

## MANHATTAN BEACH

Jennifer Egan's Manhattan Beach, our book for tonight, (and her latest novel), is many things:

- A conventional, almost Victorian work of historical fiction.
- The story of an old-fashioned heroine – a brave and determined woman whom it is almost impossible not to admire.
- A re-creation of NYC in the 1940s, and particularly Brooklyn, when the city still exhibited the historic dominance of its waterfront.
- A noir thriller, with pace and atmosphere (Egan says she “loves” crime novels).
- A wartime drama of shipwreck.
- And perhaps most of all, the story of a strong, independent, spunky young woman breaking through barriers in World War II.

This sweeping historical novel portrays the lives of an Irish-American family in Brooklyn in the 1930s and 40s, set first against the backdrop of the Great Depression, and then the Second World War.

The author says she became curious about this period in the wake of 9/11. The World Trade Center attacks felt, Egan said, like the “end of something” – the U.S. sense that it was the King of the World – and that led her to think, “When did this “something” begin?”

To begin this short commentary, a summary of this “many experiences” book may be useful:

It begins on a cold afternoon in Brooklyn in 1934. An 11-year-old girl, Anna, accompanies her father, Eddie, to visit the gangster, Dexter Styles, in his Manhattan Beach mansion. Eddie had been a theatre manager and a successful margin stock trader, but then the 1929 crash came. He lost his job, and his margin-based stock account turned to debt. The only work Eddie could find was as a “bag man,” carrying envelopes of money between men who can't be seen together.

It is a job that only pays subsistence wages (\$20/week) and Eddie is there to ask Dexter for a better job. Eddie is increasingly estranged from his wife, and he has an invalid and brain-damaged younger daughter, Lydia, who needs a special wheelchair, which he has no money to buy. (Remember, these were the Depression years, that GOP paradise when people with pre-existing conditions were not weakened by character-sapping government help like affordable health insurance.)

Eleven-year-old Anna, fascinated by the sea, removes her shoes and walks into the freezing water. Dexter Styles is charmed.

Before the real story continues, we learn that Anna, at age 14, begins to have regular sex with a 16-year-old neighbor boy. They meet in an old un-used coal cellar. Now we know that Anna, although always a dutiful daughter, also has a well-concealed wild streak.

The story continues in 1942. Anna is 19 and working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, tediously measuring tiny machined parts with a micrometer. Her paycheck is essential to help support her mother and her sister, Lydia. Her father, Eddie, disappeared five years ago, without saying good-bye.

While eating lunch one day on the pier, Anna sees a diver descending from a barge and feels “a seismic arrangement within herself.” She becomes determined to be a diver, and against all resistance, manages to take (and pass) an applicant diver’s first test – untying a knot while wearing 3-fingered diver’s gloves and being inside a 200-lb. plus diver’s suit. She is initially allowed to dive only as a way of embarrassing the other trainees – all men.

Soon after, Anna tags along with a workmate, Nell, a self-professed “bad girl,” to a Manhattan night club. A man she is dancing with points out the owner of the club, none other than Dexter Styles, whom she met and whose house she visited in 1934.

Anna, convinced Styles may know something about her disappeared father, introduces herself, using a false name.

When they meet again at the Navy Yard, Dexter agrees to drive Anna and her disabled sister to the beach, so Lydia can see the ocean. Lydia becomes more

alert than she has been in years and even repeats words. Sadly, though, she dies only a short period afterwards.

When Dexter and Anna meet again, they end up spending a passionate night together, and Anna asks about her father. Dexter doesn't respond, but eventually he agrees to help her dive for her father's body in the New York harbor. We learn that Eddie worked for Dexter, but he later informed to the authorities on the activities of Dexter's crime syndicate to revenge them having murdered his childhood friend, John Dunellen.

In the harbor dive, Anna and Dexter do not find a body, but they do find a mass of chains and Eddie's pocket watch. We learn later that Eddie had escaped his chains and joined the Merchant Marines, only to be torpedoed and forced to survive in a life raft in the South Atlantic for an agonizing 21 days, before being rescued and eventually continuing his life in San Francisco.

Eddie writes to Anna, who meanwhile finds she is pregnant with Dexter's child (Dexter himself has now been killed on orders of his sinister boss, Mr. Q, and with the consent of his father-in-law). Anna decides to move to San Francisco to have her baby and to live there with her aunt Brianne. She poses as a war widow and also resumes her diving at the Mare Island Shipyard.

As the book ends, Anna and her father Eddie are beginning to renew their relationship.

Even this brief synopsis makes clear why the critics have called Manhattan Beach:

"an old-fashioned page-turner;"

"a pot boiler;"

"a book that offers a story built on sturdy, older forms polished to a high sheen;"

and finally – "a work of remarkable cinematic scope."

For me, although Manhattan Beach may not be great literature, it certainly is a rousing good story. From interviews with her, it's clear that author Egan feels the same way. She said she wanted to write a well-researched, page-turner historical novel, and she has.

The extensive research author Egan did (she began research for the book 15 years before it was published) makes the novel realistic and believable. In the process, Egan practically became a maritime nerd: interviewing ship radio operators, vice admirals, tug-boat company proprietors, and Army divers. She read the 1942 American Merchant Seaman's Manual cover-to-cover. She attended a reunion of the United States Army Diver's Association, where she tried on a Mark V diving suit to learn what it felt like inside 200 pounds of canvas and vulcanized rubber, despite the fact that she had never done any diving, not even snorkeling, and doesn't even like to be on a boat!

And Manhattan Beach itself is an actual neighborhood just to the east of Coney Island, developed in the late 1800s as an upscale resort of beachfront hotels and handsome homes. When Egan went to scout it out in early 2013, she found at the end of Beaumont Street, Dexter's house, a stately red brick with a green tile roof and a deck facing the ocean.

The theme of the book, Anna as a diver, is however not historically accurate. There were no women divers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in World War II, nor for that matter anywhere in the U.S. military. Egan's heroine was inspired by a World War II veteran she met, who had worked as a diver in the Cherbourg harbor. He told Egan about a female Russian diver he met in France, and this almost mythological figure so inspired Egan that she imported the diver into her novel as the central character, Anna.

The author felt this would be the most effective way to combine her desire to use the World War II New York City background with a strong, independent woman breaking through social barriers.

These inspired diving segments of the novel had a particular resonance with me, because it took me back to the years when I was a young boy. I grew up on the outskirts of a small northern Wisconsin town, and loved books ever since I learned to read. So on Saturday afternoons, once all my chores at home were done, I would ride my bike to the town library and browse the shelves, picking an author or a subject, and then work my way through everything he or she wrote – or – all of the books on that particular subject.

Deep sea diving, the old-fashioned kind that Anna did, was one of the first subjects that captured me, and I still remember the joy of opening a new unread

volume. It was a feeling of anticipation that is beautifully captured by my favorite passage in the C. S. Lewis memoir of his early years, Surprised by Joy. Lewis, remembering himself as a young boy taking a January's afternoon walk in the Surrey countryside, wrote:

“On a Saturday afternoon in winter, when nose and fingers might be pinched enough (by the cold) to give an added relish to the anticipation of tea and fireside, and the whole weekend's reading lay ahead, I suppose I reached as much happiness as is ever to be reached on earth (and especially if there were some new, long coveted books awaiting me).”

That was me on a wintry Saturday afternoon, with a new novel on deep sea diving in hand.

In the process of telling Anna's story, I found the author to craft beautiful, sometimes almost magical prose. For example:

When capturing the thrill of her diving, an act that delivers Anna:

“to a purely tactile realm that seemed to exist outside of life. It was like pushing through a wall and finding a hidden chamber just beyond it.”

And the excitement in the prosaic act of riding a bicycle at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, still a rare experience for Anna:

“From the instant she pushed down on the pedals, and the bike began to bump over the bricks, Anna felt as though lightning touched her. Motion performed alchemy on her surroundings, transforming them from a disjointed array of scenes into a symphonic machine she could soar through, invisibly as a seagull.”

And Anna on the fire escape with her childhood friends, Lillian and Stella, after her sister Lydia's funeral:

“It felt good to be squeezed between her old friends, with whom she'd hidden in a cupboard and shared a single mattress on hot nights when their families took to the roofs.”

Or the sensation of a first ever glass of champagne:

“The pale gold potion snapped and frothed in her glass. When she took a sip, it crackled in her throat – sweet, but with a tinge of bitterness, like a barely perceptible pin inside a cushion.”

And the imagery of war work and women’s place in it:

“Eight hundred girls worked inside Building 4, a structural shop. It was hard to separate them from the men – the welders especially, with their thick gloves and face shields. You had to go by stature ... Girls holding blowtorches; girls cutting metal into pieces; girls building models of ship parts from wood. A matter-of-factness about even pretty ones; look or don’t look.”

And the continued love for her long-disappeared father:

“She couldn’t see him, but felt the knotty pain of his arms in her armpits as he slung her off the ground to carry her. She heard the muffled jingle of coins in his trouser pockets ... Without thinking she lifted her fingers to her face, half expecting the warm, bitter smell of his tobacco.”

And finally, perhaps some of the most affecting moments of the books, those of the relationship between Anna and her younger, profoundly disabled sister, Lydia. The author’s words capture both the moments of unexpected delight, as well as the crippling guilt of raising a handicapped child, culminating with the scene at the ocean:

“At last they set down the chair near the water. Panting from the walk, Anna leaned her head against her sister’s and watched a long wave form, stretching until it achieved translucence, then somersaulting forward and collapsing into creamy suds that eked toward them over the sand, nearly touching the wheels of Lydia’s chair. ... The strange, violent, beautiful sea: this was what she had wanted Lydia to see. It touched every part of the world, a glittering curtain drawn across a mystery.”

Perhaps also because of her extensive research, Egan seems to have created a novel that causes the reader’s mind’s eye to see a series of sharply drawn and familiar pictures:

- 1940s noir movies, in which James Cagney and George Raft play gangsters in cashmere overcoats and snappy fedoras in a New York night club.
- Brooklyn waterfront saloons and chowder houses – colorful and bustling with central casting characters.
- Descriptions of the New York waterfront and the Brooklyn Navy Yard that read like a documentary you might see on PBS.
- Descriptions of the swanky speakeasys; the train stations swarming with soldiers carrying brown duffel bags; the life raft filled with desperate sailors off the coast of North Africa – all like scenes from movies we’ve seen.

This book would make a perfect movie for the big screen.

Egan’s writing does not always ring true, however, sometimes I’m sure intentionally:

- Listen to Anna’s internal dialogue when she goes to a nightclub and recognizes Dexter Styles with the words:  
“The coincidence felt miraculous ... this handsome gangster in his beautifully cut suit might know what happened to her father.”  
Egan said that to fix the cadences of the time in her ear, she watched noir movies and read Damon Runyon and Raymond Chandler. But she may have absorbed too much.
- There is also the profusion of vintage brand names, radio programs, comic strips, songs, slang phrases – certainly more than needed to provide authenticity.

But best of all is her wonderful bodice-ripper scene. The pages are set on fire as “the hunger he’d awakened in her banished every scruple ... She climaxed like someone in a seizure.” This surely convinces the reader that Anna needed post-coital oxygen, rather than a cigarette.

Egan must have chuckled as she wrote that scene.

Finally, the author also does weave undercurrents into her story that show her skill at unstated meanings and complexity. For me at least, the most obvious unifying theme was the use of water, the sea, as a continuity symbol of destiny, or as Egan says “luck, chance, the single thing that could rearrange facts.”

Anna happening to see a diver on her lunch hour and becoming inspired. A chance meeting with Dexter which eventually led to Lydia finally experiencing the ocean. Eddie's ship being torpedoed off the African coast, but he survives. All fulcrum points for the novel and all immersed in the continuity of the sea.

And here are some other themes the critics see:

- Manhattan Beach plunges into the past to discover what lies beneath the surface of the world – the world of our perceptions.
- Egan suggests patterns and motivations at a deeper level than rationality.
- Egan seems to be interested in all the ways that our perspective and knowledge limit our reality – and finally:
- Egan, a great fan of mystery novels, says they are “trapdoors” leading to thresholds between the natural and the invented, which she weaves into her books.

These additional aspects of Manhattan Beach are all thoughtful and obviously good fodder for discussion – but I will end this short commentary by saying how successful I think the author was in constructing her believable, but fictional universe – combining her years-long research efforts with her fertile imagination.

Egan is a great storyteller and sets her tale in a world that rings true –with all its mystery, its shades of dark and light – its yearnings, its doubts, but also its satisfactions.



## Questions for Manhattan Beach

- The sea appears to be ever present in Egan's book. Does it have a special meaning, other than as setting for her story?
- How does the plot make use of its characters' faulty or only partial understanding of one another?
- Egan made the decision to withhold critical scenes until late in the book, postponing the understanding of what really happened in earlier episodes. Is this a weakness or is it an effective tool to further the author's theme of how our lives can be re-ordered by new facts?
- The author says that she often dreams about finding a door that leads to an unknown room. How did this influence her writing? Do you have the same experience?
- At Cambridge, Egan read the classics – Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, the nineteenth century novel. Do you feel this background has influenced Manhattan Beach?
- The author says she is obsessed with the Victorian novel. That the novel then was so much more powerful and agile in ways it is not now. Do you agree?