

E.L. DOCTOROW TALKS ABOUT RAGTIME

Ragtime was the invention of black musicians, and it caught on because it was suggestive of a new rhythm of America. It not only led the way to an American music freed of European conventions – jazz and swing and popular song – it was prophetic of an aroused American culture...

--Remarks to cast members on the first day of RAGTIME rehearsals, August

In a rag, the left hand plays a stride beat, the right a syncopated melody. So you ask how that applies to the book. My only conscious application was to structure the story in four parts, as a rag is structured. It was someone else who proposed to me that the stride in RAGTIME could be the march of history, the irreversible sequence of events...and the syncopated melody...the human life that tries to free itself from the march of history. But there are other meanings of the word rag, aren't there? The verb to rag means to tease, to provoke. In so far as the book is an historical chronicle, I suppose it does show a kind of impudence. And of course, a rag is a scrap of cloth, a remnant, a shred of something. I did not plan the book, but put it together improvisationally, from the rag bin of threads and tatters of images and ideas in my head. And that's my private meaning of the title that I can attest to.... It tells the truth of the novelist's desperate inspiration – because really, every time you begin a book, you go back down there and start pulling things out and it's always ragtime.

--In conversation with students at New York University, May 1995.

RAGTIME as...a tapestry...of interactions suggests that if you neglect the story of any one of the three families or [cut] their connections with the historic characters, you pull the threads out of the tapestry and the whole thing will sag and lose its tension.

--To interviewer Colin Smith for the RAGTIME television documentary, April 1996.

The character of Tateh came from a photograph of the time: A peddler, a silhouette artist, encamped on a Lower East Side street corner, making a silhouette portrait with scissors and paper...The inspiration for my portrayal of J.P. Morgan is the Famous Edward Steichen portrait of this forbidding fellow with a rather bulbous nose and fierce, raptorial eye. That was all I needed. I think I found the interior truth [of Morgan], though I metaphorized the facts. If you want to read fiction about Morgan you can't do better than his authorized biography.

-- To audience at the University of Sendai, Japan, 1978.

I listened over and over to the Scott Joplin piano rags while I wrote my book...so it is fitting that, having gone from music to book, RAGTIME now goes back to music again. The theatre artists who have got my book up singing and dancing on a stage participate in a venerable tradition. But this is the first time a work of mine has been adapted for the musical theatre, and it is enormously gratifying to me that such gifted people have made it a fount for their own creativity.

--To interviewer Colin Smith for the RAGTIME television documentary, April 1996.

I had heard a story...that a housekeeper in a suburb in New Jersey had secretly [given birth and] abandoned the infant in the garden of another home in the neighborhood - swaddled the newborn... and buried it in the garden bed. The child was discovered alive and the woman was found out - a very sad story. About twenty years after I heard it I gave it to Sarah in [RAGTIME}. That's the way it works. You collect...these scraps [of stories] without knowing really what you're going to do with them.

-- George Plimpton, The Paris Review Interviews, Eighth Series, 1988, Viking.

Another source is a legendary story by an early 19th century German writer, Heinrich von Kleist; An honest, upright horse

dealer on his way to market with a string of fine horses is stopped on the road by the henchmen of a local baron and ordered, unfairly, to pay a toll. From that small conflict a national crisis ensues. The horse dealer's name is Michael Kohlhaas. And I came to a point in writing my book where someone would visit Sarah in New Rochelle, and it was this black musician who had wronged her and would now come to court her in his new Model-T automobile. And I named him Coalhouse Walker, Jr., because I realized this was my moment to do homage to Kleist, to lift that situation and apply it to the life of a black American musician driving his car in New Rochelle, New York, in the first decade of the 20th century.

-- Pamila Wallin, Pamela Wallin Live, CBC Newsworld, Sept 20, 1996.

Imagination is a form of knowledge...It's probably naïve to think that there is always a clear distinction between fact and fiction. We all compose the world we live in every moment of our lives.

-- Charles Ruas, Conversations with American Writers, 1985.

Orwell told us about this. History is a battlefield. It is constantly...fought over because [who controls] the past controls the present. History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end product, myth. So, to be irreverent to myth, to play with it, let in some light and air, to try to combust it back into history, is to risk being seen as someone who distorts the truth. I meant it when I said everything in RATIME is true. It is as true as I could make it.... Actually, if you want a confession, J.P. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit...never existed. The historical characters in the book are Mother, Father, Tateh, [Coalhouse, Sarah], The Little Boy, The Little Girl.

--George Plimpton, The Paris Review Interviews, Eighth Series, 1988, Viking.