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# Refuse and rescue. Obsessive hoarding in Doctorow's Homer and Langley”

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## Résumé

In his 2009 novel *Homer and Langley*, American novelist E.L. Doctorow portrays two brilliant and wealthy brothers who live for decades in self-chosen squalor in a Fifth Avenue brownstone and die within a labyrinth of stuff. The real-life brothers Homer and Langley Collyer, on which the story is based, have been described as the first ‘compulsive hoarders’ or ‘messies’ (‘syllogomane’ in French), suffering from a psychological disorder on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum. In fact, before the term ‘compulsive hoarding’ was coined, the affliction was sometimes called ‘Collyer syndrom’. When their house was opened up in 1947 because of a strong smell of decay, it took the police 18 days to find both brothers’ dead bodies in and amongst the accumulated things, one of the brothers having been crushed by a collapsing pile of things.

Over the past 10 years or so, TV producers have discovered the hoarder as a profitable new character in reality television and sensationalised the image of an undisciplined slob unable to cope with their own mess. The medical community has pathologised compulsive hoarding as a symptom of a psychological dysfunction, where the hoarder feels the need to collect and keep things that other people would describe as worthless. This usually takes place on a large scale and over a long period of time. Thus, hoarding has a fundamental impact on the lives of the persons afflicted as well as their dependents, for example when the (shared) living space is reduced to little pockets and narrow corridors in a towering landscape of stacked things.

While from the outside, their behaviour is judged as pointless from a rational point-of-view, self-indulgent from a moral one and damaging to one’s health from medical one, hoarders often have good reasons for their doings. In his novel, Doctorow puts forward a rarely-heard narrative of making sense of his main characters’s odd behaviour. He presents it as a creative strategy for coping with an increasingly alienating and overstraining modern environment. In my paper, I want to analyse the protagonists’s relationship with material things that are refuse and rescue at the same time.

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