

# Manhattan Beach by Jennifer Egan

## Summary:

*The long-awaited, daring, and magnificent novel from the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of A Visit from the Goon Squad.*

*Manhattan Beach* opens in Brooklyn during the Great Depression. Anna Kerrigan, nearly twelve years old, accompanies her father to the house of Dexter Styles, a man who, she gleans, is crucial to the survival of her father and her family.

Years later, her father has disappeared and the country is at war.

Anna works at the Brooklyn Naval Yard, where women are allowed to hold jobs that had always belonged to men. She becomes the first female diver, the most dangerous and exclusive of occupations, repairing the ships that will help America win the war.

She is the sole provider for her mother, a farm girl who had a brief and glamorous career with the Ziegfeld Follies, and her lovely, severely disabled sister. At a nightclub, she chances to meet Dexter Styles again, and she begins to understand the complexity of her father's life, the reasons he might have vanished.

Mesmerizing, hauntingly beautiful, with the pace and atmosphere of a noir thriller, Egan's first historical novel is a masterpiece, a deft, startling, intimate exploration of a transformative moment in the lives of women and men, America and the world. *Manhattan Beach* is a spectacular novel by one of the greatest writers of our time. (*From the publisher.*)

## Author Bio:

Birth—September 7, 1962

- Where—Chicago, Illinois, USA
- Raised—San Francisco, California
- Education—University of Pennsylvania; Cambridge University (UK)
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize; National Book Critics Circle Award
- Currently—lives in Brooklyn, New York, New York

Jennifer Egan is an American novelist and short story writer who lives in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, New York City. She is perhaps best known for her 2010 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which won both the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

### Background/early career

Egan was born in Chicago, Illinois, but grew up in San Francisco, California. She majored in English literature at the University of Pennsylvania and, as an undergrad, dated Steve Jobs, who installed a Macintosh computer in her bedroom. After graduating from Penn, Egan spent two years at St John's College at Cambridge University, supported by a Thouron Award.

In addition to her several novels (*see below*), Egan has published short fiction in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope: All-Story*, and *Ploughshares*, among other periodicals. Her journalism appears frequently in *The New York Times Magazine*. She also published a short-story collection in 1993.

## Discussion Questions:

1. In the first chapter, on the beach, Anna walks barefoot despite the cold and says, "It only hurts at first. After a while you can't feel anything." Dexter admires Anna for her strength, which he senses

comes from her father. He reflects that "men's children gave them away" (pages 8–9). How does this meeting between Dexter, Ed, and Anna set the tone for the rest of the novel?

2. Why is the thought of what Lydia "might have looked like, had she not been damaged. A beauty. Possibly more than Agnes," (page 16) so painful to Ed? Why is he unable even to cope with Lydia, much less love her, as Anna and Agnes do?

3. "Each time Anna moved from her father's world to her mother and Lydia's, she felt as if she'd shaken free of one life for a deeper one. And when she returned to her father, holding his hand as they ventured out into the city, it was her mother and Lydia she shook off, often forgetting them completely. Back and forth she went, deeper — deeper still — until it seemed there was no place further down she could go. But somehow there always was. She had never reached the bottom" (page 26). What does this passage reveal about Anna? What allows, even compels, her to shift between worlds?

4. Ed, looking back on his decision to work with Dexter, reflects that he needed a change, that "[h]e'd take danger over sorrow any day of the week" (page 34). Is Ed right to do this? Is Ed's philosophy a noble or a selfish one?

5. What draws Anna to Nell? And Nell to Anna? How are they each not "angels" and how does this bond them?

6. Even at a young age, Dexter wants to know what's beneath the surface of things. "For him, the existence of an obscure truth recessed behind an obvious one, and emanating through it allegorically, was mesmerizing" (page 91). How does this fascination shape Dexter's life and his career?

7. How does Anna's sexual relationship with Leon, during which she thinks things like "I might not be here" and "This might not be me" (page 120), relate to her feeling abandoned by her father? Why does she later invoke her father as "an abstract witness to her virtue" (page 122)?

8. Why does Anna set herself such a difficult task — becoming a diver, "breaking" the lieutenant, facing opposition at every turn? Why does she feel "that she had always wanted [an enemy]" (page 149)?

9. Why does Lydia's death solidify Agnes's determination to be done with her husband, after so many years, whether he returns or not (page 179)?

10. Leaving Charlie Voss at the club to spend the night with Dexter, Anna releases herself to the dark: "she had ... disappeared through a crack in the night. Not a soul knew where to find her" (page 234). What do you make of her need to be lost, to be a part of the dark and its danger?

11. Ed is simultaneously drawn to and infuriated by the bosun. Discuss why there is a push and pull between these two characters.

12. Why does Dexter insist on diving with Anna to try to find her father's corpse? What does this effort represent for him? What do you think he comes to understand?

13. Visions of Lydia push Anna to not go through with her abortion. Discuss the connection between Lydia and Anna's unborn child.

14. When Anna takes the train west, there's a moment when she "bolted upright. She had thought of her father. At last, she understood: This is how he did it" (page 426). What allows her to understand and perhaps reconcile with her father?

15. Luck plays an important role throughout the novel and has particular significance for Anna, Dexter, and Ed. How does luck shape each of their lives? Good luck and bad luck?

16. Throughout the novel, characters create new identities for themselves and start over. How do these individual stories of reinvention relate to the spirit of optimism, the quest for the new that is so common among Americans at this time?

*(Questions issued by the publisher.)*

## **Reviews:**

Immensely satisfying.... [*Manhattan Beach*] is a dreadnought of a World War II-era historical novel, bristling with armaments yet intimate in tone. It's an old-fashioned page-turner, tweaked by this witty and sophisticated writer so that you sometimes feel she has retrofitted sleek new engines inside a craft owned for too long by James Jones and Herman Wouk.... She is masterly at displaying mastery.... Egan's fiction buzzes with factual crosscurrents, casually deployed.... Egan works a formidable kind of magic.... This is a big novel that moves with agility.

***Dwight Garner - New York Times***

The prevalence of the ocean in this story is not simply atmospheric; it is central to the symbolism.... Turning their backs on the crowded constraints of their urban lives, all three look to the ocean as a realm that while inherently dangerous also promises the potential for personal discovery and an almost mystical liberty. This is a novel that deserves to join the canon of New York stories.

***Amor Towles - New York Times Book Review***

[P]olished to a high sheen. *Manhattan Beach* — longlisted for a National Book Award even before it was released — is a historical novel set during World War II in New York.... *Manhattan Beach* may not offer the brilliant variety of forms found in *Goon Squad*, but Egan is still blending a jazzy range of tones in these chapters, from Tennessee Williams's apartment-trapped despair to Herman Melville's adventures at sea... [and] a particularly rich noir romance.... [*Manhattan Beach*] dares to satisfy us in a way that stories of an earlier age used to.

***Ron Charles - Washington Post***

This truly fine novel, so rich in period and emotional atmosphere and so cunningly plotted, is a joy — one of the standouts of the year.

***Newsday***

Egan's most remarkable accomplishment yet.... At once a suspenseful novel of noir intrigue, a gorgeously wrought and richly allusive literary tapestry, and a transporting work of lyrical beauty and emotional heft, *Manhattan Beach* is a magnificent achievement.

***Boston Globe***

A work of remarkable cinematic scope. . . . This is a novel that will pull you in and under and carry you away on its rip tides.... Its resonances continue to wash over the reader long after the novel ends.

***Guardian UK***

*Manhattan Beach* is ambitiously and deliciously plot-driven.

***NPR's Fresh Air***

Egan's prose is transparent and elegant.... But the chief joy of reading *Manhattan Beach* lies in diving under the surface pleasures of the plot (which are plentiful — it's immersive and compelling), and sinking slowly to its dark and unknowable depths. There are deep truths there.

***Vox***

Egan's first foray into historical fiction makes you forget you're reading historical fiction at all.

***Elle***

The novel's crooked politicians, organized-crime bosses, and shady cops make it read like a fast-paced, hard-boiled drama.

***Marie Claire***

(*Starred review.*) [S]plendid.... More straightforwardly narrated than some of Egan's earlier work ... the novel is tremendously assured and rich, moving from depictions of violence and crime to deep tenderness. The book's emotional power once again demonstrates Egan's extraordinary gifts.

***Publishers Weekly***

(*Starred review.*) This large, ambitious novel shows Egan at the top of her game. Anna is a true feminist heroine, and her grit and tenacity will make readers root for her.

***Library Journal***

(*Starred review.*) Egan's propulsive, surprising, ravishing, and revelatory saga, a covertly profound page-turner that will transport and transform every reader, casts us all as divers in the deep, searching for answers, hope, and ascension.

***Booklist***

(*Starred review.*) After stretching the boundaries of fiction in myriad ways Pulitzer Prize winner Egan does perhaps the only thing left that could surprise: she writes a thoroughly traditional novel.... Realistically detailed, poetically charged, and utterly satisfying: apparently there's nothing Egan can't do.

***Kirkus Reviews***