Some insights into American life as it is: Doctorow's Sweet Land Stories

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E.L. Doctorow, *Sweet Land Stories*, New York, Random House 2004, 147 pp.

"*But at the time there was no leisure for thought.*"

The five short stories by E.L. Doctorow in this collection were initially published between 2001 and 2003, that is, more or less in the contemporary moment, characterized by great political stress in the United States and all of the intellectual confusion, uncertainty and anger that has accompanied it.

That moment and those reactions by and large go unexamined in American fiction, even when they are acknowledged. Doctorow is an exception to this trend. Far more than in his subsequent Civil War novel, *The March*, which we will review separately, in these short pieces he has pierced somewhat the shadow that official society has cast over life in America.

Although he sometimes weakens the aesthetic unity of a given story by over-cleverness, Doctorow does not necessarily damage its force of insight into how people in America are living, thinking and feeling today.

The volume is not served well by its first story, however, "A House on the Plains." The narrator is a teenager, Earle, who moves from Chicago to rural Illinois with his mother during the early 1900s. The story begins promisingly enough: "Mama said I was henceforth to be her nephew, and call her Aunt Dora."

Mama undertakes an elaborate scheme, a variation on the theme of city slickers duping farmers, which makes them good money. Mama and Earle use people in the worst way. Doctorow keeps the reader in the grip of suspense and horror, but I found little more than that to the story. Doctorow often seems to posit a "universal" human abuse in his fiction, sometimes ignited by a crime mystery.

Earle speaks with a well-constructed naiveté; Doctorow handles his voice artfully and precisely with a sense of the place and time. The writer has often chosen to say something about American sensibilities by setting his work in the first half of the last century, or even earlier. Often he obliges readers to reflect on the differences or similarities of our epoch and the story's.

But not here. I did not find his setting "A House on the Plains" at the beginning of the twentieth century effective. Although details seem genuine enough, Earle handles ghastly events with a nonchalance that, arguably, is typical later in the century. At least it does not feel authentic here. There is an obvious, deliberate tension between the horrible events and Earle's good manners and calm tone.

At the end of the story, he taunts an innocent man in prison who will be hanged: "I whispered these words to him: 'Now you have seen it all ... now you have seen everything.'" There were horrible acts committed in 1900 and no doubt sociopaths, but the story's events seem contrived.

The other four stories are more successful. In a review of Best American Short Stories 2003, I wrote about "Baby Wilson": "This story concerns a baby-snatching and the subsequent flight from the law. The narrator, Lester, wants no part of it, but feels impelled to help for good or poor reasons, and drives around the western United States as a fugitive. There is relief in the end. The motivation for the baby-snatching seems silly, like the one in the film *Raising Arizona*, but this story presents some important images.

"Michiko Kakutani writing in the *New York Times* complains that Doctorow's pieces in *Sweet Land Stories* are missing 'an indelible sense of time and place' and fail to 'disclose a larger social landscape.' These have been, as she recognizes, some of the strengths of his writing, and perhaps, as Kakutani contends, this recent work might lack something compared to his other fiction.

"Yet in *Best American Short Stories 2003*, 'Baby Wilson' stands in glaring contrast to most of the other stories: we are in America at the turn of the twenty-first century. On the lam, Lester lives by gambling and stealing credit. A Nevada town is 'a railroad yard, a string of car dealerships.' The story has a real feeling for the emptiness and loneliness of much of American life today. The characters lack consciousness of their own lives, of the larger situation."

If anything, *Sweet Land Stories* discloses "a larger social landscape" than the vast majority of recent American works of fiction.

Like "Baby Wilson," the third story, "Joline, a Life," gives us something authentic and necessary. The story takes a young woman from age 15 to her early twenties. Joline marries young; her ambitions are modest. A man seduces her. He is at the peak of success in her community, with "a nice ranch house with a garden out back and a picnic table and two hammocks between the trees."

Family violence and the misery of courts and incarceration take over. She does a little hooking to get out West and traps herself again with a petty drug dealer and double-crosser who is "almost a gentleman." Again there are unhappy spouses and the police.

On to Las Vegas, a strip club, and a rich older man, who is not what he seems, to Joline, but perhaps exactly what he seems to the reader. No one, in fact, in her life lives up to his promises. Things get dirtier as she moves up the social scale again to a fundamentalist Christian of wealth and good family. Life is banal and empty until beatings and humiliations ensue. Then come the lawyers and her child is stolen.

When it is over, she is in Los Angeles with more dreams, but still of the token variety: to be a movie star, perhaps. She inks in comic books, now called graphic novels, for a living. Joline is still young and now has a life of her own. There is some relief, but not much hope for the young woman in a society that does not take good care of the

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young. “Joline: a Life” raises feelings of anger and sympathy.

A barren intellectual and emotional world also challenges the characters in “Walter John Harmon,” although they are a different sort of people. An educated lawyer and his wife have become members of a religious cult. They are ready to suspend rational thought and treat natural events as divine acts, as so many are in the US at present.

The language of this story and the thoughts of its characters seem quite in line with everything we know or suspect about a certain type of Christian cult. We never leave the illusions of the narrator, Jim, his sincere beliefs, the patent faith in the cult’s leader, the nearly divine Walter John Harmon, who “has in his effortless way drawn so many of us to his prophecy.” Peace and comfort, true brotherhood, even warm sunlight and the countryside’s stillness are such strong lures that they cannot be disrupted by any crisis, at least for those determined to avoid the world outside the “community.”

And the story begins with a crisis. Within the community’s isolated compound, Walter John Harmon requires the sexual use of Jim’s wife, Betty. Jealous impulses rise in Jim, but what is normal outside is not allowed to be normal inside the cult.

So Jim overcomes the crisis. He is the stronger for it, he imagines, bolstered by what he is experiencing in the Unfolding Revelation, which is that Walter John Harmon will take all sin upon himself and unlike Christ, he will not ascend. The Holy City will descend not too far from the compound, but Walter John Harmon will live in sin, have a Swiss bank account, drive a Hummer and drink a lot.

The stakes are high. “Everyone seems so happy,” a visitor tells Jim.

“Do you find that odd?”

“Yes, sort of.”

Walter John Harmon of course represents all that is filthy and deceitful—in the grand old tradition of American religious huckstering—in the world that the cult-members are escaping. He eventually runs off with Betty, and another crisis, one of faith, arises in the community. When he disappears, a community elder leads a prayer.

And then, they reason: “What further proof did we need of the truth of his prophecy than his total immersion in sin and disgrace?” Jim rises in the organization. He becomes an elder and a leader. The story ends not in another con, but in Waco-like fear. Now the community “huddles” together and there is an inference that guns will soon be present.

Doctorow takes a wrong turn here, I feel. The conclusion does not flow smoothly from the earlier portions of the story. It surely hints correctly at something in the social air, but it is still unnecessary and handicapping. Without the suggestion of violence, the story is dramatically and thematically sufficient to show the illusions and irrationality in which many disoriented people find themselves trapped.

The final story is called “Child, Dead, in the Rose Garden.” The story is not an indictment of the present occupant of the White House, although the title inevitably suggests that. Imputations of criminality of all sorts stick to the Bush administration. Because it is so deliberately shocking, the title appears a trifle gimmicky, but the story, fortunately, lives up to its sensational billing.

An FBI agent in Washington, DC, Molloy, near retirement, must investigate the discovery of a child’s corpse in the Rose Garden after an official function. The story starts with the familiar routine of protecting the crime scene, security measures, and inquiries. There are numerous cover-ups, dead-ends and fingers pointed in the wrong direction. Molloy has to deal with shady White House officials and corporate heads and their lawyers. Overall, it is an ugly experience.

In the end, Molloy learns that the child comes from an impoverished immigrant family. He had died of an incurable disease and an invited guest placed his body in the Rose Garden. The event is never made public and no one is called to account.

But Doctorow does impute guilt. When, finally, Molloy is able to interview the responsible party, who belongs to a high social status, we pass from the sadness of the boy’s home, a bungalow “like any other on the street except for the little front yard—it was not burnt-out, it was green” to a breezy and lovely place, emanating strength and confidence.

When Molloy conducts his interview, he finds out that the boy’s corpse was left there as a protest. “It would be a kind of shock treatment,” the culprit says, “if they felt the connection, even for just a moment, that this had something to do with them, the gentlemen that run things? That’s all I wanted.”

The individual in question asks Molloy, “Are you not one of the configured gentlemen?

“Configured in what way?

“Configured to win. And fuck all else.”

One senses that by “configured” here Doctorow means “on the inside,” “connected,” endowed with the family upbringing, education and social insularity that condition the sense of entitlement and self-satisfaction of the American upper echelons and their top functionaries.

There are artistic problems in this story as well. It is has too much of the clichéd tired-but-honest detective, also perhaps a slightly too stereotypical image of the ruling class itself. But from the title to the end, through a series of simple devices it depicts the elite as venal and murderous.

It seems fair to say that a tint of pessimism and a sense of powerlessness haunt the author. Undoubtedly, like most contemporary American short stories, those in *Sweet Land Stories* suffer from a certain mannered approach. There is too much cleverness and quirkiness, too much focus on the style and structure beyond the artistically necessary or satisfying. Events and history and social processes cry out for artistic treatment, and the artists, even many of the most sincere, remain far too concerned with trying to ‘impress.’

Yet on the whole, these stories feel vital and genuine. In most of *Sweet Land Stories* Doctorow has produced dispatches from life as it is in the United States, where muddy thinking is almost everywhere, where the most limited ambitions are thwarted and where people do not do well at avoiding abuse woven into the fabric of society.

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