



Mourning and Melancholia in E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*

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Abstract

The Book of Daniel is a fictionalized version of the case of the Rosenbergs, Jewish-American Communists electrocuted by the American government as atomic spies in 1953. It is told by Daniel Isaacson, child of executed spies, in the form of his doctoral dissertation, but the structure of the narrative reflects Daniel's self-therapy. It mimics a psychoanalytic session, in which the analysand may relate family history, recent events, and dreams, all kinds of material in no apparent order, sometimes with radical shifts in tone, including laughter, anger, and tears. The patient may go off on tangents and free-associate to the material he brings up. In that case, the reader plays the role of the listening analyst, and Daniel's occasional aggression against the reader can be considered a form of transference. What takes place in the narrative is the long-delayed process of Daniel's mourning. Like a Holocaust survivor, Daniel is consumed by survivor guilt. Daniel's self-reproaches and his making the reader complicit are part of his unfinished mourning; they are disguised reproaches against his parents, whom he cannot forgive for abandoning him and his sister Susan.

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