Manhattan Beach

by Jennifer Egan



About the Book

NEW YORK TIMES **BESTSELLER ? NEW YORK?S ?ONE BOOK, ONE NEW YORK? 2018 PICK**

Winner of the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction

Named One of the Best Books of the Year by NPR, *Esquire, Vogue, The Washington Post, The Guardian, USA TODAY, Time* ? A *New York Times* Notable Book

Anna Kerrigan, nearly 12 years old, accompanies her father to visit Dexter Styles, a man who, she gleans, is crucial to the survival of her father and her family. She is mesmerized by the sea beyond the house and by some charged mystery between the two men.

?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 once belonged to men, now soldiers abroad. She becomes the first female diver, the most dangerous and exclusive of occupations, repairing the ships that will help America win the war. One evening at a nightclub, she meets Dexter Styles again, and begins to understand the complexity of her father?s life, the reasons he might have vanished.

?A magnificent achievement, at once a suspenseful noir intrigue and a transporting work of lyrical beauty and emotional heft? (*The Boston Globe*), ?Egan?s first foray into historical fiction makes you forget you?re reading historical fiction at all? (*Elle*). MANHATTAN BEACH takes us into a world populated by gangsters, sailors, divers, bankers and union men in a dazzling, propulsive exploration of a transformative moment in the lives and identities of women and men, of America and the world.

Discussion Guide

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

Jennifer Egan is the author of several novels and a short story collection. Her 2017 novel, MANHATTAN BEACH, a *New York Times* bestseller, was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and was chosen as New York City?s One Book One New York read. Her previous novel, A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD, won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* book prize, and was named one of the best books of the decade by *Time Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Also a journalist, she has written frequently in the *New York Times Magazine*, and she recently completed a term as President of PEN America. Her most recent novel, THE CANDY HOUSE, a sibling to A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD, was named one of the *New York Times* ?s 10 Best Books of 2022, as well as one of President Obama?s favorite reads of 2022.

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