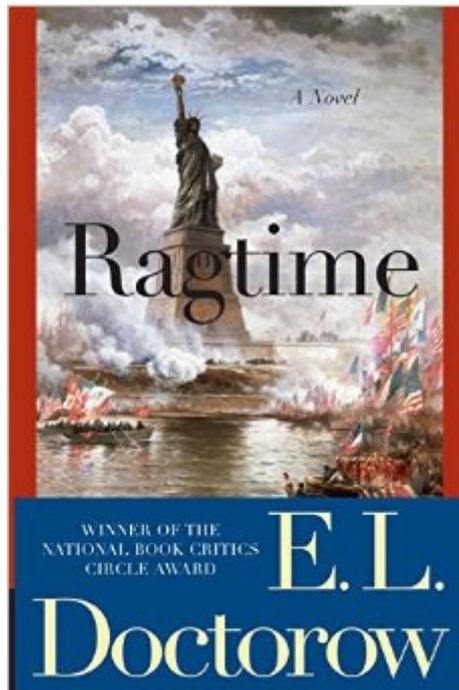


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# Ragtime: A Novel (Modern Library 100 Best Novels)



## Synopsis

Selected by the Modern Library as one of the 100 best novels of all time. Published in 1975, *Ragtime* changed our very concept of what a novel could be. An extraordinary tapestry, *Ragtime* captures the spirit of America in the era between the turn of the century and the First World War. The story opens in 1906 in New Rochelle, New York, at the home of an affluent American family. One lazy Sunday afternoon, the famous escape artist Harry Houdini swerves his car into a telephone pole outside their house. And almost magically, the line between fantasy and historical fact, between real and imaginary characters, disappears. Henry Ford, Emma Goldman, J. P. Morgan, Evelyn Nesbit, Sigmund Freud, and Emiliano Zapata slip in and out of the tale, crossing paths with Doctorow's imagined family and other fictional characters, including an immigrant peddler and a ragtime musician from Harlem whose insistence on a point of justice drives him to revolutionary violence.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (312 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

Even before the Broadway musical and the film, *Ragtime* was E.L. Doctorow's best known work, a celebrated novel that combines the syncopation of ragtime and the literary sensibilities of a writer intrigued by history as literary device. Set primarily in Westchester County's New Rochelle but also in New York City and, briefly, Massachusetts, the novel follows the stories of real and fictional characters as they move from innocence to disillusionment, from peace time to the beginnings of racial conflict and World War I. Because the novel contains so many stories, some as short as a few pages (in the case of Freud) and some woven throughout the entire novel, describing the plot of the

book is a challenge. The author primarily follows the lives of a New Rochelle family (Father, Mother, Younger Brother, and the Little Boy) as they navigate changing times. Father accompanies Peary on his exploration to the North Pole. Mother takes in a young black woman, Sarah, and her newborn, an impulsive act which leads to the introduction of ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker and his simple demands which escalate into violence. Younger Brother becomes infatuated with the celebrated beauty Evelyn Nesbit, which in turn leads to his association with anarchist Emma Goldman. Harry Houdini's car breaks down in front of their house, and the novel enters his story as well. The family acts as a touchstone for the disparate stories of a generation. Meanwhile, the story of a counterpart family - Mameh, Tateh, and the Little Girl - unfolds in the ghetto, where the Jewish immigrant family struggles for survival. Unbeknownst to both families, their stories are linked by those of the others.

During the first half of *Ragtime*, I prematurely concluded that this book was incredibly dull. Characters - both fictional and non-fictional - were dropped on the pages like a yo-yo, appearing and disappearing before you could identify their purpose in the story. I could not get attached to the characters - they all seemed like random thoughts with no connection, no development and often no names. However, after I passed the novel's halfway point, pieces started to fall together, the plot emerged with force, and Doctorow enchanted me with this important novel of the 20th century. *Ragtime* is a story about the social lives and forces of the early 1900's. The plot follows a well-to-do white family, an immigrant Jewish father and daughter, and an African-American musician who is hell-bent on seeking revenge against the racial injustice that he endures. Mingled in are historical figures, including Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Emma Goldman and Booker T. Washington, and historical events of the time, such as presidential elections and the start of World War I. As a reader, you get a steady look into the history of this era. Doctorow flexes his creative muscles in writing this story. One critic described *Ragtime* as "impressionistic" -an accurate adjective for this novel. Like an artist, Doctorow paints his story but blurs the lines and colors. For most of the novel, you may wonder why this character or event is included. This intrigue motivated me to keep reading - I had to know how it all ends. And Doctorow masterfully draws it all together during the last pages so that everything becomes very relevant and purposeful.

E.L Doctorow's highly readable novels combine history, imagination, character development, a sense of time and place and beautifully controlled and paced writing. Doctorow's relatively early novel, "*Ragtime*" (1974) remains his best-known work. The book is a delight to read, moves with the

feel of ragtime piano, and has a light happy surface. Yet the book combines many disparate threads and stories, a wealth of historical and fictional characters thrown together, and offers an unsettling vision of the United States at the turn of the century, c.1906. There is a complex, multi-layered vision at work here. The story is told in the first person in the words of Young Boy, whose parents are Father, a successful manufacturer of fireworks and flags in New Rochelle, New York, and Mother, an increasingly frustrated housewife. Mother has a brother, referred to as "Mother's younger brother" who is infatuated with a notorious, (and historical) beauty and femme fatale of the day, Evelyn Nesbit, and who becomes an expert in the use of explosives in Father's fireworks business. The story of this family slowly intertwines with that of a different American family -- Tateh, a Jewish immigrant from East Europe who at the beginning of the book is struggling as a silhouette artist on Hester Street New York City, has young daughter, and Mameh, who through poverty and desperation has abandoned the family for a life of prostitution. There is a third fictitious American intertwined in the story. Sarah is a young (18 years old) black woman who has a young child that come to live with Mother while Father is away exploring the North Pole with Peary. Mid-way in the novel, we meet the baby's father and Sarah's suitor, an older black man and a pianist named Coalhouse Walker.

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