

My Ántonia and Ragtime

We will read two astonishing American novels: *My Ántonia* (1918) by Willa Cather (1873-1947), and *Ragtime* (1975) by E.L. Doctorow (1931-2015). Reading and reflecting these novels onto each other will allow us to explore the twentieth-century American literary landscape in ways we might not have considered before, all while we experience two of America's greatest storytellers.

NOTE: ANY EDITIONS OF THESE NOVELS WILL WORK FOR THIS CLASS.

Course Outline by Week

Sept 3: Introduction/background to Cather and Doctorow

Sept 10: Cather, *My Ántonia*, Book I

Sept 17: Cather, *My Ántonia*, Book II

Sept 24: Cather, *My Ántonia*, Books III, IV, V

Oct 1: Doctorow, *Ragtime*, I

Oct 8: Doctorow, *Ragtime*, II

Oct 15: Doctorow, *Ragtime*, III, IV

Oct 22: *My Ántonia* and *Ragtime*, together

I look forward to our Cather/Doctorow adventure! I'll see you onscreen on September 3rd!

--Ann Boswell

If you want to do some interesting preliminary reading, I am linking two short stories by Willa Cather, "Paul's Case" (1905) and "The Bohemian Girl," (1912), both published originally by *McClure's Magazine*, and accessible online here:

<https://cather.unl.edu/writings/shortfiction/ss006>

<https://cather.unl.edu/writings/shortfiction/ss004>

This is an essay from *The New Yorker* this summer about Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *One of Ours*.<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/willa-cathers-quietly-shattering-war-novel>

I am also including an essay by E. L. Doctorow, first published in *Esquire Magazine* in 1986.

Ultimate Discourse

E. L. Doctorow

When I was a boy everyone in my family was a good storyteller, my mother and father, my brother, my aunts and uncles and grandparents; all of them were people to whom interesting things seemed to happen. The events they spoke of were of a daily, ordinary sort, but when narrated or acted out they took on great importance and excitement as I listened.

Of course, when you bring love to the person you are listening to, the story has to be interesting, and in one sense the task of a professional writer who publishes books is to overcome the terrible loss of not being someone the reader knows and loves.

But apart from that, the people whose stories I heard as a child must have had a very firm view of themselves in the world. They must have been strong enough as presences in their own minds to trust that people would listen to them when they spoke.

I know now that everyone in the world tells stories. Relatively few people are given to mathematics or physics, but narrative seems to be within everyone's grasp, perhaps because it comes of the nature of language itself.

The moment you have nouns and verbs and prepositions, the moment you have subjects and objects, you have stories.

For the longest time there would have been nothing but stories, and no sharper distinction between what was real and what was made up than between what was spoken and what was sung. Religious arousal and scientific discourse, simple urgent communication and poetry, all burned together in the intense perception of a metaphor—that, for instance, the sun was a god's chariot driven across the heavens.

Stories were as important to survival as a spear or a hoe. They were the memory of the knowledge of the dead. They gave counsel. They connected the visible to the invisible. They distributed the suffering so that it could be borne.

In our era, even as we separate the func-

tions of language, knowing when we speak scientifically we are not speaking poetically, and when we speak theologically we are not speaking the way we do to each other in our houses, and even as our surveys demand statistics, and our courts demand evidence, and our hypotheses demand proof—our minds are still structured for storytelling.

What we call fiction is the ancient way of knowing, the total discourse that antedates all the special vocabularies of modern intelligence.

The professional writer of fiction is a conservative who cherishes the ultimate structures of the human mind. He cultivates within himself the universal disposition to think in terms of conflict and its resolution, and in terms of character undergoing events, and of the outcome of events being not at all sure, and therefore suspenseful—the whole thing done, moreover, from a confidence of narrative that is grounded in our brains as surely as the innate talent to construe the world grammatically.

The fiction writer, looking around him, understands the homage a modern up-to-date world of nonfiction specialists pays to his craft—even as it isolates him and tells him he is a liar. Newsweeklies present the events of the world as installments in a serial melodrama. Weather reports on television are constructed with exact attention to conflict (high-pressure areas clashing with lows), suspense (the climax of tomorrow's prediction coming after the commercial), and the consistency of voice (the personality of the weathercaster). The marketing and advertising of product-facts is unquestionably a fictional enterprise. As is every government's representations of its activities. And modern psychology, with its concepts of *sublimation*, *repression*, *identity crisis*, *complex*, and so on, proposes the interchangeable parts for the stories of all of us; in this sense it is the industrialization of storytelling.

But nothing is as good at fiction as fiction.

It is the most ancient way of knowing but also the most modern, managing when it's done right to burn all the functions of language back together into powerful fused revelation. Because it is total discourse it is ultimate discourse. It excludes nothing. It will express from the depth and range of its sources truths that no sermon or experiment or news report can begin to apprehend. It will tell you without shame what people do with their bodies and think with their minds. It will deal evenhandedly with their microbes or their intuitions. It will know their nightmares and blinding moments of moral crisis. You will experience love, if it so chooses, or starvation or drowning or dropping through space or holding a hot pistol in your hand with the police pounding on the door. This is the way it is, it will say, this is what it feels like.

Fiction is democratic, it reasserts the authority of the single mind to make and remake the world. By its independence from all institutions, from the family to the government, and with no responsibility to defend their hypocrisy or murderoussness, it is a valuable resource and instrument of survival.

Fiction gives counsel. It connects the present with the past, and the visible with the invisible. It distributes the suffering. It says we must compose ourselves in our stories in order to exist. It says if we don't do it, someone else will do it for us. **G**

E. L. DOCTOROW dreamed of becoming a writer as a young boy growing up in the Bronx. He was born in 1931 and graduated from Kenyon College. He became the editor in chief and publisher of *Dial Press* and then went on to various colleges, including Sarah Lawrence and New York University, where he currently teaches in the graduate writing program. His astonishingly varied collection of works includes *Welcome to Hard Times*, *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award), *Loon Lake*, *Lives of the Poets*, and last year's *World's Fair*. His previous story for *Esquire*, "The Writer in the Family," appeared in our August 1984 fiction issue.