction and fact is fact and myth is myth and one combines them all, and



if I had to categorize the kind of novelist you are, in retrospect, I would say you're an unpredictable novelist, and that is my way of thinking of it.

Now a first-rate novelist has to be, using materials from wherever they come and not necessarily dividing them up into—slicing them into fictional rows of material and factual rows, but as you—glad to see you as reflective as you are in assessing these things, do you have any further thoughts on "The Book of Daniel," the case that inspired it, and your own perceptions of these matters? I have to tell you that's a very painful question for me to ask.

DOCTOROW: Well, I don't know how recently you've read that book, but the fact is, all these revelations of the code documents and this latest confession of Morton Sobell, all that's anticipated in the novel. It's all there. If someone asks would I write differently now, I say, "No."

This is what I mean by the endowment that fiction gives you, figuring things out that you don't have any factual knowledge of, but in the book, a reporter tells Daniel, who's the narrator—he's the son of the executed couple—that, "Yeah, your parents were framed, but in this country, people don't get picked out of a hat to be put on trial for their lives."

"Your parents had to be doing something," he says. There's also some indication of the emotional distance that Daniel's mother takes, who apparently has not been totally informed about what his father has done as a spy. So that's all in the book, and perhaps you'll be interested in how that book came to be written?

WEINSTEIN: I would be very interested in that.

DOCTOROW: In the late 1960s, something called the New Left arose out of the college campuses more or less spontaneously as a result of the anger about the Vietnam War, and I began to think about it compared to the Old Left. The Old Left in the 1930s was this Europeanized, Marxist, theoretical—generally, the Old Leftists were either in thrall to the Soviet Union or schismatically embittered by the Soviet Union, but it all had that intellectual basis of Utopian theory, whereas the New Left was in its spirit in—its genius was anarchic. Later, it broke into various factions of one kind or another, but its genius was totally anarchic. It came out of the college campuses, and it came along with the music of rock 'n' roll and clothing changes, fashion changes. Men began to wear their hair long, and people wore jeans, and then it got conflated with the Civil Rights Movement. So I began to think, "What better way to tell the story of my country's life in a 30-, 40-year period than in terms of its dissidents?"

And I've always had an idea of a novel as a large canvas, but, see, I didn't have a story, and when the Rosenbergs were executed, I was serving in the army in Germany. I didn't pay that much attention. I may have seen something about in "Stars and Stripes," and



then I thought, "That may be the story that I can use to connect--be the fulcrum between The Thirties and The Sixties." So that's how I landed on that case. I didn't know any of these people. I didn't know any of the prosecution. I start to read some transcripts and newspaper stories, and then I decide to write an omniscient point of view, and I wrote about 150 pages, and I read them one day.

You know, that's part of the writing process? You have to see what you're doing every once in a while, and one day you devote to reading what you've got. And I read this material, and it was awful. I was bored. I fell into great despair. If I could make a story like this boring, I had no business being a writer. I remember I threw the pages across the room. I've never felt a greater moment of desolation in my life. In anger at myself, I put a piece of paper in the typewriter. That's what we used those days. We used typewriters. And I start to type something almost in mockery of my own pretensions as a writer, and what that turned out to be was the first page of "The Book of Daniel," and this took me a while to figure out that I shouldn't write the book. Daniel should write the book. The son of this murdered, executed couple should be in his adulthood trying to reconcile himself with the life he'd been given by his parents. Daniel was the answer to how to get this book done because he was intimate with what was going on, as the novelist has to be when you're writing about something, but he was in the dark of what was going on, as I in fact as the writer was, as well.

So by writing from his point of view, I was able to develop this book, and, um, people who haven't read it often think it's a defense, a simple-minded defense of Rosenberg. It's not, but it asks a different question. The question, what I discovered in writing the book, of their guilt or innocence was not the question. It was not about them. It was about what happened to them. That case is an iconic portrait of the United States in the 1950s as a self-portrait of a time of total national psychosis, and that's what my book is about, and my book is about, also, the unconscionable, I feel, thing that parents can do to the lives of their children based on their ideological fantasies.

WEINSTEIN: Arthur Koestler, "Darkness at Noon," the chapter on the jailing of the old Bolsheviks who are about to be tortured and executed in the purge years, and he writes, "They were all guilty but not of the crimes for which they were charged." That line is...

DOCTOROW: Well, I think even people that feel that—have always felt that the couple was guilty never thought they should have been executed.

WEINSTEIN: Of course not.

DOCTOROW: Yeah. To talk not about the book but about them, these revelations indicate that, yes, he was a spy, Julius Rosenberg, probably she wasn't. She was electrocuted on the basis of perjured testimony by her sister-in-law. That has been made clear, and he was not involved particularly in nuclear espionage. He was doing a lot of



other things, radar, other kinds of weapons, but all that stuff, substantive treachery was done by a man named Klaus Fuchs, who ended up getting an 8-year prison sentence. The fact of the matter is nobody looks very good when you look at that case: certainly not the prosecution; certainly not the judge, who was apparently in some collusive extrajudicial conversation with the prosecution; certainly not Roy Cohn, who was demonic and boasted about putting the idea of sentencing them to death in Judge Kaufman's mind; and certainly not Judge Kaufman, who--who said that the Rosenbergs were responsible for the Korean War. That's totally insane. Everyone looks bad if you look at that case, everyone.

WEINSTEIN: I could continue my questions for you for the next several hours, but we have a tradition here of inviting the audience to approach one of the microphones on the side--there's one over here, there's one over here--and join us with whatever questions you have in the remaining time. So do I see people?

There's someone already. Yes?

WOMAN: Hi. I have two editorial-type questions.

WEINSTEIN: Brief ones, we hope.

WOMAN: Brief, yes. One is in "Waterworks," which I just finished and loved, I'm just curious why you chose to use ellipses all the time instead of commas? And the more substantive question is everyone thanks they're editors when they do their forward, but how do you react to editors?

DOCTOROW: Images?

WOMAN: Editors.

DOCTOROW: Editors?

WEINSTEIN: I was gonna ask that one, too.

WOMAN: Editors and ellipses in "Waterworks."

WEINSTEIN: Start with ellipses. You use ellipses and not commas. Why?

DOCTOROW: I'm sorry, but could you repeat that? I'm having a little trouble hearing you.

WEINSTEIN: You use ellipses rather than commas in "Waterworks." Why do you use ellipses in the book?

Did I state your question?



WOMAN: Isn't that correct? I mean, I just finished it. Am I imagining it? Am I mixing it up with something else? In "Waterworks," the use of ellipses, the punctuation in "Waterworks"?

DOCTOROW: Oh, that.

WOMAN: And then the more substantive thing is how do you react to editors editing your work?

DOCTOROW: Oh, I don't let them.

[Laughter]

No. You know, I used to be an editor, and what I learned from that was to regard my own work with the same objectivity that I would read other people's work and consider it. So usually when I had a book in, most of the time, that's the book I want, and they seem to agree usually. You don't like my ellipses?

WOMAN: No. I'm just--at first, I found it difficult, but I adjusted, and I did love the book.

DOCTOROW: Oh, good. I'm glad to hear that. Usually people ask me why I don't have any diacritical marks over people's conversation in some of my books. Would you like to ask me that question?

WOMAN: No. I'm just curious about the ellipses.

WEINSTEIN: Well, the ellipses is a mystery of long standing and rather deep, and so the answer to that question—to your question is none of your business.

[Laughter]

Next. Yes?

MAN: I'm a journalist trying to write not a historical play, because I wouldn't-- based on what you say, I wouldn't use that term, but a play that the plot for which occurs some time ago. As a journalist particularly, I wrestle constantly—even though all the characters are real in this play--I wrestle constantly with how closely I have to hew to their actual lives in terms of what's known about them and if I should be immersing myself in every document I can lay my hands on about these people to make sure that I don't make some sort of mistake. I think that's wrong. I think you shouldn't have to even worry about something like that, but I guess because of my background I do. I'd like to know how much you worry



about it. The book that I'm thinking of particularly is "The March," which I hugely enjoyed but which I take it you took a lot of liberties with in terms of the characters, and I wonder where if anywhere you draw the line between what you would invent for a historical character and what you feel you have to somewhere on the record.

DOCTOROW: Well, there are several answers. I think you asked a complex question. In the first place, I've known a lot of writers over the years who've researched things with enormous scrupulousness, and they've done exhaustive research, and then they begin to try to write, and they can't. They're--the weight of what they know from these sources is just--kills their imagination. You can't--you don't want to be an exhaustive res--people ask me, "How much research do you do?" And I say, "Just enough, just enough." The point of a novel, and I imagine a play, is among other things it's an aesthetic system of opinions, and if I do a characterization of an historically verifiable figure like General Sherman in "The March," it's equivalent to a painter making a portrait on an easel. There's a difference between that painting, which is interpretive and subjective and as much about the painter as it is about the subject. There's a difference between the painting and the real thing.

Did you know that there's an historical society in England called The King Richard III Society, and their mission is to correct the terrible calumny of Shakespeare's play, that they claim Richard was badly maligned and libeled by Shakespeare because he was actually a very good, wise king, and he didn't kill those children, and he wasn't a serial murderer with a hunchback, and they've been working at that.

[Laughter]

If they succeed ever—and they've found out that Shakespeare's working from Holinshed, who was in the thrall of Thomas More, who was a publicist on the wrong side of history. If they ever succeed, there will be two Richard IIIs. There will be the historical one, and there will be Shakespeare's, and whose do you think is more valuable? That's one of the most popular plays that he's written, and it instructs us on the desire of everyone to live preemptively at the expense of other people. It's a great moral tragedy, that play. So he didn't worry about sticking too close to the facts. He found something that suited him, and he did it. In "War and Peace," which I mentioned before, Tolstoy describes Napoleon as a fat, little guy with quivering thighs who can't sit a horse properly. He left--that happens to be fairly accurate about Napoleon's physique, but he made the point that the disparity between what Napoleon was physically and what he did--in that disparity were the thousands of dead bodies of soldiers all over Europe. See, Tolstoy did his research, but he had an opinion about Napoleon. So I'm really throwing these big guns at you now, but you mustn't be overwhelmed. I mean, when I--when I wrote "Ragtime," I had a little fun with J.P. Morgan, but the thing is that famous people usually make fictions of themselves long before the writers get to them.

[Laughter]



And if you want to read real fiction about Morgan, read his authorized biography.

[Laughter]

I think I've said enough about your question.

WEINSTEIN: Here we are.

MAN: You said you write every day. Can you give us a clue as to what's coming up next from you, and then separately, of everything you've written in the past, what's been the thing you're most happy with?

DOCTOROW: I'll give you clues. What I'm writing now is another great novel.

[Laughter]

You want to know the particular one book you should read, is that it? Why bother adventuring into reading and figuring it out for yourself? You want a label. You want the one book that's worth reading. Is that it?

Well, let's see. You might read "Welcome to Hard Times," but that's--no. I don't think you should do that one. "Book of Daniel" is interesting, but it's kind of a grim, complicated book, and there are certain postmodern devices in it. Forget that one. "Ragtime"--well, that's also a mock historical chronicle, but I don't think that's for you either.

Let's see. I don't think any of them are for you.

[Laughter]

WEINSTEIN: Do you have any children? Who's the person who asked the question about which book to read? Do you have any children?

DOCTOROW: -No.

WEINSTEIN: Oh. Because I was gonna ask you if you had children, which one is your favorite? It's not a question that most writers would care to answer. Yes, ma'am?

WOMAN: I've been taking your advice about writing, and I put the research away for the most part and have been writing pretty religiously every day, but I found I had to take a break for personal reasons, but my question to you is I read your short story--I know you like to get in the saddle and stay in it, but I read your short story in "The New Yorker"



about February, and the name escapes me at this time. It's about the guy who hides out in his garage.

DOCTOROW: Which story was that?

WOMAN: The man who leaves home, and he hides out in his garage.

DOCTOROW: Oh, and hides in the garage, yeah.

WOMAN: What's the name of it again?

DOCTOROW: That's called "Wakefield."

WOMAN: "Wakefield," which made me—I couldn't believe it—I couldn't believe you pulled that off, but did you write that in the middle of writing a novel? Did you take time off from writing a novel and do that?

DOCTOROW: Yeah. Sometimes, it's a good thing to do, to run away from the novel for a while and write something that you think has nothing to do with it, and usually, that story has nothing to do with the novel, but somehow, it's useful to you, but I have to tell you that Hawthorne wrote a story called "Wakefield," Nathaniel Hawthorne. It's about an Englishman in the 18th Century in London says good-bye to his wife one day and leaves and doesn't come back for 20 years, but he's taken a place about a block away, and during that story, Hawthorne says, "Let the reader meditate on this insanity." So I said, "All right. I'm gonna do that." So this story is my gloss on the Hawthorne story, but what was your question?

WOMAN: Well, the question was is it--it was a total escape, it was a total escape, and I know that's not what you're writing about in your novel. I don't know what your novel's about, but I knew that was a great departure, and so I'm sitting here giving myself time off for good behavior, but also thinking that maybe it's time to reread what I've got because I started having anxiety about pacing, about the shifts in point of view, things that maybe are better left for the end of the novel when I'm finished.

DOCTOROW: Ladies and gentlemen, you've heard the voice of a writer here—the troubles, the difficulties, the hazards, the misery, the torment. Just press on, my dear, press on.

WEINSTEIN: Last question.



MAN: Mr. Doctorow, throughout-- you've written everything from before World War I up until the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and on. Your personal historic moments. What memories do you have of American history that stay with you?

DOCTOROW: What memories?

MAN: Yes, sir, of historic moments in American history. What personal moments?

DOCTOROW: Well, I remember where I was when Jack Kennedy was killed. I was in an office on Madison Avenue. That's the kind of thing you want to know? Um...I remember as a little boy when Franklin Roosevelt died, and everyone around me was crying, all the adults were crying, so I start to cry, too. Um... I remember when the War—World War II was over, how happy we all were. I remember how nervous we all were when the standoff when Khrushchev sent those missiles to Cuba, and they were a few really grim days in our lives. We thought we'd all be blown away by nuclear bombs.

It's just things that happened. I mean, I don't even think of these things as history, actually just things in our lives. You know, a young person, a person born 15 years ago, my grandchildren would think of these things I just mentioned as history, but I don't. They're things that happened.

WEINSTEIN: I wrote a story--

DOCTOROW: When my children were born, I loved that each time. That was great. Is that history? It was just life.

WEINSTEIN: I'm gonna give you a copy of "Prologue," which is our quarterly magazine here, and we had a Roosevelt issue, celebrates the anniversary of his birth, and I wrote up my experience as an 8-year-old the day he died with the crying, with the entire country weeping, trying to puzzle through what was going on, and it's the closest I've ever come to writing something fictional, but it's fact. It happened, I lived through it. They were strange moments.

DOCTOROW: Well, you know, the interesting thing about historians now is that some of them start to write fiction. Have you tended to that at all? Like Simon Schama wrote a piece in the 1990s about this really good historian's approach, the ideal of a fiction writer. I loved reading that. That was wonderful, and then this chap who started out writing a biography of President Reagan.

WEINSTEIN: Edmund Morris.



DOCTOROW: Yeah, and then he--it was--he couldn't contain what had to be done in strict, historical, objective terms, so he took off, and of course, historians have always known the great creativity in history writing. I think it was Schama who said that the objective voice--maybe he didn't say that. The objective voice of the historian is a form of--is a fictional device, and the French critic Barthes said something that I extrapolate this way. If someone came down from another planet, he or it wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the storytelling of the novelist and the storytelling of the fiction writer. Nietzsche said there can be no facts without meaning, so what facts does the historian choose to put together to create his picture, his understanding, his interpretation, and what facts does he leave out?

I've had this genial, collegial argument with many historians of my acquaintance, and there's no way to settle this discussion. There really isn't, but I'm committed to the idea that there is--storytelling is the most ancient system of knowledge we have, and the storytellers in the oral--in the Bronze Age, whether it was Homer or the people who essentially eventually put The Bible--The Old Testament together, working under a system that it was the only system they had, and so their science was religious illumination. They didn't separate the functions of language the way we do so that we have science and we have religion and we have daily communication, we have poetry, we have all these things, but in the Bronze Age, they were fused, there were no differences among these things, and so they able to pass along information, to educate the young, to connect the visible to the invisible, the past to the present, and to distribute the suffering so it could be born. So the very act of telling a story had a presumption of truth. The very act of telling a story meant it was the truth, but then along came the Enlightenment and Galileo, and Bacon said, "You have to make observations and prove things to make them true." At that point, storytelling lost its authority, and today, it's only children who believe the act of telling a story carries with it a presumption of truth. Children and fundamentalists.

[Laughter]

But our brains are still wired for storytelling, and we know that because for several years the social scientists and the psychologists and the anthropologists have all invaded the territory of the fiction writers. You read Freud's case studies, they're wonderful stories, and ethnic portraits of a very personal level done by some of these sociologists. They all moved in on our territory, put us on a reservation somehow. So--I remember feeling that very strongly when I wrote "Ragtime." I was living in a world of empirical domination. So I said to myself, "Well, if they want facts, I'm gonna give them facts. I'll give them facts that will knock their eyes out."

WEINSTEIN: So a historian began a book of his, as I did, "Once upon a time," wouldn't be living in his own archaic fantasy world. We can't do that any longer. Storytelling doesn't



work that way. I think your own work disproves that. Storytelling works, and it works very elegantly and effectively.

"The voice of The Constitution is the inescapable, solemn self-consciousness of the people giving the law unto themselves." The Constitution, the original of The Constitution, is just a few hundred feet from where we are right now. That's a good place to stop this evening and to thank everybody for coming and to hope that you'll come join us again.

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