



LOON LAKE



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*E.L. Doctorow*

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## **Loon Lake** E.L. Doctorow

It is America in the great depression, and he is a child of that time, that place. He runs away from home in Paterson, New Jersey, to New York City and learns the bare bones of life before he hits the road with a traveling carnival. Then one icy night in the Adirondacks, the young man sees a private train roar by. In its lit windows, he spies an industrial tycoon, a poet, a gangster, and a heartbreakingly beautiful girl. He follows them, as one follows a dream, to an isolated private estate on Loon Lake.

Thus the stage is set for a spellbinding tale of mystery and menace, greed and ambition, harsh lust and tender love, that lays bare the darkest depths of the human heart and the nightmarish underside of the American dream. E. L. Doctorow has written a novel aglow with poetry and passion, lit by the burning fire of humanity and history, terror and truth.

## **Loon Lake Details**

Date : Published June 1st 1996 by Plume (first published 1980)

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Author : E.L. Doctorow

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## From Reader Review Loon Lake for online ebook

### Rebecca says

Let me preface this with this: I LOVE E.L. Doctorow. Loved City of God. Loved Ragtime. Loved The Book of Daniel. So, ok...I didn't LOVE Homer & Langley, but at least I didn't finish the book thinking I had lost my facility to comprehend English.

I wish I could tell you I know what this book is about. There's a con-man/fugitive "protagonist" who is not at all likeable or even interestingly evil. There's a bizarre ladylove who dances in and out of self-respect every chapter or so. The most interesting character is a maid, who disappears from the narrative fairly early on. The depressed and eccentric poet holds promise, yet he also vanishes.

I get that this was an experiment. There are moments of that great Doctorow language that I treasure. But as a coherent book it fails. I totally understand that some people find this work a "stunning masterpiece" and "utterly compelling." Variety is definitely the spice of life, and I am probably the dry saltine of literature here, but this one really did not do it for me.

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### Nick Jones says

I first came across E.L. Doctorow when I was in my twenties. I was reading a lot of American writers who I thought of as 1960s writers and Doctorow fitted in. His work was wittily experimental, self-consciously used past literary styles, could often be described as pastiche, often switched perspective, was playful, he played literary games...the new buzz word at the time for all this was 'postmodernist'. But Doctorow differed from writers such as Thomas Pynchon, because, while for Pynchon the playfulness and experimentation was a thing in and for itself, for Doctorow they had a purpose: through the 1970s and '80s Doctorow published a series of five novels that investigated the history of the Twentieth Century United States: he explored the past to discover the present. Loon Lake is the central volume in this series and, although its reputation doesn't seem to be overwhelming, I think it is one of the finest and more remarkable. Another variation on Huckleberry Finn, here 18 year old Joe Korzeniowski sets out from New Jersey to travel 1930s America and reinvent himself as Joe Patterson, but while Finn travelled an America fractured by slavery, Joe's Depression America is fractured by wealth and poverty and that most taboo of American subjects, class struggle. There is not a clean narrative, it switches perspective, switches time lines, fractures into shortish passages, cuts back on its chronology, sometimes switches from first to third person...this is 'strange' (although not that strange for anyone who has read Pynchon, Barthelme, Brautigan or other American writers of the 1960s and '70s...and the skipping though time had been used in cinema for the previous 20 years) and one of its effects is to draw us up, make us slow down, not rush from one narrative incident to the next, consider their purpose and relationship to each other...and, it should be emphasized, it makes it fun. But the methods are also important in forming the book's response to its historical material: the past is not set and easily identifiable, but can constantly be interpreted and reinterpreted, it is contested, it has to be constructed and we never construct it innocently, but always with ulterior motives. Like all great novels (and I think this is a great novel) Loon Lake demands that we participate in its construction, not consume it as disposable product. There is, however, a second central consciousness within the narrative, the failed poet Warren Penfield: he works well as a contrast to Joe, the passive against the active, but I find the passages centred on his perspective less successful than those around Joe. Focused on two male characters, the women of the novel are largely subjects of the story, given little active force: this seems to me to be a limitation of the novel, not a failure. The work finishes with an ironic happy ending, Joe achieving the American dream, but seemingly losing his vivacity and humanity.

## Lou Maresca says

Thus far on "Goodreads" I have reviewed (27) books; I guess it has to happen that I will write a definitively negative review, which I have not as of yet done. I did not like the way this book was written; the author's writing style clashed sharply with my tastes and sensibilities. Though there was a plot, and it, for the most part, was interesting, aspects of his writing grated on me. To wit.....

\* his copious use of egregiously long run-on sentences; I am guessing that he thought that this was chic or something close. I couldn't stand it.

\* his shifting back and forth between "I" and "Joe" for the main character...that is, in my view, silly.

\* his "stream of consciousness" writing, which appeared to me (sorry....) to be drug-induced- just ridiculous and very difficult to read...I had to plough through it (because I like to not skip pages)

\* I usually feel down as I am nearing the end of books. In this book, by the time I got to page 100 and decided to stick with it, I was constantly looking forward to being released from it, to its being over.

Let me say here that I would feel mean-spirited if I gave the book (\*\*), so I have given it (\*\*\*). I will say further that I realize that there will be folks who will simply love this book and the author's style- I am, simply put, not one of them.

I do not recommend this book, unless readers can tolerate or even like the sort of writing that I have delineated here.

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## iixo says

I picked this up at a book recycling stall in a shopping centre some years ago and only got round to reading it now. I had no idea who the author was or what the book would be about - there wasn't even a background blurb - which was a rather refreshing way to start reading a novel. But even if I had had expectations, I doubt I would have been disappointed.

The writing seemed effortless, which is not a given with experimental or stream-of-consciousness styles, and was generally a pleasure to read. (apart from when the content was not so pleasant, naturally, but that's rather different.) Not everything was explained and no doubt I missed some finer points and/or connections, but the book didn't need explanations or assurances of the significance of any given scene. If I have to analyze it, I'd say its method was flowing rather than making arguments.

(Plus I have a soft point for American 20th-century hopelessness.)

I was not quite sure whether the poems thrown in here and there were intended to be bad, written in the character Warren Penfield's name as they were, but either way they had their moments, and even in their less-of-a-moments managed to provide a spark and a change of pace, rather than being a mandatory bore inbetween the prose.

While writing this review, I had to change my rating from 3 to 4 stars, because I only just realized that I did "really like" this novel.

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### **Louis says**

I bought this book because of the author, (years ago I read Ragtime, which was excellent), I did not know anything about it, but what a pleasant surprise. The story plays off in the era of the Great War and the Great Depression. It is very well written, and the story is interesting. One point of criticism, the author makes use of different styles in the narrative, from poetry to normal punctuation to chapters without punctuation. I found the latter irritating because of the different possible meanings, I did not think it a successful ploy.

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### **Leah says**

This may be the worst book I've ever read. I'm not kidding. It was awful. Celebrated author, intriguing cover copy, great reviews . . . but it was a complete and utter mess of unmitigated dreck. It wasn't just the fact that the narrative switches back and forth between third person, first person, and bad poetry; or the fact that rules of grammar and punctuation don't seem to exist, making it necessary to go back and read the same sentence several times in the hopes of figuring out what it's saying; but the fact that scenes and characters come out of the blue, go back and forth in time, and have no cohesion whatsoever that makes this book truly bad.

I'm still not sure what it was about. One of the characters in the book is a poet, and when he gives a book of his work to another character, he says, "The signatures in this one are out of order. But no matter, no matter." I think the same could be said for *Loon Lake*. Honestly, I was determined to finish it because I'd hoped it would improve, that the story would somehow come together in the end in a way that made the torture worthwhile. Nope. Not so much. Just so bad! I can't believe I actually wasted my time on it! Argh!!!

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### **Wendy says**

I read this book during a week on a Maine lake that has several resident loons. In spite of its bucolic title, the book is a scathing commentary on free-market capitalism and the complicated human motivations that hold us in its grip. There's a hallucinogenic quality to some of the passages that can make the story line and characters hard to keep hold of, but the craftsmanship suggests this was the author's intent. The main character he creates is a sort of dark and perverted version of a classic American success story, poor boy makes good, that's reminiscent of Mann's Felix Krull - and even more relevant for the times we're living in.

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### **Lola Brown says**

I wish I could give it a 0. Doctorow is the king of run-on sentences and incorrect grammar. He jumps from 1st person to third person. With all the grammar errors, this book is hard to follow. There seems to be no plot as he jumps all over. I read it because it was a bookclub book. What a waste of my time.

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### **Vit Babenco says**

*Loon Lake* is extremely complex, full of unexpected turns and hard to penetrate. The nonlinear evolutions of the plot don't help either but in the long run it's one of the best novels by **E. L. Doctorow** and it surely is my most favourite.

“The man resisted all approaches he was stone he was steel I hated his grief his luxurious dereliction I hated his thoughts the quality of his voice his walk the way he spent his life proving his importance ritualizing his superiority his exercises of freedom his arrogant knowledge of the human heart I hated the back of his neck he was a killer of poets and explorers, a killer of boys and girls and he killed with as little thought as he gave to breathing, he killed by breathing he killed by existing he was an emperor, a maniac force in pantaloons and silk slippers and lacquered headdress dispensing like treasure pieces of his stool, making us throw ourselves on our faces to be beheaded one by one with gratitude...”

Nothing but hate can fill up a gulf between the rich and the dispossessed.

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### **Patrick Sprunger says**

I would say *Loon Lake* is the best E.L. Doctorow novel I have read thus far (I even hazard to say *Loon Lake* is the superior of *Ragtime*). Others have called it confusing, difficult, compromised by bad poetry, etc., but I found the out-of-chronological order and first-person-narrative jumping exciting. The use of verse to reprise the prose was a way of angling the story slightly differently so the reader can admire the way the light strikes it on different facets. Doctorow's occasional decision to present the verse version ahead of the narrative version has the cinematic/musical effect of rushing the reader down a wormhole into the scene or leaping into a new verse on a backward cymbal hit. This, along with the riveting stream-of-consciousness vignettes, give *Loon Lake* a rhythmic quality unlikely to appear in a straightforward, linear story.

The stream-of-consciousness segments are what truly make *Loon Lake* the success it is. In the past, I've had trouble with stream-of-consciousness prose, chiefly because the authors themselves were too eccentric in their own consciousness and decided to imbue their subjects with the same inscrutability (Joyce, Wolfe, Dos Passos). Doctorow writes such accessible, *plausible* characters that their streams of consciousness are logical and feel like natural motions, like being masterfully led in a dance.

And - I realize this sounds cheap and corny - the fact that *Loon Lake* has a relatively ( but plausibly) happy ending gives the book a clean finish. The novel's horrific scenes make the reader apprehensive that *Loon Lake* will play out like a Coen Brothers movie (of the *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men* variety) by the end. Don't think of this as a spoiler; consider it reassurance: *Loon Lake* is not a crushing despair. It's a great novel, one any Doctorow fan should seek out.

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### **Mont says**

This depression-era tale takes place at a tycoon's hidden mountain estate. In an ironic twist of Horatio Alger, the poor hero, Joe Korzeniowski of Paterson, New Jersey, becomes Joseph Patterson Bennett, the rich man's adopted son and heir to *Loon Lake*. But he is corrupted, not empowered by the money.

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### **John says**

“A book has its origins in the private excitements of the writer's mind,” novelist E.L. Doctorow wrote in 1994. “The excitements are private because they're incommunicable unless they're rendered, given extension

and resolved as a book.

“Years ago,” he continued, “driving in the Adirondack mountains, I passed a road sign that said ‘Loon Lake.’ I’ve always been moved by that part of the country but my strong feelings for its woods and streams suddenly intensified and seemed to cohere on those two words, which I said aloud as if they were the words of a poem.”

Doctorow's private excitement that day resulted in *Loon Lake*, published in 1979. *Loon Lake* is an odd book. It alternates between fairly straight-ahead narrative, poetry, and passages written as dossier extracts. There are also shifts in the narrative voice. Maybe all this makes *Loon Lake* experimental. I don't know.

In any case, it's the Depression-era story of streetkid Joe of Paterson, New Jersey. After a stint as a carney he winds up at the private estate of a wealthy industrialist, where a reclusive poet and mysterious young woman are also in residence. Lives intersect and interact, and therein, as they say, is the tale.

I really love Doctorow, and like all his other stuff *Loon Lake* is filled with beautiful prose, haunting and terrifying scenes, and memorable characters. The novel's experimental nature gives it a weird and dense dimension that is tough going at times.

"Of course not all, in fact very few, of the writer's private excitements are resolved as books," Doctorow concluded in those 1994 comments. "Most are forgotten as soon as they occur."

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## Christian Schwoerke says

I read this book only a little more than two weeks ago, but when I recall its various, disparate episodes and characters and how they may be made to cohere, I find myself going back to the book's final image. Meanwhile, the real conclusion to this novel-cum-dossier about characters in the orbit of Loon Lake is the bio/CV of Joseph Korzeniowski aka Joe of Paterson or Joe Paterson. The final words in this CV—"Master of Loon Lake"—serve to caption the fore mentioned final image: Joe Paterson lolling in the middle of a placid, forested mountain lake, showing himself off to his appreciative patron, industrialist and union breaker, F.W. Bennett. Image and caption suggest the serenity of a Japanese ink and wash print, where the Orient's heron has been replaced with an American loon.

This is a complex novel, with many of the signatures seemingly out of place (as was the case with Warren Penfield's self-published volume of poetry). There are shifts in first and third person, time shifts in the narratives of the principal characters, and sections written/presented in a stream-of-conscious manner by those same principals, with little or no concern for punctuation—though the syntax (Doctorow's cleverly unobtrusive manipulation) keeps these sections intelligible. What does all this manipulation of voice, tense, period, and point of view have to contribute to the basic story? In fact, what is the basic story? If called on to find that locus, it would be the titular Loon Lake, the hub around which characters' lives spin out, backward and forward in time and place.

Why, when the story seems be the lake—situated in the Adirondacks of upstate New York in 1936—does the story concern itself with the maladroit adventures of two men who, nearly a decade apart, stumble into the preserve and sanctuary of the otherworldly Loon Lake? Joe of Paterson's life has been one of urban poverty and familial neglect and abuse as the scion of immigrants to that New Jersey city. At the age of 17, in 1936, he flees his parents and his circumstances in Paterson, and takes to the road, but he quickly learns to avoid the masses of Depression-era hoboes in order to make his own way, hiring on for a season as a roustabout in a small circus. When the summer ends, and he has opportunity to steal away with the circus owner's wife, he

strikes out on his own again and has a singular vision of a woman in a luxurious, well-lit private train car. His wanderings bring him to Loon Lake, where he finds the private train again, and where for a short while he resides as a convalescent and then as a worker.

Warren Penfield has arrived at Loon Lake by a more circuitous route, his life fully underway, having endured as a youth his family's itinerant existence as hard-scrabble union miners in Colorado, a short stay in a sanitarium, service in France during World War I, a short stint as a union man in Seattle, then a longer period in Japan, much of it as a zen acolyte. In all his peregrinations Warren Penfield has sought to understand a spirit that accompanies him, which he encounters as a series of archetypal women in different times and places, and which spirit he tries to capture in mediocre free-verse poetry. Propelled by the desire to kill F.W. Bennett, the industrialist and union breaker behind the deaths of people he's known, Warren makes his way to Loon Lake in 1930. Like Joe, he is attacked and injured by wild dogs and spends time there convalescing. Bennett, even aware of Warren's intent, gives him lodging and sets him up as the lake's poet in residence.

For the fulfillment of their separate visions of the girl Clara—a young, uncouth, urban woman who is given by a mobster to serve as Bennett's mistress—Warren and Joe work together to help her escape from the lake, and Joe accompanies her on a meandering flight to Indiana. Joe goes to work on the car assembly line at a plant owned by Bennett, figuring it best to hide in plain sight. Union and plant security intrigues ensue, and Joe is embroiled, narrowly escaping charges that he was behind the death of a plant spy embedded in union activities. Meanwhile, Clara, tiring of the drudgery of an honest living, runs off again with the mobster. Joe then returns to Loon Lake and, playing on Bennett's good will towards him, makes himself the tycoon's ward and adoptive son.

Two women are principal attractions to the men in this novel: the fore mentioned Clara and the aviatrix Lucinda Bennett, F.W.'s wife. Around these two women are overt angel/whore and patrician/proletarian polarities, and they inspire coincident flights and paths for Joe and Warren: while Joe tries and fails to forge an ordinary life with Clara, Warren accompanies Lucinda on her plane to Japan and vanishes somewhere in the Pacific. Bennett himself is for a while master of both, but when he loses wife and mistress, he falls into decrepit lassitude. Joe's return to Loon Lake is tonic, and he is able to cede to Joe a restorative and benevolent affection. Each is in a harmonious equipoise, free even of the countervailing forces represented by Clara and Lucinda.

So, there is finally the matter of Joe's life that follows—college student, WWII flight officer, then a 25-year career as director the CIA—and how that corresponds to the presentation of the novel. I suggested with the word "dossier" that the information about Joe, Bennett, Clara, Lucinda, et al., is in the nature of a data dump, which idea is echoed in Warren's poetry—"Data linkage escape this is not an emergency / Come with me compound with me"—and when he invites his auditor to "compute with me." A later chapter, alluding to Joe's access to information as an intelligence officer, speaks of the data and countervailing data surrounding the life of F.W. Bennett. But even if this is a data dump, a disorganized purging of information from some central storage, why is it presented with the signatures out of sequence and in so many different voices and formats? Does the artistry of disorganization (a dissembling of chaos) lead to the vision of peace and stasis, where the fount of everything is a quiet lake in the Adirondacks? The questions raised are very zen, in the manner of a koan-like riddle that niggles at the conscious mind, begging answers that will not compute. Hyper-rationality turns into a sort of paranoia—exhibited when Joe is held in the murder of the company/union counterspy—and Joe is lucky to have escaped both the cops and the pitfall of ever multiplying explanations.

Giving the author credit for a design meant to elicit a particular effect, the novel suggests we might find resolution in irresolution, in a stasis where there is no desire, where attractions are not merely offset but simply cease to exist. But is the seeming randomness and scattering of different characters, scenes, narrative voices, and styles against the background of a specific historical epoch to be trusted? Does it all cohere? Is

there meaning beyond the reader's instinct to forge meaning? Is the reader's progress a pilgrim's progress, a parallel to older and wiser Joe's self-reflective meandering through his early life, whilst surrounded by an assortment of texts and data? There is no one who will reply: I see only the image of a man in his boat upon the still waters of a lake surrounded by mountains, a single loon rising up from a ripple in the water...

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### **Kathryn says**

In the summer of 1936, at the age of 18, Joe leaves Paterson, New Jersey with the vague notion of heading to California but detours to the Adirondack Mountains instead where he eventually stumbles onto the rustic estate of a wealthy automobile manufacturer. Loon Lake is a tale of the haves and have-nots set in the heartbreaking early years of labor unions.

Of the five or six incredibly remarkable Doctorow novels I have read, Loon Lake, published in 1980 between his award-winning Ragtime (1975) and award-winning World's Fair (1985), is the least satisfying and most puzzling. The narrative is sometimes linear but often not; some sentences are breathtakingly elegant but just when the reader begins to adjust to the lack of punctuation along comes a solitary comma, as if to prove that Doctorow's typewriter keys were not sticking when he wrote this book.

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### **Ankeyt Acharya says**

Don't know what to say of this book. The reviews made me pick it up, but "aaaghhh". The writing is somewhat weird, and even if you get past that, the narration is confusing. Maybe I'm not made out to read this kind of book, but I'd read it again only if I have absolutely nothing to read.

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### **Kyle says**

If you don't want an experimental great depression novel with multiple perspectives, stream of conscious madness and Zen koans hidden through out then don't read this book.

Your loss.

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### **Craig Amason says**

The intrigue in this book really kept my attention, and the parallels to historical figures made it so Doctorowesque. As in City of God, he is playing with the stream of consciousness, which does get a bit laborious at times. It is still a fine read.

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### **Janice says**

Confusing. Jumping from character to character, person to person, prose to poetry, punctuation to no

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punctuation. There were moments where the writing was surprising that would keep me reading, and then, disappointment. What really drove me crazy was there wasn't one redeemable character -- not one person I would want to spend any time with -- not one that seemed human.

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## **Toolshed says**

At first, I was very surprised with *Loon Lake* because I didn't expect it to be as much experimental as it was - good thing that I like such novels. Despite many of the not-so-positive reviews here and despite the fact that they are actually spot-on and true in some statements, I'm gonna have to go with the 5\* rating anyways. Reason one: I like experimenting both in form and content, as long as it is not for the sake of the story itself (like it happened in Barthelme's *Dead Father*), so this innovative approach is all right by me. Secondly, I like complicated books. Simple statement. I like solving the story as if it was a one big puzzle and like to do my own interpretations of events inside the book. I have got plenty of that from *Loon Lake*. Moreover, I got somewhat of a soft spot for picturesque images and unusual characters, thus I was really enjoying the circus parts and even Penfield's stream-of-consciousness passages even though they got tiring at some point. I value experimentation really highly and if the author manages to maintain some kind of a unity and cohesiveness of his own text despite the fact that its very nature is not unified and cohesive AT ALL, it's just another big plus. In a nutshell, so to speak, these are the reasons why I am giving it the full rating although there were some weak spots for me as well. I am, however, willing to turn a blind eye for them this time.

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## **Simon Mcleish says**

Originally published on my blog here in December 2001.

One of Doctorow's more experimental novels, *Loon Lake* presents a bewildering collection of different techniques: traditional narratives, stream of consciousness, poetry. It is also a novel which continually reminds the reader of others, possibly an easy way for an author to put himself in the tradition of the great American novel; among those which are brought to mind are *The Grapes of Wrath* and the U.S.A. trilogy.

*Loon Lake*, a retreat for millionaire industrialist F.W. Bennett in the 1920s, is the central setting of the novel. Young hobo Joe turns up there, entranced by a woman seen through the windows of a private railway carriage. There too is poet Warren Penfield, Bennett's pensioner; as the novel follows Joe's path after he meets Bennett and leaves *Loon Lake*, so too in parallel it describes Penfield's journey there. (The mixed up chronology contributes to the experimental feeling of the novel.)

A difficult read, with even the most traditional parts of the narrative flipping between first and third person, *Loon Lake* is also atmospheric and interesting for a reader prepared to make the effort.

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