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## Homer & Langley by E.L. Doctorow

**Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.**

1. There were several unusual sets of people who came into Homer and Langley's lives. Do you feel that Homer collected people the way that he collected objects? Why do you suppose that is or is not?
2. What do you think of Langley's Theory of Replacements? Given today's 24-hour news environment in which historical context is rarely addressed, does Langley's theory and perspective have some merit?
3. Langley is obsessive in his quest to create one universal newspaper of "seminal events". What categories were used by Langley so that the newspaper would be "eternally current, dateless"? What categories would you add or change? Why?
4. What effect did the war have on Langley — did he come back mentally damaged along with his medical problems? How would the brothers' lives have been different if there had been no war?
5. Discuss the importance of Jacqueline in the story. Would the story have been as effective without this "muse"? Do you think she really existed?
6. On page 76 Homer talks about how things were for him when he and Langley returned to the house after their night in jail. He said, "this time marked the beginning of our abandonment of the outer world." He also said that for the first time he felt that his sightlessness was a physical deformity. What was it about the night in jail, the end of their community dances, and/or their return home that caused such a drastic shift in their lives?
7. One of the novel's themes is isolation/a feeling of being separate from the world. Some characters do this by choice, others not. Discuss how Homer, Langley, and their various houseguests feel isolated from the world around them.
8. In what ways is the house a character as well as the setting? How does the house's condition reflect the brothers' physical and mental conditions?
9. The brothers' paranoia became ever-increasing, causing them to lay booby traps and close themselves in with physical as well as emotional shutters. Homer's last thoughts were, I wish I could go crazy so I might not know how badly off I am. Could Homer and Langley have been "saved" from themselves?
10. The book is told from Homer's point of view. Why do you think the author chose Homer to tell the story of the brothers? How did Homer's disability affect his telling of the story? How would the story be different if Langley had been the voice?

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**Name Pronunciation**

**E.L. Doctorow:** E.L. DAHK-tuh-ROH

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#### Biography

Named for Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow occupies a central position in the history of American literature. On a shortlist that might also include Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow is generally considered to be among the most talented, ambitious, and admired novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. Long celebrated for his vivid evocations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American life (particularly New York life), Doctorow has received the National Book Award, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, the William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal.

Doctorow was born in New York City on January 6, 1931, and, like the novelist Everett in *City of God*, attended the Bronx High School of Science. After graduating with honors from Kenyon College in 1952, he did graduate work at Columbia University and served in the U.S. Army, which stationed him in Germany. In 1954, he married Helen Setzer. They have three children. Doctorow was senior editor for New American Library from 1959 to 1964 and then served as editor in chief at Dial Press until 1969. Since then, he has devoted his time to writing and teaching. He holds the Glucksman Chair in American Letters at New York University and over the years has taught at several institutions, including Yale University Drama School, Princeton University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the University of California, Irvine.

With *The Book of Daniel*, his third novel, Doctorow emerged as an important American novelist with a strongly political bent. A fictional retelling of the notorious Rosenberg spy case, the novel deftly evokes the complex anxieties of Cold War America, shuttling back and forth in time from the 1950s, when Paul and Roselle Isaacson are convicted and electrocuted, to the late 1960s, when their troubled son, Daniel, a grad student at Columbia, must deal with the consequences of his unusual birthright. *The Book of Daniel* was adapted in 1983 into the film, *Daniel*, starring Timothy Hutton and directed by Sidney Lumet. Four years after *The Book of Daniel* came *Ragtime*, a dazzling reimagining of the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century by means of a plot that, like *City of God*, ingeniously brings together real-life figures—such as Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, Harry Houdini, and Emma Goldman—with an array of invented characters. *Ragtime* was named one of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century by the editorial board of the Modern Library and was adapted into a successful Broadway musical in 1998. *The March* was published in 2005.

Widely acclaimed for the beauty of his prose, his innovative narratives, his feel for atmospheric, and above all for his talent for evoking the past in a way that makes it at once mysterious and familiar, Doctorow has created one of the most substantial bodies of

work of any living American writer.

This biography was last updated on 11/12/2005.

# Collyer brothers

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Homer Lusk Collyer** (November 6, 1881 – March 21, 1947) and **Langley Collyer** (October 3, 1885 – March 1947) were two American brothers who became famous because of their snobbish nature, filth in their home, and compulsive hoarding. For decades, neighborhood rumors swirled around the rarely seen, unemployed men and their home at 2078 Fifth Avenue (at the corner of 128th Street), in Manhattan, where they obsessively collected newspapers, books, furniture, musical instruments, and many other items, with booby traps set up in corridors and doorways to protect against intruders. Both were eventually found dead in the Harlem brownstone where they had lived as hermits, surrounded by over 130 tons of waste that they had amassed over several decades.<sup>[1]</sup>



Langley Collyer, c. 1942

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## Family

The Collyer brothers were sons of Herman Livingston Collyer (1857–1923), a Manhattan gynecologist who worked at Bellevue Hospital, and Susie Gage Frost (1856–1929), a former opera singer.<sup>[2]</sup> The parents were first cousins.<sup>[2]</sup> The Collyer family traced its roots to a ship that supposedly arrived in America from England a week after the *Mayflower*. The family was descended from the Livingston family, an old and well established New York family with roots going back to the 18th century. The couple had a daughter, Susan, who died as an infant in 1880.<sup>[2]</sup> The following year, on November 6, 1881 they had their first son, Homer Lusk, and in 1885 Langley was born.<sup>[2]</sup> They were living in a tenement while Herman interned at Bellevue.<sup>[2]</sup> As a child, Homer attended PS 69. At the age of 14, he was accepted to the College of the City of New York as a "sub-freshman", earning his bachelor's six years later.<sup>[2]</sup>

Both sons attended Columbia University, which had just relocated to its present-day Morningside Heights campus, about a twenty-minute walk from the Collyer house. Homer obtained a degree in admiralty law, while Langley claimed a degree in engineering (though Columbia University states it had no records of his attendance)<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>, and made attempts at being an inventor. Langley played concert-level piano and had long, flowing hair, which was a rarity in this era. Over the years, as both brothers' eccentricities intensified, Langley tinkered with various inventions, such as a device to vacuum the insides of pianos and a Model T Ford adapted to generate electricity.

Dr. Herman Collyer, with his wife and two sons, moved into their residence in Harlem in 1909, when Harlem still contained upper class neighborhoods. Dr. Collyer was known to be eccentric himself, and was said to frequently paddle down the East River in a canoe to the City Hospital on Blackwell's Island, where he occasionally worked; and then carry the canoe back to his home in Harlem after he came ashore on Manhattan Island. He abandoned his family around 1919, a few years before he died. No one knows why Dr. Collyer abandoned his family, or whether his wife moved with him into his new home at 153 West 77th Street when he left behind his house in Harlem. Nevertheless, Homer and Langley Collyer stayed in the family house after their father left. Dr. Collyer died in 1923, and Mrs. Collyer died in 1929. After their parents died, the Collyer brothers inherited all of their possessions and moved those possessions into their house in Harlem.

During World War I, Harlem saw a major influx of black residents from the Southern United States, leading to the Harlem Renaissance which would emerge in the decade following the end of World War I. Even though the neighborhood's character changed to become a black American cultural center, the two white brothers, who by now were in their forties, remained in their family home, becoming an anachronistic curiosity which began to draw more attention from the residents of their neighborhood.

## Recluses

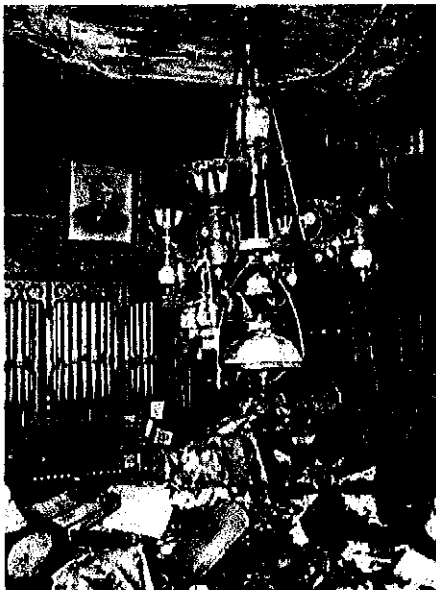
Neighborhood people tried to break into the house because of unfounded rumors of valuables,<sup>[2]</sup> and teenagers developed the habit of throwing rocks at the windows. As the brothers' fears increased, so did their eccentricity. They boarded up the windows, and Langley set about using his engineering skills to set up booby traps. Due to their failure to pay the bills, their telephone service was disconnected in 1917; <sup>[2]</sup> electricity, water, and gas were turned off in 1928.<sup>[2]</sup> The brothers took to warming the large house using only a small kerosene heater. For a while, Langley attempted to generate his own energy by means of a car engine. Langley began to wander outside at night;<sup>[2]</sup> he fetched their water from a post in a park four blocks to the south (presumably Mount Morris Park, renamed Marcus Garvey Park in 1973). Langley would also walk miles all over the city to get food, sometimes going as far as Williamsburg, Brooklyn to buy as little as a loaf of bread. He would also pick food out of the garbage and collect food that was going to be thrown out by grocers and butchers to bring back to his brother Homer, who by this time was handicapped with rheumatism. He also dragged home countless pieces of abandoned junk that aroused his interest. In 1933, Homer lost his eyesight due to hemorrhages in the back of his eyes. Langley devised a remedy, a diet of one hundred oranges a week, along with black bread and peanut butter.

In 1932, shortly before Homer Collyer went blind, he purchased the property across the street from their house at 2077 Fifth Avenue, with the intent of developing it by putting up an apartment building. But after the onset of his blindness, any plans of profit from the real estate venture fell through. Since the Collyer brothers never paid any of their bills, the property was repossessed by the City of New York in 1943 to pay back all of the income taxes that the Collyers owed to the City. Langley protested the repossession of their property, saying that since they had no income, they should not have to pay income taxes.

## Public scrutiny

The Collyer brothers were first mentioned in the newspapers in 1938, when they rebuffed a real estate agent who was eyeing their home. *The New York Times* repeated neighborhood rumors that the brothers lived in some sort of "Orientalist splendor"<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> and were sitting on vast piles of cash, afraid to deposit it in a bank. Neither rumor was true; the brothers were certainly not broke, although eventually they would have been, since neither of them had worked for decades. They drew media attention again in 1942 when they got in trouble with the bank after refusing to pay the mortgage on their house. That same year, the *New York Herald Tribune* interviewed Langley. In response to a query about the bundles of newspapers, Langley replied, "I am saving newspapers for Homer, so that when he regains his sight he can catch up on the news." When the Bowery Savings Bank began eviction procedures, they sent over a cleanup crew. At this time, Langley began ranting at the workers, prompting the neighbors to summon the police. When the police attempted to force their way by smashing down the front door, they were stymied by a sheer wall of junk piled from floor to ceiling. Without comment, Langley made out a check for \$6,700 (equivalent to about \$89,600 in 2010), paying off the mortgage in full in a single payment. He ordered everyone off the premises, and withdrew from outside scrutiny once more, emerging only at night and when he wanted to file criminal complaints against housebreakers.

## Homer Collyer found dead



View of interior

On March 21, 1947, an anonymous tipster phoned the 122nd Police Precinct and insisted there was a dead body in the house.

<sup>[3]</sup> A patrol officer was dispatched, but had a difficult time getting into the house at first, noting however that an awful odor was emanating from somewhere within the building. There was no doorbell or telephone and the doors were locked; and while the basement windows were broken, they were protected by iron grillwork. An emergency squad of seven men eventually had no choice but to begin pulling out all the junk that was blocking their way and throw it out onto the street below. The brownstone's foyer was packed solid by a wall of old newspapers, folding beds and chairs, half a sewing machine, boxes, parts of a wine press, and numerous other pieces of junk. A patrolman, William Barker, finally broke in through a window into a second-story bedroom. Behind this window lay, among other things, more packages and newspaper bundles, empty cardboard boxes lashed together with rope, the frame of a baby carriage, a rake, and old umbrellas tied together. After a two-hour crawl he found Homer Collyer dead, wearing just a tattered blue and white bathrobe. Homer's matted, grey hair reached

down to his shoulders, and his head was resting on his knees.

Assistant Medical Examiner Dr. Arthur C. Allen confirmed Homer's identity and said that the elder brother had been dead for no more than ten hours; consequently, Homer could not have been the source of the stench wafting from the house. Foul play was ruled out: Homer had died from the combined effects of malnutrition, dehydration, and cardiac arrest. By this time, the mystery had attracted a crowd of about 600 onlookers, curious about the junk and the smell. But Langley was nowhere to be found.

In their quest to find Langley, the police began searching the house, an arduous task that required them to remove the large quantity of amassed junk. Most of it was deemed worthless and set out curbside for the sanitation department to haul away; a few items were put into storage. The ongoing search turned up a further assortment of guns and ammunition. There was no sign of Langley.

## Manhunt

On March 30, false rumors circulated that Langley had been seen aboard a bus heading for Atlantic City. A manhunt along the New Jersey shore turned up nothing. Reports of Langley sightings led police to a total of nine states.<sup>[4]</sup> The police continued searching the house two days later, removing 3,000 books, several outdated phone books, a horse's jawbone, a Steinway piano, an early X-ray machine, and more bundles of newspapers. More than 19 tons of junk were removed from the ground floor of the three-story brownstone. The police continued to clear away the brothers' stockpile for another week, removing another 84 tons of rubbish from the house. Although a good deal of the junk came from their father's medical practice, a considerable portion was discarded items collected by Langley over the years.

## Langley Collyer found

On April 8, 1947, workman Artie Matthews found the body of Langley Collyer just 10 feet from where Homer died. His partially decomposed body was being eaten by rats. A suitcase and three huge bundles of newspapers covered his body. Langley had been crawling through their newspaper tunnel to bring food to his paralyzed brother when one of his own booby traps fell down and crushed him.<sup>[5]</sup> Homer, blind and paralyzed, starved to death several days later.<sup>[5]</sup> The stench detected on the street had been emanating from Langley, the younger brother.

Both brothers were buried with their parents at Cypress Hills Cemetery, Brooklyn.

## House contents

Police and workmen removed 130 tons of garbage from the Collyer brownstone. The salvageable items fetched less than \$2,000 at auction; the cumulative estate of the Collyer brothers was valued at \$91,000 (about \$1.2M in 2008 dollars), of which \$20,000 worth was personal property (jewelry, cash, securities, and the like).<sup>[6]</sup>

Items removed from the house included baby carriages, a doll carriage, rusted bicycles, old food, potato peelers, a collection of guns, glass chandeliers, bowling balls, camera equipment, the folding top of a horse-drawn carriage, a sawhorse, three dressmaking dummies, painted portraits, pinup girl photos, plaster busts, Mrs. Collyer's hope chests, rusty bed springs, the kerosene stove, a child's chair (the brothers were lifelong bachelors and childless), more than 25,000 books (including thousands about medicine and engineering and more than 2,500 on law), human organs pickled in jars, eight live cats, the chassis of the old Model T with which Langley had been tinkering, tapestries, hundreds of yards of unused silks and fabric, clocks, 14 pianos (both grand and upright), a clavichord, two organs, banjos, violins, bugles, accordions, a gramophone and records, and countless bundles of newspapers and magazines, some of them decades old. Near the spot where Homer died, police also found 34 bank account passbooks, with a total of \$3,007.18 (about \$40,000 in 2008 dollars).

There was also a great deal of garbage. The house itself, having never been maintained, was decaying: the roof leaked and some walls had caved in, showering bricks and mortar on the rooms below. The house was eventually deemed a fire hazard and was razed.

Some of the stranger items were exhibited at Hubert's Dime Museum, where they were featured alongside Human Marvels and sideshow performers. The morbid centerpiece of this display was the chair in which Homer Collyer had died. The Collyer chair passed into the hands of private collectors upon being removed from public exhibit in 1956. As time went by it acquired a reputation of being cursed, due to the misfortunes of its owners.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Legacy

*The New York Times*, on March 26, 1947, wrote:

There is, admittedly, something unattractive about the avidity with which society now pores over every detail the Collyer brothers vigorously withheld from public scrutiny... It is almost as though society were taking revenge upon the brothers for daring to cut the thread that binds man to his fellows.

Basic elements of the Collyer brothers' story were used as the framework for a Boston Blackie radio mystery titled "Aggie Rogers Murder" that aired on April 8, 1947. (Coincidentally the same day Langley Collyer's body was found). Two elderly sisters, Aggie and Martha Rogers live in an old house that is divided into two sections; Aggie never leaves her section of the house and only opens a small passage so that Martha can give her food. Aggie inherited all of their father's money and the title to the house, which is filled with junk and has boobytraps everywhere to discourage and trap thieves. A neighbor goes to Boston Blackie and tells him that she heard loud moans coming from the house and asks him to investigate. When he does, bringing along the police, Aggie Rogers is found dead from a blow to the head and Martha is nowhere to be found. The story then further diverges from the facts of the Collyer brothers.

The Collyer brothers' story was first directly fictionalized by Marcia Davenport in her novel, *My Brother's Keeper* (Scribners, 1954), also published as a Popular Library paperback. Despite motion picture options spanning decades, the Davenport novel has never been filmed.

The 1995 movie *Unstrung Heroes* features two uncles whose lifestyle and apartment are a direct homage to the Collyer brothers. The film was based on an eponymous 1991 memoir by Franz Lidz, whose 2003 urban historical *Ghosty Men* (published by Bloomsbury USA) is the definitive history of the Collyers. *Ghosty Men* also chronicles the parallel life of Arthur Lidz, the hermit uncle featured in *Unstrung Heroes*. Uncle Arthur grew up near the Collyer mansion and was inspired by the brothers.<sup>[7]</sup>

Since the 1960s, the site of the former Collyer house has been a vest-pocket park, named for the brothers.<sup>[8]</sup>

A "Collyer's Mansion" is a modern firefighting term for a dwelling of hoarders that is so filled with trash and debris it becomes a serious danger to the occupants and emergency responders.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>



Collyer Brothers Park



In 2002, playwright Richard Greenberg released *The Dazzle*, which told a story loosely based on the brothers' lives after their parents' deaths, leading up to their own death. In the play, Homer dies before Langley, and the two fall in love with the same woman. The author's note in the beginning of the play claims "The Dazzle is based on the lives of the Collyer brothers, about whom I know almost nothing."<sup>[9]</sup>

In September 2009, Random House released E. L. Doctorow's *Homer and Langley*, a work of historical fiction which speculates on the brothers' inner lives.<sup>[10]</sup> Taking considerable historical liberties, the novel extends their lifespans into the late 1970s and switches the brothers' birth order.<sup>[11]</sup>

In 2011, filmmaker Lyon Forrest Hill released a short film on the brothers, titled *Junk Palace*.

In April 2011, Irish musician Declan O'Rourke released a new album called "Mag Pai Zai" which includes a song "Langley's Requiem", about the brothers. The album title is a reference to a line in the song.

## See also

- Compulsive hoarding
- Animal hoarding
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder

## Other recluses

- Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale and Edith Bouvier Beale, famous recluses.
- Hetty Green, businesswoman and miser of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- Alexander Kennedy Miller, eccentric recluse and compulsive hoarder of Stutz automobiles.
- Edmund Trebus, British compulsive hoarder.

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## The Odd Couple

By LIESL SCHILLINGER  
Published: September 8, 2009

The subject of E. L. Doctorow's gentle, enveloping new novel, "Homer & Langley," is one that might easily come to any deskbound writer who spends his days amid mounting piles of books, newspapers and magazines. It's the Collyer brothers, Homer and Langley — wealthy, reclusive Manhattan pack rats who lived for decades in squalor in a Fifth Avenue brownstone and died within a labyrinth of trash: towers of newspapers, battlements of books, mountains of boxes and heaps of chandeliers and debris (human organs in brine, pianos, a Model T Ford). After their deaths, in 1947, investigators had to break an upstairs window to gain entrance. Burrowing through walls of clutter, they soon found Homer's body, but it took weeks to locate Langley's, which lay within 10 feet of his brother's, crushed beneath a booby trap he'd set for prowlers. After both Collyers were extracted, more than 100 tons of refuse was removed from the building.

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Bettmann/Corbis

Though their story is entirely true, the Collyers have become the stuff of urban legend; as such, they've inspired many commemorations before this one. A few years ago, Franz Lidz wrote a riveting, fact-filled nonfiction account of the brothers, "Ghostly Men," interwoven with reminiscences of his uncle (also a compulsive hoarder). In 1954, the impetuous writer and critic Marcia Davenport (she titled her autobiography "Too Strong for Fantasy") mined their biography for melodrama in her novel "My Brother's Keeper," in which a passionate opera singer drives two brothers to disposophobic lunacy. The peculiar pair have also popped up, by name or reputation, in plays, television shows and films, as well as in the horror and

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Excerpt: 'Homer &amp; Langley' (September 9, 2009)

'Homer &amp; Langley,' (September 1, 2009)

crime genre — from Stephen King's "Salem's Lot," in 1975, to Linda Fairstein's "Lethal Legacy," published last February.

But Doctorow considers the Collyers in a less lurid fashion, casting them as sympathetic, if eccentric, players in the drama of the departed American century — sepia-tone figures in an elegiac zoetrope. Where other writers, titillated by the brothers' ghoulish history, have asked, "How did they die?," Doctorow asks the more respectful, and thus more surprising, question: "How did they live?"

Reaching back to their Gilded Age beginnings and

extending their life span into the 1980s, he resurrects 10 decades through the brothers' imagined experience — matching the accumulation of junk within the Collyer home with the accumulation of epochal events in the world outside their walls.

At the *fin de siècle*, child Homer stands on a city pier, holding his nursemaid's hand, waving at his well-upholstered parents as they sail for Europe on a grand ocean liner. World War I musters Langley to France, where he's gassed but survives, while back at home his parents succumb to the Spanish Flu. During the Great Depression, the orphans host public dances in their mansion (the world-whipped patrons "shuffled about with a sinuous somnolent shushing"), and during World War II their Japanese-American housekeepers are hauled off to an internment camp by the F.B.I. — "something that might seem momentous and horrifying to the people they have come for but is mere routine for them," Homer sorrowfully reflects. Fast-forward to the moon landing and beyond, and the brothers open their "pad" to childlike hippies they meet at an anti-Vietnam War rally in Central Park — women in fringed jackets and beaded headbands, and an R. Crumb-like cartoonist who draws "comic strips in which men's feet and women's breasts and behinds were greatly exaggerated."

Mercifully, Doctorow's Collyers are much more than a couple of Zeligs with O.C.D. These happenings unfurl not in herky-jerky newsreel fashion but slowly, in a stately, careful retelling by Homer Collyer, who is blind. Homer can sense, but not see, the transformations going on around him. Because of his affliction, and because of his dependence on his brother, his recollections carry special weight, poignance and, sometimes, humor. When the cops raid one of the Collyers' dances, Homer instinctively takes a swing at the intruders, "like the swat of a bear's paw but something lazier," and gets a clout to the solar plexus that sends him gasping to the floor. "He's blind, you idiot," Langley shouts. "And so ended the weekly tea dance," Homer somberly concludes.

When the family cook objects to Langley's installation of a Model T in the dining room, Homer scolds her: "My brother is a brilliant man. There is some intelligent purpose behind this, I can assure you," then confides to the reader, "At that moment of course I

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hadn't the remotest idea of what it might be." The world may see Langley Collyer as an erratic loon with wild eyes and Einstein hair, but to Homer he's a man of ideas, a caretaker, a brother. Langley consolingly urges him not to regret his blindness too much. "There is endless debate as to whether we see the real world or only the world as it appears in our minds," he explains. "It's not just your problem."

Increasingly, however, Langley is just Homer's problem. Blind and eventually deaf, trapped by impassable hedgerows he can't see, Homer is left with "only the touch of my brother's hand to know that I am not alone," and with only his diary to confide in: "I am grateful to have this typewriter, and the reams of paper beside my chair, as the world has shuttered slowly closed, intending to leave me only my consciousness." When Langley begins stockpiling newspapers, Homer earns the reader's sympathy as he seeks a logical justification for his brother's mania. Langley has come up with a "Theory of Replacements," Homer explains: "Everything in life gets replaced. We are our parents' replacements just as they were replacements of the previous generation." Time, Langley has told him, "advances through us as we replace ourselves to fill the slots," and this theory has spurred him to conceive an "ultimate newspaper" containing slots for every kind of human event, for which the stockpiled documents will serve as backup. Langley's goal is to "fix American life finally in one edition," to create an "eternally current dateless newspaper."

Had Langley come of age in the Internet era, the masses of documents he hoarded could have been replaced by a two-pound laptop, depriving New York of one of its most resonant cautionary tales. Instead, floor-to-ceiling bundles of newspapers become his hard drive, holding his "murder of innocents" file (the Birmingham church bombing of 1963, the Kent State shootings of 1970, the killing of nuns in El Salvador in 1980); his "political assassinations" file (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Kennedy); and his fledgling "presidential malfeasance" file (the first entry is Watergate). Doctorow's examples remind readers that any person in the present day who undertook such a project would soon find himself similarly immured. Then again, who but a Langley Collyer would bother?

When Homer hears of a newspaper photograph of Langley "shuffling down Fifth Avenue in a porkpie hat, a ragged coat down to his ankles, a shawl he'd made from a burlap sack, and house slippers," he knows his brother's sanity has taken a nose dive but blames it on civic outrage. "I will say in my brother's defense that he had a lot on his mind. It was a period of appalling human behavior."

Of course, if disturbing headlines were enough to justify such a reaction, there would be what the police call a "Collyer situation" on every city block. When Homer, in a bid for empathy, asks, "What could be more terrible than being turned into a mythic joke?" readers caught up in Doctorow's tender, lushly drawn narrative may feel a pang, remembering Langley's Theory of Replacements and wondering what slot history has in

store for them. Yet after the novel's spell ebbs, they will probably, guiltily, revert to the more instinctive response to Homer's plea. What's worse than being turned into a joke? Dying in your house buried under 100 tons of trash. The achievement of Doctorow's masterly, compassionate double portrait is that it succeeds for 200 pages in suspending the snigger, elevating the Collyers beyond caricature and turning them into creatures of their times instead of figures of fun.h

*Liesl Schillinger is a regular contributor to the Book Review.*

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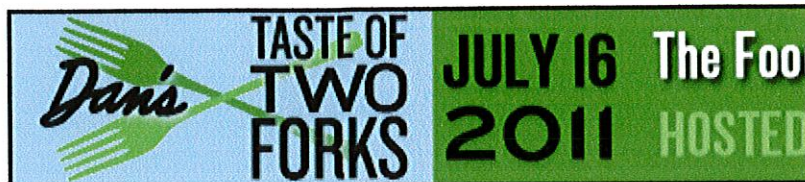
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Tuesday, October 5, 1999

# The Collyer Brothers of Harlem

By William Bryk

Two years after the Collyers' arrival, African-Americans began settling in Harlem in large numbers. By 1925, Harlem had been transformed from an upper-middle-class white suburb into the center of African-American life.

But while nearly all the other white folks left, the Collyers did not. Dr. Collyer died in 1923; Mrs. Collyer in 1929. Their sons remained in the mansion. According to Trinity Church's baptismal records, Homer Collyer was born on Nov. 6, 1881. Langley was about six years younger. Both men graduated from Columbia: Homer, who graduated with the class of 1904, earned an MA, LLB and LLM and practiced admiralty law. Langley took his degree in chemistry and mechanical engineering. He never worked for a living, devoting himself to music.

In 1928-'29, Homer worked in the law office of John McMullen, who would become the family lawyer. Homer then worked for City Title Insurance at 32 Broadway, spending his days researching in the Hall of Records. A former colleague described Homer as an affable, courtly, Dickensian type, with old-fashioned clothing, high collars and elaborate sideburns who wrote with an elegant Spencerian hand.

Langley, who was last photographed in 1946, looked like a stereotype of an aging late Romantic poet, with an old-fashioned bowtie, formal black jacket and vest, gray striped trousers, a long gray mustache and longish hair.

By 1917, the Collyers' telephone had been disconnected because, as Langley explained, they were "being billed for long distance calls they didn't make." In 1928, the gas was shut off. The brothers began going without steam heat and hot running water, using kerosene for lighting and cooking. *The Encyclopedia of New York City* and Jan Morris in *Manhattan '45* claim they had no water or sewer connection; no contemporary sources go that far. Some of the local kids threw stones through their windows and after Langley had spent large sums to replace the glass, he decided it was better to board them up and close the inner shutters.

Most sources agree Homer last appeared in public in 1932. In 1933, he suffered a stroke, with "hemorrhages in both eyes," and went blind. Thereafter, Langley cared for him. They avoided doctors, treating Homer's illnesses with special diet and rest. Langley said Homer ate 100 oranges a week and treated his eyes by consciously resting them: keeping them closed at all times.



Their solitude was first violated by the press on Aug. 11, 1938, when Helen Worden wrote an article for the *World-Telegram* about Maurice Gruber, a real estate agent who wanted to buy Collyer property in Queens. When the Collyers did not respond to his letters and then his personal visits, Gruber staked out the house. By the following day, Worden found Charles Collyer, a distant cousin working as a ticket agent for the Long Island Rail Road, who suddenly and conveniently became worried that Homer was dead. Worden's article was accompanied by photographs posing Charles Collyer and his wife on the front steps of the mansion. Worden called Langley "the mystery man of Harlem." She recapitulated every street rumor that behind the shabby facade was a veritable *Arabian Nights* palace of Chinese rugs, rare antiques and thousands of morocco-bound books, including piles of money Langley was afraid to put in the bank.

She then staked out the mansion herself. One night she caught Langley slipping out to go shopping and began her interview by calling out, "Good evening, Mr. Collyer. The neighbors tell me you keep a row boat in the attic and a Model T in the basement."

Strangely enough, he responded. "Yes and no," Langley replied. The boat, he explained, was his father's canoe. "He used to carry it to the Harlem River on his head and paddle down to [Bellevue] every morning and back every evening. The auto was his, too. I never got around to putting it together again after he died."

Langley later claimed all his troubles dated from these articles. Jan Morris wrote that "...nobody ever interfered with them it seems, or tried to make them live like everyone else. They were the Collyer Brothers, Harlem's Most Fascinating Mystery, as the tabloids like to say, and fashionably mysterious they were allowed to remain."

But they were not left alone. As the *Daily News* wrote, "folks attempted to see for themselves." This phrase is ambiguous. The clippings on the Collyers leave a strong impression that from the late 30s, nosy neighbors knocked on the door, nasty kids threw rocks at the house, broke their fence and smashed bottles in their front yard, and reporters kept interviewing obscure relatives on the steps of the house, expressing concern over poor cousins Homer and Langley.

Another story quoted a neighbor describing Langley as "the ghostly man... He did have a brother, Homer, but nobody's seen him in a long while. They ain't seen his ma, either. She was s'pose to be dead, but she never had a funeral... He's like haunts in graveyards, he don' come out before midnight."

Langley panicked. Though gloomy, the house had not been messy in 1938. By 1942, Langley had singlehandedly accumulated vast quantities of newspaper, cartons, tin cans and other refuse, transforming the mansion into a fortress. He apparently applied his engineer's training to arrange packing boxes and cartons in interlocking tiers with concealed tunnels passing from one room or one floor to another. Langley alone was familiar with the maze. Anyone else would have to remove the entire barricade to pass. He also booby-trapped massive piles of newspapers and old luggage with trip wires.

Their final drama began at 8:53 a.m. on March 21, 1947, when a man who gave his name as Charles Smith telephoned police headquarters, saying, "There was a dead man in the house at 2078 Fifth Avenue." Police arrived around 10 a.m. to find a crowd of Harlem residents outside the house. The police roped off the house. Some officers tried forcing the mahogany front doors. Then the police took them off their hinges. There stood a solid wall of boxes and debris, up to the ceiling.

Other officers entered the unlit, cluttered basement. The way from the basement to the first floor was blocked by a solid mass of packing cases. Then, the police forced the shutters on a first floor window. Within lay a desolation of ceiling-high stacks of boxes, paper and furniture, crawling with rats. The officers found the stairs to the second floor blocked with yet another mass of packing cases.

Two hours after the police first arrived on the scene, officers finally clambered from a ladder into a second-story room. There they found Homer dead. He was emaciated, bearded (*Daily News*) or mustachioed (*Times*), clothed only in either a tattered robe (*Times*) or a few ragged fragments of clothing (*The Sun*), and lay with his knees drawn almost to his chin. Dr. Thomas Gonzales, the medical examiner, said that Homer's body was extremely emaciated and dehydrated. "There is no question," Gonzales said, "that he had been neglected for a



long time." There was no food in his stomach or his digestive tract, indicating he had nothing to eat or drink for at least three days before his death, which was attributed to chronic bronchitis, gangrenous decubital ulcer (a large, untreated bedsore), and senile pulmonary emphysema.

The story was a wild sensation: on March 22, 1947, even the *Times* printed a front-page story on Homer's death. By the end of the second day, according to the *Times*, the police had removed 19 tons of debris from the first-floor hallway alone.

As the search for Langley continued, thousands of curious citizens walked or drove by the house. According to the *Daily News*, "few lingered at the scene. They were driven away by the smells."

A friend whose father covered the story for one of the dailies told me the cops lit up cheap, foul-smelling cigars against the overpowering stench of organic corruption—"like a blow from a mailed fist." For not only the newspapers, garbage and animal wastes were rotting, but as a city housing inspector told *The Sun*, even the house was rotting: Its floor and walls were saturated because of the open windows and roof leaks, the beams were rotted and buckled from the weight of the junk and bricks were falling from the walls.

The New York County public administrator, a Surrogate's Court official, took over the search from the police. On March 31, the public administrator hired six professional movers to remove all articles of value from the house. They tore out the basement entrance and began emptying the law library. The 2500 law books were merely a tenth of the volumes in the house. They found numerous family oil portraits. They found Mrs. Collyer's hope chests, jammed with unused piece goods, silks, wool, damask and brocade; three bolts of embroidered white curtain material, each containing 54 yards, that had never been unwrapped; and a batch of fine linen dish towels, stamped "Collyer," that had never been used.

They found telephone directories, three revolvers, two rifles, a shotgun, ammunition, a bayonet and a saber, a half-dozen toy trains, toy tops, a toy airplane, 14 upright and grand pianos, cornets, bugles, an accordion, a trombone, a banjo; tin cans, chandeliers, tapestries, a portrait camera, enlarger, lenses and tripods, a bowling ball in a canvas bag, bicycles and bicycle lamps, a rolled-up 100-foot rug runner, a 9-foot-tall mahogany clock with a music box inside and pastel painted figures on the broad face; 13 ornate mantel clocks, including one contained in a metal bust of a girl whose ears and bodice dripped coins, 13 Oriental rugs, heavily ornate Victorian oil lamps and vases, white plaster portrait busts and picture frames. They found a static machine, an electrical device manufactured during the 1890s for the treatment of arthritis, rheumatism and other ailments. They found five violins, at least two dating from the 18th century, two organs and scores of 7-inch gramophone records dating from 1898, including "Round Her Neck She Wears a Yeller Ribbon for her Lover Who is Fur, Fur Away," "Atta Baby" and "Nobody In Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine." They found sheets in braille from Homer's failed attempts to learn the system. And they found a certificate of merit for punctuality and good conduct awarded to Langley at Public School 69, 125 W. 54th St., for the week ending April 19, 1895.

These things merely salted the vast sea of junk and paper.

By April 3, according to the *Herald Tribune*, the searchers had removed 51 tons of waste. They had only reached two rooms on the first floor. By April 8, 19 days after the search began, *The Sun* reported 103 tons of debris removed. Then they found Langley's body.

He had been buried alive in one of his booby traps while crawling to bring Homer food. He had been only eight feet from his brother. He was wearing burlap draped over his shoulders as a cape, and police speculated this had snagged on a wire and tripped the booby trap. Langley wore no underwear or socks. He had on a bathrobe, three jackets and four pairs of trousers. Around his neck as a scarf was a white onion sack fastened with a safety pin. He lay on his right side and the rats had been at him. Both *The Sun* of April 8 and the *World-Telegram* of April 9 stated a preliminary examination indicated Langley had died quite some time before his brother. Apparently, Homer had died utterly, horribly alone.

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On May 9, 1947, Robert F. Wagner Jr., the city's commissioner of Housing and Buildings (later Manhattan borough president and mayor), announced the mansion would be demolished as unsafe and a menace to life and property. It was torn down within the year.

Langley was buried in the Collyer family plot in Cypress Hills Cemetery on April 11. The funeral arrangements were made by the public administrator's office. The numerous relatives produced by the press apparently did little more than attend the services and file claims against the brothers' estates.

There was no great wealth. The Surrogate's Court probated the estates in 1949: \$60,000 in real estate holdings, \$2000 in savings, \$4000 from the sale of personal property. Against this were claims for \$15,000 in estate taxes and thousands more in city, federal and state tax arrears. It is unclear whether the 40 claimants against the estate ever saw a dime.

The only explanation Langley ever provided for the brothers' behavior was that they preferred to live alone.

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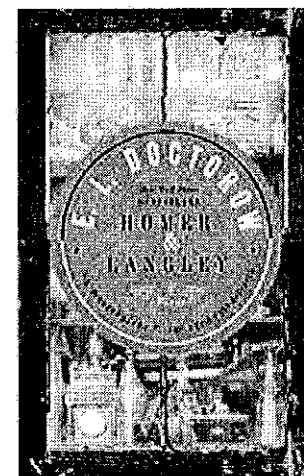


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### ***Homer & Langley***

*E.L. Doctorow, 2009*

*Random House*

*208 pp.*

#### **In Brief**

Homer and Langley Collyer are brothers—the one blind and deeply intuitive, the other damaged into madness, or perhaps greatness, by mustard gas in the Great War. They live as recluses in their once grand Fifth Avenue mansion, scavenging the city streets for things they think they can use, hoarding the daily newspapers as research for Langley's proposed dateless newspaper whose reportage will be as prophecy. Yet the epic events of the century play out in the lives of the two brothers—wars, political movements, technological advances—and even though they want nothing more than to shut out the world, history seems to pass through. (*From the publisher.*)

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#### **About the Author**

- Birth—January 6, 1931
- Where—New York, New York, USA
- Education—A.B., Kenyon College; Columbia University
- Awards—3 National Book Critics Circle Awards; National Book Award; PEN/Faulkner Award
- Currently—lives in Sag Harbor, New York and New York City

E. L. Doctorow, one of America's preeminent authors, has received the National Book Critics Circle Award (three times), the National Book Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Edith Wharton Citation For Fiction, and the William Dean Howells medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has also published a volume of selected essays *Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution*, and a play, *Drinks Before Dinner*, which was produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival. (*From the publisher.*)

#### **More**

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow is an American author whose critically acclaimed and award-winning fiction ranges through his country's social history from the Civil War to the present. Doctorow was born in the Bronx, New York City, the son of second-generation Americans of Russian Jewish descent. He attended city public grade schools and the Bronx High School of Science where, surrounded by mathematically gifted children, he fled to the office of the school literary magazine, *Dynamo*,

where he published his first literary effort, *The Beetle*, which he describes as "a tale of etymological self-defamation inspired by my reading of Kafka."

Doctorow attended Kenyon College in Ohio, where he studied with the poet and New Critic, John Crowe Ransom, acted in college theater productions and majored in Philosophy. After graduating with Honors in 1952 he did a year of graduate work in English Drama at Columbia University before being drafted into the army. He served with the Army of Occupation in Germany in 1954-55 as a corporal in the signal corps.

He returned to New York after his military service and took a job as a reader for a motion picture company where he said he had to read so many Westerns that he was inspired to write what became his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*. He began the work as a parody of the Western genre, but the piece evolved into a novel that asserted itself as a serious reclamation of the genre before he was through. It was published to positive reviews in 1960.

Doctorow had married a fellow Columbia drama student, Helen Setzer, while in Germany and by the time he had moved on from his reader's job in 1960 to become an editor at the New American Library, (NAL) a mass market paperback publisher, he was the father of three children. To support his family he would spend nine years as a book editor, first at NAL working with such authors as Ian Fleming and Ayn Rand, and then, in 1964 as Editor-in-chief at The Dial Press, publishing work by James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Ernest J. Gaines and William Kennedy, among others.

In 1969 Doctorow left publishing in order to write, and accepted a position as Visiting Writer at the University of California, Irvine, where he completed *The Book of Daniel*, a freely fictionalized consideration of the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for allegedly giving nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Published in 1971 it was widely acclaimed, called a "masterpiece" by *The Guardian*, and it launched Doctorow into "the first rank of American writers" according to the *New York Times*.

Doctorow's next book, written in his home in New Rochelle, New York, was *Ragtime* (1975), since accounted one of the hundred best novels of the 20th century by the Modern Library Editorial Board.

Doctorow's subsequent work includes the award winning novels *World's Fair* (1985), *Billy Bathgate* (1989) and *The March* (2005); two volumes of short fiction, *Lives of the Poets I* (1984) and *Sweetland Stories* (2004); and two volumes of selected essays, *Jack London, Hemingway, and the Constitution* (1993) and *Creationists* (2006). He is published in over thirty languages. (From Wikipedia.)

#### Extras

- Doctorow began his career as a reader for Columbia Pictures. He went on to work as an editor for New American Library in the early 1960s, and then served as chief editor at Dial Press from 1964 to 1969.
- Critics assailed Doctorow for delivering a commencement address critical of President George W. Bush at Hofstra

University. (From the publisher.)

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### Critics Say. . .

as with his much admired novels *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime*, *Billy Bathgate* and *The March*, Doctorow again creatively reconfigures and amplifies the historical record...There's a briskness to *Homer & Langley* that never flags, and its solitary protagonists—two lost souls—possess a half-comical, half-nightmarish fascination. They seem, at once, symbols of both American materialism and of American loneliness. Think of Melville's "isolatoes," or of all those forlorn men in shirt sleeves and the dispirited women of Edward Hopper's paintings, or of Hank Williams singing "I'm so lonesome I could cry."

*Michael Dirda - Washington Post*

Doctorow paints on a sweeping historical canvas, imagining the Collyer brothers as witness to the aspirations and transgressions of 20th century America; yet this book's most powerfully moving moments are the quiet ones, when the brothers relish a breath of cool morning air, and each other's tragically exclusive company.

*O Magazine*

Doctorow, whose literary trophy shelf has got to be overflowing by now, delivers a small but sweeping masterpiece about the infamous New York hermits, the Collyer brothers. When WWI hits and the Spanish flu pandemic kills Homer and Langley's parents, Langley, the elder, goes to war, with his Columbia education and his "godlike immunity to such an ordinary fate as death in a war." Homer, alone and going blind, faces a world "considerably dimmed" though "more deliciously felt" by his other senses. When Langley returns, real darkness descends on the eccentric orphans: inside their shuttered Fifth Avenue mansion, Langley hoards newspaper clippings and starts innumerable science projects, each eventually abandoned, though he continues to imagine them in increasingly bizarre ways, which he then recites to Homer. Occasionally, outsiders wander through the house, exposing it as a living museum of artifacts, Americana, obscurity and simmering madness. Doctorow's achievement is in not undermining the dignity of two brothers who share a lush landscape built on imagination and incapacities. It's a feat of distillation, vision and sympathy.

***Publishers Weekly***

A young man leading a privileged life in early 1900s New York goes blind. His brother goes to war and returns home a different person, reckless yet reclusive after being gassed. Their parents, never a strong presence in their lives, languish and die, and so Homer and Langley are left on their own in a Fifth Avenue apartment that slowly decays as Langley stacks it with all manner of rubbish he lovingly collects. Langley has mad schemes—he wants to publish a newspaper that needs only one issue, encapsulating all that's worth knowing—but he sees with stark clarity what's wrong with the world. Homer, a sensitive pianist, sticks with Langley. Together, through Homer's failed liaison with a housemaid, the death of longtime servants, and the internment of their Japanese housekeepers during World

War II, the brothers age, their lives summing up a fading 20th-century America. This novel defines quiet desperation, captured with such precision ... that it can be a dispiriting read—as, one thinks, the author intended. The ending is wrenchingly poignant. *Verdict:* Doctorow in a minor key but as accomplished as ever.

—Barbara Hoffert

**Library Journal**

Following the panoramic scope of *The March*, Doctorow creates a microcosmic and mythic tale of compulsion, alienation, and dark metamorphosis inspired by the famously eccentric Collyer brothers of New York City... Doctorow has Homer, who is blind, narrate with deadpan humor and spellbinding precision...Over the decades, people come and go—lovers, a gangster, a jazz musician, a flock of hippies, but finally Homer and Langley are irrevocably alone, prisoners in their fortress of rubbish, trapped in their warped form of brotherly love. Wizardly Doctorow presents an ingenious, haunting odyssey that unfolds within a labyrinth built out of the detritus of war and excess.

**Booklist**

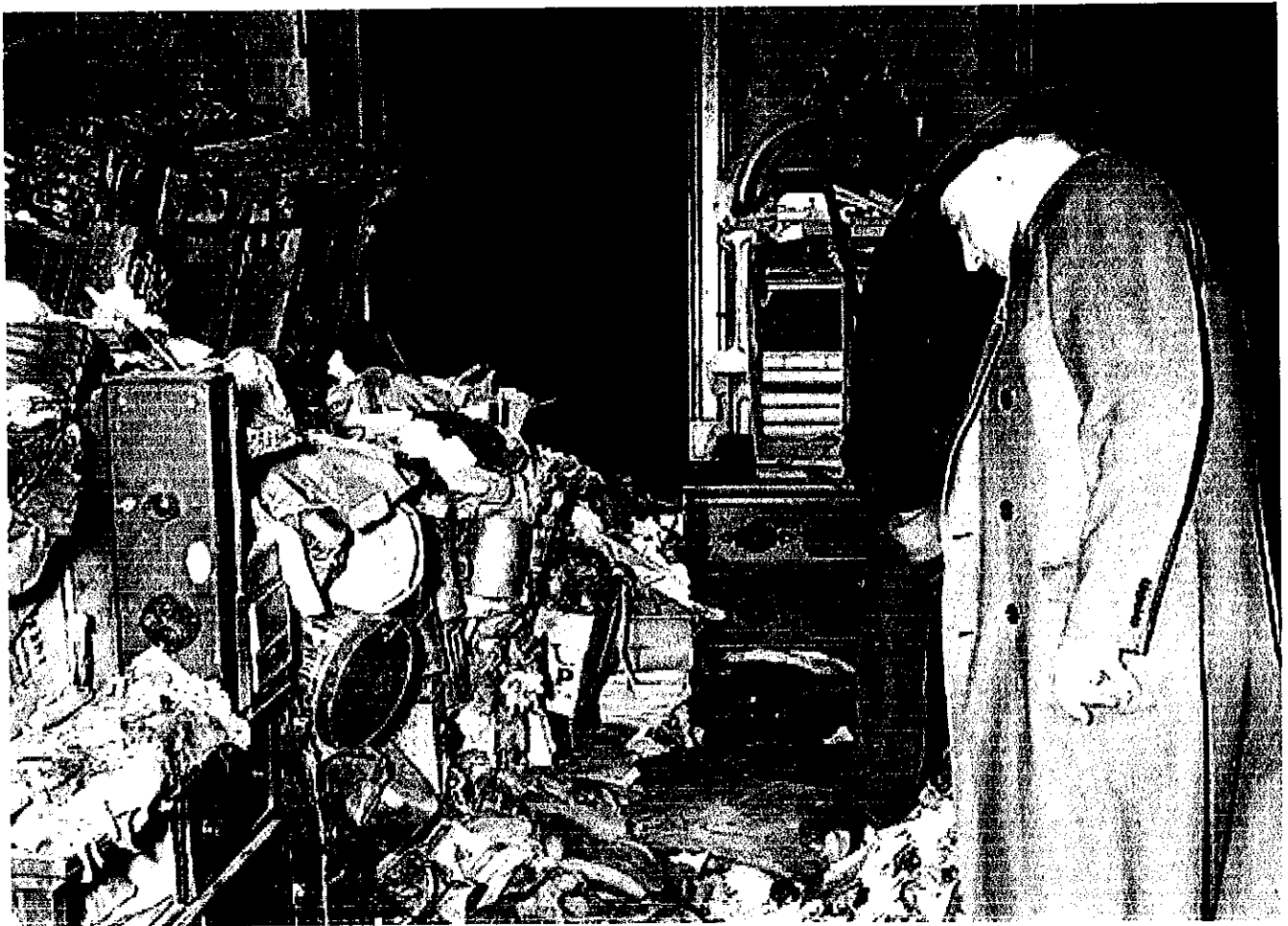
Brothers live together in a decaying New York City mansion as history marches on in the latest from Doctorow (*The March*, 2005, etc.). Brothers Homer and Langley share a moneyed childhood in relative bliss, although narrator Homer is slowly going blind. Then both Homer's parents succumb to the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, shortly before older brother Langley returns from service in World War I damaged by mustard gas. Increasingly eccentric (or deranged), Langley devotes his life to organizing articles from the newspapers he collects and never throws away. Homer's musical ambitions never come to much. Nor do his romantic affairs. Langley's one marriage is a disaster. But the brothers' lives touch on history, or its surface accoutrements, with a vengeance. Homer plays accompaniment for silent movies. Langley drives a Model T into the dining room. In the '20s they frequent speakeasies, where they meet a stereotypical gangster playboy who by the '50s has become more of a stereotypical Mafioso. Their African-American cook has a New Orleans jazz musician grandson. During the Depression the brothers throw "tea dances" to make extra money. The FBI whisk away a nice Japanese couple in the brothers' employ to a World War II internment camp. By the '50s Langley has acquired a television and a typewriter collection. By the '60s the brothers are taking in hippies as well as feral cats. Later Homer is dismayed to discover the young girl he once mentored as a musician and secretly loved has become an activist nun murdered in South America. As the brothers' funds shrink and the Fifth Avenue mansion they inherited falls into decay, the parallel to Gray Gardens comes to mind, particularly since an aging Homer types his memories on a Braille typewriter for a French journalist named Jacqueline. Usually a master at incorporating history into rich fiction, Doctorow offers few insights here and a narrator/hero who is never more than a cipher.

**Kirkus Reviews**

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### Book Club Discussion Questions







Sept. 20, 2009

## E.L. Doctorow on 'Homer & Langley'

### The Famed Author Talks About Bringing to Life the Infamous Collyer Brothers in His New Novel



E.L. Doctorow at his desk in Sag Harbor, L.I., where his books, he claims, write themselves. (CBS)

(CBS) Author E. L. Doctorow is one of the literary stars of the new season. Not surprising, considering he had a lot of material for his latest novel - a LOT of material. *Rita Braver* examines the fine print:

The peaceful park in Harlem belies its sensational past. Once upon a time, the Collyer Brothers' house stood here.

A pair of upper crust recluses, they made headlines in the 1940s, when reporters discovered how they hoarded tons of treasure and trash. There's no photo of Homer, who was blind, and just a few shots of Langley, who felt hounded by everyone.

"And he gets more and more defensive," said novelist E.L. Doctorow, "and decides to use this material that's been collected over the decades to create traps and snares to destroy anyone who dares to trespass."

Then in 1947 neighbors complained of a terrible odor, and police broke in. They found that Homer had died of starvation in the midst of 19 tons of roach and rat-infested clutter.

But Langley was missing! It took weeks to figure out that he actually died first, killed by one of his own booby traps.

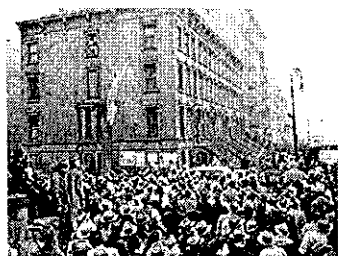
The story became a sensation.

"The idea of people with that kind of heritage opting out and turning reclusive and isolating themselves and collecting everything they could get their hands on seemed in general a sort of Satanic mockery of what we all stand for," Doctorow said.

E.L. Doctorow, now one of the nation's most acclaimed novelists, with a string of awards and bestsellers to his name, grew up on tales of the horrors behind the Collyer Brothers' doors.

"I was one of those teenagers, one of millions whose mothers looked in his room and said, 'The Collyer Brothers!'" he laughed. "But later, as time went on, I began to think there's more to them than that."

He was intrigued both by their behavior, and the public's response to them



(AP Photo/Harry Harris)

He describes the huge crowd that gathered when the brothers were found dead and the cops were pulling out *tons* of stuff. "What was the crowd doing? They were celebrating a fall. They were fascinated by the sheer excess of what they'd seen," Doctorow said.

(Left: A crowd watches the old, debris-cluttered Collyer mansion in New York's Harlem, March 24, 1947, as police entered building to search for Langley Collyer who has been declared missing.)

He calls his new novel "Homer and Langley."

"At a certain point, this idea for a book based on the Collyers rose in my mind. And I wrote a line, 'I'm Homer, the blind brother.' And there was the book right there."

But make no mistake: It's a work of fiction based only loosely on the real brothers.

"You're no doubt going to get letters from people saying, 'Wait a minute, you gave Homer some of Langley's characteristics and vice versa.' what are you going to say to those people?" **Braver** asked.

"I'm probably going to ignore them!" Doctorow laughed. "In fiction, you know, there are no borders. You can go anywhere. You can write as a reporter. You can do confession. You can sound like an anthropologist, a philosopher, a theologian, a pornographer. You can be anything and do anything."

What Doctorow wanted to do was write . . . and no wonder. He was named after Edgar Allen Poe!

Edgar Lawrence Doctorow grew up in the Bronx.

"Why did you use E.L. rather than your first name?" **Braver** asked.

"I think that's because as a young man, I admired writers like D.H. Lawrence, W.H. Auden, W. Shakespeare!

"And I did make the mistake of telling everyone I was going to be a writer. And of course, I didn't feel it necessary to write anything for several years."

By 1960 Doctorow did write his first novel, "Welcome to Hard Times," a gritty frontier tale. He started it while he was working as a movie script-reader.

"I was reading all these terrible westerns, they made me ill," he said. "And I decided to write - that I could lie about the West better than these people."

The book did well, but he didn't quit his day job.

"I got married very early, and in no time at all, we had three children," he said. "And it seemed to me I had an obligation to support them."

Today, E.L. Doctorow (now 78) and Helen, his wife of 53 years, divide their time between Manhattan and Sag Harbor, Long Island.

She described how they met in a graduate school acting class: "And then, at one time he leaned against the proscenium arch and lit a cigarette, and I thought, 'That does it: I love this guy.' (laughter) So I knew from the first minute I saw him.:

"That's pretty good," **Braver** said. "Did he know that he was the one?"

"No, it took some effort on my part, which I was willing to put in," Helen said.

She is always the first to read his work. **Braver** asked if ever says "Uh oh, honey, you better try this again"?

"It's never necessary," Helen said. "It really isn't."

Doctorow's vivid writing has often been adapted to the movies. His 1969 novel "The Book of Daniel" was loosely based on real characters - convicted spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Critics raved. [It was later filmed as "Daniel" (1983), starring Timothy Hutton, Mandy Patinkin and Lindsay Crouse.]

"Do you read reviews today?" **Braver** asked. "Do you care what reviewers say?"

"Well, I read them selectively," he admitted. "I look for certain key words like 'masterpiece,' 'genius,' 'brilliant' and so on!"

Those very words were used to describe "Ragtime."

Doctorow's 1975 novel is about race, class and the changing country at the turn of the 20th century. It is now considered a classic, and was turned into a film nominated for 8 Academy Awards.

"Ragtime" also became a Tony Award-winning musical, now headed back to Broadway.

Doctorow's latest book is already a bestseller. Despite his years of success, he still finds writing difficult.

"I try to write 500 words if I can. That's an enormous achievement usually."

But he says when it's going well, the book sort of writes itself. He sat at the desk where "Homer & Langley" was composed.

"You could sort of hear it in your head as you were writing it?" **Braver** asked.

"Yeah, you hear their voice. You're ventriloquizing .... you are them."

"When future generations tell the story of E.L. Doctorow, what do you want people to say?" she asked.

"I'll be satisfied enough if I'm still being read," he replied. "Isn't that the idea? To write something that will last?"

**For more info:**

**"Home & Langley"** by E.L. Doctorow (Random House)

**Excerpt: "Home & Langley"**

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NEW YORK POLICE HAD OFTEN BEEN DRAWN BY THE STRANGE GOINGS-ON AT THE RUN-DOWN BROWNSTONE AT 2076 FIFTH AVENUE -- IT WAS THE HOME OF THE CITY'S MOST FAMOUS RECLUSES, HOMER AND LANGLEY...



BUT THE CALL ON MARCH 21, 1947, WAS DIFFERENT.

THEY SAY THERE'S A DEAD BODY INSIDE.



DOOR'S LOCKED TIGHT, SIR-- CAN'T BUDGE IT.



BRING THE BATTERING RAM!



HOLY GOD! LOOK AT THAT!



THE OCEAN OF DEBRIS MADE THE DOWNSTAIRS IMPASSABLE.



NOW... WHERE THE HECK IS --



JESUS!



NAME'S HOMER COLLYER. AGE 65. BLIND AND PARALYZED FOR YEARS... HIS BROTHER, LANGLEY, TOOK CARE OF HIM.

YEAH, BUT WHERE'S LANGLEY?

--WHERE INDEED?



THE SONS OF A NEW YORK DOCTOR. THE TWO BOYS HAD GROWN UP IN THE FIFTH AVENUE BROWNSTONE. HOMER, THE ADMIRALTY LAWYER...



... LANGLEY, THE CHEERFUL ENGINEER AND CONCERT PIANIST.

DEAR LANGLEY,

FOR YOU, MOTHER,



AFTER THEIR PARENTS SEPARATED IN 1909, THE BOYS STAYED WITH THEIR MOTHER, WHO DIED IN 1929.

SO, IN A WAY, DID THE COLLYER BROTHERS.



HOMER LOST HIS SIGHT IN 1933 AND BECAME PARALYZED A FEW YEARS LATER.



LANGLEY THOUGHT HE COULD BRING BACK HIS BROTHER'S SIGHT WITH ORANGES -- AS MANY AS 100 A DAY.

REMEMBER... WE ARE THE SONS OF A DOCTOR.



THEY PAID NO BILLS. SOON THEY HAD NEITHER HEAT NOR LIGHT.



LANGLEY COOKED THEIR SIMPLE MEALS ON A KEROSENE STOVE...



... AND BROUGHT THEIR WATER FROM A NEARBY CITY PARK.

