World's Fair Short Guide

World's Fair by E. L. Doctorow

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

The small number of characters may indicate that Doctorow has thought of World's Fair as a novel quite different in kind from Ragtime. If the earlier novel resembles an epic with a very large cast and plenty of action, then World's Fair is closer to a lyric poem with one principal voice and few events beyond the subtle changes of mood and tone. Not many contemporary novels are so dependent upon the modulation of a single voice.

The success of World's Fair is largely due to the introspective drama of the child narrator. Edgar Altschuler is a sensitive and thoughtful boy with a mind like a seismograph that records each hint of doubt or concern that runs through his family. He also possesses an amazing memory for the fears and aspirations of childhood. The novel reads like a tour de force of total recall.

The other characters of immediate concern to Edgar are his mother, father, and older brother. (Doctorow uses the names of his own parents.) The mother is an intelligent woman who feels trapped by a difficult marriage, the day-to-day routine of family responsibility, and the limited chances of middle-class America in the Depression. The father is a perpetual dreamer who cheats on his family by playing with cards and other women.

Failure and premature death are his fate in the novel, but his son still remembers the appeal of his restless imagination. If the son learns about safety from his mother, he inherits a taste for intrigue and danger from his father. The older brother is also a reflection of both parents, and perhaps a closer model for the narrator.

Other relatives and friends are of minor importance with the exception of Norma, a young girlfriend's mother, who has a bad reputation and a job at the World's Fair. Norma performs an underwater striptease while being attacked by Oscar the Amorous Octopus. The narrator's attraction to this show is part of the climactic sequence of the novel.

Social Concerns/Themes

The concerns of a child's life—security, growth, fear, and love—are the subjects of World's Fair. The fictional child and the real author share the same first name, the same year of birth, and the same lower middle-class background in a Jewish section of the Bronx. E. L. Doctorow is playing games with history again, but this time the history is his own. The novel begins with the earliest memories of the child made welcome in his parent's bed and extends to his eighth year when he makes a visit with his parents to the World's Fair.

The larger political and economic problems of America in the 1930s are reflected in the novel as the little boy gradually understands the concerns of his mother and father. The hardships of the Depression are felt in the family when the father loses his music store and the mother finds a smaller apartment to match their fading resources. The marriage is tested by adversity, and the perceptive child begins to see its inherent flaws. The novel is about the attempts of the child to imagine a future for himself when his family may be falling apart and the world is certainly headed for a global war. The future for the child, of course, will be in the field of writing, and the novel comes to a happy and ironic conclusion when his first essay for a contest wins honorable mention and free tickets to the World's Fair. The visit to the Fair may be a rite of passage for the child, but for his parents it is a view into a future beyond their reach. The ultimate theme of the novel is the value of the child's perception and memory—without these powers of mind and imagination, the past would be either meaningless or irretrievable. Doctorow thus proves once again that history and fiction are two forms of the same narrative.

Techniques

Doctorow admits that something happened in the writing of World's Fair that he did not anticipate. "The beginning of the book is the voice of an adult recollecting childhood. As the book proceeds, the voice gets younger and younger, almost as if this man is being possessed by his memories. So the diction grows simpler in tone and the difference between adulthood and childhood disappears entirely." Whether planned this way or not, the power of the novel has much to do with the memories of childhood assuming more and more control over the narrative point of view.

The voice of the adult/child is complemented infrequently by chapters that are narrated by other family members. Four are told from the mother's point of view, two chapters from the older-brother's, and one by Aunt Frances. The early death of the father removes him as a possible witness at the time the chief narrator is recollecting his childhood.

The novel lives up to its tide with a climactic sequence that includes two visits to the New York World's Fair in 1939.

Doctorow thus finds another opportunity for combining history and fiction. The visits to the Fair not only give the child narrator a view of the future (his favorite exhibit is the Futurama) but also a way to preserve the past in the form of a time capsule. After learning about the contents of the official capsule designed to open after five thousand years, the narrator builds his own time capsule to hold a selection of his favorite things. On the last page of the novel the narrator is placing his time capsule in the ground, but it is the secret of Doctorow's technique that the novel itself reads like the opening of that capsule.

Key Questions

The themes of childhood—curiosity, fear, uncertainty, and great expectations—are helpful for starting a discussion of World's Fair. Questions about Doctorow's way of turning memory into narrative are then likely to follow, and these should lead to a consideration of how the author creates a vision of a particular childhood against the background of America in the 1930s.

1. Which elements of human nature are highlighted when the vision of a child informs the narrative point of view of a novel?

2. How does Doctorow play with his own history to create a novel that often reads like an autobiography?

3. What are the advantages and limitations of exploring the past from a child's perspective? Does it help for Doctorow to include a few chapters narrated by other family members?

4. Are the other family members portrayed with an independent vitality in this novel? Or do they seem to live only in terms of the needs and fears of the principal narrator?

5. What resources of imagination and understanding are represented by the account Edgar Lawrence gives of his early years?

6. How are the social and political conditions of America in the 1930s reflected in the novel? Does the author value the act of writing as a way to escape from the Great Depression?

7. If the boy's visit to the World's Fair in 1939 is a rite of passage for him, what opportunities does it confirm? How is the Fair used by Doctorow as a symbol of America's future?

Literary Precedents

Memories of childhood are so prevalent in literature that countless books might be cited as likely precedents for World's Fair. Perhaps the best example is Wordsworth's The Prelude (1850), where the growth of the poet's mind is chronicled through the fears and aspirations of a young boy. Doctorow is well aware of his debt to Wordsworth, and acknowledges it by using a few lines from The Prelude as an epigraph for World's Fair.

The most famous American novel with a child narrator is Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885; see separate entry). It may be a long way from a raft on the Mississippi to an apartment in the Bronx; it is hard to imagine Huck with nice Jewish parents; but the art of storytelling with a child's point of view is coherent from Twain to Doctorow, and Huck would enjoy the exhibits and side shows at the World's Fair.

Related Titles

When asked about the writing of World's Fair which he completed in less than a year, Doctorow admits being "set up" for it by his preceding book, Lives of the Poets (1984). The subtitle for that book is Six Stories and a Novella, and at least one of the stories can be read as a prologue to World's Fair. The first story "The Writer in the Family" introduces the boy who will become a writer, the apartment in the Bronx, the Jewish family, the other relatives, and several details that will be developed into the full novel published a year later.

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