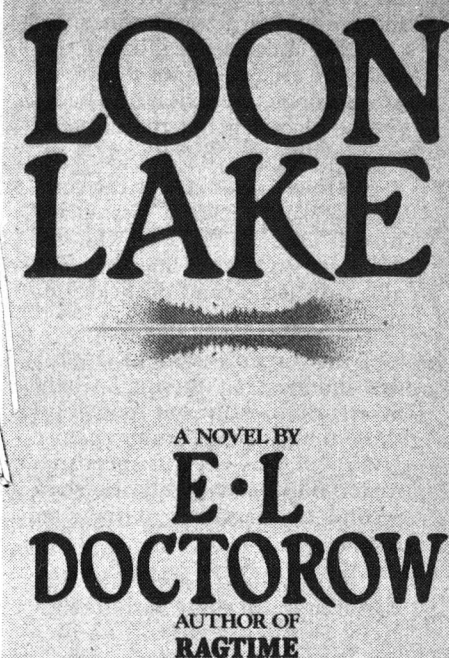


Loon Lake reveals classic Doctorow

by Gordon Turtle



E.L. Doctorow's books are rare and beautiful combinations of fact and fiction, politics and personalities, and cruelty and comedy, all held together by unmatched prose and often startling irony. His best known previous novels, *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, took their characters from American history though Doctorow makes no pretense of historical accuracy or factual detail. He does not draw from the events of the periods he writes of, he draws from the themes, the symbols, and the meanings of the periods. The "Roaring" Twenties become a sometimes comical, but usually bewildering and class-torn era in *Ragtime*, and the McCarthy Fifties and Johnson Sixties become harrowing years of grief and destruction for the characters of *The*

Book of Daniel, a novel of such dramatic intensity and shocking bitterness that it overwhelms the reader.

Loon Lake, the author's first since *Ragtime* was published in 1975, again utilizes the myths and mythical figures of America's recent past with great finesse and skill. Set in the Depression, *Loon Lake* tells the story of a young hobo who lucks into a job at the exclusive mountain resort of F.W. Bennett, multimillionaire industrialist. Joe, the hobo, is forced to flee the resort and subsequently becomes involved in labour troubles at a midwest Bennett auto factory.

Throughout the novel, the wealth and opulence of Bennett and his associates are mercilessly compared to the poverty of the working class, as in this passage:

Compare the private railroad car sitting on the Sante Fe siding one night in 1910 in front of the mine near Ludlow Colorado whose collapsed entry was being dug away by rescue crews. Late at night by the glow of torches they began to bring out the dead hunky miners, some so impregnated by coal dust they looked like ancient archaeological finds of considerable significance. Some had been blown to pieces and were assembled on the cold ground by thoughtful colleagues who matched the torn halves of pants legs or recognized what head went with which trunk.... The rescue work was commanded from the private railroad car, a property like the mine and the miners of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, and in the car a self-sufficient unit with bedrooms, kitchen, small library and a row of partners' desks were three or four officers of the firm some in gartered shirt sleeves efficiently dealing with the wives, making settlements, pushing waivers across their desks, proffering pens, matching the tally sheets to the employ-

ment records and in general dealing so efficiently with the disaster that the mine would be back in action within the week. The only thing that threatened this work performance was the occasional embittered woman who would come in screaming and tearing her hair and cursing them in her own language. They would nod to one of the private peace officers and the troublesome woman would be removed.

Doctorow is at his best when describing the misery of the workers. He does not become maudlin or make the workers out as heroes, but shows them to be the victims of a vicious system controlled by rich men with no concern for their employees' condition. He is stark and realistic about the workers, their sex lives, their leisures, their repressed anger. *Newsweek* immediately labelled Doctorow a leftist because of his writing, but his novels offer no real reason to think this. His subject is poverty, and he deals with it in a straightforward and angry manner that is unique in contemporary American fiction.

The story of Joe is the story of Bonnie and Clyde, Woody Guthrie and Horatio Alger all drawn together. It is a perverse twist of the rags-to-riches American Dream, where not only the realization of the Dream is depicted, but also the suffering of the Dream's many victims. If one succeeds, many must subsequently fail: that is Doctorow's American Dream.

Doctorow's themes are brought out

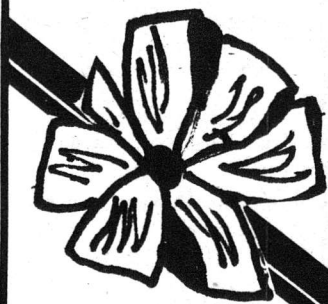
in marvellous manners by his prose, which escapes the pompous academic posturings of many contemporary American novelists. Relying on irony and outright shock, Doctorow often uses run-on sentences in a mock stream of consciousness style that rushes the reader on to the end of the sentence, where he smashes head-on into an important and shocking twist. Though his techniques reached their highest degree of emotive manipulation in *The Book of Daniel* and their most polished form in *Ragtime*, Doctorow is still able to put them to great use in *Loon Lake*.

Of course, the use of historically-based characters is highly effective, though not original, technique that allows the author a large amount of editorial comment. Amelia Earhart appears as Lucinda Bailey Bennett, the wife of F.W. Bennett (himself modelled after J.P. Morgan?) and her story, though secondary to the plot, provides the final, breathtaking linking of imagery that runs through the novel, and which, in the end, leaves this reader at least with nothing but a stunned look of appreciative awe on his face.

Much more could be said about *Loon Lake*, but no review can capture the emotive power of Joe's story, or the cleverly buried passion of Doctorow's writing. It's not an easy novel to follow at times, but the moments of confusion are well worth it.

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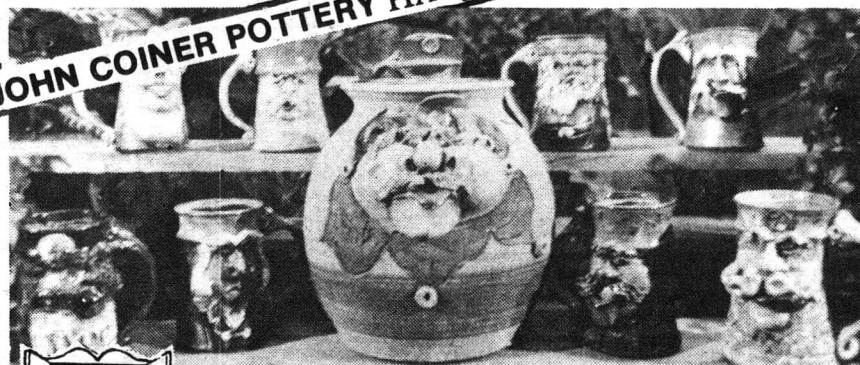


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