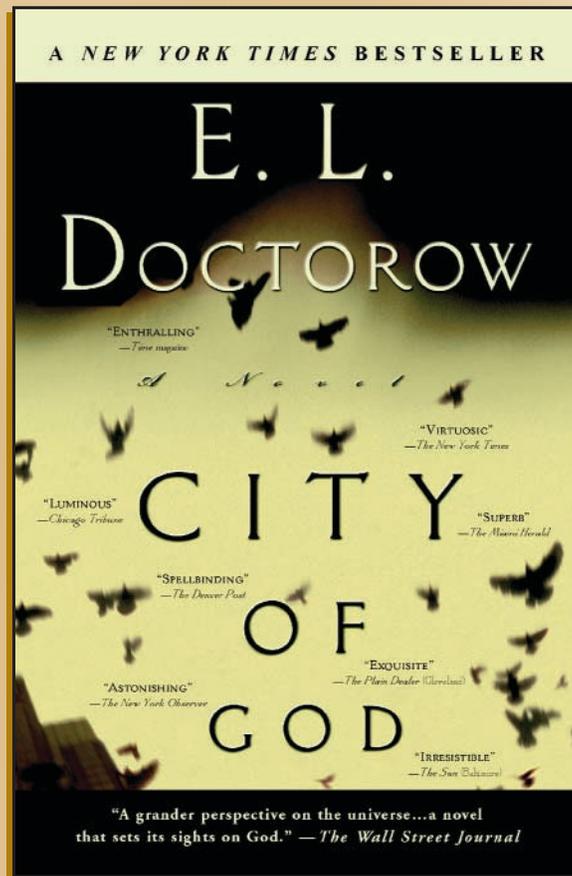




A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PLUME EDITION OF

E.L. DOCTOROW'S
CITY OF GOD

By DANIEL ESHOM, M.A.



NOTE TO THE TEACHER**“ACADEMIC ICEBREAKERS”: ASSORTED COMMENTARIES**

The following are not A-to-Z overviews or straightforward synopses of Doctorow's work. Some fascinating threads in the novel go unremarked, and many interpretations are open to expansion and amplification. Each commentary provides teachers with possible perspectives for approaching the novel with students, each invites further thematic unpacking as well as dissension in the classroom, and each aims chiefly to create a springboard for generating engaging ideas, discussions, and activities.

I. ONE CREATOR, MULTIPLE VOICES: “THIS IS MY LABORATORY, HERE, IN MY SKULL.”

As diversely populated and wide-ranging as it seems, E. L. Doctorow's novel can nonetheless be viewed as a singular, intricately rendered portrait of one man's peripatetic imagination and streaming consciousness. Everything we read about in *City of God*—from the Episcopal priest in the throes of a crisis of faith and the bereaved rabbi endeavoring to redirect the destiny of the entire Jewish tradition, to a Holocaust survivor's harrowing ghetto narrative and the pair of lushly imagistic verse poems about the World Wars—presumably flows from a single, blinking computer cursor that is manipulated by a middle-aged New York novelist named Everett. With Everett as his protagonist and millennially harried Everyman, Doctorow takes readers on a sweeping survey of the twentieth century, channeling the voices of Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Frank Sinatra, as well as the voices of Everett's fellow fictional beings, who occupy the novel's principal narrative. Beginning with his novel's title and its Augustinian overtones, every aspect of Doctorow's survey is in the service of the novel's thematic preoccupation with the nature of belief, the mystery of human consciousness, and above all, “our wrecked romance with God.”

II. THE UNIVERSE

As *City of God* begins, readers find Everett—a secular man without extensive training in astronomy or physics—riffing on the cosmos and dropping some poetry-tinged science. As he summarizes modern conceptions of the history of the universe, Everett struggles with the mind-dwarfing notions of two tenets that are central both to the novel itself as well as to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition writ large: the notion of a “singular original” Creator, and the belief in an ever-approaching and ultimately unknowable human destiny. If the Big Bang engendered fifteen billion years of spatial expansion, then to what end is this expansion progressing? And as to the space itself (our universe) that is expanding: what, exactly, is it filling up or replacing? And above all, Everett wonders, what kind of “fearsome” God could be involved in these concepts of “disastrous, hopeless infinitude,” this “fluke happenstance,” this apparently “accidental” genesis? Here, in Everett's universal musings, which appear frequently in the first forty or so pages of the book, Doctorow illuminates an unresolvable disconnect between Reason and Faith, or between scientific understandings about the origin of life and organized religion's increasingly untenable narratives about the same. This same crucial disconnect comes to play a primary part in the story of the Reverend Dr. Thomas Pemberton, to whom we are introduced as the first-person narrator of the new book Everett is sketching out.

III. WRESTLING WITH THE WORD: “THE MIND CONSIDERING ITSELF”

“In the beginning was the Word,” writes Saint John the Apostle. In *City of God*, Doctorow contends with the myriad implications of this statement. Here, John's assertion refers to the philosophical notion that language—the human capacity for naming things—has wholly created our consciousness, and thus, the entire world we live in. The fundamental work of Albert Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose towering ideas have peerlessly shaped our perception of life in modern times, presumes this notion: no being, no idea, no planet, can exist in an absolute sense without reference to something else, without being perceived, or named, by something else. (Everything is relative.) Without language, there is no world. The world is a story. The characters in this novel wrestle with the bewildering and timeless questions that necessarily arise out of this: Is God a story? A product of language? Or is language a product of God? If God exists outside of language, creating the text of life—which we live “as it is written”—by what resources do we construct our faith and our hope for the future, and by what preordained design do we pursue our destiny? Alluding to such unanswerable issues, Doctorow's incarnation of Wittgenstein writes, “Even if all the possible scientific questions are answered, our problem is still not touched at all.”

IV. THE STORY AND THE STORIES: "I THINK WE MUST REMAKE YOU."

City of God is a story about storytelling—about the ubiquity of narrative; about the whole of language existing as a storytelling tool to reflect and respond to reality; about consciousness perceived as a narrative (hi)story. Dozens of different stories comprise this book. The universe, to begin with, is itself a story, the Text created by God through the assumably unassailable Word, and it is a story with no apparent ending. Everett's blackly comic portrait of the "ex-Times guy" characterizes the journalism story as the most unsatisfying of professional endeavors, because it is nothing more than a life of narratives without endings. Elsewhere, in a brilliant riff on Borgesian postmodernism, Everett depicts a man coming to the realization that his life is, quite literally, a single story (a movie, no less). By contrast, the Holocaust is characterized in *City of God* as millions of individual stories, one of which is powerfully filtered and shaped, in the voice of Yehoshua, through Everett. Together, the Holocaust's narrative depictions of human evil signify the central tragedy of the twentieth century. Everett, the storyteller himself, becomes something of a stand-in for God, creating his own narrative universe. And finally, the Judeo-Christian tradition is a story that Pem ferociously struggles with—in much the way his real-life forebear, James Pike, did—because it appears to him to be more a narrative about power, genocidal destruction, and the renunciation of human reason and intellect than about faith, hope, and love.

But of all the stories illuminated and considered in Doctorow's novel, the story of Pem and Sarah is paramount, and in many ways accommodates all of the others. In the early pages of the novel, an enormous brass cross is heisted from St. Timothy's Episcopal on the Lower East Side. Pemberton, D.D. (for "Divinity Detective"), sets off in search of it, yet he senses from the start that this is no ordinary theft, with no ordinary solution. "So now these people," Pem says, "have lifted our cross. It bothered me at first. But now I'm beginning to see it differently. That whoever stole the cross had to do it. And wouldn't that be blessed? Christ going where He is needed?" When the cross turns up on the roof of the fledgling Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism on the Upper West Side, Pem realizes he is being led by fate. With Rabbi Sarah, Pem seeks to transcend the constraints of storytelling and to reclaim an elusive, pre-scriptural (pre-narrative) state of "unmediated awe." *City of God's* own story climaxes here, with Pem on the verge of Jewish conversion, giving what is in a sense his final sermon, telling God that consciousness, our stories, our language, all of them are "not enough." "If we are to remake [rewrite] ourselves, we must remake you, Lord."

V. CITY OF GOD'S SELF-REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE AND GENRE HOPPING

Through Everett, E. L. Doctorow serves up an amalgam of literary genres dealing with a common theme. He introduces a series of tenuously related stories comprised of philosophical meanderings, sleuthing narratives, cultural histories, theological musings, science lessons on the life of ants, explications and deconstructions of pop lyrics, film treatments, poetry, and even a head-spinning monologue from the twentieth century's silver-throated Chairman of the Board. The dizzying array of styles, tones, and rhythms pile up on us like so much history. Doctorow has rendered what might be viewed as a prose simulation of contemporary Western consciousness: eclectic, scattered, unresolved, attention-deficit-disordered, overloaded with information, and tremendously burdened by the weight of so much devastating human history. Clearly, a linear, A-to-B narrative has no chance of reproducing the disjointed, poignant rhythms of the shell-shocked, end-of-the-century New York City which Doctorow imagines here. Like the Bible (the prototypical fusion of disparate stories on a common theme), like a city, like the whole of literature, and like contemporary life itself, Everett's stream of fragments in *City of God* resembles "a great historically amassed communal creation" derived from the Word and from the evolutions of culture that language makes possible.

INTRODUCTION

WHY STUDY CITY OF GOD? AND HOW?

City of God affords teachers and students a vast window on a range of religious, scientific, historic, and aesthetic concerns. When studied alongside the usual suspects featured in most high school and early college literature curriculums—which generally follow a rigid canonical progression first prescribed by T. S. Eliot some 80 years ago, from Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare and on to such nineteenth- and twentieth-century American giants as Melville, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Salinger, and Eliot himself—E. L. Doctorow's novel promises to strike students as a wonderfully unusual novel with a liberating narrative technique that breaks many of the so-called "rules" of the novel and also echoes and riffs on styles and themes from a wide range of literary and historical antecedents, including some of those mentioned above. At the same time, the works of such disparate authors as John Dos Passos, Virginia Woolf, Walter Benjamin, Tony Kushner, Elie Wiesel, Jorge Luis Borges, and Aharon Appelfeld might be discussed alongside *City of God* with fruitful results.

A novel as thematically playful, nonlinear, and wide-ranging as *City of God* invites a similarly atypical approach to teaching and studying it. Hardly a narrative suitable for chapter-by-chapter analyses and succinct plot summaries, Doctorow's novel concerns itself centrally with the kind of capital "M" mysteries (the natures of God, creation, and human destiny) that finally defy satisfying solutions. This guide—in the interest of casting students as apprenticing detectives to the Reverend Dr. Thomas Pemberton, the book's self-anointed Divinity Detective—aims to allow for a lot of scholarly "play," giving teachers ideas for inspiring classes to focus on and investigate some of the themes, questions, and historical figures that arise over the course of *City of God*. Attention is also paid to Doctorow's "kitchen sink" prose style itself: the mix of genres, the use of imagery and dialogue, and the stew of fragmented biographical sketches, Homeric verse poems, prayers, and jazz-like improvisations on pop standards, all of which orbit around the narrative's central issue—the eponymous, allegorical mystery of the stolen cross.

City of God is truly a book worth reading, perhaps particularly when one is in late adolescence, when one's first serious questions about our culture and the history that shaped it are often posed. Doctorow's book delivers an extraordinary amount of "food for thought" for curious, questing students. It is also a novel that lends itself wonderfully to a collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching approach that might involve a team of literature, world and U.S. history, and even physics teachers. At the same time, *City of God* should probably be reserved for honors or advanced placement students due to the complexity of the plot, the bold nature of its questions about faith and religious tradition, and the sophisticated scientific and philosophical concepts with which Doctorow's characters grapple. The book's language (both the advanced vocabulary as well as the occasional profanity), its challenges to the integrity and "truth" of various religions, and its powerful depictions of violence may make some students, parents, and school boards uncomfortable. To avoid censorship of the novel, teachers may want to draft a written rationale for teaching it. Critical points to include in the rationale might include: the vitality of studying effective innovations in fictional narrative technique (teachers might link Doctorow's prose experiments to similarly convention-defying works by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce); the contextual significance of the book's religious iconoclasm (Pem is "God-drunk," a man of uncommon faith in spiritual crisis, searching for meaning, and certainly not out to simply destroy, mock, or blaspheme specific traditions); the contextual inherency of the graphic violence to the novel's depiction of the Holocaust; and of course, the longstanding esteem in which Doctorow's literary art is held.

The plot of *City of God*, such as it is, will likely seem confusing to readers because it is so fragmented and jittery, and because the narrative, especially at the outset, rarely supplies us with the standard clues to establish who is speaking and what the situation is. A useful metaphor which could be discussed and assigned to the novel prior to reading it is that of an intricate puzzle, the assembly of which is up to the class to perform together. The following commentary discusses central strands of the novel and by no means follows or recounts the structure of the author's deliberately disjointed style. Perhaps more than any book since Joyce's *Ulysses*, *City of God* all but defies critical distillation or reduction. And like *Ulysses*, *City of God* is more than anything a work of skilled mimesis, mirroring in prose the nature of one New York writer's consciousness and concerns at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

BEFORE READING THE NOVEL: DISCUSSION AND WRITING PROMPTS

To set the stage for *City of God*, select several of the following open-ended questions and topics and have students discuss and respond to them either orally or in writing. The topics are adaptable for use before, during, or after reading the novel. Initial small-group (three or four students each) sessions might be very effective for tackling these topics, followed by a recap among the class as a whole.

1. What makes a novel a novel? That is, what are the specific qualities and aspects of a book that lead us to characterize it as a novel? Are there limits to what a novel might include or how a novel might be structured? And should there be? Explain.
2. What happens when the novelistic boundaries discussed above are "violated" by an author, when the lines that distinguish fiction and history, as well as prose and poetry, are blurred or even erased?
3. Discuss what you've learned and portraits you've read or seen about Jewish ghetto life in 1940s Eastern Europe.
4. How did Plato characterize art in relation to Nature, his creator, or God? [Discuss, or simply outline so that it will be fresh in students' minds as they tackle Doctorow's novel, the mimetic view of art originated by Plato and his famous shadow on the cave wall, wherein literature texts function chiefly as handmaidens to theology, or as a series of reflections of the original Text (God). After reading, return to this issue again and consider it alongside the themes in *City of God*.]
5. Discuss recent discoveries by astronomers, physicists, geologists, and other scientists about the origins and nature of the universe. How have they shaped our culture's understanding of life and human history?

6. How do such discoveries complement, defy, and/or complicate Judeo-Christian narratives and beliefs about universal origins and the role of God in human history?
7. Upon what qualities and behaviors does an “ethical” lifestyle rely? Is it possible to live according to a code of ethics without piety or without an allegiance to an organized religion? Explain.
8. By what rules might a code of “secular ethics” function? Where and in what ways do notions of God figure, for example, in our government, our judicial system, and our collective understandings of “right” and “wrong”?
9. Discuss the structure, language, and imagery of the novel itself. In what ways does it mimic or recreate the rhythms of contemporary life?
10. When Pem goes to the cancer ward just after leaving the priesthood, he encounters a group of dying people singing twentieth-century standards. Discuss the implications of this scene. Why does it affect Pem the way it does? What does it mean when the pop song, that most “self-referential” and instantly recognizable of all musical genres, is transformed into a sort of secular hymnal?
11. Link the scene at the cancer ward with the alternately comic and devastating reinterpretations of standards served up by the “Midrash Jazz Quartet” throughout *City of God*.
12. At one point, Pem muses, “If God is to live, the words of our faith must live. The words must be reborn.” What does he mean?
13. Compare Albert Einstein’s search for evidence that would point to some sort of universal “design”—some relief from the horrifying prospect of infinite chaos and meaninglessness—with the quests taken up by Pem, Sarah, Everett, the “ex-Times guy,” Yehoshua, Wittgenstein and other figures in *City of God*.
14. “I take the position that true faith is not a supersessional knowledge. It cannot discard the intellect.... How can we presume to exalt our religious vision over the ordinary pursuits of our rational minds?” Interpret Pem’s remarks here to the bishop’s examiners.
15. Discuss the book’s extended portrait of the man who discovers that his life is gradually becoming a movie. What is going on here? Fill in the blanks of Doctorow’s metaphor.
16. “You say all history has contrived to pour this beer into my glass,” says the nameless Vietnam veteran to Everett. Later, Pem speaks of “a great historically amassed communal creation.” And finally, much earlier in the novel, Rabbi Joshua asks, “Is time a loop? Do you have the same feeling I have—that everything seems to be running backwards? That civilization is in reverse?” With all of these lines, what theme is Doctorow underscoring?
17. How do Pem’s penitential ruminations on the Holocaust, his pilgrimage to Eastern Europe and, above all, his eventual conversion to Judaism, relate to the issues raised in question number 16?
18. How might the Jewish notion of Messianic time, in which all of history becomes meaningful retrospectively by the sudden and unexpected coming of the Messiah, be linked to the themes in *City of God*?
19. As a class, re-read Pem’s toast at the wedding. How does this impassioned speech serve to bring together the dozens and dozens of fragments that have preceded it in *City of God*?

WHILE READING THE NOVEL

Students may want to learn more about the author of *City of God*. A brief biography follows, as well as suggestions for related Web sites that will enhance the students’ understanding of the author and his works.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF E. L. DOCTOROW

Named for Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Lawrence Doctorow occupies a central position in the history of American literature. On a shortlist that might also include Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Don DeLillo, E. L. Doctorow is generally considered to be among the most talented, ambitious, and admired novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. Long celebrated for his vivid evocations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American life (particularly New York life), Doctorow has received the National Book Award, two National Book Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, the William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal.

Doctorow was born in New York City on January 6, 1931, and, like the novelist Everett in *City of God*, attended the Bronx High School of Science. After graduating with honors from Kenyon College in 1952, he did graduate work at Columbia University and served in the U.S. Army, which stationed him in Germany. In 1954, he married Helen Setzer. They have three children. Doctorow was senior editor for New American Library from 1959 to 1964 and then served as editor in chief at Dial Press until 1969. Since then, he has devoted his time to writing and teaching. He holds the Glucksman Chair in American Letters at New York University and over the years has taught at several institutions, including Yale University Drama School, Princeton University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the University of California, Irvine.

With *The Book of Daniel*, his third novel, Doctorow emerged as an important American novelist with a strongly political bent. A fictional retelling of the notorious Rosenberg spy case, the novel deftly evokes the complex anxieties of Cold War America, shuttling back and forth in time from the 1950s, when Paul and Roselle Isaacson are convicted and electrocuted, to the late 1960s, when their troubled son, Daniel, a grad student at Columbia, must deal with the consequences of his unusual birthright. *The Book of Daniel* was adapted in 1983 into the film, *Daniel*, starring Timothy Hutton and directed by Sidney Lumet. Four years after *The Book of Daniel* came *Ragtime*, a dazzling reimagining of the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century by means of a plot that, like *City of God*, ingeniously brings together real-life figures—such as Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, Harry Houdini, and Emma Goldman—with an array of invented characters. *Ragtime* was named one of the 100 best English-language novels of the twentieth century by the editorial board of the Modern Library and was adapted into a successful Broadway musical in 1998.

Widely acclaimed for the beauty of his prose, his innovative narratives, his feel for atmospherics, and above all for his talent for evoking the past in a way that makes it at once mysterious and familiar, Doctorow has created one of the most substantial bodies of work of any living American writer.

RELATED E. L. DOCTOROW WEB SITES

<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive/Vol.%2011.1/11.1Wutz.htm>

An interesting 1994 interview with E. L. Doctorow with Weber Studies—Voices and Viewpoints of the Contemporary West, a Web site of Weber State University in Ogden, Utah.

<http://www.roland-collection.com/rolandcollection/literature/101/W97.htm#real>

Download a video interview with E. L. Doctorow from the *Writers Talk: Ideas of Our Time* series from The Roland Collection of Film and Videos.

<http://www.nytimes.com/specials/ragtime/>

A Web site from *The New York Times* that explores how E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* was adapted into a successful musical.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY: CHARACTER INVESTIGATIONS

Beginning with the prompts provided by the following capsule biographies—which teachers may want to supplement later with independent research by students—discuss the lives and contributions of the historical figures who co-star in *City of God*.

St. Augustine (354–430), the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father, was a bishop and philosopher who devoted much of his monastic life in North Africa to theological and Neo-Platonic studies. Regarded as one of the primary figures in the development of the church, he developed theories of predestination and inherent grace that came to be crucial to Roman Catholicism as well as to the tenets of John Calvin and Martin Luther. The most famous of his writings is *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*), which describes how Christianity could provide a model for a new social order. He died violently when Vandals sacked the city of Hippo. Augustine is the last of the great Roman writers, as he is the first of the great medieval ones.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), an Austrian philosopher, was born to a well-to-do family of Jewish descent who had converted to Catholicism. He studied under Bertrand Russell at Cambridge before enlisting in the Austrian army to fight in World War I. He was captured by the Italians and spent some time as a prisoner of war. While in prison, he began work on the seminal *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, the only book he published during his lifetime. Central to his philosophical work was the notion that most of philosophy's problems could be better understood by attending to the workings of language outside of philosophy. In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein explained the intimate relationship of language, thought, and

the world. He saw thought and language as working alongside each other to construct a reproduction of reality. That is, to understand an utterance, Wittgenstein argued, it was necessary to comprehend how its components relate to one another and to the real world. His later work evolved this formula to explain language as a response to, as well as a depiction of, reality.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) is widely considered to be the most brilliant and by far the most famous scientist of the twentieth century. His renown among scientists resulted from his special and general theories of relativity, which rejected the Newtonian universe of absolute space and time for the mathematical relativity of the “curved” space-time continuum. A lifelong pacifist, he vehemently opposed World War I. When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, Einstein took asylum in the United States and stayed there for the rest of his life. In 1939, he warned President Franklin Roosevelt of the possibility of an atomic bomb, a weapon made possible in large part thanks to his own work. He spent his final years searching in vain for a unified field theory and agitating for world peace.

Bishop James A. Pike (1913–1969), born in Oklahoma City and raised a Roman Catholic, was an extremely unorthodox theologian and outspoken advocate of civil rights. He served as dean of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City and later became bishop of California. In *A Time for Christian Candor*, Pike infamously outlined his misgivings about the church (misgivings that are very similar to those of Pemberton in Doctorow's novel) and about the characterization of Jesus Christ as the son of God. He renounced the church once and for all in 1968, and died mysteriously the next year while on an expedition in the Judean desert.

AFTER READING THE NOVEL

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES AND EXTENDED LEARNING

1. Read other books by E. L. Doctorow, particularly *The Waterworks*, *Ragtime*, and *The Book of Daniel*, and see how they compare with, complement, and enrich the ideas in *City of God*.
2. Compare *City of God* with other works of intergeneric prose: John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, Jessica Hagedorn's *Danger and Beauty*, Carol Shields' *Swann*, etc.
3. Compare and contrast the spiritual and metaphysical quests of Pem, Everett, and Sarah with the struggles faced by characters in other novels the class has studied.
4. Write a Midrash Jazz-style riff on a well-known pop song from your own era.
5. Investigate a particular historical, scientific, or religious aspect of *City of God* and present findings to the class in five- or ten-minute presentations.
6. Choose another historical figure from the twentieth century who, like Einstein, Wittgenstein, and Sinatra, played a central role in shaping the texture of human life. Research the life and professional contributions of this person and then write a Doctorovian monologue in this person's voice. In your monologue, try to touch upon the themes of *City of God*.
7. Read a short story from Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinths*, and analyze it in the context of Everett's musings on creation, life, art, and human destiny.
8. After the class has read the book, put together and pass out a packet of what literary critics have said and written about *City of God*. Invite students to agree, disagree, and/or expand upon critics' arguments.

RELATED TITLES

TITLES BY E. L. DOCTOROW AVAILABLE FROM PLUME

Billy Bathgate 0-452-28002-8

The Book of Daniel 0-452-27566-0

City of God 0-452-28209-8

Lives of the Poets 0-452-27879-1

Loon Lake 0-452-27568-7

Ragtime 0-452-27907-0

The Waterworks 0-452-27549-0

Welcome to Hard Times 0-452-27571-7

World's Fair 0-452-27572-5

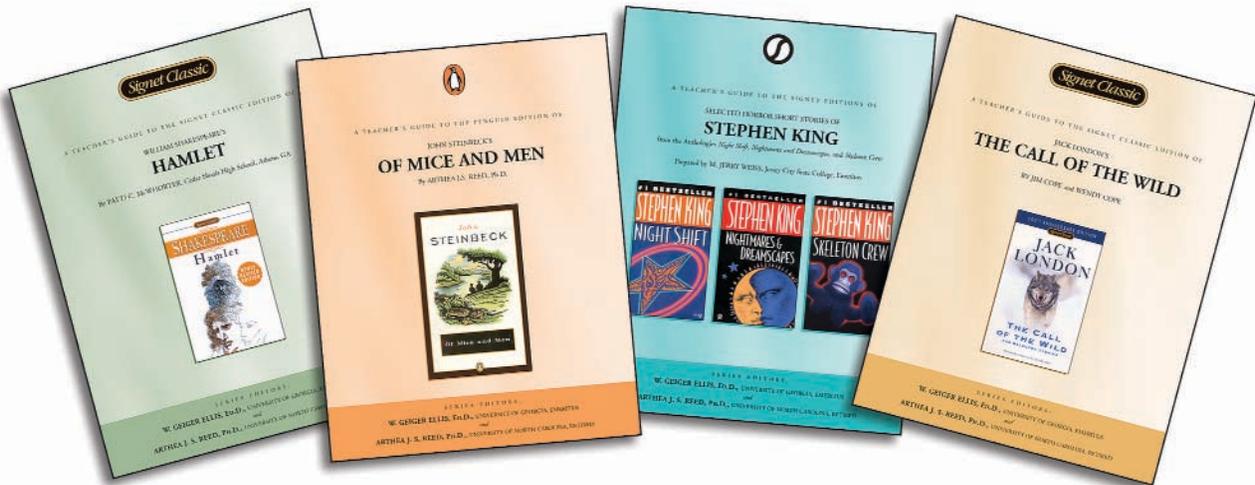
ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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