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Book Club Set

A Visit From the Goon Squad

By Jennifer Egan

About the Author

Jennifer Egan's 2017 novel, *Manhattan Beach*, has been awarded the 2018 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. Egan was born in Chicago and raised in San Francisco. She is also the author of *The Invisible Circus*, a novel which became a feature film starring Cameron Diaz in 2001, *Look at Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction in 2001, *Emerald City and Other Stories, The Keep, and A Visit From the Goon Squad*, won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, and the LA Times Book Prize. Her 2017 novel, Manhattan Beach, a New York Times bestseller, was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction and was chosen as New York City's One Book One New York read. Her new novel, The Candy House, a companion to A Visit From the Goon Squad, was named one of the New York Times's 10 Best Books of 2022 and one of President Obama's favorite reads of the year. Her short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Harpers, Granta, McSweeney's* and other magazines. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, and a Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library. Also a journalist, she has written frequently in the *New York Times Magazine*. Her 2002 cover story on homeless children received the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award, and "The Bipolar Kid" received a 2009 NAMI Outstanding Media Award for Science and Health Reporting from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She recently completed a term as President of PEN America.

Retrieved from: https://jenniferegan.com/about/

About the Book

Moving from San Francisco in the 1970s to a vividly imagined New York City sometime after 2020, Jennifer Egan portrays the interlacing lives of men and women whose desires and ambitions converge and collide as the passage of time, cultural change, and private experience define and redefine their identities. Bennie Salazar, a punk rocker in his teenage years, is facing middle age as a divorced and disheartened record producer. His cool, competent assistant, Sasha, keeps everything under control—except for her unconquerable compulsion to steal. Their diverse and diverting memories of the past and musings about the present set the stage for a cycle of tales about their friends, families, business associates, and lovers.

A high school friend re-creates the wild, sexually charged music scene of Bennie's adolescence and introduces the wealthy, amoral entertainment executive Lou Kline, who becomes Bennie's mentor and eventually faces the consequences of his casual indifference to the needs of his mistresses, wives, and children. Scotty, a guitarist in Bennie's long-defunct band, emerges from a life lived on the fringes of society to confront Bennie in his luxurious Park Avenue office, while Bennie's once-punk wife, Stephanie, works her way up in the plush Republican suburb where they live. Other vignettes explore Sasha's experiences and the people who played a role in her life. An uncle searching for Sasha when she runs away at seventeen becomes aware of his own disillusionments and disappointments as he tries to comfort her. Her college boyfriend describes a night of drug-fueled revelry that comes to a shocking end. And her twelve-year-old daughter contributes a clever PowerPoint presentation of the family dynamics—including hilariously pointed summaries of her mother's "Annoying Habit #48" and "Why Dad Isn't Here."

From a trenchant look at the vagaries of the music business and the ebb and flow of celebrity to incisive dissections of marriage and family to a provocative vision of where America is headed, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is unnerving, exhilarating, and irresistible.

Retrieved from: https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/201020/a-visit-from-the-goon-squad-by-jennifer-egan/9780307592835/readers-guide/

Discussion Questions

1. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shifts among various perspectives, voices, and time periods, and in one striking chapter (pp. 234–309), departs from conventional narrative entirely. What does the mixture of voices and narrative forms convey about the nature of experience and the creation of memories? Why has Egan arranged the stories out of chronological sequence?

2. In “A to B” Bosco unintentionally coins the phrase “Time’s a goon” (p. 127), used again by Bennie in “Pure Language” (p. 332). What does Bosco mean? What does Bennie mean? What does the author mean?

3. “Found Objects” and “The Gold Cure” include accounts of Sasha’s and Bennie’s therapy sessions. Sasha picks and chooses what she shares: “She did this for Coz’s protection and her own—they were writing a story of redemption, of fresh beginnings and second chances” (pp. 8–9). Bennie tries to adhere to a list of no-no’s his shrink has supplied (p. 24). What do the tone and the content of these sections suggest about the purpose and value of therapy? Do they provide a helpful perspective on the characters?

4. Lou makes his first appearance in “Ask Me If I Care” (pp. 39–58) as an unprincipled, highly successful businessman; “Safari” (pp. 59–83) provides an intimate, disturbing look at the way he treats his children and lover; and “You (Plural)” (pp. 84–91) presents him as a sick old man. What do his relationships with Rhea and Mindy have in common? To what extent do both women accept (and perhaps encourage) his abhorrent behavior, and why to they do so? Do the conversations between Lou and Rolph, and Rolph’s interactions with his sister and Mindy, prepare you for the tragedy that occurs almost twenty years later? What emotions does Lou’s afternoon in “You (Plural)” with Jocelyn and Rhea provoke? Is he basically the same person he was in the earlier chapters?

5. Why does Scotty decide to get in touch with Bennie? What strategies do each of them employ as they spar with each other? How does the past, including Scotty’s dominant role in the band and his marriage to Alice, the girl both men pursued, affect the balance of power? In what ways is Scotty’s belief that “one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out” (p. 98) confirmed at the meeting? Is their reunion in “Pure Language” a continuation of the pattern set when they were teenagers, or does it reflect changes in their fortunes as well as in the world around them?

6. Sasha’s troubled background comes to light in “Good-bye, My Love” (pp. 208–33). Do Ted’s recollections of her childhood explain Sasha’s behavior? To what extent is Sasha’s “catalog of woes” (p. 213) representative of her generation as a whole? How do Ted’s feelings about his career and wife color his reactions to

Sasha? What does the flash-forward to “another day more than twenty years after this one” (p. 233) imply about the transitory moments in our lives?

7. Musicians, groupies, and entertainment executives and publicists figure prominently in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. What do the careers and private lives of Bennie, Lou, and Scotty (“X’s and O’s”; “Pure Language”); Bosco and Stephanie (“A to B”); and Dolly (“Selling the General”) suggest about American culture and society over the decades? Discuss how specific details and cultural references (e.g., names of real people, bands, and venues) add authenticity to Egan’s fictional creations.

8. The chapters in this book can be read as stand-alone stories. How does this affect the reader’s engagement with individual characters and the events in their lives? Which characters or stories did you find the most compelling? By the end, does everything fall into place to form a satisfying storyline?

9. Read the quotation from Proust that Egan uses as an epigraph (p. ix). How do Proust’s observations apply to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*? What impact do changing times and different contexts have on how the characters perceive and present themselves? Are the attitudes and actions of some characters more consistent than others’, and if so, why?

10. In a recent interview Egan said, “I think anyone who’s writing satirically about the future of America and life often looks prophetic. . . . I think we’re all part of a zeitgeist and we’re all listening to and absorbing the same things, consciously or unconsciously. . . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 8, 2010). Considering current social trends and political realities, including fears of war and environmental devastation, evaluate the future Egan envisions in “Pure Language” and “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.”

11. What does “Pure Language” have to say about authenticity in a technological and digital age? Would you view the response to Bennie, Alex, and Lulu’s marketing venture differently if the musician had been someone other than Scotty Hausmann and his slide guitar? Stop/Go (from “The Gold Cure”), for example?

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Author Interview

Q. You have cited both Marcel Proust and the TV show *The Sopranos* as sources of inspiration for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Can you explain this unique combination of influences?

A. First of all, influence is always a difficult thing to pinpoint when you write as instinctively as I do because I don't really know exactly what I'm going to end up doing when I sit down to do it. I'm waiting to be surprised myself because I find that surprises are always the best ideas. It's not that I sit down and write great stuff without thinking, not at all. Most of it is terrible. But the stuff that feels fun and fresh to me tends to happen fairly unthinkingly. So, sometimes it's only later that I can really parse out what actually influenced me.

Proust was the most conscious influence. I returned to *In Search of Lost Time* in my late 30s, having read only a couple of volumes in my early 20s. And when I returned to it, I found myself wondering, over the years that it took me to read the whole book, what a contemporary book about time might look like. It seemed a very worthy topic to me at that point, though it actually seemed quite dull when I read it in my early 20s (laughs). What a difference 18 years can make.

Proust accomplishes his heroic task in a sort of real-time way. A lot of time passes as you read the book, even if you read it quickly, and I did not. In the group of peers that I was reading it with, I think we had five or six children among us in the years we spent reading Proust. So as he teases out the implications of time and the radical shifts that it brings, we as readers were experiencing some of those twists and shifts in our own lives as we read the book. I loved all of that and I especially loved Proust's ability to capture the transformations and reversals that happen over time, the way that outcomes are so often unexpected and in fact almost the opposite of what you would expect. The biggest question for me was how to capture the sweep and scope of those transformations and reversals without taking thousands of pages to do it. It's a technical question — how do you do that?

During the same years that I was reading Proust with my friends, I was also watching *The Sopranos*, which also unfolded at a leisurely, kind of real-time pace, through which the children in the series grew up, and all of the characters visibly aged. So again there was a sense of one's own life passing in tandem with the unfolding of the series. Somehow, as I asked myself the question of how to technically accomplish what Proust accomplishes but in a different and, most importantly, compressed way, I decided that

using some of the techniques of a series like *The Sopranos* might be one way to try to do that. That's the way in which they fused.

There's this lateral approach in *The Sopranos* in which a minor character suddenly becomes a major character for a while and then goes out of focus again, and the overarching story is almost invisible at times in the face of subplots and complications that are so engrossing that one almost would forget what the story, capital S, of the season was, or not even know it until the season began to conclude. I really liked all of that, and I think in some way when I sat down to work on *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the idea of merging some of those techniques with my conscious goal of writing a book about time must have happened.

Q. And to bring it full circle, I believe HBO is currently developing *A Visit from the Goon Squad* into a miniseries. What has your role been like in the project?

A. I should correct you there, it's not a miniseries but an actual series that they are imagining, which is interesting because of course what it means is, if by some miracle, it all really works, they would move beyond the confines of my own book after probably one or two seasons. As you say, it has a full circle feeling of inevitability about it.
My involvement is pretty minimal, I'm attached as a consultant which means I'm happy to appear and share ideas, but I don't really want to be involved in the writing because my books tend to be very different from each other and one of the things that I most need when I try to start something new is a kind of distance from the previous projects. On some level I need a kind of mental renunciation of it, a severing of contact with the approach and voice and mood and tone of the previous project and I'm worried that if I got involved in the physical creation of a series, it would be very hard for me to get the distance I'm going to need. Not to mention that I have no idea how the hell to write for television, and I worry that it could be a learning curve that would absorb me for way too long.

Q. There does seem to be this trend of novelists going into television writing, and many critics have praised long-form television as one of the most exciting new realms of cultural production. What are your thoughts on the relationship between fiction and television?

A. Well, I agree that there's a lot of really interesting stuff going on out there, but I'm really at a kind of distance from it. I recently started watching *The Wire*. I watched the first season and I was utterly engrossed in it. I found it pretty addictive, actually to the point where I'm pausing before starting to watch the second season because it was taking up too much of my time. So, I certainly understand why people are interested.

There's this kind of joyous, swaggering revelry in serialization that we haven't seen since the 19th century when these amazing novels were written in that way. So I'm all for it, theoretically.

Though in terms of my own time and energy, I have to say honestly that I don't watch a lot of TV and I'm not that interested in writing for it. I guess on some level my fascination with this is more theoretical than actual. In the end, I just keep wanting to put my own time and energy into both reading and writing. But it's clear that I'm also interested in some of the techniques of TV, not so much so that I can participate in the creation of television, but because I have this sense that all of this can do interesting things for the novel and that's really what I'm mostly interested in.

Q. Even with these kinds of crossovers that we've discussed, there is still this persistent divide between a popular culture of TV, movies and music and a so-called high culture of art and literature. What are your thoughts on this dichotomy and how do you view your own work in relation to it?

A. I don't like this so-called high brow versus commercial dichotomy because I feel it isolates both camps in an area that I'm guessing no one particularly wants to be in. Who wants to be "high brow", and I put that term in quotes, and unappreciated, and who wants to be "commercial" and "unserious"? And again, I can't help looking back to the 19th century to someone like Dickens or George Elliot or Zola. These were writers who were revered, widely consumed, and yet they were writing great work by any standards. I don't see any reason why there has to be opposition there. I don't like it and I don't think it serves any of us very well, either as producers of creative work or as consumers of it.

Q. You have worked in a wide variety of genres throughout your career: novels, short stories, speculative and gothic fiction to name a few. What is the role of genre in your work?

A. Good question (laughs). I don't really begin with ideas about genre. I certainly wrote a gothic novel, *The Keep*, that conformed to and in some ways played with every convention I knew of to work within the gothic, but the way I came to it was very instinctive and visceral.

I went to visit this castle in Belgium. My husband was working in France at the time, and we had a newborn baby. I put him in a sack around my neck and we went to this castle on my husband's day off. I had been to castles before, but this time I had a very strong, excited reaction to being there that at first, I didn't quite understand myself. It felt

revelatory and thrilling to be in a ruined castle and I thought: I have to write about this somehow, but I didn't know what that meant.

At first, I thought maybe that meant that I wanted to write a historical novel set in medieval times. But then I started to feel like, no, I wanted the kind of fake medievalism of the gothic. I wanted the sort of cheesiness, if you will, of that gothic atmosphere, which is really about the perception that the supernatural might be possible, that there's this state of awaiting the arrival of a disembodied presence and communication. And I began to realize that I was interested in this, in part, because I just felt enticed by that gothic sensibility and gothic realm, but also because I was interested in juxtaposing that with our own present-day hyper-connectedness.

So, I came to it instinctively, with an excitement that I had to work myself to understand, and that finally brought me to the genre. And the genre was almost like a place, I mean the gothic is a realm that doesn't exist in life, it's a literary space. Although I include in that this cheesy soap opera *Dark Shadows* that I watched in the '70s as a kid (laughs). So, the gothic is an imaginary realm, and for me what genre provided was this imaginary realm that I could visit in all kinds of ways and did with delight for a couple of years as I wrote my book.

Q. Your work has, at times, been characterized as satire. Are you comfortable with this description and what are your thoughts on the role of satire in contemporary society?

A. I think parts of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* have a satiric edge, let's say, and *Look At Me* very much did. I think the big lesson I've learned is that it's very hard to write satire in America because almost immediately whatever you've thought of turns out to come true, or sometimes it already was true. Maybe I don't go far enough as a satirist, because what begins for me as satire ends as verisimilitude, and sometimes not much time seems to have passed to get from one to the other. I think a playful critique is good for all of us, and that's basically how I see satire functioning. But I'm not interested in a kind of contemptuous satirical vision, I try always even when I'm knowingly being satirical to also be humane, but I mean let's face it, there's plenty in American life to make fun of, and we all participate in it.

Q. What inspired you to write about the music industry in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*?

A. Well, music and time are pretty intertwined as I think most of us know from our daily lives now that we each have our own individual sound system. Many songs on that

sound system, for most of us, have significance because they meant a lot to us at earlier points in our lives. So I think that's one thing. Music plays a big part in Proust, both as a plot element and as an organizing principle and, of course, there's the famous madeleine that transports Marcel, the narrator, through time, but honestly, music does the same thing in his novel, and more often. So I think that was part of it.

I also had to do a fair amount of research just to write the second chapter about the music producer Bennie Salazar, and in the course of those conversations which were with a producer/mixer, I became sympathetic to what it was like to be on the inside of an industry in free fall. It's not something that I had really understood before because I didn't know anyone in the industry. But in those conversations that I had, the goal of which was really just to learn the difference between analogue and digital recording, repeatedly, there was this sense of, well, it used to be like that, but now it's like this.

There's this real sense of a gigantic, seismic shift and that really interested me because I knew that I was writing a book that was about time and about change. It's hard to think about time and change nowadays without also thinking about technology because it changes so fast and the rate at which it changes reminds us constantly that time is passing. Somehow, with all those thoughts in my mind and hearing, again and again, this kind of before and after the notion of the music industry, I began to feel like that industry would be a good lens through which to look at the passage of time technologically.

Q. You have compared the narrative structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* to that of a concept album. Can you explain?

A. Yeah, a concept album is a big story, told in parts that sound very different from each other. I don't think you can come up with a better purely technical description of what *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is. It's not really a conventional novel in the sense that it doesn't have a strong forward thrust to it, or a strong central narrative. It's very diffused. There are kind of two main characters but we also really diverge from them at various points. So, I was not comfortable even putting "novel" on the cover of the hardback because I worried that people would pick up a book that they thought was a novel and dislike it simply because it wasn't that type of book. But I also didn't want to call it a story collection because that really didn't seem to describe the overarching effect that I was going for.

So, as I was working on it, I thought, huh, I don't really know what this is. That wasn't especially troubling. I think it is troubling to readers though. I think that in some people's minds, the novel and story collection exist as a kind of Platonic category. There's

something a little bit troubling about a book that refuses to fit into either one. Whereas to me, I feel like, look, fiction is fiction. Who cares whether it exactly matches a label. However, as I was working on it, there was a point where I thought, you know there really is sort of a part one and a part two here. I thought, why not call them “A” and “B”, since we’re harkening back to the days of vinyl. And then I thought, huh, isn’t that interesting?

In a way, the idea of this as an album really makes more sense than I had realized. Because there is a big difference between A Visit from the Goon Squad and a collection of stories, or especially so-called linked stories, where stories are about some of the same characters and there’s a lot of overlap between them. Often these collections of linked stories have a similarity of mood and tone that indicates the fact that they are in fact telling one bigger story, but I really wanted mine to function differently. I wanted the parts to be as different in sound, if you will, as they could possibly be.

Q. You use a variety of narrative perspectives, shifting tenses, styles, and even a PowerPoint presentation to present the stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Is the book in some way a comment on the aesthetic form of fiction itself and all of the various things that it can accomplish?

A. I didn’t think of it that way. The way I imagined it was just — if I’m writing this in parts, why not get the maximum advantage from that that I can? In other words, why not create a much bigger range of experience than I could possibly get away with within a more centrally oriented novel? Maybe I’m saying the same thing in a different way though, because in some ways it is a celebration of all these possibilities, and I do feel that way about fiction. One of the things that are so great about it is its flexibility. That’s why I sometimes do feel impatient with the question of whether it’s a novel or a story collection. I feel like, who cares about those names? Aren’t they only there to serve us, and if they’re not doing that job, then let’s put them to the side for a moment. I do feel energized by the many things that fiction can do and has done from the very beginning. If you look at the early novels, they’re these really exciting, elastic grab bags of possibilities.

Q. What is the importance of distance in your creative process, because you’ve said in interviews that you don’t like to write directly about your own experience?

A. I think that there are many things that a sense of distance does for me. On the most basic level, I write out of a desire to, I don’t want to say escape because that makes it sound like my life is bad, but to transcend my own everyday experience and to get to live in a parallel world. I think that’s the motivation for me. I feel like I’m getting to have

two lives for the price of one. It's heavenly. And in a way, it's really three lives, because there's also whatever I'm reading, whatever world that's transporting me to. That's what I love. And because I write in a fairly instinctive way, as I've said before — endless revising etcetera — there's a real element of surprise and discovery to the process for me. I don't know what's going to happen next.

Even in *The Keep* which is a very tightly plotted thriller, the plot moves came about instinctively. So that element of surprise is a lot of the motivation and the fun for me. If I'm writing about things that I know, like myself or other people, a lot of that excitement is diminished because I don't have that sense of discovery or adventure. I'm having to continually harken back to my own life as a reference point which is the opposite of the sort of thrill-seeking that I enjoy.

I know there's a way in which the tools that I'm really using as I write are emphases and extrapolation, because of course, I must be using my own life in some way. You could say, well what else have you got? And that's reasonable. But I think a feeling of distance from my own life is what allows me to find emotions and experiences elsewhere and really throw myself into them. It's almost like a kind of ventriloquism whereby I detach from my own emotional life so that I can find those emotions in other places and feel as if they belong to other people. It helps me a lot to forget about myself when I'm writing fiction not just because I'm not that interested in myself but because I think I can find myself, if you will, in a fragmented and unrecognizable form more easily if I'm not thinking about my actual life.

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Other Links and Resources

Jennifer Egan talks to James Naughtie and readers about A Visit from the Goon Squad:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b09h0dxt

A Visit from the Goon Squad | Jennifer Egan | Talks at Google:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kl86UbQWmyk

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Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

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Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

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