

Manhattan Beach

Discussion Questions



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Genre: Historical Fiction

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?

Author Bio

- Birth: 1962, Chicago, Illinois; Raised: San Francisco, California
- Education: University of Pennsylvania; Cambridge University (UK)
- Currently: Lives in Brooklyn, 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 and awards

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.

A Visit from the Goon Squad

Egan has been hesitant to classify her most noted work, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, as either a novel or a short story collection, saying,

I wanted to avoid centrality. I wanted polyphony. I wanted a lateral feeling, not a forward feeling. My ground rules were: every piece has to be very different, from a different point of view. I actually tried to break that rule later; if you make a rule then you also should break it!

The book features genre-bending content such as a chapter entirely formatted as a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. Of her inspiration and approach to the work, she said,

I don't experience time as linear. I experience it in layers that seem to coexist.... One thing that facilitates that kind of time travel is music, which is why I think music ended up being such an important part of the book. Also, I was reading Proust. He tries, very successfully in some ways, to capture the sense of time passing, the quality of consciousness, and the ways to get around linearity, which is the weird scourge of writing prose.

Partial bibliography

Novels

1995 - *The Invisible Circus*

2001 - *Look at Me*

2006 - *The Keep*

2010 - *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

2017 - *Manhattan Beach*

Short fiction

1993 - *Emerald City* (short story collection; released in US in 1996)

2012 - "Black Box" (short story, released on *The New Yorker's* Twitter account)

(Author bio adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 10/3/2017)