

# BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

**Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the  
discussion companion for  
Jennifer Egan's novel  
A Visit From the Goon Squad**

Trade paperback novel published in 2011 by Anchor Books, a division of Random House. (Original copyright is 2010.)

ISBN: 978-0-307-47747-7

Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the trade paperback edition of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion was co-written by Laura Godfrey and Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed. Herbert is the founder of Bookclub-in-a-Box and an international speaker with more than 30 years experience as a teacher and school librarian. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

**Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for  
A Visit From the Goon Squad**

(PRINT) ISBN: 978-1927121-078

(E-PUB) ISBN: 978-1927121-085

(E-PDF) ISBN: 978-1927121-092

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

<b>READERS AND LEADERS GUIDE</b>	2	Memory	45
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>		Pauses	47
Novel Quickline	7	Children as Authority Figures	48
Key to the Novel	8		
Author Information	8	<b>WRITING STYLE AND STRUCTURE</b>	
Chapter Breakdown	11	Interconnected Short Stories	53
Character Web	13	Wordplay	54
<b>CHARACTERIZATION</b>		A to B	56
Bennie Salazar	17	<b>SYMBOLS</b>	
Sasha	19	The Footprint	61
Alex	21	Sunlight	62
Rob Freeman Jr.	22	<b>IN HER OWN WORDS: Q&amp;A WITH</b>	
Drew, Alison, Lincoln	24	<b>JENNIFER EGAN</b>	67
Scotty Hausmann	26	<b>LAST THOUGHTS</b>	
Lou Kline	27	Discussion Questions	75
Dolly (La Doll) and Lulu	29	<b>FROM THE NOVEL (QUOTES)</b>	81
Jules Jones	31	<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	89
<b>FOCUS POINTS AND THEMES</b>			
Counterculture	37		
Fear of Aging and Cultural Irrelevance	39		
Shame, Redemption, and Survival	40		
Changing Technology and Music	43		

# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

### You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your book club.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more "hands on" support, feel free to contact us.

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences. You can contact us via our website ([www.bookclubinabox.com](http://www.bookclubinabox.com)), by email ([info@bookclubinabox.com](mailto:info@bookclubinabox.com)), or by phone (1-866-578-5571). We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a book club discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

- Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)
- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (Not necessarily from the novel.)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (Not applicable to all novels.)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

**Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Novel Quickline**

**Key to the Novel**

**Author Information**

**Chapter Breakdown**

**Character Web**

# INTRODUCTION

## Novel Quickline

Moving back and forth between different characters and points in time, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* weaves the story of Bennie Salazar, an aging musician and record executive, Sasha, his assistant with a history of sticky fingers, and a whole host of others whose lives are intricately interconnected.

In the 1970s, Bennie was the bassist in a San Francisco punk band, the Flaming Dildos. Decades later, he finds his career as a record executive and his relevance in the industry slowly fading. While his tastes remain the same, the music scene and the technology that creates it change rapidly around him. Sasha, his younger assistant, loyally keeps an increasingly forgetful Bennie on track, but struggles with her own history of aimlessness, loss, and a bad pick-pocketing impulse.

Each chapter offers a new perspective, from Sasha's college friend Rob, to Bennie's destitute former bandmate Scotty, to an entire chapter laid out as a PowerPoint presentation by Sasha's daughter, Alison. Moving from the

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notes

1970s to the 2020s and several places in between, *Goon Squad* shows how every encounter — whether it’s a one-time acquaintance or a lifelong friend — has the potential to change a life’s direction, but no matter what you do, time is the one goon you can never avoid.

## Key to the Novel

The over-arching theme of *A Visit From the Goon Squad* is the constant **fear of passing time** and all of its implications: cultural irrelevance, aging, and eventually, death. Bosco, the former frontman for the rock band The Conduits, sums it up while also referencing the book’s title: “*You don’t look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you’ve had half your guts removed. Time’s a goon, right? Isn’t that the expression?*” (ch.7, p.127)

The phrase “Time’s a goon” speaks to the idea that you can avoid all the dangers in the world, and you can try to keep up with changes in technology and pop culture, but time is the stealth assailant that creeps up on you without you realizing it. In *Goon Squad*, virtually every character struggles with the effects of aging. Bosco’s ultimate plan is to cheat time by playing a ‘Suicide Tour,’ with the intention of performing so wildly that it kills him: “*I’m old, I’m sad—that’s on a good day. I want out of this mess. But I don’t want to fade away, I want to flame away—I want my death to be an attraction, a spectacle, a mystery. A work of art.*” (ch.7, p.129) (see **Fear of Aging and Cultural Irrelevance**, p.39)

## Author Information

- Jennifer Egan was born in Chicago in 1962 and moved to San Francisco with her mother and stepfather when she was seven years old, after her parents’ divorce. She studied English at the University of Pennsylvania, after which she did a two-year fellowship at St. John’s College, part of the University of Cambridge, in England.

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- When Egan was 19, she spent some time backpacking alone through Europe, an experience that taught her a lot about disconnectedness. In an interview with the *Star Tribune*, she explained, “*there was no internet. You had to stand in line for a pay phone, and if the people you called weren't there, you couldn't even leave a message. Trying to explain this to young people today is like talking about traveling by horse and carriage.*”
  - Although she enjoys listening to music, Egan is not an avid concert-goer, as the central plotlines of *Goon Squad* might lead you to believe. As a teenager coming of age in the ‘70s, the author cites The Who, Iggy Pop, and The Sex Pistols as some of her favorite musicians growing up (Igarashi). As research for this novel, Egan read several books on the music industry and spent a lot of time on the phone with a mixer/producer who explained the technology behind music production, and the difference between analogue and digital sound.
  - However, a few small details were inspired by her own journalistic experience: the Stop/Go sisters, featured in Chapter 2 of the book, have similarities with identical twin sisters who formed the real-life rap duo Dyme, whom Egan once wrote about for an assignment. Like the fictional Stop/Go sisters, Dyme lived in Mount Vernon, where they had an orange shag carpet in a recording studio built by their father. (Fox)
  - For all of her books, Egan has the unusual habit of writing her first drafts by hand, rather than on a computer. “*That always seems to startle people,*” she told *The Guardian* newspaper in the UK. “*I think the reason I do that is to bypass the thinking part of me and get to the more unconscious part, which is where all the good ideas seem to be. I've tried working on a word processor because I would love to be faster but it just doesn't seem to work.*”
  - In addition to publishing books, Egan is a journalist, frequently contributing articles to *The New York Times Magazine*. In 2002, she won the Carroll Kowal Journalism Award for her cover story on homeless children, and another article, “The Bipolar Kid,” received a 2009 NAMI
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Outstanding Media Award for Science and Health Reporting from the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She has also published short stories in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Granta*, and *McSweeney's*.

- In 2011, Egan won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. She is currently living in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband (a theater director) and two sons.

## **Published Books:**

*Emerald City and Other Stories* (1993, UK; 1996, US)

*The Invisible Circus* (1995)

*Look at Me* (2001)

*The Keep* (2006)

*A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2010)

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## Breaking Down *A Visit From the Goon Squad*

### Part A

#### **Chapter 1: Found Objects**

**Year:** 2008. **Description:** While Sasha and Alex are on their first (and only) date, Sasha steals a woman's wallet from the hotel bathroom. (Third-person.)

#### **Chapter 2: The Gold Cure**

**Year:** 2006. **Description:** Bennie, a 44-year-old record executive, tries to connect with his aloof young son, Chris. Joined by Bennie's assistant Sasha, they pay a visit to a band he signed years ago, the Stop/Go sisters. (Third-person.)

#### **Chapter 3: Ask Me If I Care**

**Year:** 1979. **Description:** Best friends and bandmates Rhea, Jocelyn, Bennie, Scotty, and Alice experiment with drugs, sex, and punk culture in their high school years. Jocelyn gets into a relationship with Lou Kline, a much older man she met while hitchhiking. (First-person, Rhea.)

#### **Chapter 4: Safari**

**Year:** 1973. **Description:** Lou Kline, a middle-aged record producer, is on safari in Africa with his girlfriend and his two children, Rolph and Charlie. (Third-person.)

#### **Chapter 5: You (Plural)**

**Year:** 2005. **Description:** More than 20 years after they knew him in high school, Jocelyn and Rhea, now 43, visit an ailing Lou at his home. (First-person, Jocelyn.)

#### **Chapter 6: X's and O's**

**Year:** 1997. **Description:** After reading about Bennie's success as a music producer in *Spin* magazine, Scotty, who is down on his luck, slightly bitter, and looking to revisit the past, pays a visit to Bennie's office. (First-person, Scotty.)



**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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