

REVIEW

With new historical novel, Jennifer Egan switches gears

By Michael Magras

If you're one of the most dazzlingly inventive prose stylists of your generation, someone who has employed, among other tricks, a chapter written in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, what might you do to surprise your readers further? Here's what Jennifer Egan, author of the Pulitzer-winning and PowerPoint-featuring "A Visit from the Goon Squad," has done: written an old-fashioned historical novel set in Brooklyn during World War II.

In a way, "Manhattan Beach" may be the biggest challenge she has ever set for herself. If you're accustomed to cooking complicated meals, a relatively simple dish might be more difficult to perfect than you'd expect.

Simple doesn't necessarily mean inferior, of course. An old-fashioned story can provide as much room for creativity as an experimental work.

The good news is that Egan, despite a few lapses, has met the challenge. If "Manhattan Beach" isn't as thrilling or doesn't feel as effortless as some of her earlier efforts, it's still a richly imagined portrait of a bygone era, and a sly commentary on the racism and sexism of an earlier generation.

Egan introduces the setting in a brief opening set in the mid-1930s. Four days after Christmas, 11-year-old Anna Kerrigan accompanies her father, Eddie, to the Manhattan Beach home of Dexter Styles, a Runyonesque mobster who runs a series of nightclubs and talks about "dames who'd run over rooftops" to escape the feds. Eddie has spent years working at the docks for union guy



'Manhattan Beach'
By Jennifer Egan
Scribner, 448 pp., \$28

Author appearance

Jennifer Egan will discuss "Manhattan Beach," appearing with author Claire Messud as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Stude Concert Hall, Rice University, 6100 Main. \$5 tickets available online at inprintheouston.org.

Dunellen, a shady character with a wooden leg who calls guys mutts and says, "Quit sticking your snoot where it doesn't belong."

Ever since ships have stopped arriving, Eddie has worked as Dunellen's bagman, delivering payoffs to aldermen, state senators, police officers and others. But he has to earn more money because his younger daughter, Lydia, suffers from echolalia, can't move without help and needs a special wheelchair. Eddie appeals to Styles for a job. Styles decides to hire Ed — he refers to the Irish Kerrigan

by a racial epithet common to the era, one of many such epithets used in the book — in part thanks to the "magnificence in the dark-eyed daughter" Anna.

Egan beautifully dramatizes each of her many characters' perspectives, including Agnes, Eddie's wife and a former Follies dancer, who worries about caring for Lydia, and Eddie's older half-sister Brianne, who worked in risqué revues, has dated many men and needs Eddie to help her afford her expensive lifestyle.

Egan wears her research too heavily in this opening, as she does occasionally throughout the novel. The abundance of historical detail and brand name references — Frank Buck panda bears, Betsy Wetsy dolls, men drinking shots of rye — gives the impression that she may have been less sure of her material, at least at the outset, than she has been in other novels.

Fortunately, the novel gains assurance when Egan shifts to the years of America's involvement in World War II. The action jumps to 1942, when 19-year-old Anna works at the Brooklyn Naval Yard. She is now the family's breadwinner; Eddie disappeared under mysterious circumstances five years earlier. At first, her job is to inspect and measure parts for the battleship Missouri. Soon, despite the objections of a lieutenant who thinks it's not a job for "girls," she proves herself worthy of becoming the yard's first female diver, repairing ships beneath the surface.

Among the novel's greatest pleasures are Egan's rich, detailed descriptions of diving — a case where her research enhances the narra-

tive — from Anna passing the test of untying a bowline while wearing three-fingered gloves, to the manila cord of a descending line that helps Anna lower herself to the bottom of Wallabout Bay.

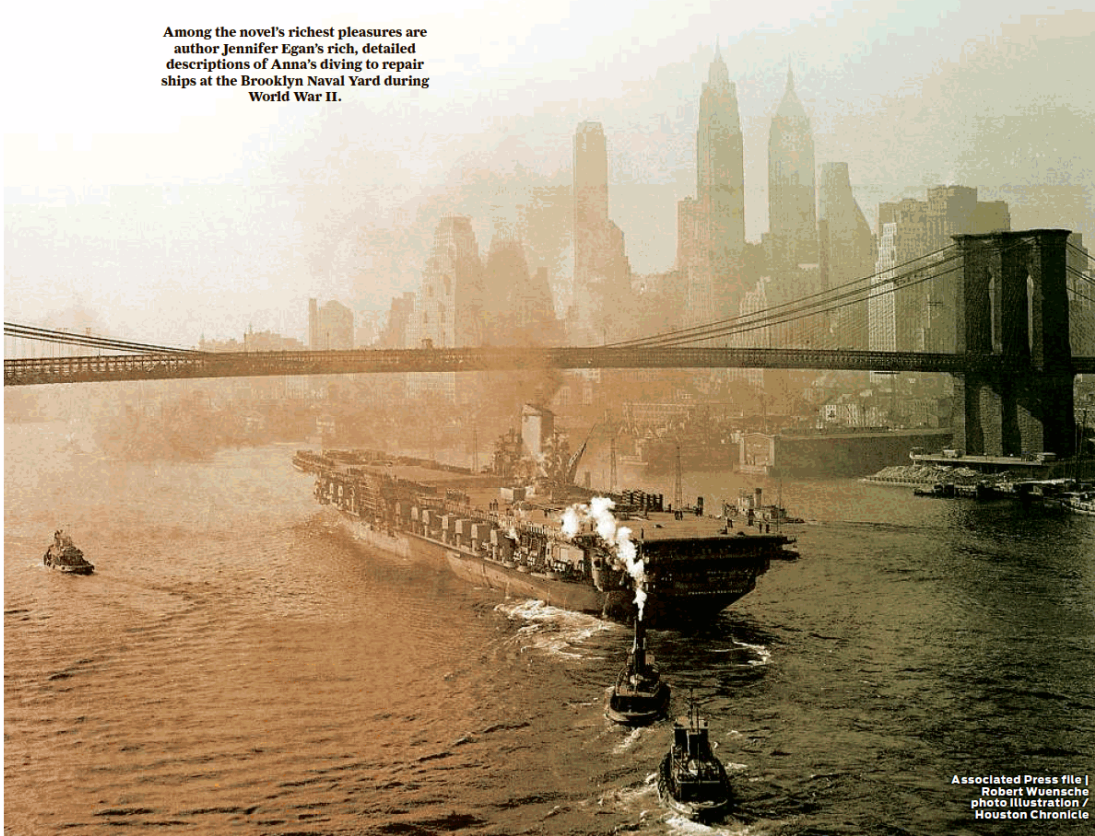
That's the kind of achievement that would give a determined woman confidence. Indeed, Anna is so emboldened by her success that, after she bumps into Styles at one of his nightclubs, she accepts his offer of a ride home — and more — at the end of the evening.

That Styles doesn't immediately recognize Anna is one of the many joys of "Manhattan Beach" as the novel takes the reader from the nightclubs of Manhattan to a ship carrying wartime supplies through Cape Town and Mozambique, from characters like the mysterious, 90-year-old Mr. Q, whom Styles works for, to Styles's banker father-in-law and the mystery of what really happened to Eddie Kerrigan.

If some of the more romantic elements of "Manhattan Beach" skirt the edge of soap opera, Egan's storytelling prowess still makes this an entertaining read. As Egan proves, sometimes the most unorthodox act an author can perform is to write a seemingly conventional novel about characters we've seen before and point out the preconceptions that they, and we, may have taken for granted.

Michael Magras is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His work has appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, San Francisco Chronicle, Philadelphia Inquirer and Miami Herald.

Among the novel's richest pleasures are author Jennifer Egan's rich, detailed descriptions of Anna's diving to repair ships at the Brooklyn Naval Yard during World War II.



Associated Press file | Robert Wuensche photo illustration / Houston Chronicle