

Jennifer Egan – A Biographical Sketch for The Novel Club
Catherine J. LaCroix, December 2018

I prepared this sketch using material from Wikipedia, the New Yorker, and a variety of other online sources. It is at least as reliable as they are. Some details are unclear, so I left them out.

Jennifer Egan was born in Chicago in on September 7, 1962. Her paternal grandfather was a Chicago police commander; her maternal grandfather was an orthopedic surgeon. Both presumably had wives.

Egan's parents are Donald, a devout Catholic lawyer with a drinking problem, and her mother Kay, an art dealer. Over the strenuous objections of her father, her parents divorced when she was two. Egan grew up mainly with her mother, her stepfather, and her younger half-brother Graham.

When Egan was seven, her investment banker stepfather moved the family to San Francisco. Egan reflects that life in San Francisco in the seventies made her feel sad that she missed the sixties; the town felt like a place that had already peaked. Egan seemed to try to re-create some aspects of the sixties: she drank and experimented with drugs as a teenager. I suspect that this experience informed part of the material in her 2010 novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which includes quite a bit of misbehavior among a group of teens in San Francisco in the seventies, including one character who, like Egan, attended a private girls school.

After difficult high school years, Egan took a gap year before college. She tried a bit of archaeology in Kampsville, Illinois, where the Center for American Archaeology offers experience researching indigenous peoples. Egan did not like the experience. Her mother's marriage to her stepfather was going bad, so she decided to travel. In order to pay for it, she did some modelling for catalogs, first in San Francisco and then in Tokyo. The experience left her with an interest in the way the fashion industry damages the people in it. Her novel *Look At Me* (nominated for the National Book Award in 2001) describes a washed-up model who undergoes reconstructive surgery after a car accident.

During her gap year she went to Europe to backpack, but it was not a good experience; she was lonely and had panic attacks.

Her European excursions were reflected in her first novel, *The Invisible Circus*, which was published in 1995 and tells the story of an eighteen-year-old girl who travels through Europe, tracing the footsteps of her dead sister. *The Invisible Circus* was made into a movie starring Cameron Diaz, in 2001. Her short-story collection *Emerald City* (1996) was also inspired by her European travels.

Egan went on to the University of Pennsylvania, where she majored in English literature. While an undergraduate, Egan met Steve Jobs at a party while home in San Francisco. They dated for a year. He was already famous and wealthy; it was a bi-coastal affair. Ultimately, she declined

his offer of marriage because she wanted to have her own life – a decision she thinks he expected.

After graduating from Penn, Egan spent two years at St John's College, Cambridge supported by a Thouron Award. This is a scholarship to study in England awarded to highly qualified Penn graduates. At Cambridge, Egan earned an M.A. She also met her future husband, another American who was studying classics.

She came to New York in 1987 and worked an array of jobs while learning to write. Her first extensive writing job was to be the ghost author of a biography of Aline, Countess of Romanones, a former model from Rockland County, New York who had gone to Europe as a spy during WW II and married a Spanish count. Egan says she was treated like a servant, but learned a lot about writing.

In 1994, she married the man she met at Cambridge, David Herskovits. Egan now lives Brooklyn with her husband and two sons.

Egan has written quite a few novels, but the only other one I have read is *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize in 2011. This novel follows the life of a record producer as well as a number of other characters, covers several decades, is told from different points of view, and does not follow a linear or chronological order. It includes a chapter written as a Power Point presentation. I listened to this book so I didn't get the full Power Point effect.

Of her inspiration and approach to this novel, she said to the New Yorker, "I don't experience time as linear. I experience it in layers that seem to coexist ... One thing that facilitates that kind of time travel is music, which is why I think music ended up being such an important part of the book. Also, I was reading Proust. He tries, very successfully in some ways, to capture the sense of time passing, the quality of consciousness, and the ways to get around linearity, which is the weird scourge of writing prose." (Veterans of our Novel Club multi-year voyage through all of Proust will appreciate her qualified praise of his work.)

I recommend *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, if the subject matter appeals to you at all.

In 2012, she wrote a short story, "Black Box," which is a spy thriller written as a series of tweets.

Manhattan Beach, tonight's work, took her fifteen years to write. During its gestation, she published two other books, *The Keep* and *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. In part, *Manhattan Beach* took so long because of the extensive research that went into it. She watched movies and read the books of the time to capture the feel of the forties. According to the New Yorker: "On her iPhone, she kept lists of questions: Where did the urban poor bury their dead? Were ballgames played on Sunday? Did rubber bands exist?" She attended a reunion of the United States Army Diver's Association, where she tried on a diving suit to learn what it felt like. She finally began to write in 2012.

She found her first draft nauseating. She reworked it extensively, until it became the book we are discussing tonight.

One passage in the New Yorker article struck me: Egan's half-brother Graham was an artist who developed mental illness and committed suicide in 2016. She quoted him as saying: "I can't believe this. You're hearing voices and you're making a living from it. And I'm hearing voices and I'm spending a fortune trying to get rid of them."

Perhaps it takes a very special character to be a successful novelist.

A few other notes:

Awards

Egan writes a lot and is also a serious journalist. She has published short fiction in The New Yorker, Harper's, Zoetrope: All-Story, and Ploughshares, among other periodicals, and her journalism appears frequently in The New York Times Magazine.

Egan received National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1996. In 2002 she wrote a cover story on homeless children that received the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award. She was a fellow at the Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library in 2004–2005. Her 2008 story on bipolar children won an Outstanding Media Award from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. In 2011 she was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

Egan won the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award (Fiction), the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and Pulitzer Prize for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Finally, here is a quote from Wikipedia, for what it is worth (brackets in original):

Academic interpretation [clarification needed]

Academic literary critics have examined Egan's work in a variety of contexts. David Cowart has read Egan's project in A Visit from the Goon Squad as indebted to Modernist writing but as possessing a closer affinity to postmodern writing, in which "she meets the parental postmoderns on their own ground; by the same token, she venerates the grandparental moderns even as she places their mythography under erasure and dismantles their supreme fictions", [clarification needed] ... Baoyu Nie has focused, alternatively, on the ways in which "Egan draws the reader into the addressee role" through the use of second-person narrative technique in her Twitter fiction. Finally, Martin Paul Eve has argued that the university itself is given "quantifiably more space within Egan's work than would be merited under strict societal mimesis", leading him to classify Egan's novels within the history of metafiction.

And now, for a more illuminating analysis, let us turn to tonight's Novel Club critical paper.