

December 2018
Novel club minutes

Book: Manhattan Beach
Author: Jennifer Egan

Our December 8 meeting of the novel club was remarkably well attended, with nearly all members present. The group mingled in Catherine LaCroix's dining room over snacks and beverages, provided by Marie Lathers and Jennie Kaffen, to begin the evening. Coffee proved to be as popular as wine this evening, with members consuming a notably smaller amount of wine than in meetings past. We shall see if this trend continues.

Our formal meeting began at 8:15 with introductions of guests. Tricia Smith came with Teri and Tom Nestor, and Bob Brody brought Jonathan Frielich. Following these introductions, we had a reading of Ham Emmons obituary, and two committees made short comments: Treasurer Andy Fabens reported that we have \$1500 in the bank, we need to pay for our website's domain name, and those who haven't paid dues need to pay. Program committee chair Catherine LaCroix reminded us that they will begin book selection process soon, and that members should offer book suggestions for next year.

At this time, Catherine once again switched roles, this time from to biographer. She mentioned that she got her information from a 2017 New Yorker article profiling the author, as well as other sources. We learned that Jennifer Egan was born in Chicago in 1962 to a mother who was and artist, and a dad with a drinking problem. She moved to San Francisco when she was seven. Catherine noted the influence that life experiences clearly had on her writing, one of which is the 2011 Pulitzer prize winning *Visit from the Goon Squad*, in which many characters are heavily involved with drug use. She experienced significant amounts of this when a teenager in San Francisco.

After high school, Egan took a gap year in which she traveled to Europe, paying for it by modeling. This experience clearly influenced *Look at Me*, which explores the life of a model. Other works include *Invisible Circus* and *Emerald City and other stories*. Egan attended UPenn, where she met Steve Jobs, whose marriage proposal she turned down, and then earned her MA at Cambridge. Egan now lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband. *Manhattan Beach*, published in 2017, took 15 years to write, as Egan is a meticulous researcher. The time she spends may be immaterial, thought, as she states that she experiences time not at linear, but as layers. Egan is an accomplished writer, with too many awards and fellowships to list here.

Jim Schilling delivered the critical paper, which examined our novel from multiple angles. He mentioned that this is, simply put, a conventional novel about a brave and determined woman breaking through barriers. He noted that the story was told at a good pace, set in the Great Depression and later World War II. He provided a concise plot summary, followed by a report on what the critics had to say about *Manhattan Beach*. It has been described as a "Good old fashioned page turner", and a "work of cinematic scope". Jim described the book as a rousing

good story; a well researched, realistic historical novel. One example of Egan's research is that she tried on a diving suit from the time so she could adequately describe the diving experience.

Jim noted that the book is not entirely historically accurate, as there were, in fact, no female divers at that time. The author does, however, capture the experience of diving as well as bike riding. She also succeeds in capturing the delight and guilt of raising a disabled child, and the longing for the long disappeared father. Also well drawn were the scenes at the Brooklyn waterfront bars, swank speakeasies, as well as the depiction of the life raft of lost sailors. While these scenes were exceptional, Jim pointed out that one possible flaw of the book is that the dialogue was not always on the mark.

The theme of water and our connection to it had strong continuity throughout the novel, as did the idea of luck and chance as rulers of our lives. Jim concluded by stating that Egan was highly successful in combining research with imagination, and provided several questions for the Novel Club to ponder. Nearly all in attendance had something to say, and discussion was constructive, and on topic.

Question one concerned the sea; Does it have special meaning, other than just the setting for the story? Comments included the sea is a powerful life force and that it proved to be too much for the weaker sister, others noted the therapeutic effect of the sea. Leon Gabinet had a different perspective, as a veteran of WWII. He spent 12 terrifying hours on a life raft near Okinawa, and sees the sea as rough and dangerous, and representational of death. He felt Egan's description of the sailors stuck at sea was accurate.

The next question was about characters. Each significant character has a light and dark side. Also, is there a pattern as to who survives and thrives, and who doesn't? Again, people had inciteful comments. Several readers appreciated that Egan tied up loose ends, although some thought she tried too hard to do so. One commenter found the take away from the book was the power of secrets to bring down a family.

Question 3 was about whether the author's withholding of the details of what really happened in earlier episodes until the end; was this an effective tool? This tied in a bit with the next question about the character's faulty or incomplete knowledge of the actions of others. Many commented that this novel was like a film noire, and that as a thriller, it needed these devices.

Jim's final question changed tack a bit, asking whether the Novel Club felt Egan's background as a reader of the classics whilst at Cambridge influenced Manhattan Beach. This drew a mix of responses about the general themes of the book and whether or not it was successful. Some felt it unraveled at the end, some felt she didn't capture the feel of NY. Jim rightly stated that one mark of a successful novel is that it provides a machinery for discussion. By this measure, the novel clearly succeeds.

The evening wrapped up with more treats in the dining room and a lovely time was had by all.