

# arts & entertainment

## 'Ragtime:' history in tune

Ragtime/By E. L. Doctorow/Random House, New York/\$8.95.  
Review by Bill Roberts

*Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast. . .*

—Scott Joplin

Despite being intended for a mass audience—and successful in reaching one—E. L. Doctorow's best selling *Ragtime* is a surprisingly ambitious work.

Although Doctorow throws in a tale of passable suspense, his real purpose is making sense out of a period of American history.

He harmonizes the life of a fictional family from New Rochelle, N.Y., with the lives of historical figures from the early 1900s. He uses the era's ragtime music, such as that played by Scott Joplin, as his artistic model to bring about this harmony.

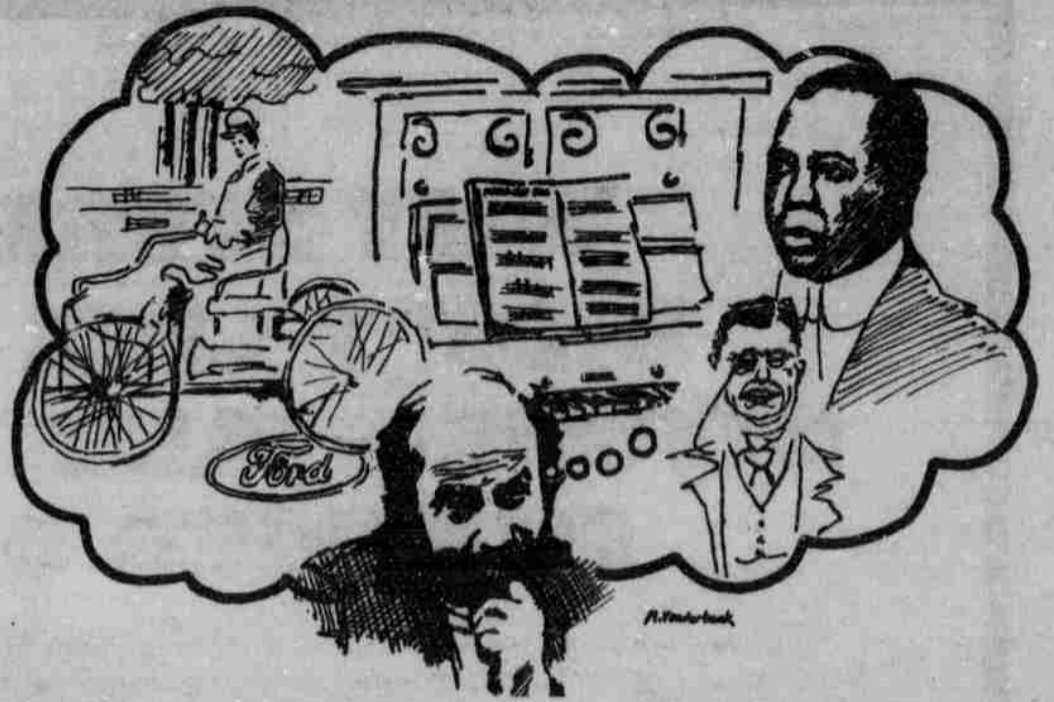
A wide range of historical people

figure prominently in the book. Harry Houdini, revolutionary Emma Goldman and capitalist J. P. Morgan are major characters. Others, include muckraker Jacob Riis, Sigmund Freud, industrialist Henry Ford, explorer Robert Peary and educator Booker T. Washington.

Doctorow is at his best when he draws subtle connections between these and other characters, hinting at their impact on American history. A meeting between Morgan and Ford is especially well done.

But when Doctorow finally brings all his material together into a suspenseful incident (a heroic black musician holds Morgan's priceless art collection hostage), the reader almost feels the author has sold out.

Doctorow tries to recreate, with his words, the tempo and charm of ragtime music.



He describes the playing of Joplin's "The Maple Leaf" with his own intents obviously in mind: "This was a most robust composition, a vigorous music that roused the senses and never stood still a moment."

"The boy perceived it as light touching various placed in space, accumulating in intricate patterns until the entire room was made to glow with its own being."

It is difficult to judge whether Doctorow has succeeded in his ambitions. To go from music to prose, with a light-filled room as a guide, is tricky business.

But he has done something right. The writing is vigorous, clear and streamlined. It carries the reader from Taft's presidency to America's first sex goddess to revolutionary politics in a matter of paragraphs, without leaving the reader feeling hurried or jostled.

*Ragtime* has been at the top of the best seller lists for weeks now, contradicting the notion that whatever book becomes popular must be sensational or shallow. It's a provocative, expertly written novel, one that is likely to last.

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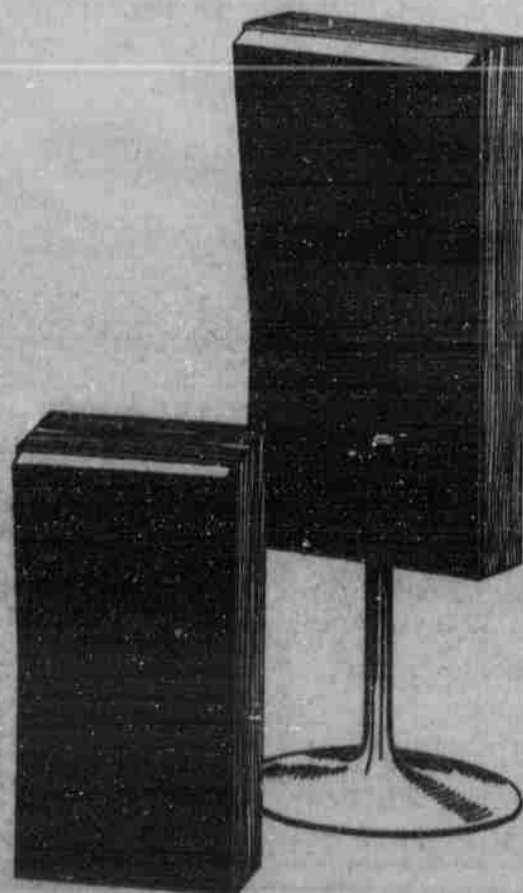
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