Doctorow's Bleak House


His subjects, of course, are the New York City nutball Collyer brothers and their activities in - mostly in - and around their Upper Fifth Avenue mansion. The narrator is Homer, "the blind brother," who recounts a progression from the Manner to madness. But Doctorow makes no pretense in this novel to verisimilitude. Indeed, he extends their lives from 1947 to the late 1970s. Although (as the book jacket claims), "the epic events" of the twentieth century - "wars, political movements, technological advances" - do pass through the Collyers' cluttered house - Doctorow isn't really interested, as he's been so often before, in illuminating America's past.

After a wealthy childhood, Homer tells us, Langely ships out "Over There." He returns home with scars to his body and mustard gas in his lungs, but it is the damage to his soul which provides the book its historically familiar - and philosophically challenging - subject: Langley's post-World War I disillusionment.

Langely becomes a full-blown eccentric. He is - as the real life Langely was - a compulsive hoarder, venturing out into the city each day and returning with junky treasures. Homer is, well, a home-bound "homer" (and, of course, a "Homer"). With the exception of a stint as the piano player at a silent movie house and fast walks around the neighborhood, he spends most of his time exploring the tactile sensations of the residence. There is a halcyon time for the brothers, just before the moon landing, when Homer resumes his piano playing and Langley takes up painting. But they quickly return to outer space.

As a story, the novel moves briskly. Love interests such as Perdita Spence, Mary Elizabeth Riordan and Jacqueline Roux, along with a collection of other characters, weave through, emblems of their times. These folks can be compelling, especially the Collyers' cook, Gramama Robileaux and her grandson, Harold, a gifted musician who is killed in WW II. But some, like Vincent the gangster, who befriends the boys at a speakeasy, sends call girls as a gift, and then does the Collyers a bad turn, are B-movie stereotypes. It must also be said that some references, like the one to a Pulitzer prize winning photo of Langley, seem culled from the historical record and pasted in. But even when he throws pitches low and outside, you're willing to give Doctorow a free pass.

As time goes by, the Collyer's brownstone fills with more and more miscellanea. The most fantastic object is a Ford Model T, which Langley sets up in the vast dining room, a perfect metaphor for Homer's imagined world, with its blurred line between inside and out, Langley's crackpot attempts at control, and the breathtaking technological transformation of New York City during the century. Already world-weary, Homer and Langley seem to pass the point of no return with news of Harold's death. The brothers slumber, sleepwalk, and stagger through the fifties, sixties and seventies, collecting crap, encountering hippies and fighting with just about everybody. Langley whacks out and Homer withers within.

What's going on here? Would Doctorow mail in a *March of Time*? Why would the master of the "deep verticals" of historical fiction write a laterally moving novella about bizarre brothers who overstuffed their brownstone?

*Homer & Langely*, as we read it, is a philosophical reflection, best understood as a meditation on the distinction between the universal and the particular. Convinced that "doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle," Langley is a self-appointed Modern Day Platonist: he collects every New York City newspaper each day, aiming to create a single edition. In doing so, he thinks he can demonstrate that every person, event, and phenomenon is but a pale
copy of an Ideal Form, thus justifying his decision to stave off despair by isolating himself. "All those census records," he tells his brother, "all those archives, attest only to the self-importance of the human being who gives himself a name and a pat on the back and doesn't admit how irrelevant he is to the turnings of the planet."

Homer, for his part, keeps reaching, albeit episodically and ineffectually, toward the particular, the unique. He lives through music and he yearns for love. Although he is, ultimately, at the mercy of the sighted Langley, Homer parries his brother's beliefs reluctantly but resolutely. Are individuals irrelevant? Is there nothing new under the sun? "I wasn't prepared to go that far, for if you felt that way what was the use of living in the world." For "someone who had no regard for his own distinctiveness," he observes, shrewdly, Langley "certainly was putting up quite a struggle, holding off the city agencies, the creditors, the neighbors and the press and relishing the battles."

Properly framed, the book considers ultimate questions. And they ain't easy. What explains modern life? Does a Langley-like acknowledgment of evil, imperfect communications, and death lead to the conclusion that one should forego human connections? If you subordinate the particular to the universal, as Langley does, will you end up powerless - and with a Model T in your living room? Does Platonism end in a darkness darker than Homer's?

Throughout the novel, there is the haunting presence of Doctorow sitting in Homer's seat at the typewriter, and a sad feeling that we are reading his final argument. Without shrinking from the bleakness, Doctorow surely casts his vote for Homer and for a love and not Love. "If what mattered was the universal form of Dear Girl," Homer opines, "and if each Dear Girl was only a particular expression of the universal, any of them might serve equally well, and could replace another as our morally insufficient nature demanded. And if that were the case how could I ever be educated to love anyone for a lifetime?" Homer, it's clear, wants to love someone for a lifetime - and he might even settle for some good moments, hours, or days.

In the end, though, Doctorow chooses to remain a bit elusive. When a failing Homer is visited by "Jacqueline Roux," the novelist doesn't make clear whether she is actually "there" or present in his mind as an Ideal Form. "I don't remember the sex," Homer confesses. "I felt her heart beating. I remember her tears under our kisses. I remember holding her in my arms and absolving God of meaningless." And even more ambiguously - and achingly - Doctorow has Homer wish for himself a madness akin to his brother's as the only relief against "an unremitting consciousness" that is "irredeemably aware of itself" - and, at the same time, desire, desperately, the touch, the very particular touch, of his brother's hand.

In *Homer & Langley* - and for Homer and Langley...and maybe E.L. Doctorow - such philosophical questions come at the end of the line, when deep historical narratives no longer seem adequate.