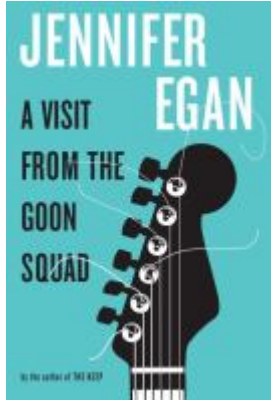


**Oliver Wolcott Library**  
**A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan**  
**Book Discussion Guide**  
**Prepared by Patricia Moore**



**About the Book:**

Bennie Salazar, an aging punk rocker and record executive, and the beautiful Sasha, the troubled young woman he employs, never discover each other's pasts, but the reader does, in intimate detail, along with the secret lives of a host of other people whose paths intersect with theirs in the course of nearly 50 years. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is about time, about survival, about our private terrors, and what happens when we fail to rebound.

*Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com*

**About the Author:**

Jennifer Egan is the author of *The Keep*, *Look at Me*, *The Invisible Circus*, and the story collection *Emerald City*. Her stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *GQ*, *Zoetrope*, *All-Story*, and *Ploughshares*, and her nonfiction appears frequently in *The New York Times Magazine*. She lives with her husband and sons in Brooklyn.

*Source: RandomHouse.com (USA)*

**Book Reviews:**

"Wildly ambitious. . . . A tour de force. . . . Music is both subject and metaphor as Egan explores the mutability of time, destiny, and individual accountability post-technology." —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"Clever. Edgy. Groundbreaking. . . . Features characters about whom you come to care deeply as you watch them doing things they shouldn't, acting gloriously, infuriatingly human." —*The Chicago Tribune*

"If Egan is our reward for living through the self-conscious gimmicks and ironic claptrap of postmodernism, then it was all worthwhile. . . . [A] triumph of technical bravado and tender sympathy. . . . Turn up the music, skip the college reunion and curl up with *The Goon Squad* instead." —*The Washington Post*

“Egan has accomplished the tricky feat of using metafiction techniques without sacrificing old-fashioned story-telling. . . . A Visit from the Goon Squad has a circuitous structure that seems almost designed for our Internet rewired brains.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

**Discussion Questions:**

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 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. 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?

### **Further Reading:**

#### Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell

*Cloud Atlas* begins in 1850 with Adam Ewing, an American notary voyaging from the Chatham Isles to his home in California. Along the way, Ewing is befriended by a physician, Dr. Goose, who begins to treat him for a rare species of brain parasite. . . . Abruptly, the action jumps to Belgium in 1931, where Robert Frobisher, a disinherited bisexual composer, contrives his way into the household of an infirm maestro who has a beguiling wife and a nubile daughter. . . . From there we jump to the West Coast in the 1970s and a troubled reporter named Luisa Rey, who stumbles upon a web of corporate greed and murder that threatens to claim her life. . . . And onward, with dazzling virtuosity, to an inglorious present-day England; to a Korean superstate of the near future where neocapitalism has run amok; and, finally, to a postapocalyptic Iron Age Hawaii in the last days of history.

#### The House on Fortune Street by Margot Livesey

It seems like mutual good luck for Abigail Taylor and Dara MacLeod when they meet at university and, despite their differences, become fast friends. Years later they remain inseparable: Abigail, the actress, allegedly immune to romance, and Dara, a therapist, throwing herself into relationships with frightening intensity. Now both believe they've found "true love." But luck seems to run out when Dara moves into Abigail's downstairs apartment. Suddenly both their friendship and their relationships are in peril, for tragedy is waiting to strike the house on Fortune Street.

#### NW by Zadie Smith

This is the story of a city.

The northwest corner of a city. Here you'll find guests and hosts, those with power and those without it, people who live somewhere special and others who live nowhere at all. And many people in between. Every city is like this. Cheek-by-jowl living. Separate worlds.

And then there are the visitations: the rare times a stranger crosses a threshold without permission or warning, causing a disruption in the whole system. Like the April afternoon a woman came to Leah Hanwell's door, seeking help, disturbing the peace, forcing Leah out of her isolation...

#### One Last Thing Before I Go by Jonathan Tropper

You don't have to look very hard at Drew Silver to see that mistakes have been made. His fleeting fame as the drummer for a one-hit wonder rock band is nearly a decade behind him. He lives in the Versailles, an apartment building filled almost exclusively with divorced men like him, and makes a living playing in wedding bands. His ex-wife, Denise, is about to marry a guy Silver can't quite bring himself to hate. And his Princeton-bound teenage daughter Casey has just confided in him that she's pregnant—because Silver is the one she cares least about letting down.

#### Specimen Days by Michael Cunningham

In each section of Michael Cunningham's bold new novel, his first since *The Hours*, we encounter the same group of characters: a young boy, a man, and a woman. "In the Machine" is a ghost story that takes place at the height of the industrial revolution as human beings confront the alienating realities of the new machine age. "The Children's Crusade," set in the early twenty-first century, plays with the conventions of the noir thriller as it tracks the pursuit of a terrorist band that is detonating bombs, seemingly at random, around the city. The third part, "Like Beauty," evokes a New York 150 years into the future, when the city is all but overwhelmed by refugees from the first inhabited planet to be contacted by the people of Earth.

#### Super Sad True Love Story by Gary Shteyngart

In the near future, America is crushed by a financial crisis and our patient Chinese creditors may just be ready to foreclose on the whole mess. Then Lenny Abramov, son of an Russian immigrant janitor and ardent fan of "printed, bound media artifacts" (aka books), meets Eunice Park, an impossibly cute Korean American woman with a major in Images and a minor in Assertiveness. Could falling in love redeem a planet falling apart?

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~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.