



REINTERPRETATION OF HISTORICAL FACT IN E.L. DOCTOROW'S
THE BOOK OF DANIEL

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ABSTRACT

E.L. Doctorow is considered to be a political writer and he attempts to define America's past and present politics by the help of his imagination through his narrative. Most of his fiction reminds the 20th centuries' historical figures into imagined characters. The way, he reimagining of the Civil War, Rosenberg trial and the World War I have enticed a huge following and critical appreciations. Doctorow's four novels *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate* and *The March* have been increasingly deeper experiments with history and fiction. According to Girgus, " Doctorow indicates his commitment to the world of imagination and creative coherence rather than to a restricted political doctrine of truth" (88). *The Book of Daniel* is comprised of different styles of content: contemporary events of 1940s', 1950s' and 1960s', his childhood memories and family history and his parents' arrests, trial and execution. This article mainly focuses on the conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, (passing top secret information to the Soviet Union, including details of the atomic bomb) and how E.L. Doctorow portrays this real life incident in his novel *The Book of Daniel*. Author creates Paul & Rochelle Isaac son to explicit Rosenbergs' life in this novel. Daniel is the narrator of the novel and he pursues his parents' real identity thorough out the novel.

Key words: History, Political, Julius, Paul and Ethel, Rochelle, Espionage, and Daniel.

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E. L. Doctorow (January 6, 1931 – July 21, 2015) was an American novelist, dramatist, short-story writer, editor, and professor, best known worldwide for his works of historical fiction. He has been described as one of the most important American novelists of the 20th century. Doctorow won his first critical acclaim with *The Book of Daniel*. His writing style was accepted for its re-imagining of American history, particularly that of his favorite New York City. Doctorow's continuous political outlook and frequent assessment of political issues has harvested a varied reaction from the readers.

Henry Claridge says *The Book of Daniel*, the 'story of the American left' narrows to the story of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed on 19 June 1953 for espionage (particularly the passing top secret information to the Soviet Union, including details of the atomic bomb). Doctorow tells the story of Paul & Rochelle Isaacson (the Rosenbergs) through the person of their older son, Daniel and his sister, Susan, who are both students heavily involved in 1960s student politics. Doctorow says "The Book of Daniel, a novel reflecting on an espionage conspiracy trial in the '50s, and its aftermath in the

'60s, was composed out of that unassuageable feeling. Daniel says,

Yet they are held to account for it. They are held to account for the Soviet Union. They are held to account for the condition of the world today. Daniel, pp. 204-205

The 1951 Rosenberg trial became one of the most embarrassing moments in American history. The fact that the trial was poorly conducted, the sentence of death was so severe and it led countless historians, novelists, journalists, and politicians investigate into the records and archives to show exactly where and how the American justice system failed. Whether or not Julius/Paul and Ethel/Rochelle were guilty or innocent does not matter. What does matter is that the usual anxieties, tensions, and prejudices of mid-20th century Americans resulted in the conviction and execution of two Americans despite repeated and flagrant violations of their rights. As Ascher puts it in the novel, the Isaacsons are a scapegoat for all of the things Americans perceive as frightening or unexplainable. They are the "other" and are treated as such.

Doctorow enlisted his name in the literary writers' list by his renowned novel 'The Book of Daniel'. History and its impact on the present with the author's political ideas narrated perfectly in this novel. Unlike his previous two novels, *The Book of Daniel* keeps away from the traditional linear narrative and helps the reader to understand the novel's multifaceted sociopolitical memories. Joseph Moses pointed out in "The Book of Daniel, Doctorow already demonstrated his preoccupation with actual history, with real event".

In 1971 when Doctorow was a Visiting Author at the University of California, *The Book of Daniel* was published. Doctorow conceived the idea for the novel in the late 1960s - an era of intense conflicts over Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, and social change. The *New Republic* review expressed it was "the political novel of our age. The *Chicago Tribune* said it was like reading a capsule history of the American left in the twentieth century.

The American Left is in this great moment artfully reduced to the shabby conspiracies

of a couple named Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. Daniel, p. 110

The American Left, as characterized by Communist Party members, socialists, anarchists, etc., has never been predominantly effective on a grand scale. Disdained and mistreated from the 1920s-1960s, leftists in America were harassed by the American government and fractured by disputes both theoretical and pragmatic from within. Certain figures, such as Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs, and Alger Hiss, attained prominence during their time for the supposed menace they posed to society and later for what they represented about the era's prejudices and pitfalls. What amuses Daniel so much is that his parents were elevated to the scale of masterminds; when his father was arrested he pointed out that his father and mother slept on a foldaway couch-bed. Their home was small and poor. Nothing about them suggested that they were devious perpetrators of espionage and treason.

Doctorow's fiction utilizes actual historical figures, events, etc. Doctorow has been publicly critical of fiction which pursues to ignore political and social dimensions; he shapes the lines between fiction and history purposefully to challenge the existing and preserved narratives. His work interrupts and challenges such rules' monopolies on truth and experience. Doctorow makes it clear that truth is elusive and it is difficult to pin down the differences between history and fiction. Doctorow's contemporary Joyce Carol Oates found it "a nearly perfect work of art, and art on this level can be only a cause for rejoicing." The reader can, ironically, get closer to the humanity of the real figures through this process. Overall, Doctorow is able to make profound political and aesthetic statements through this ambiguous mode of storytelling.

All societies are armed societies. All citizens are soldiers. All Governments stand ready to commit their citizens to death in the interest of their government. Daniel, p. 73

The Book of Daniel is unashamed in its description of the defects and flaws in American society during the Cold War. The partialities, illiteracy, worries, and dreads of Americans marked themselves in the conviction and execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, mostly because they

appropriately denoted the "other". In these lines, Daniel speaks about his own complex rapport with his country. Earlier he explained that this rapport was "constant and degrading" (72) because there was nothing he could do to make an impact or have his voice heard; he was "totally deprived of the right to be dangerous" (72). In this quote he utters how he trusts that it is one's own country that puts him in danger, who tells him who is the enemy, who tells him how he will die.

The novel has four parts, and Daniel is the chief narrator for all the parts. Daniel tries to find out the secret left by his parents and he is on a hunt for a truth that relentlessly flees him for Mindish, the only eyewitness and main accuser at his parents' trial. The novel moves fluidly and promptly between 1967 ('the present') and flashback (to the late 40s/early 50s), and between first and third person:-

1. Memorial Day - Opens, in 1967, with Daniel, his young wife, Phyllis and his son Paul, walking to the sanatorium to see his sister Susan; closes with the dropping of atom bomb in Japan
2. Halloween - closes with the lawyer, Ascher, telling Daniel and Susan of the forthcoming start of the Isaacsons' trial
3. Starfish - closes with Daniel's connection with anti-draft march, whilst his sister (the starfish of the title) is dying from problems following her suicide attempt.
4. 4 Christmas - recalls the closing moments of the trial, including the key evidence from their co-accused, Selig Mindish and the funeral of Daniel's parents and his sister Susan.

Afterwards the book was made into a film in 1983, Daniel directed by Sidney Lumet. Sidney changes the emphasis of the novel, in order to concentrate more on 1940s left-wing politics of the parents. This was an era of which Lumet had close personal experience - however, the film is generally less well-regarded than the book.

Neither the book nor the film makes direct reference to the Rosenberg events. In particular the introduction of Susan as the younger child, and her lingering death, is a clear attempt to distance the novel from being considered biographical, as the

Rosenbergs had two sons. Other key differences include - Rochelle is a graduate, Paul is not - (this is the reverse of the Rosenberg case, but perhaps makes for a stronger explanation of Rochelle's character). Mindish appears to be a fusion of two characters, Morton Sobell and David Greenglass. A key scene (in part 1), is the family's attendance at the Robeson concert at Peekskill (1949); in the novel Paul leaves the bus to argue with the right-wing protesters and is violently set upon by them. Another key scene has Daniel taking part in the 1967 anti-Vietnam war march on the Pentagon.

This novel is having three different endings, each in its own way valid, *Kunstlerroman* and a *Bildungsroman*, and a fusion of newspaper excerpts, letters, family accounts and nonfiction. This novel was nominated for the National Book Award and it reached the core. Doctorow's reconstruction of American tradition is a great effort to evaluate people's nostalgia. Doctorow's fiction calls the reader to reassess his or her own sense of the past.

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