Doctorow: history as fiction

By Thomas J. Spink

"History is itself a form of fiction," said E.L. Doctorow, author of *Ragtime*, a fictional account of New York society during the late nineteenth century, observed during the second Humanities Department Literary Program, "Writers and the Uses of the Past," Thursday.

There has always been an intervention between fact and fiction," Doctorow stated. "The first novelist in the English language (Defoe) had been a journalist most of his life before writing *Robinson Crusoe* and in it he turns a raving maniac into a hero.

Participating in the forum with Doctorow were Justin Kaplan, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his biography of Mark Twain, and Linda Wagner, Professor of English at Michigan State.

Wagner pointed out a conflict between theme and craft, the philosophical and mechanical elements of writing. "History provides the sense of otherness that makes a novel believable," she stated.

"In the 20's and 30's American history was presented as myth, hiding behind a facade of objectivity," she said, citing the works of Dos Passos and Hart. "There is a fine line between history and mythology, according to Doctorow. "Instead of drawing distinctions between fact and fiction, I prefer to call both narratives."

Doctorow asserted that novelists "have been put on the Reservation of Personal Experience" by the success of the case history style of non-fiction. "There is a very fine line between theme and craft, the determination," he maintained. "There is no history except as composed."

Kaplan observed that the history of Dos Passos and Hart. "History was presented as myth, according to Kaplan, "turns them into figures in a peepshow."" As a matter of survival, the novelist will break out of the reservation and take back the ground usurped by social scientists and others," Doctorow declared.

Kaplan also noted that the succession of case histories is based on their borrowing the techniques of fiction.