

One New Book for the Preacher

Kathy Wolf Reed
Nashville, Tennessee

Doctorow, E. L. *Homer and Langley: A Novel*. Random House, 2009.

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the *morning*” (Acts 2:14-15).

The world thought they were crazy. It was 1938 when the media first caught wind of the curious lives of Homer and Langley Collyer, two brothers living in their family’s Manhattan mansion as complete recluses and compulsive hoarders. Homer, the elder of the two brothers, was an accomplished pianist, whose eyesight had been failing him since childhood, eventually rendering him blind. His brother Langley, a self-proclaimed inventor, deemed himself responsible for wandering the streets of New York to scavenge for food, water, and the multitudes of useless items that eventually filled every nook and cranny of the once stately home.

Rumors surrounding the living conditions and odd practices of the Collyer brothers swirled throughout early twentieth-century New York: they were keeping women in the house against their will, they were sitting on piles of cash because they didn’t trust the banks, the house was filled floor to ceiling with newspapers that Langley had been collecting for decades. Eventually their story became so well known that the term “Collyer mansion” was adopted by New York firefighters to describe a home packed with hoarded possessions – what psychologists now refer to as “a monument to obsessive compulsive disorder.”¹

So were they crazy? Compulsive? Drunk off of the hoarding-induced high that seemed to drive Langley’s nightly jaunts into the world outside of their mysterious cove? In his fictionalized account of the Collyer brothers’ lives, author E.L. Doctorow ventures into the life and mind of Homer Langley, the artistic brother whose poor health rendered him not only blind, but eventually crippled. He tells their story from Homer’s first person perspective, relying upon vivid descriptions of sounds, smells, and touch to bring the reader into Homer’s world of friends, visitors, strangers, and lovers, all of whom participate in a series of odd events that come to paint the lives of Homer and Langley.

Doctorow’s account of the Collyer lives is by no means factual – the book is a work of midrash in which Doctorow takes great artistic liberty. Dates are changed: the Collyers are born later and live longer than history tells us. Langley becomes not only an engineer, but also a World War I veteran. The series of housekeepers, cooks, and visitors to the mansion have little historical basis. However, what Doctorow creates in his work is a greater question about the Collyer legend: Were the brothers truly insane? Can all of their behaviors be brushed aside under the guise of “mental illness”? Or, did the Collyers understand something about the nature of humanity that others could not comprehend within the bounds of acceptable social behavior? Doctorow

seems to hint at the latter.

One example of the Collyers' insight comes prior to the peak of their hoarding habit, when Langley decides they will open their home as a make-shift nightclub for those who longed to gather for music and dancing, but had become wary of the reputation that surrounded dance halls at the time. The goal was "to give our dances for people who wouldn't be caught dead in one of those dance halls."² Soon after the initiation of these dances, the house becomes packed with so many participants that the Collyers find themselves using two, three, four different rooms of their home for the venture. At a time in Manhattan when people couldn't be themselves in public for fear of being considered improper, the Collyer home becomes a sanctuary free of judgment.

Stories like this one flow throughout the novel. Different characters enter and exit, each having an impact in one way or another on the sensitive and observant Homer. It was, as Homer states, "as if our house were not our house but a road on which Langley and I were traveling like pilgrims."³ Doctorow makes one wonder what really happened inside those brownstone walls. Throughout history – *throughout biblical history* – there were those thought to be mad, who in truth had been given insight beyond common understanding.

The season of Pentecost is one in which we are reminded of a time when being a witness to Christ was considered madness. While others supposed that they were drunk, Peter and the eleven went about witnessing to what the Spirit had placed upon their hearts. In a similar manner, Doctorow suggests, while others assumed the Collyers' behavior a result of madness, inside their home – *their church* – lives intertwined, creativity flourished, music was made... and they danced.

Notes

1 Andy Newman, "Collyer Mansion Is Code for Firefighters' Nightmare," *New York Times*, July 5, 2006.

2 E.L. Doctorow, *Homer & Langley: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2009), 61.

3 *Ibid.*, 121.