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Acclaimed author of "Ragtime," author E.L. Doctorow, describes the basic plot of his new depression-era novel, "Loon Lake" -- and says he did not know the ending to the book until he wrote it.

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Transcript

Doctorow: "Loon Lake"

JANE PAULEY, co-host:
I want you to meet E.L. Doctorow the author who wrote “Ragtime,” one of the most popular novels of the last decade, has written a new novel now called “Loon Lake” about which he speaks with Eric Burns.

E.L. DOCTOROW (Author, “Loon Lake”): Loon Lake was once the destination of private railroad cars, rocking on a single track, of forest and pine and spruce and hemlock.

ERIC BURNS reporting:
Let me begin with a complete shedding of journalistic impartiality and tell you that I think “Ragtime” and “Loon Lake” are two of the most enchanting books I’ve ever read in my life. They were just wonderful.

DOCTOROW: Thank you.

BURNS: It seems to me that one of the most important scenes in the book involves Joe from Patterson, New Jersey, and a railroad track. Would you tell us what that scene is?

DOCTOROW: Joe is on the road as a hobo in Carnival Roustabout, and after adventures with the carnival that leave him pretty desolate, he ends up wandering thorough the Adirondacks in the late summer and makes a camp beside a single track railroad line going up through these mountains.

BURNS: This is during the Depression.

DOCTOROW: During the Depression in the 1930’s, and makes a little fire to keep warm. And sometime during the night is awakened by the sound of a train coming. And he sees a car with several men being served drinks, and then another car in which a girl, a naked girl is standing in front of the mirror holding a white dress up to see how it looks. And the train passes by and turns the bend, and in that way he comes to Loon Lake, the destination of the train and the estate of F.W. Bennett.

BURNS: What does it mean to Joe what he sees on the train.

DOCTOROW: It’s a vision of life’s possibilities and grander and romance.

BURNS: You mentioned F.W. Bennett, multimillionaire, baron of capitalism. There is a time in the book when he tells Joe what the principles are by which he lives. Will you tell us what they are?

DOCTOROW: He says whatever you do, do it well. Find your place and make the most of it. You don't equivocate.
BURNS: And if it’s exploiting workers as Bennett did in some cases, that’s okay?
DOCTOROW: Then do it. If you’re criminal, be a good criminal. And if you’re a pastor, be a good pastor.
BURNS: Do you believe that or were you just writing about someone who believes it?
DOCTOROW: I’m writing about a person who believes. But you see, when you do this kind of work you believe it all.
BURNS: I won’t reveal how the book ends, but if you could control people’s reactions to the end of the book, how would you like them to feel?
DOCTOROW: I can tell you my feeling at the end of the book, an uncanny shiver up and down my spine and a certain sense of awe for the way this man’s life had gone.
BURNS: Did you know at the beginning of book how the book would end? I have a feeling that you didn’t.
DOCTOROW: You do best when you don’t know what’s coming. When you write to find out what it is you’re writing. The image I use for writing is driving at night. You never see beyond the range of you’re headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.
BURNS: Were you a little discomforted at the beginning of this interview when I told you how much I enjoyed “Ragtime” and “Loon Lake”?
DOCTOROW: I was delighted to hear it and every happy to hear it, but I never know how to react face to face when someone tells me how much he likes what I’ve done.
BURNS: Well you are going to have the problem one more time. We are out of time and I have to repeat you have given me, and a lot of other people, a lot of pleasure with at least those two books. Thank you again for doing that.
DOCTOROW: I’ll try not to look discomforted.