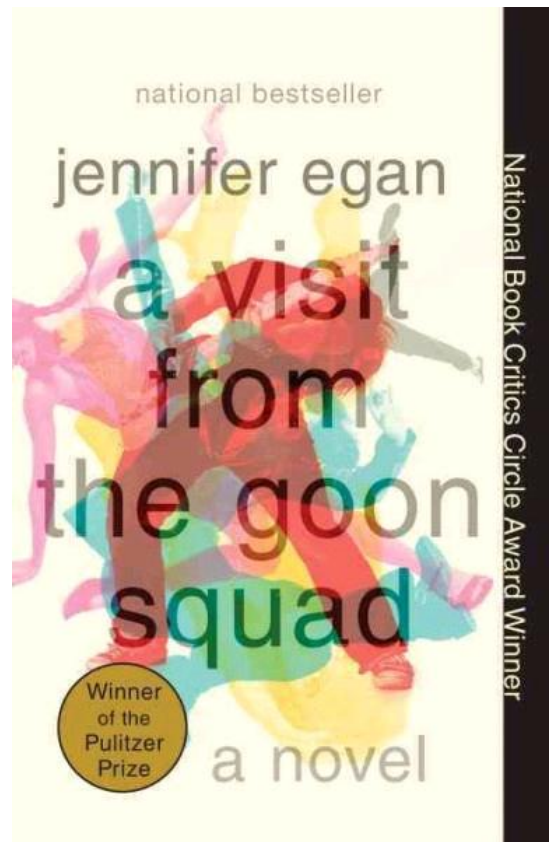


About the book...



Jennifer Egan's spellbinding interlocking narratives circle the lives of Bennie Salazar, an aging former punk rocker and record executive, and Sasha, the passionate, troubled young woman he employs.

Although Bennie and Sasha never discover each other's pasts, the reader does, in intimate detail, along with the secret lives of a host of other characters whose paths intersect with theirs,

over many years, in locales as varied as New York, San Francisco, Naples, and Africa.

We first meet Sasha in her mid-thirties, on her therapist's couch in New York City, confronting her long-standing compulsion to steal. Later, we learn the genesis of her turmoil when we see her as the child of a violent marriage, then as a runaway living in Naples, then as a college student trying to avert the suicidal impulses of her best friend. We plunge into the hidden yearnings and disappointments of her uncle, an art historian

stuck in a dead marriage, who travels to Naples to extract Sasha from the city's demimonde and experiences an epiphany of his own while staring at a sculpture of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Museo Nazionale.

We meet Bennie Salazar at the melancholy nadir of his adult life - divorced, struggling to connect with his nine-year-old son, listening to a washed-up band in the basement of a suburban house” and then revisit him in 1979, at the height of his youth, shy and tender, reveling in San Francisco's punk scene as he discovers his ardor for rock and roll and his gift for spotting talent. We learn what became of his high school gang - who thrived and who faltered; and we encounter Lou Kline, Bennie's catastrophically careless mentor, along with the lovers and children left behind in the wake of Lou's far-flung sexual conquests and meteoric rise and fall.

A Visit from the Goon Squad is a book about the interplay of time and music, about survival, about the stirrings and transformations set inexorably in motion by even the most passing conjunction of our fates. In a breathtaking array of styles and tones ranging from tragedy to satire to PowerPoint, Egan captures the undertow of self-destruction that we all must either master or succumb to - the

basic human hunger for redemption; and the universal tendency to reach for both, and escape the merciless progress of time, in the transporting realms of art and music. Sly, startling, exhilarating work from one of our boldest writers.

About the author...



Jennifer Egan is the author of [*The Keep*](#), [*The Invisible Circus*](#) and the story collection [*Emerald City*](#). Her stories have been published in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, *Zoetrope*, and *Ploughshares*, and her nonfiction appears frequently in *The New York Times Magazine*. Egan lives with her husband and son in Brooklyn.

Awards...

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize
National Book Critics Circle Award Winner
PEN/Faulkner Award Finalist
A New York Times Book Review Best Book

Reviews

Booklist/**Starred Review**/

Egan is a writer of cunning subtlety, embedding within the risky endeavors of seductively complicated characters a curious bending of time and escalation of technology's covert impact. Following her diabolically clever *The Keep* (2006), Egan tracks the members of a San Francisco punk band and their hangers-on over the decades as they wander out into the wider, bewildering world. Kleptomaniac Sasha survives the underworld of Naples, Italy. Her boss, New York music producer Bennie Salazar, is miserable in the suburbs, where his tattooed wife, Stephanie, sneaks off to play tennis with Republicans. Obese former rock-star Bosco wants Stephanie to help him with a Suicide Tour, while her all-powerful publicist boss eventually falls so low she takes a job rehabilitating the public image of a genocidal

dictator. These are just a few of the faltering searchers in Egan's hilarious, melancholy, enrapturing, unnerving, and piercingly beautiful mosaic of a novel. As episodes surge forward and back in time, from the spitting aggression of a late-1970s punk-rock club to the obedient, socially networked "herd" gathered at the Footprint, Manhattan's 9/11 site 20 years after the attack, Egan evinces an acute sensitivity to the black holes of shame and despair and to the remote-control power of the gadgets that are reordering our world.

Library Journal

Time changes both everything and nothing in this novel about former punk rocker-turned-music executive Bennie Salazar and Sasha, his indispensable secretary with an unhappy past. A host of characters from San Francisco's 1970s music scene collide in ways that are hard to summarize, with peripheral characters in one chapter more fully developed in others. These well-defined characters and the engaging narrative are hallmarks of Egan's earlier fiction, which include *Look at Me*, a National Book Award finalist, and the best-selling *The Keep*. Here, we learn that power is transient, authenticity is not all it's cracked up to be, and friendships are often fragile, but the

connections among people matter terribly. Often, we survive the self-destructive tendencies of youth only to realize that we've just exchanged one set of problems for another. VERDICT In the end, this novel does offer hope, but it is the grubby kind that keeps you going once you've been kicked to the curb. Readers will enjoy seeing the disparate elements of this novel come full circle.

*Kirkus Review /*Starred Review*/*

"Time's a goon," as the action moves from the late 1970s to the early 2020s while the characters wonder what happened to their youthful selves and ideals. Egan (*The Keep*, 2006, etc.) takes the music business as a case in point for society's monumental shift from the analog to the digital age. Record-company executive Bennie Salazar and his former bandmates from the Flaming Dildos form one locus of action; another is Bennie's former assistant Sasha, a compulsive thief club-hopping in Manhattan when we meet her as the novel opens, a mother of two living out West in the desert as it closes a decade and a half later with an update on the man she picked up and robbed in the first chapter. It can be alienating when a narrative bounces from character to character, emphasizing interconnections rather than developing a continuous story line, but Egan

conveys personality so swiftly and with such empathy that we remain engaged. By the time the novel arrives at the year "202-" in a bold section narrated by Sasha's 12-year-old daughter Alison, readers are ready to see the poetry and pathos in the small nuggets of information Alison arranges like a PowerPoint presentation. In the closing chapter, Bennie hires young dad Alex to find 50 "parrots" (paid touts masquerading as fans) to create "authentic" word of mouth for a concert. This new kind of viral marketing is aimed at "pointers," toddlers now able to shop for themselves thanks to "kiddie handsets"; the preference of young adults for texting over talking is another creepily plausible element of Egan's near-future. Yet she is not a conventional dystopian novelist; distinctions between the virtual and the real may be breaking down in this world, but her characters have recognizable emotions and convictions, which is why their compromises and uncertainties continue to move us. Another ambitious change of pace from talented and visionary Egan, who reinvents the novel for the 21st century while affirming its historic values.

Publishers Weekly

Readers will be pleased to discover that the star-crossed marriage of lucid prose and expertly

deployed postmodern switcheroos that helped shoot Egan to the top of the genre-bending new school is alive in well in this graceful yet wild novel. We begin in contemporaryish New York with kleptomaniac Sasha and her boss, rising music producer Bennie Salazar, before flashing back, with Bennie, to the glory days of Bay Area punk rock, and eventually forward, with Sasha, to a settled life. By then, Egan has accrued tertiary characters, like Scotty Hausmann, Bennie's one-time bandmate who all but dropped out of society, and Alex, who goes on a date with Sasha and later witnesses the future of the music industry. Egan's overarching concerns are about how rebellion ages, influence corrupts, habits turn to addictions, and lifelong friendships fluctuate and turn. Or as one character asks, "How did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?" Egan answers the question elegantly, though not straight on, as this powerful novel chronicles how and why we change, even as the song stays the same.

Discussion questions

(<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>)

1. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shifts among various perspectives, voices, and time periods, and in one striking chapter (pp. 176–251), 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. 96), used again by Bennie in "Pure Language" (p.269). 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" (p. 7). Bennie tries to adhere to a list of no-no's his shrink has supplied (pp. 18-19). 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. 30-44) as an unprincipled, highly successful businessman; "Safari" (pp. 45-63) provides an intimate, disturbing look at the way he treats his children and lover; and "You (Plural)"

(pp. 64–69) 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 do 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. 74) 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" (p. 157). Do Ted's

recollections of her childhood explain Sasha's behavior? To what extent is Sasha's "catalog of woes" 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. 175) 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. vii). 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 American life often looks prophetic...I think we're all part of the zeitgeist and we're all listening to and absorbing the same things, consciously or unconsciously..." (Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 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. (*spoiler*) 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?

Readalikes

[*Super Sad True Story*](#) by Gary Shteyngart

In a novel set in the near future, when a beautiful, yet cruel, woman that Lenny Abramov met in Italy says she his coming to stay with him in New York, even the tanks and soldiers stationed in the city and the ongoing war with Venezuela can't get him down.

[*Everything Lovely, Effortless, Safe*](#) by Jenny Hollowell

Hoping to escape her past when she escapes her religiously conservative family and moves to Hollywood, Birdie all but despairs of an acting career nine years later and meets a naive young actor whose self-destructive impulses parallel her own

[*The House on Fortune Street*](#) by Margot Livesey

Forging an unlikely friendship that endures beyond their university years, actress Abigail and therapist Dara encounter challenges in the forms of an anonymous letter and a reconciliation with a distant parent

[*Specimen Days*](#) by Michael Cunningham

Prophetic poet Walt Whitman presides over each interlinked episode in a visionary novel set in the

city of New York, featuring the same group of characters--a young boy, an older man, and a young woman

[Cloud Atlas](#) by David Mitchell

Recounts the connected stories of people from the past and the distant future, from a nineteenth-century notary and an investigative journalist in the 1970s to a young man who searches for meaning in a post-apocalyptic world



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