





Like her four previous books, alumna Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* received generally stellar reviews. But it didn't look like this resistant-to-summary novel-in-stories would catch on with the public—that is, until she won this year's Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

By Sean Whiteman

# Surprises Are Always the Best

Jennifer Egan C'85 walks into the Metropolitan Bakery for our meeting miraculously dry, despite the spring rain shower that's just scalded the Philadelphia sidewalk. She orders a small coffee, and surveys the interior: stacks of handmade bread, pastries glistening under the glass, bagel smoke hanging in the air like incense. "I wish a place like this had been around when I was a student," she says. Later this afternoon, Egan has a date at the Kelly Writers House—another structure that didn't exist when she was a student—to read from her new novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, which has just won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Pick up any review of the novel, and two things are immediately apparent. One, people love her book. Two, nobody can describe exactly what it's about. (Despite the title, it has nothing to do with hired thugs). Egan herself calls it a set of short stories, which are not so much linked as entangled. "I've always had trouble with the word 'novel' for this book," she says, holding her copy at arm's length, and peering at it as though trying to understand exactly what she's wrought.

Nominally about the music industry, *Goon Squad* is a constellation of stories that loosely orbit the lives of Bennie Salazar, a brutally successful record producer, and Sasha, his efficient but kleptomaniacal assistant. But the story also roams freely through the San Francisco punk scene, lonely towns in Italy, gritty sections of New York City, an emotionally dysfunctional African safari, and an arid future when little children keep their diaries in the form of PowerPoint slides. And that list is far from exhaustive.

Like a vinyl LP, the book is divided into an A and B side, and each of the 13 chapters has a distinct voice. One is written in the second person, another is an entertaining parody of the celebrity profile, still another consists entirely of 76 PowerPoint slides. It might sound overly clever, but Egan rescues herself from gimmickry by filling each story with language that is deeply felt, and characters that matter. In fact, the chapter made of slides turns out to be one of the saddest, most affecting parts of the book. If there's a common denominator it might be that, no matter the time period or place, each of Egan's characters is struggling against time, and the wreckage it's left behind. As an aging, burnt-out singer named Bosco puts it while beseeching his publicist: "How did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck that no one cares about?" In that same conversation, he's the one that asks: "Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?"

**E**gan was born in Chicago, and transplanted to San Francisco at age seven after her parents divorced. Her father stayed in Chicago, and she would travel back to visit him during the summer. When she began looking for colleges, she was drawn to Penn in part by the excellent reputation of the University Museum. It seemed like the perfect place to pursue her childhood dream: a career in archeology.

After her senior year of high school, she deferred coming to Penn for a year so she could join an archeological dig in southern Illinois. "Which I paid to go on," she recalls. After some time uncovering pottery shards and projectile points of the Mississippian Indians, she'd mental-

ly switched her major before actually arriving at college. "I discovered that my notions of archeology were pretty fantastical," she says. "I pictured shovels and big urns. Instead I had a scalpel, and a square meter of earth." To her dismay, she found that archeologists didn't even get to dig things up. "I hadn't understood that you have to lower the earth until it's below the object. I think that might have been the death knell" for archeology, she says. "I did not have the patience."

The expedition did have a clarifying effect on her freshman year, though. "By the time I got to Penn, I already knew I wanted to be a writer," she says. In the 1980s, before the advent of the Kelly Writers House, that meant building her own network of professors who saw her potential. One of these was the playwright Romulus Linney, who taught playwriting and fiction at Penn from 1982 to 1995 (he passed away this past January). He became an important figure to Egan, and would eventually advise her while she produced her creative writing thesis. "The last couple of years I just worked privately with Romulus," says Egan.

Egan also took several fiction classes from Diana Cavallo CW'53, a writing teacher whose office was just across from Linney's in Bennett Hall. "She stood out right from the start," says Cavallo, now retired. "Her work was extremely vivid, and very visual. Place was very important." From their first meeting, Cavallo recalls that Egan was unusually serious about her craft for a young writer. "She honed her craft, and that's what stood out about her. She was willing to do it until it was right."

Daniel Hoffman, the poet and Felix Schelling Professor of English Emeritus, who was then the director of Penn's creative writing program, encountered Egan for the first time when the two of them gave a reading together in the old Christian Association building (now the ARCH). "Already, her prose had fluency and style," he recalls. And although he also helped direct her final creative thesis, Hoffman says that Egan was never someone who needed much in the way of direction.

Helped by a glowing letter of recommendation from Cavallo, Egan was among the winners of the Thouron Award her senior year, which allowed her to study in England for two years. "I went to Cambridge," she says, and while she was

there she traveled a lot. Besides the UK, "I went to China in '86, so [it was] pre-Tiananmen Square," and also visited the USSR and Italy.

When it was time to come back to the States, she decided to move to New York. "I think I just somehow sensed that this is where I wanted to live as an adult," she says. But while she'd been away, her college friends had already settled into the city. "They had jobs, and lives," Egan says, while she arrived without any visible means of support. "And of course, New York is much more expensive than anyone thinks it could be," she says.

Worst of all, the novel she'd been working on while she was away, based on an idea she'd had while at Penn, "was terrible," she says, "as I quickly learned when I started to show it to people." (Eventually, it would emerge as her first book, *The Invisible Circus*.) During her travels, there were long stretches when no one saw her work, and in that time her writing had drifted out of tune. "I had basically lost touch with what I had learned at Penn," she says, from people like Linney. "I'd forgotten what made fiction feel alive."

The first two years were truly difficult, she says. "I was very down. And it was very depressing to learn that the book was bad."

By way of artistic rehab, Egan began studying with Phillip Schultz, who at the time was still teaching writing out of his home (he now runs the prestigious Writer's Studio school in Manhattan, and has won a Pulitzer of his own, for poetry). "I can't remember how I found my way to him," says Egan, but the painful process of receiving feedback ("mostly negative") did begin to move her work in the right direction. "I didn't even bring in any of the book," says Egan. Instead she brought scraps of new material, looking for pieces that would at least register a pulse. "I was finally reconnecting with the question of what we read for, and what as a writer you're trying to do for the reader."

Around the same time, she started reading unsolicited manuscripts—known as the "slush pile"—for *The Paris Review* literary journal. "Which was fun," she says, "because I got invited to the parties." Those weekly bashes at Editor George Plimpton's expansive Upper East Side apartment have since been shrouded in

legend, and Egan says she's pretty certain Plimpton never actually knew her name. But those late evenings gave her a look into the New York literary scene, and the cast of characters inhabiting it.

To make ends meet Egan worked as a temp, but the jobs paid little and left her even less time to write. She landed a position as a "word processor" (bear in mind that it was the late '80s) at the firm of Willkie Farr & Gallagher, which offered more flexible hours. Ultimately, she ended up as the private secretary to the Countess of Romanones (aka Doña María Aline Griffith Dexter), an immaculately dressed aristocrat, socialite, and occasional writer. "She had worked for the OSS during World War II, went to Europe and married a Spanish Count, and had a very colorful life," Egan says. The Countess was writing a series of memoirish books about her experience as a spy (which became surprise bestsellers, and later turned out to be liberally embroidered). "She needed help with all aspects of her life," says Egan, "and she was a very difficult personality."

But she paid a living wage, and most importantly allowed Egan to work from 1 pm to 6 pm every day. "So from 8 am to noon, I wrote," Egan says. "And then I jumped in the shower, put on my work clothes, and walked to the Upper East Side." Finally, "I had the pieces of a life in place that really let me write."

Over the next five years, Egan made good on her free time, releasing her first novel, *The Invisible Circus*—about a teen-aged girl who travels through Europe alone in the 1960s, searching for clues about her deceased sister—and the collection *Emerald City and Other Stories*. In preparation for her next book, *Look at Me*, Egan planned a story that "involved a New York fashion model who has a very serious accident, and her face needs to be reconstructed. She's no longer really recognizable," Egan explains.

If such a category exists, the conceit might be called vintage Egan: not quite realistic, but not exactly implausible either. "The idea is that she doesn't look damaged, she just doesn't look like herself anymore." To actually write the story, though, "I knew I needed to do some pretty serious research," she says. At the time, it seemed like a good opportunity to revisit an old passion. "I had

always loved the idea of doing investigative reporting," she says. "That was like a childhood fantasy."

But when Egan started banging on the doors of the fashion world, nobody answered. "I would call modeling agencies and ask if I could spend time understanding what the life of a model in New York was like, and they essentially hung up on me," she says. "I think they just didn't care."

Egan had to make them care, or the novel was in danger. "Right around that time, a friend of mine got a job as an editor at *The New York Times Magazine*," Egan says. "And he said 'Look, we want someone to do a story on young models living as adults in New York.'"

*Goon Squad* made *The New York Times* list of the 10 Best Books of 2010, and a couple of months later won the National Book Critics Circle award. Sales still remained lackluster. Egan began to wonder: what would it take? "And it turns out it took a lot," she says. "It took a Pulitzer."

As a fiction writer, she says, "even though I had no idea how to do such a story, I said yes. Because I figured, even if it doesn't work out, at least I will have gotten my research done." And in the meantime, she could preface all her interview requests with the amazingly effective line: "Hello, I'm calling from *The New York Times*..."

"So that was basically how I got into journalism. And I spent months and months submerged in that world." Not only did the article work out, it actually ended up being somewhat high profile—mostly, Egan says, on account of the stellar Nan Goldin photo spread that ran alongside it.

Since then, she's written primarily for *The New York Times Magazine*, producing big pieces at the rate of one or two

per year, most of them cover stories, on topics ranging from the secret life of gay marines to the difficult treatment of bipolar disorder in children. In 2002, her story on homeless children won the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award.

Not many novelists can claim dual citizenship in the upper echelons of both journalism and fiction, but Egan has found a way to balance her loyalties. "I don't write that many non-fiction articles, but the ones I do tend to be really kind of long and exhaustive research pieces," she says, the sort that involve "scores and scores of interviews." And the act of submerging herself in the material of a non-fiction story can lead to an imaginative leap that generates

the stuff of future novels, in ways that might not be obvious. Her third novel, *The Keep*, is a gothic tale of isolation and fear updated for the age of satellite phones and wireless networks. But part of the inspiration came from a cover story she'd just written about closeted gay teenagers in the Deep South, who are only out online, and spend much of their day-to-day "real" lives in isolation and fear. It's not necessarily easy to shuttle back and forth between the two worlds of journalism and fiction, Egan says. Both fields tend to proceed from the assumption that the other is less important. "But that's no surprise," she adds. "Everyone thinks their own world is central. That's how we all make ourselves feel important."

**As her coffee cools,** I ask Egan the question that one is obliged to ask someone who's just won the Pulitzer: What's it like to win the Pulitzer? She laughs, and for the first time looks like she might rather be somewhere else.

"The biggest difference," she says, "is you get asked that question a lot." And just being asked constantly "gives you the feeling that more should have changed."

One concrete effect is that sales of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* have finally started to pick up. Despite all the positive press, when the book came out a year ago it threatened to sink without leaving much of a trace in the market. "It's such a killer," Egan says, of the feeling she experienced then: that years of work might be left to languish on the shelf, that the reading public simply wasn't all that interested. When things were looking grim, she remembers agreeing to go to a signing at a Borders, even though her publicist had informed her that the store only had five copies. "Not a very exciting quantity, but I was willing to go sign anything," she says. "And when I got there, they still had five books. In five days, they hadn't sold a single book."

The good reviews kept appearing, but the signs were unmistakable. "You can just feel whether a book is selling," she says. *Goon Squad* made *The New York Times* list of the 10 Best Books of 2010, and a couple of months later won the National Book Critics Circle award. Sales still remained lackluster. Egan began to wonder: what would it take? "And it turns out it took a lot," she says. "It took a Pulitzer."

**T**O her reading at the Kelly Writers House, Egan wears a green dress with a faintly cellular pattern, in a color that matches the bright stems of the fresh-cut tulips perched on the old, wooden podium. The front room has overflowed, and a second monitor and temporary chairs are being hurriedly assembled. Egan's own copy of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is a battered hardback missing its dust jacket, the pages marked with dozens of purple PostIt notes that have crumpled down to the texture of old money.

Earlier, she'd told me about her experience being robbed as a student at Penn ("Actually, this is unbelievable, I was robbed on consecutive weeks, in the same place,"

she says, while trying to make photocopies in the basement of College Hall). A soon-to-be stolen wallet is one of the first images that appears in *Goon Squad*, and that's the story that she's chosen for today. When she reads, her voice is cool and even:

It began in the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror when she noticed a bag on the floor beside the sink that must have belonged to the woman whose peeing she could faintly hear through the vaultlike door of a toilet stall. Inside the rim of the bag, barely visible, was a wallet made of pale green leather. It was easy for Sasha to realize, looking back, that the peeing woman's blind trust had provoked her.

Egan's creative process often provokes conversation, because she's known for writing all her fiction longhand, on legal pads. "Then the initial scrawl gets typed into a computer," she says, essentially turning her PC into an elaborate typewriter. "I've written whole drafts of novels on legal pads and then typed that in," she says.

After it's typed in, "I read what I've got," and it's not always pretty. "In the case of a long book, it's painful to read hundreds of pages of that impetuous scrawl, suddenly in typeface." Her system might not sound particularly efficient, but it's the only way she's found to access the imaginative space that makes her fiction writing possible at all.

Once she's read over her draft, she forms an after-the-fact outline that will guide her revisions. "I sit down and try in a very systematic way to figure out what I've got, what it seems like it should be, and what it wants to be," she says. The outline itself can stretch to the length of a novella (for her longest book, *Look at Me*, the first outline filled 80 pages). "It has checklists," she says, "and I literally check them off."

She prints out a hard copy and, armed with her outline, goes back to rewriting and editing directly on the printouts, again working longhand so that she can reenter the mindset she needs to create new material. The marked up drafts are typed back in, and the process continues. "It's a dialectic between analysis and impulse. And it goes on as

long as it needs to go on," she says.

After she describes the mindset she tries to write from, I suggest it sounds something like the approach behind method acting. Egan wrinkles her nose. (Her husband, David Herskovits, directs the experimental Target Margin Theater in Brooklyn.) "Method acting has a reputation of being a little precious," she says. But she's willing to entertain the parallel, in a limited sense. When she's doing her best work, she says, "I forget who I am, almost. And I find that not scary at all. I find that a pleasure."

In the tactile act of writing, she says, she can switch off the mental chorus of judgment and distraction, whether it's about the household chores: "You have to get the laundry done." Or about her own words: "That's not very good. Why would anyone want to read that?" Or about her characters: "Why is he doing that?"

Her more intuitive approach isn't based on unraveling the motivations of any particular character, or solving plot problems as though they're equations. Rather, "I'm trying to let a certain voice emerge, for the whole work. The storytelling voice is the most important thing, to me," she says. "The voice, and the texture of that voice."

Perhaps for this reason her work is strikingly non-autobiographical, and Egan says she's never transplanted a whole person or an experience into her work. It's true that for *Goon Squad*, she drew on some of her own memories to recreate the feel of the '70s punk scene in San Francisco. "I went to the Mabuhay Gardens, and went to lots of punk concerts there," she says. "But it just felt like a colorful environment that I had access to."

When Egan talks this way about the stray details of her life that have slipped into her work, it sounds as impersonal as an empty movie set. Slowly, she will populate it with the characters that take shape on her legal pad, in her own messy handwriting, as she excavates her imagination with all the care of a good archeologist sifting through the accumulated layers of history and memory.

"My entry point is a time and place," she says, "and it's best not to know too much more than that. Because the surprises are always the best." ♦

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