



# E.L. Doctorow's fictional autobiography: *World's Fair* (1985) as a carnivalesque *Bildungsroman*

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In *World's Fair* (1985) E.L. (Edgar Lawrence) Doctorow (1931–) artistically transforms autobiographical and historical facts and memories of the actual world of his childhood into a *Bildungsroman*. Doctorow was in his fifties when he wrote this novel, which is widely regarded as more autobiographic than his other *Bildungsromane*, namely *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Loon Lake* (1980) and *Billy Bathgate* (1989). This fictionalisation takes place through the use of a retrospective narrator who depicts the memories of his formative experiences as a nine-year-old boy. The novel is marked by a striking structural feature, namely that positive and sombre or serious events alternate. The question therefore arises: Why does Doctorow construct his childhood memoir in this manner? In brief, the answer is that the narrator's *Bildung* depends on a carnivalesque dialectic of dangerous and/or threatening events and the relief and/or repair of these same events. This article therefore attempts to make sense of *World's Fair* in terms of selected aspects of M.M. Bakhtin's notion of 'carnival'. It shows a clear link between, on the one hand, this novel's status as a *Bildungsroman* along with the personal growth of the narrator and central character and, on the other hand, a carnivalesque dialectic of seriousness and amelioration. It thus shows that the main theme of the book is, in fact, the reliance of growth on this dialectic. The article begins with a brief analysis of the novel in terms of its semi-autobiographic character and then provides an equally brief overview of Bakhtin's (1984, 1985) notion of carnival. The main body of the text provides examples from the novel and thus evidence for the above-mentioned dialectic.

**E.L. Doctorow se fiktiewe outobiografie: *World's Fair* (1985), as 'n karnavaleske *Bildungsroman*.** In *World's Fair* (1985) omvorm E.L. (Edgar Lawrence) Doctorow (1931–) outobiografiese en geskiedkundige feite en herinneringe van die werklike wêreld van sy kindertyd op 'n artistieke wyse in 'n *Bildungsroman*. Doctorow was in sy vyftigs toe hy hierdie roman geskryf het, wat oor die algemeen as meer outobiografies beskou word as sy ander *Bildungsromane*, naamlik *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Loon Lake* (1980) en *Billy Bathgate* (1989). Hierdie fiksionalisering vind plaas deur 'n retrospektiewe verteller wat sy herinneringe aan sy lewensvormende ervaringe as 'n negejarige seun skilder. 'n Opvallende strukturele eienskap kenmerk hierdie roman, naamlik dat positiewe en somber of ernstige gebeurtenisse mekaar afwissel. Die vraag ontstaan dus: Waarom konstrueer Doctorow die memoir van sy kindertyd op hierdie wyse? Die antwoord is kortliks dat die verteller, Edgar Altschuler, se *Bildung* op 'n karnevalistiese dialektiek van gevaarlike en/of bedreigende gebeurtenisse en die verligting en/of herstel van dieselfde gebeurtenisse berus. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om *World's Fair* in terme van geselekteerde aspekte van M.M. Bakhtin se idee van 'karnaval' te verstaan. Dit toon aan dat daar 'n duidelike verband bestaan tussen, aan die een kant, die roman se posisie as 'n *Bildungsroman* tesame met die persoonlike ontwikkeling van die verteller en die sentrale karakter en, aan die ander kant, die karnavaleske dialektiek van erns en verbetering. Persoonlike groei wat op hierdie dialektiek gebaseer is, is dus die sentrale tema van hierdie boek. Die artikel begin met 'n kort ontleding van die semi-outobiografiese aard van die roman en verskaf dan 'n ewe kort oorsig van Bakhtin (1984, 1985) se konsep 'karnaval'. Die hoofdeel van die artikel bestaan uit voorbeelde en daarmee bewyse van bogenoemde dialektiek.

## Introduction

On 30 August 2014, the novelist E.L. Doctorow received the Library of Congress Prize for American fiction. James Billington, the 13th Librarian of the United States Congress, described Doctorow as '... our very own Charles Dickens, summoning a distinctively American place and time, channelling our myriad voices' (Flood 2014). This certainly also brings to mind Doctorow's 1985 fictionalised childhood memoir, *World's Fair* – even though this novel has elicited very little research in the past decade. *World's Fair* was preceded by five novels since his 1960 debut,



*Welcome to Hard Times*, and followed by six more, the most recent being *Andrew's Brain* (2014). Doctorow relates that it took him only seven months to write the book:

Usually it takes me a few years to write a book. *World's Fair* was an exception. It seemed to be a particularly fluent book as it came ... I think what happened in that case is that God gave me a bonus book ... I imagine He just decided, Well, this one's been paying his dues, so let's give him a bonus book. (Plimpton 1986)

Harter and Thompson (1990:107) emphasise that the novel to a large degree consists of the author's memories of his own childhood even though it is difficult to distinguish between '... the novel's material and his own past experience'. The author himself also draws attention to the fact that it is 'virtually a memoir' by giving the protagonist his own first name, birth date and biographical facts (Harter & Thompson 1990:107).

Indeed, *World's Fair* (1985) appears, on the surface at least, to be less experimental and political (cf. McGowan 2001:233) than Doctorow's other novels: a rather simple, mostly chronological, first-person account of a boy's coming-of-age in 1930s New York. Doctorow's novel is comparable to Saul Bellow's *The adventures of Augie March* ([1953] 2006) in the sense that *World's Fair* is filled with the discursive construction of the childhood memories of one Edgar Altschuler. Doctorow says that Saul Bellow was important to him:

I'd read his 'Adventures of Augie March' in college, and it was in the nature of a revelation, the freedom in that narrative — that there were no rules for the writing of a novel except as you made them up. (Sunday book review 2014)

However, whilst *Augie March* is a picaresque novel, *World's Fair* is, as McGowan (2001:233) states, 'an autobiographical *Bildungsroman*', filled with the memories of a more or less normal childhood. Thus Towers (1985:23) remarks that events like the grandmother's death, a Sunday visit to paternal grandparents, a Seder celebrated at rich Aunt France's house and a near mugging at the hands of anti-Semitic toughs from the East Bronx are 'ordinary' and infused with realistic period detail.

Critics like Lewis (1986:101) and Weber (1985:78), however, recognise that the autobiographic nature of the novel does not supersede the fictional quality of the book: '... the deliberate withholding of the narrator's name for so long helps to blur the distinction between fictional and real selves, between imagination and reality' (Lewis 1986:101). Weber (1985:78) also quotes Doctorow, who himself calls *World's Fair* a *Bildungsroman*, emphasising that this novel is not simply autobiographical: the autobiographic details are '... all true. But the book is an invention. It's the illusion of a memoir' (Weber 1985:78). Doctorow avers that the sources which he used do not matter in the final analysis because 'you're making a composition' and '... the sources may be autobiographical, but a composition has been made, so it's fiction. We can no longer think of it as autobiographical' (Silverblatt [1994] 1999:217). An accurate portrayal of historical New York based

on memorial reconstruction is not at issue; the literary value of the work is.

Firstly, as a *Bildungsroman* (cf. Tokarczyk 2000:36–37), *World's Fair* has been compared, in fact, to another well-known example of this genre, James Joyce's ([1916] 1992) *A portrait of the artist as a young man*. Tokarczyk (2000:36) points out that *World's Fair* imitates Joyce's book: '[M]ost notably, it begins with a bed-wetting scene. Whilst Stephen Dedalus has to cope with poor eyesight, Edgar is an asthmatic child with numerous allergies.' Treadwell (1986:163) observes that the focus of both Joyce's and Doctorow's protagonists progresses or grows from a narrow self-absorption to the desire to '... embrace the multiform experiences of life and, by implication at least, to turn them into art'. Thus, these *Bildungsromane* develop into *Künstlerromane*, or literary works.

The above-mentioned growth process is, in turn, linked to a further central theme of this novel. Doctorow explains again, in the interview provided in Weber (1985), as follows:

So what I wanted to do was write something with narrative advance that did not depend on plot, that is to say, that seemed to be life, not a story. To break down the distinction between formal fiction and the actual, palpable sense of life as it is lived, the way time passes, *the way things are chronically dramatic without ever coming to crisis*. (p. 78; italics added)

It is particularly the notion of life being 'chronically dramatic without ever coming to crisis' that is central to the focus of this article. *World's Fair* as a carnivalesque *Bildungsroman* based on autobiographic information is clearly different from Doctorow's other novels in the sense that it does not focus on a single climactic event that generally leads inexorably to a tragic end, that is, one comparable to the arrival of the Bad Man of Bodie in *Welcome to Hard Times* (Doctorow [1960] 1996), to the execution of the Isaacsons in *The Book of Daniel* (Doctorow 1971) or to the death of a child in *Andrew's Brain* (Doctorow 2014). Rather, Doctorow attempts to depict the continuous subversion of unpleasant and potentially harmful or disastrous events as part of an individual's growth process. This is what distinguishes *World's Fair* as a *Bildungsroman* or an *Erziehungsroman*, that is, a novel of formation or education, as Abrams and Harpham (2005) point out:

The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world. (pp. 198–199)

The deflation of potentially harmful or malevolent events does not necessarily entail a direct reversal or negation: Negative events follow and, at times, grow out of positive events which, in turn, follow or grow out of negative ones. The question consequently arises: Why does Doctorow structure historical facts of the period in combination with his personal memories in this way? Edgar's youthful development is characterised as clearly resting on a dialectic of 'seriousness' and 'festivity'. It is meaningful that the author – as artist – has decided to reconstruct his collection



of memories, within the context of specific historical facts, in such a way that they lead to a fictional perspective that implies that the actual world consists of neither exclusively beneficial nor malevolent aspects. The only way in which the individual can survive and grow is to embrace this dialectic. This cycle or dialectic of negative and positive is taken up in the following section, with specific reference to Bakhtin's (1984, 1985) notion of 'carnival'. This carnivalesque dialectic is then explicitly linked in the next section to *World's Fair's* status as a *Bildungsroman*.

## World's Fair and Bakhtin's 'carnival'

This section uses M.M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world* as well as his *Literatur und Karneval: Zur Romantheorie und Lachkultur* [Literature and carnival: Regarding the theory of the novel and the culture of laughter<sup>1</sup>] as theoretical bases for understanding important aspects of Doctorow's *World's Fair*. Of specific interest here is Bakhtin's discussion of the nature and characteristics of carnival. The sections in *Rabelais and his world* entitled 'Wolfgang Kayser's theory regarding the grotesque', 'Basic features of the culture of laughter', 'Carnival and the carnivalisation of literature' and 'Carnival related matters in Dostoyevski' are especially useful as a basis from which to interpret the novel.

The discussion in this section will centre primarily on one aspect of Bakhtin's carnival,<sup>2</sup> that of metaphoric rebirth, restoration or repair. Bakhtin (1984:7) says that the carnival has a universal spirit: 'It is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part'. Carnival, in turn, is part of a broader dialectic as Bakhtin (1985) points out:

The people of the Middle Ages participated equally in two lives: the official life and the carnival. Their existence was determined by two aspects of the world: by the aspect of the piety of seriousness and by the aspect of laughter. (p. 41)

People yearn to escape the vices of seriousness: There is a need to restore or repair their lives. Carnival is the experience of liberation from the suffering of a too sober and too serious life. Existence becomes endurable again by placing the official world in relativized perspective. Bakhtin (1985) explains this in the following words:

Seriousness reduced people to servitude, scared them. It lied, it was hypocritical, it was stingy and it fasted. It was possible on the fairgrounds to put the serious tone down on the holiday table and another truth began to sound: laughing, crazy, unseemly, swearing, parodying, travesty. Fear and the lie are dispelled due to the triumph of the material-physical and that of the festive. (p. 39)

Ultimately, the concept of a carnival should be seen as a metaphor for the world: the cyclical swing from laughter to

seriousness and back, repeated, as a universal condition. The truth of carnival is, thus, that it is not an alternative life. The carnival is embedded in the real world as the real world is embedded in the carnival. This notion of opposite spheres merging and being recognisable in one another is itself a carnivalesque concept according to Bakhtin (1985):

Birth becomes visible in death, death becomes visible in birth, in victory defeat, in defeat victory, in elevation humiliation, et cetera. The carnival laughter ensures that not one of these moments of change are made absolute, that they do not freeze in a one-sided seriousness. (p. 66)

Turning now to the novel, we first of all note the title: *World's Fair*. Whilst the 1939 New York World's Fair has a central position in the novel, other fair-like, carnivalesque places appear and events occur in the novel: There are references to an animal exhibition, a circus and Rockaway beach<sup>3</sup> as a kind of fair. McHale (1993:174) makes a useful comment in this regard when he says that '[r]epresentations of circuses, fairs, sideshows, and amusement parks often function as residual indicators of the carnival context in postmodernist fiction'.

The carnivalesque notion of the merging of opposite spheres is also apparent in the novel, particularly in relation to Edgar's parents, who are reconciled at the end of the novel. Edgar's mother is a strict, reliable, hard-working person: 'Rose is Apollonian, all order and efficiency and common sense' (Parks 1991:99). His father, who owns a radio shop, is the opposite in that he is not only amiable and fun-loving but also inclined to gamble. In general, Dave is an unreliable family member, notorious for breaking promises, and he might also be a philanderer: 'Dave is a free spirit, the Dionysian, the impulsive, dreamy but passionate' (Parks 1991:99). We note in this regard that the New York World's Fair, which dominates the end of the novel and which in a sense provides a backdrop to the final moment of reconstruction, is itself dominated by the integration of two modernistic architectural structures: the so-called Trylon and Perisphere; the first being angular (masculine) and the second round (and feminine). That this is an example of the carnivalesque integration of opposites seems obvious enough.

An important point is that Doctorow's novel does not represent carnival as a conscious decision to be silly or jolly in reaction to preceding seriousness. Rather, the focus is that of reconstruction, relief, amelioration and integration and inversion. Thus, for example, when Edgar's grandmother dies, one finds a carnivalesque representation of death. The fact of death is inverted to the extent that the dead body seems youthful:

She lay white and slender; I could not see her face, but her body, the white female whiteness of it, it was dazzling to me, not at all wrinkled and not bent but straight ... I wondered if it was a thing about death that made grandmas into girls (Doctorow 1985:97)

1.The translations from German into English are those of the first author. Henceforth only the English translations are provided.

2.McHale (1993:174) stresses that '... postmodernist representations of carnival often take the form of some reduced version of carnival, rather than the full-fledged popular carnival such as Bakhtin describes'. The same is true of the use of Bakhtin's theory in this article and thus, by implication, in *World's Fair*.

3.The Rockaway peninsula is an 11-mile ribbon of land that juts out from the southern tip of Queens (Detrick 2011).



These various moments of reconstruction appear, at the same time, to be centrally involved with the *growth* of the main character, that is, his journey from self-absorption to multiform experience.

## World's Fair as Bildungsroman: The journey from the family microcosm to the social macrocosm

The link between the novel's carnivalesque thematic and its status as a *Bildungsroman* will be taken up in this section in more detail.

### The security and comfort of Edgar Altschuler's early microcosm

According to Weber (1985):

... although outwardly his quietest novel, *World's Fair* uses the Bronx, as much as Joyce did Dublin, as a window through which to witness the tremors of a whole society. (p. 26)

Thus, '... the macrocosm impinges upon, but in no sense displaces, the microcosm' (Harter & Thompson 1990:116). Lewis (1986:102) observes that the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm entails a '... preoccupation with the relationship between the private and the public, the personal and the historical'. Likewise Harter and Thompson (1990:113) explain this central feature of *World's Fair*, one clearly reminiscent of Joyce's *A portrait*, in terms of concentric circles that constantly expand. Weber (1985:78) also describes an image of the protagonist's microscopic initial life, surrounded by his family and relatives, surrounded in turn by the Bronx (into which he later ventures) and New York. The city is, furthermore, surrounded in its turn by the larger world and Europe that was at that time characterised by the growth of fascism. We shall see in this section that the process of growth is characterised by the dialectic described in the previous section: The amelioration provided by carnival is a central facet of the movement from one 'concentric circle' to the other.

Beginning with the innermost circle, an experience that is representative of Edgar's early home life is when he wets his bed, which can be experienced as 'disastrous' from an infant's perspective, the first of a series of 'serious' events. This memory has three basic components that correspond closely with Stephen Dedalus's similar experience in *A portrait*. The first is a physical sensation, the second is the mother's care, and the third is the child's emotionally positive awareness of both of his parents. Both Edgar and Stephen experience childhood as a balance between, or dialectic of, menace and exemption from menace. Compare the following excerpts:

When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had a queer smell. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. (p. 3)

Startled awake by the ammoniated mists, I am roused in one instant from glutinous sleep to grieving awareness; I have done it again ... From her bed she hushes me. 'Mama!' She groans,

risers, advances on me in her white nightgown. Her strong hands go to work ... In seconds I am washed, powdered, clean-clothed, and brought to secret smiles in the dark ... My father gives me a companionable pat and falls back to sleep with his hand on my shoulder ... I smell their godlike odors, male, female. (p. 6)  
(see Joyce [1916] 1992; Doctorow 1985)

Doctorow's *Loon Lake* and *The Book of Daniel* differ radically from *World's Fair* and *A portrait* in this regard. Whilst the Altschuler family is depicted as a sanctuary, in contrast, Joe of Paterson in *Loon Lake* recalls the following:

only when it turned cold and chafed my thighs did I admit to being awake, mama, oh, mama, the sense of real catastrophe, he wet the bed again – alone in that, alone for years in all of that. (Doctorow 1980:5)

In *Loon Lake*, the child experiences a complete lack of care, the opposite of the care that Stephen and Edgar experience; a lack of carnivalesque redemption.

In *Loon Lake*, unhealthy relationships within other contexts continue, leading to the final, bleak, unredeemed outcome. Similarly, in *The Book of Daniel*, Susan's bed-wetting arguably symbolises her traumatisation subsequent to the execution of her parents. Contrastively, this common childhood experience has, as mentioned, a reconstructive and positive effect on the development and growth of both Stephen and Edgar. Stephen's reference to bed-wetting is immediately followed by a cheerful remark, the bed-wetting apparently already forgotten: 'She played on the piano the sailor's hornpipe for him to dance' (Joyce [1916] 1992:3). At first, the experience is startling for Edgar: the smell is disagreeable, abrasive. However, the situation is quickly repaired by the efficient care of Rose and the comfort given to Edgar. 'Secret smiles' combined with Edgar becoming a 'prince' (Doctorow 1985:6) can all be related to the triumphant carnival laughter that relativizes seriousness and suffering.

### Entering the macrocosm: The cruel realities of the world

As the novel progresses, both Edgar and Stephen become more aware of the menaces which the world presents. They enter the next 'concentric circle' where the distinction between the warmth of family life and the menace of the outside world becomes clearer. Early in *World's Fair*, the potential for misfortune exists when the family dog, Pinky, disappears after an unloading coal truck scares her away. The janitor, Smith, notifies the Altschulers, and Rose and Edgar initiate a search. Pinky is finally discovered, the crisis is dissolved, but only after a car has grazed her. Edgar elaborates:

The calamity of her loss panicked my small heart ... 'With luck she'll never come back,' my mother said. This was her way – to express concern from opposite sides of the crisis ... 'Oh Pinky,' my mother said and got down on her knees and hugged the dog she despised. (Doctorow 1985:23)

There is a connection between this episode and a later one. Edgar's parents come to the conclusion that he is allergic to



the dog. Pinky is taken away and put to sleep. This infuriates Donald, Edgar's elder brother:

When Donald got home from school and found no Pinky and heard my report to him, he became enraged ... 'I hate you!' he said. 'I hate Mom and I hate Dad and I hate Dr. Perlman, but most of all, I hate you because you caused the problem in the first place. (Doctorow 1985:83)

Goodwill is, however, eventually restored by Edgar winning a free visit for the whole family to the World's Fair. The death of the dog is long-forgotten, and the reader clearly recognises excitement in Donald's reaction:

Donald enjoyed very much the way it had happened that the family was finally going. He claimed not to be able to believe it. He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. (Doctorow 1985:281)

This kind of benevolent event thus stands in stark, but intimate, contrast to the various threatening events that characterise this fictional memoir.

A more serious occasion involves the near-drowning of his friend, Arnold, in the school swimming-pool. At the moment when Arnold goes under, Edgar's first reaction is to look for the swimming instructor, Mr Bone. He and his female colleague Mrs Fasching are both authoritarian caricatures:

He was the school's swimming coach and *lord* of this underworld, a fat bald man with steel-rim spectacles who wore a white cotton undershirt stretched taut over his enormous belly, and white ducks and rubber sandals. He also had a gimpy leg ... The girls were instructed by his associate, Mrs. Fasching, as skinny as he was fat ... (Doctorow 1985:149–150; italics added)

These descriptions echo Bakhtin's (1985:51) statement that the 'centre of the carnivalesque experience of the world' is to be found '... in the custom of the elevation and humiliation of the carnival king; the pathos of transition and change, death and renewal ...' Subsequently, as Bakhtin (1985) points out, the:

exact opposite of the real king gets crowned: the slave or the fool. This expresses and elucidates the carnival world which is a world turned on its head ... Everything is moved to the standing position of relativity, it almost becomes a requirement [*but a customary requirement*]. (Bakhtin 1985:51)

The carnival is a symbolic portrayal of the real world but done so in a satiric manner as a coping mechanism through comic relief:

Debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrowning, related to blows and abuse. The king's attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world 'turned inside out'. (Bakhtin 1984:370)

Importantly, 'Fasching' is a German word meaning 'carnival'. She is Mr Bone's female counterpart, the carnival queen. Thus the representatives of the official world, Mr Bone and Mrs Fasching, are clowns, yet, they are also figures of authority. Mr. Bone's name but also his behaviour are portrayed as subtly ridiculous. At one point, Edgar says: 'I looked for

Mr. Bone, but he was down at the end of the line yelling at someone' (Doctorow 1985:151). His strictness, his authority, is counterweighed by the fact that he appears not to watch over the children sufficiently. The instructor 'crowns' himself as a leader by a display of aggression aimed at another child, but the 'clownish' effect is that he almost lets another child drown. Edgar manages to rescue Arnold:

We looked at each other, too terrified to acknowledge the seriousness of what had happened. You came up, you went down, you took in water like air, and in a few quiet moments you could die. (Doctorow 1985:151)

The potential harm is eliminated and Arnold survives.

Immediately after this episode, Edgar describes a further, far worse incident. While at school, Edgar witnesses a woman being fatally hit by a car. His depiction of this episode ends with the macabre image of '... the arm of the dead woman bobbing up and down' (Doctorow 1985:153). The disturbing nature of the reality of her death, accompanied by an illusion of life created by the movement of the arm, is heightened by another coincidence:

... the hand limp, palm up, as if the dead arm were pointing to the schoolyard, indicating it repeatedly – so that I should not forget – as a place of death. (Doctorow 1985:153)

Edgar also stays acutely aware of the reality of death because the stain of the woman's blood is visible for a few weeks. Experiences of terror continue for a while. He finds it difficult to conquer his fear but eventually succeeds: 'The acute awareness of victory over fear is an essential element of medieval laughter' (Bakhtin 1984:91); the terrible is transformed into a jolly 'bogey' (Bakhtin 1985:36). In this regard, we note that the description of the woman's death and Edgar's awareness of it are followed immediately by a contrasting remark when the new chapter begins: 'I found it very pleasurable to rub colour comics onto waxed paper' (Doctorow 1985:54). This discontinuity emphasises the fact that the disaster has had no lasting or traumatising effect on Edgar.

### The grave realities of the international macrocosm and personal relief

The explosion of the *Hindenburg*, another disaster, both fascinates and disturbs Edgar. He brings the fall of the airship into direct relationship with his own existential angst: 'In bed, trying to sleep, I imagined my father stumbling and crashing to the ground, and I cried out' (Doctorow 1985:159). Parks (1991:100) observes in this regard that Edgar learns that the world is not invulnerable; it is made uncertain in the light of death. This fear and uncertainty are then, in carnival fashion, once again subverted by the frivolous 'revelation' that he fell himself all the time. The narrator then quickly moves on to the following: 'I had a best friend now, Bertram, who lived a block away on Morris Avenue and took clarinet lessons' (Doctorow 1985:160). This childlike, enthusiastic tone mitigates the terrible story of the *Hindenburg* and communicates a world not solely defined by failure, tragedy



or cacophony. It is also distinguished by a little boy who takes clarinet lessons with the objectives of having fun and playing harmoniously.

The disaster that redefines the whole world, the Second World War, also features in the novel. *World's Fair* succeeds too in mitigating the reality of the war without undermining the fact that it is arguably the worst catastrophe of the 20th century. For the Altschulers, the war creates the fear that Donald might be sent away, once America becomes involved. The given context indeed becomes a *world's 'fair'* because of the war. However, by way of private involvement, the novelist mitigates the public or historical reality whilst acknowledging the seriousness of the worldwide death and suffering which the war caused. This is done (within Edgar's context) by redirecting the focus towards a child's innocence. Edgar feels safe in his parents' house despite the war: 'I liked the shelter of a desk lamp, feeling toward it Bomba the Jungle Boy's affection for his campfire in the roars of the dark surrounding night' (Doctorow 1985: 200).

An individual can thus experience security despite the inevitable presence of 'darkness' or disaster in the broader context. *World's Fair* succeeds in acknowledging historical and personal disasters whilst still presenting the perspective that the world is not characterised solely by disaster. This is clearly illustrated when Donald tells his family the gruesome Sigmund Miller story. Although a disturbing tale, this story signals, in fact, the first falling-off of intensity in the disasters after the introduction of the war in the novel. Miller and his girlfriend made a suicide pact as a result of the girlfriend falling pregnant, but Miller did not have the courage to kill himself after he had killed her. Donald tells the story to the family during supper, and Rose disapproves. She feels that the story is unbecoming for a dinner-table conversation. Edgar misinterprets the meaning of Rose's reaction:

I was offended. 'You think I don't know what pregnant means?' I said to her. 'I can assure you, I know exactly what it means!' Then I was doubly offended because everyone laughed, as if I had said something funny. (Doctorow 1985:197)

The humour of the moment is, of course, brought about by Edgar's guileless reaction. Edgar is more focused on the sexual aspect of the story than on the crime committed. The crime is of a macabre, puzzling nature that transcends his understanding whilst Edgar's reaction is comforting to the family because his youthful indignation mitigates the harshness of the reality evoked in the story. It distracts them in the same way that a carnival used to distract people from the seriousness and upsetting events that often occur:

Ritual laughter directed itself towards the highest. The sun (the highest god), the other gods, the highest earthly forces were reviled and laughed at. This enforced their renewal. All forms of ritual laughter were related to death and renewal, the act of procreation, the symbols of fertility. Ritual laughter was a reaction to crises in the life of the sun (the solstices), the crises in the life of the divinity, in the life of the world and the human being ... Diatribe merged in that with happiness. (Bakhtin 1985:53–54)

Edgar is, thus, the catalyst for his family's carnivalesque reaction against a universe in which it is possible for a macabre event such as the Miller story to take place. In laughing, they celebrate Edgar and his innocence. The family overcomes fear through laughter.

Thus, in authentic carnival tradition, threats are relativized through amelioration. Rose is, for example, depicted as an overprotective mother, but the effect is one of humour. The dangers of the external world, like that exemplified by Mrs Goodman's daughter who will always have to wear braces on her legs, are a chilling reality, but Rose's love for her child is ironically characterised by moral lessons that have, at the same time, a comic effect because of their extreme nature. The narrator portrays the perspective of a mother desperately desiring her son to be responsible:

All about the air were the childhood diseases – whooping cough, scarlet fever, and most dreaded of all, infantile paralysis ... her stories dazzled me. Their purpose was instruction. Their theme was vigilance. (Doctorow 1985:13–14)

Edgar therefore grows up armed with various precautions and rituals useful or necessary for escaping danger.

Superstition becomes part of this defensive system. One example relates to the occasion of a birthday when he has to blow out the candles on his birthday cake: 'In fact, I had a secret dread of not being able to blow out the candles before they burned down to the icing. That meant death' (Doctorow 1985:36). Another one of Edgar's superstitions is put to the test later in the novel. He has a 'theory' regarding death and illness: 'It was simply that if I thought of it, if I imagined it, it would not happen to me' (Doctorow 1985:171). Thus, when he suffers a ruptured appendix, he ascribes it to his not having thought about it. A carnivalesque example of superstition's link with disaster is when, during his illness, Edgar dreams that his deceased grandmother visits him. His family interprets this as a sign of his own advancing death. However, Edgar recovers, and restoration is once again effected.

## Embracing carnivalesque laughter and growth

A show of strength of character follows one of weakness of character when a group of louts confronts Edgar on his way home from the library. Edgar is robbed and belittled, and the episode results in further humiliation because Edgar denies that he is a Jew. He is also ashamed of himself because he says that his father is a policeman: 'A policeman! It was the weakest of ploys ... It is what four-year olds say to one another' (Doctorow 1985:238). Edgar is also concerned that this might put his father at risk despite the fabrication of his father's identity: 'Why had I mentioned my father! He existed now in their minds' (Doctorow 1985:238). In this instance, the influence of Edgar's mother leads him to make the best of a bad situation. Rose clearly has ambitions for herself and her family. She distinguishes her family from the rest of the neighbourhood: 'My mother wanted to move up in the world. She measured what we had and who we were against



the fortunes and pretensions of our neighbors' (Doctorow 1985:14). Similarly, Edgar is inspired after his encounter with the louts to distinguish himself. The essay on 'The typical American boy' that he writes to the World's Fair essay-competition organisers is an innocent collection of desiderata that reflect 'grown-up' values and ideals like courage, patriotism and honesty. It is charming because, on the one hand, it tends to be exaggeratedly poetic (an American boy should 'traverse the hills and valleys of the city'), but in a childlike manner, he also tries to achieve a balance between wholesome values like diligence, respect and kindness – and childhood pleasures: 'He reads all the time. It's all right for him to like comic books so long as he knows they are junk' (Doctorow 1985:244).

This model is used by Edgar to distance himself from what the louts had turned him into. Identifying himself with this ideal of what the typical American boy should be helps Edgar Altschuler to overcome his humiliation and fear. For Edgar, thus, the value of this essay lies in self-validation and self-renewal (cf. Doctorow 1985:237). Doctorow says: 'I think of my politics as biblical politics: you shouldn't murder, you shouldn't steal, that sort of thing' (Wolf 2014). Doctorow's novels often feature the dangers of the malevolent side of humanity. In *Welcome to Hard Times* he portrays the devastating effects of confusing external and inner evil, and in *World's Fair* the main character successfully resists his own inner evil.

Edgar's unfortunate experience with the louts transforms itself into a fortunate encounter. Edgar grows through the adoption of a new set of ideals, a new identity. The carnivalesque juxtaposition of bad followed by good is repeated as he overcomes his original fear and humiliation. He has, so to speak, the last laugh, particularly given that his essay leads to his whole family being invited as special guests to the World's Fair.

Before the whole family visits the fair, however, Edgar's mother permits him to go to the World's Fair with his friend Meg and her mother, Norma. Faithful to the novel's structure, a noteworthy carnivalesque episode occurs: Rose telephones Norma whilst Edgar is at Norma's house. Edgar's mother looks down on Norma on account of her being a 'ten cents per dance girl'; she suspects Norma might have a shady past. Rose asks Norma to take good care of Edgar in a clearly overprotective manner:

My mother went on for a while and Norma sat down on the sofa and lit a cigarette as she held the phone cradled in her shoulder. She blew smoke and looked at me through the smoke. I was embarrassed about this but didn't know what to say. (Doctorow 1985:249)

Norma's reaction, however, defuses Rose's potential subversion of harmony. She says to Edgar: "'Your mother likes you a lot Edgar.' I agreed. 'But why would anyone like a monkey face like you?' Norma said, and we all laughed" (Doctorow 1985:249). From a Bakhtinian point of view, laughter asserts 'the people' (Norma, Meg and Edgar) against the tyranny of the 'god' (Rose). Bakhtin's (1985:30) insistence

that such laughter need not only be bitter but that it may also be joyful, liberating, revitalizing and creative is appropriate here. This is exactly what Norma actuates. She restores the happy anticipation that existed before the telephone call by remaining genial and effectively defusing the discomfort of the event. If this miniature carnival had not taken place, Edgar might not have had the opportunity at that time to attend the World's Fair.

Another telling incident involves Dave, the father, taking the two brothers, Donald and Edgar, to a baseball game, another pseudo-fair. The boys stand outside the stadium without tickets, and the game is about to begin. Dave manages against all odds to purchase tickets at the last moment; this is again linked to Edgar's superstitious propensity:

I developed that specific prayerful longing that went with these situations: If we got into the game, I said to myself, I would do my homework every day for a week the minute I got home from school. I would help my mother when she asked. I would go to bed when I was told to. (Doctorow 1985:202)

Dave obtains three tickets, and the carnival is a success. Edgar says about his father: 'He loved this sort of situation, the suspense of getting in just at the last moment' (Doctorow 1985:204). Obtaining the tickets at the last minute is regarded by Dave and Edgar as an indication that the universe in its mysterious workings is ultimately sympathetic towards them:

He'd done it! From one moment to the next he led us from despair to exhilaration through the turnstiles and up the ramp into the bright sunlight of the stadium ... We couldn't believe our good fortune. It was magic! His face was flushed with delight, his eyes widened and he pursed his mouth and puffed his cheeks like a clown. (Doctorow 1985:204)

Of interest here is that the real carnival for Dave is in obtaining the tickets and not in the game itself. His reaction is quite different from that of Edgar and Donald who enjoy the game once the tickets are bought: 'My father was more calm. He smoked his cigar and every now and then closed his eyes and turned his face up to the afternoon sun' (Doctorow 1985:204). Obtaining the tickets is an assurance that things have a way of working out well in the end: 'The game meant more now, more than it might have if he had purchased the tickets a week in advance' (Doctorow 1985:204).

Important too, of course, is the World's Fair itself. Here Edgar and Meg find each other, and Edgar's winning of tickets to the World's Fair is the impetus for probably the most touching restorative moment in the novel; a 'rebirth' (cf. Bakhtin 1984:7) which pretty much explains itself:

And so a few minutes later we were on our walk up the Concourse, my mother and my father and I. He was in the middle. My mother's arm was in his and on the other side I held his hand. They looked very nice. She wore her flowered sundress with a matching jacket and a smart hat with the brim pulled over on one side, and he wore his double-breasted grey suit and his straw boater tilted at a rakish angle. I had put on a clean shirt and tie and had washed my face. 'Don't we look swanky!' I said. We were all very happy. (Doctorow 1985:279–280)



## Conclusion

*World's Fair* is regarded as Doctorow's most obvious instance of life writing, his 'most autobiographic book'. For instance, Tokarczyk (2000:44) points out that it is more obvious in this book than in his other novels that Doctorow drew upon his personal experiences. However, his factual childhood experiences within the context of actual history are fictionalised by means of carnivalisation: Like a carnival, it is a colourful 'confusion' that is symbolic like so many other symbolic fairs within the novel.

The title *World's Fair* and the novel's motto: 'A raree-show is here,/With children gathered round ... Wordsworth, *The Prelude*' thus both point to the carnivalesque. The concept of a fair reappears at various stages in the novel. The travelling farm exhibit encamped in the big park, Claremont, (Doctorow 1985:49), the baseball game and the beach at Rockaway in 1936 (Doctorow 1985:62) can all be regarded as symbolic 'fairs' – carnivals – within Edgar's fair-like metropolitan context. Fowler (1992) says:

A brilliantly described Rockaway Beach in 1936 is not only rendered with intensity, but Doctorow also convinces the reader that the scene really did convey to him a primal sense of nothing less than the world itself: 'I learned the enlightening fear of the planet' ... (pp. 133–134)

This is where the focus of the novel lies. Edgar says: 'You learned the world through its dark signs and its evil devices, such as slingshots, punchboards and scumbags' (Doctorow 1985:58). In contrast, Doctorow (2009:31) points out that the Collyer brothers in *Homer & Langley* are 'engaged in trying to create meaning for themselves and a life that makes sense to them' (Smallwood 2009:31). Theirs is a tragic education due to their inability to accept society and resiliently stay part of it. Edgar Altschuler's education is, on the contrary, of a comedic kind: His growing pains are essential for his growth and survival. Daniel's sister in *The Book of Daniel* fails to integrate into the social context and becomes a 'starfish', that is, completely lethargic, introverted and antisocial (Van der Merwe 2000:33). The central principle in the novel remains that neither bad nor good events are lasting. Both minor upsetting incidents, such as Edgar's vexation about his parents locking their bedroom door and that he is excluded when Donald and his friends visit as well as more serious realities like his grandmother's mental decline, the parents' unhappy marriage and the loss of his father's radio shop are of a transient nature.

In *World's Fair*, Doctorow is less concerned with how such events are causally linked with one another than in his preceding novels. There is no logical progression due to a singular seminal event, comparable to what occurs in, for example, *The Book of Daniel*. The novel represents fragments of a childhood which are not represented as a causative, tragic chain reaction.

The collection of memories of events that is *World's Fair* becomes a causative sequence in itself, however, in that it

forms the individual protagonist. Parks (1991) summarises this notion as follows:

At the end, Edgar and a friend put together several of their precious objects to go into a time capsule made from a cardboard mailing tube and tinfoil. This is a fitting image of the novel – a time capsule comprised of the human memory. And Edgar remembers well; his prose is stunningly evocative of the sights, sounds, and smells of the Bronx in the 1930s – the fish markets, the butcher shops, the bakeries, the dairy, the clothing stores, the cafeterias, the streets. Like so many of Doctorow's narrators, Edgar sees clearly and intensely. (pp. 95–96)

The events in *World's Fair* vary from the mundane to the dramatic, but they are all seminal in the main character's coming-of-age: They are important because they are formative. This corresponds with Lehmann-Haupt's (1985:C21) [*sic*] remark that the novel is the product of a middle-aged narrator who looks back on his childhood with amused amazement at the disasters he survived. Edgar Altschuler attempts to magically control his world, an attempt which Tokarczyk (2000:38) explains as a prefiguring of the control an artist has over his universe. Doctorow as artist chooses the following perspective: The world is defined by neither good fortune nor catastrophe alone; the world is always a carnival.

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