

Jennifer Egan in conversation with Ivan Kreilkamp

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Transcript

John Plotz

Hello and welcome to Season 2 of Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. So, Aarthi Vadde is one of your hosts, and I'm John Plotz, the other guy.

Today I'm very happy to play third fiddle or, perhaps in *Wizard of Oz* parlance, we should think of me as the small man behind the curtain, to the illustrious novelist Jennifer Egan and to Ivan Kreilkamp, longtime writer on fiction and on rock music, author of two stupendous books on Victorian literature and most recently of *A Visit from the Goon Squad Reread*, which is, as its name suggests, a book length response to one of Jennifer Egan's own novels.

Egan herself probably needs no introduction to Novel Dialogue listeners, so I'll just say quickly that her *A Visit from the Goon Squad* won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 2011. Her other novels are *The Invisible Circus*, *Look at Me*, *The Keep* and of course, *Manhattan Beach*. She's also the author of many, many shorter works and the 1993 short story collection *Emerald City*. She was born in Chicago, raised in San Francisco, and currently lives in Brooklyn. Thank you both so much for being here and welcome to both of you. I guess as third fiddle, my role now is simply to say, Ivan and Jenny, take it away.

Ivan Kreilkamp

Yeah, thanks so much, John and thank you so much Jenny for doing this with us. This is really exciting for me. I want to start by asking you about a book that I believe you have just recently finished. Can you tell us about that? It's some kind of continuation of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* or a sequel in a way?

Jennifer Egan

I would say that it's more an expansion of the world of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* which never really felt done to me. I mean, it's you know, of course

with any book it ends up having a kind of cohesive appearance once it's between covers, but the truth is that it's often a pretty messy production.

And in the case of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* there were a lot of things I tried that didn't work. The PowerPoint chapter, which I think is probably the signature chapter of the whole thing, was a very late add-on. I actually sold the book without that. And so, you know it sort of felt like it was the best I could do when the clock ran out rather than some sort of perfect whole. And before it was even published, I was already imagining beyond it because there were so many open questions. I mean there are so many people in it and the whole principle of it is following you know, a place or a time or a person that we glimpse from our peripheral vision into a world that is completely theirs. And so, it felt natural to let that curiosity continue beyond the confines of the book itself.

IK

Did you have any particular models in mind? I mean, it's such a tricky thing to return to a fictional world, and you know you're describing it, not exactly as a sequel, but as a sort of something a little bit different. Were there particular versions of that that you admired or had in mind?

JE

Well, in a way you know it's great that you're Victorianist. I mean, I look to the 19th century for that. I think about Trollope, you know he's great. He was the great creator of series, series of series and I, you know, I love 19th century fiction. It's always a model for me. I think in part because it has so much swagger to it. You know, it really was a time when being a great fiction writer was like being a rock star and a movie star, you know and a TikTok star I guess, not that that's my medium, all combined.

And so I just feel like there was no hindrance or no limit on the greed of imagination at that time and so I, you know, if you look at Trollope, for example his Palliser series and his Barchester series, I mean each one contains many, many thousands of pages of fiction that are related to each other and then the two series are related to each other. But each one really is its own thing, so there's nothing that outrageous about writing a sibling or companion volume to *Goon Squad*.

I definitely don't think in terms of sequels, though, because the sequel implies that the experience would be richer if you had read the first. I think with this it makes absolutely no difference. You could read them in either direction or just read one.

I also I will say that I think about JK Rowling in the sense that you know I was a mom at the time that her books were being published and I was reading them to my kids. And I just really appreciated the way she stuck with her world, developed it in every way that it could be developed, sort of, used all of the table settings she had laid out as it were, which is something I really think about, you know, are you using everything you've put out for yourself? And I love the thought of doing that. I guess she would be the contemporary equivalent, maybe of one of those 19th century writers, including many thousands of pages on expanding a world, although in her case the protagonist is, for at least the *Harry Potter* novels themselves, was always Harry Potter, but I loved the thought of trying to do that in a different way.

JP

Jenny, could I just jump in here because you've touched on one of the real leitmotifs of this podcast, which is that one of the things we like to ask folks is if you could have a conversation like this with any living or dead novelist, who would it be? And basically, what would you be hoping to get out of a conversation like that? And you've mentioned both a living and a dead writer there. But assuming you want to stick with a 19th century writer, I was wondering, you know, not just who it would be, but also what tricks of the trade you would want to discuss with someone from that world.

JE

That's interesting, I mean, actually, I think the one, I think I would go back to the 18th century and I'm finally reading all of *Clarissa*. Not a short novel.

JP

Pandemic project. I know a lot of people who read it for the pandemic, yeah.

JE

I mean, it's absolutely fascinating. I read *Pamela* first, which is a little more problematic, but also fascinating. I mean, I first of all, I should just say that if anyone is curious about what it was like to live in another time I don't know why they're not just reading fiction published at that time. It is literally a time machine into consciousnesses of other people. It's so incredible. I don't think I appreciated that aspect of it when I was younger. I just thought well, *do I like it or don't I? Can I relate to this or can't I?* Those are not the questions I ask anymore. And in fact, it's incredible how much I can relate as a 21st century person to this novel about a woman written by a man. Many thousands of pages, all epistolary in the 18th century.

Anyway, I would be curious to ask Richardson, you know what sort of challenges he had in sustaining this insanely long narrative. And also, you know how he so fully imagined his way inside the mind of a female. Because I think he really did it pretty effectively. I mean I'm only at the end of volume one, so we'll see what I think when I get to the very end. But those are some of the questions I would be interested in.

There's an epistolary chapter in *The Candy House*, so.... And you know, what I found myself thinking as I worked on that chapter is that in an epistolary structure, you are looking always at the gap between what people say and what they really want. That's kind of what a communication is, you know. People are saying certain things, but they also want something when they write a letter or an email. And I don't even specify what the genre of communication is in the chapter of *The Candy House*. And you know, Richardson does that so beautifully. So, I would be very curious to talk to him about how he came to want to write this, how he imagined himself inside this woman's mind. I don't know much about his life.

It's such a step forward from *Pamela*, which is really an almost clichéd version which is also an epistolary novel, but really, a little hard to swallow about this servant who, a girl who's repeatedly approached, and you know, accosted by her employer who really almost basically tries to rape her on more than one occasion and ultimately falls in love with him and marries him. It's a bit much. I mean it's fascinating, anthropologically, and thinking about that time. But as fiction, it's just, you know, it's not credible. And I don't think it was then. Because Henry Fielding of course, wrote *Shamela*. Which is, you know, in a way a one-line

joke but kind of funny as a send up of *Pamela*, basically suggesting that Pamela was laughing all the way to the bank and really was just trying to get this guy to marry her.

JP

But you know that's related to the same thing you just said about letters which is that *Shamela* is about the gap between self-presentation and reality. Like the point of *Shamela* is she presents herself this way, but she's really this other way. But that's just what you said about how the epistolary works, which is that the gap between our presentation and our actuality.

JE

Yeah, although it's interesting as I said that about *Clarissa*, I realized that Clarissa herself, in Clarissa's letters there is not that gap which is interesting, and in that way she's a somewhat idealized figure. And as is Pamela, to the point of comedy, but not so with Clarissa. So, I have to wait and see what I think. Anyway, I guess I find myself thinking all the time about those very early novelists and wanting to remember and connect with what their goals were and also just channel their ingenuity and flexibility in drawing whatever forms they saw around them into the novel itself, which it seems to me, is why the novel was invented and you can't do that with epic poetry.

IK

Yeah, I mean, I do think your PowerPoint chapter or *Black Box* have that same feel. I mean it's a little bit like epistolary fiction where you're responding to existing communication forms and sort of remediating them or using them for your own purposes. And there's a similar dynamic of gaps in those as well, where we have to read between the lines. In terms of what's not there.

JE

Yeah, I mean what I love is inadvertent storytelling or the appearance of inadvertent storytelling, where somewhat, the person, the speaker is trying to do one thing, but the reader is gathering a story at the same time.

I'm always interested in, as a general principle of fiction, how can as many things as possible be going on at once. That is, like an aesthetic goal of mine, always, you know. How many things can we have happening here? Once we've

established something, it's time to move on. It's not time to dig in. And so, I'm always thinking that way.

And so, you know, inadvertent storytelling really embodies that, because it's someone doing something. But it's the reader understanding something else at the same time.

IK

There's a blurb on *Manhattan Beach* from *The Washington Post*, the reviewer said, “[i]t dares to satisfy us in a way that stories of an earlier age used to.” And I was thinking about that line and wondering, do you think about different ways fictions used to satisfy and ways that it now satisfies, and I mean, obviously one way to think about that would be in terms of, you've already mentioned, the sort of larger media landscape. Obviously, to be a novelist today is to be competing with Netflix and so many other forms. Not to mention TikTok. I mean, do you think, have the goals fundamentally shifted or...how do you think about this question?

JE

I think they, I don't think they have shifted in the sense that really good fiction is its own thing, and nothing else can really do what it does, and that is put you inside the consciousness of another human being in a narrative way. Nothing else can do that. Until something else can, I think fiction will have a life. Although I will say I think streaming and people's interest in streaming, is connected to the same wish because you're looking at what someone else is looking at on their screen and you're hearing their thoughts as they play a video game or play chess. And it's very compelling. And it's a little frightening to me because I think *Wow OK, this is where the screen-addicted person that we all are to some degree can actually have that sensation of being inside another consciousness without ever turning to fiction.*

IK

I mean, on the one hand, one thing I really like about your work is the way—and I do think this is very novelistic and it, you know, goes back to sort of very long standing tendencies of fiction— that quality of, sort of, appropriating or seizing forms or remediating forms for its own purposes. But I think part of what you're saying is that you know fiction needs, any form needs to maximize its

own form. It needs to bring those other things in, but then do what it does best. And if you're just weekly, you know, like if you're a PowerPoint chapter, we're just trying to be a good PowerPoint presentation, it would not be very interesting.

JE

Right exactly, I think. I mean the PowerPoint, in a way the PowerPoint challenge was a little different in that it was really impossible to write very well in PowerPoint for a long time. I mean, it's just hard to use a form like that to bend it towards storytelling unless you're telling a story that can't be told any other way.

I think if, right, if fiction writers are trying to do things like using PowerPoint, I would already say that's not TV fiction because it's just not the easy route. It's really hard to do, and even if it doesn't work, I still would really honor the effort, whatever it might be.

IK

I mean, the novel is so bound up in spying and overhearing and eavesdropping and so on, and I feel like you sort of channel that history in really interesting ways.

But then so, on the one hand, there's, you know, fiction's investment in privacy violations and spying. But I also sense a really strong valuation of privacy in your work. So, I mean one example of that would be the ending of *Look at Me*. Let me just read a sentence or two.

"Life can't be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes, even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves to catch it unawares. The truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, coiled privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it's touched by light."

So that kind of relates to streaming too, the question of like, what we give up when we open ourselves up, we open our minds up to other people. So just to throw that at you, could you reflect a little bit about privacy violation versus privacy and how fiction connects to that?

JE

Well, I guess you know it feels to me like, it's a kind of paradoxical aspect of being human, especially in a time that in which contemporary life is more and more pervaded by image culture. Which is, you know, a curiosity to know about other people and a corresponding wish, which I don't share, personally, but which many people do to reveal ourselves to be known in a really deep and intimate way by as many people as possible.

I mean that is a cultural wish that really seems to exist. I don't personally feel it, but I'm very interested in it because it's fascinating. Of course, you know, the nature of self-revelation is that it is performative. And so, there's a kind of paradoxical quality to it even with streaming where we have the illusion and, perhaps to some degree, reality of someone's reactions to what they're doing, and they're real.

Like if someone makes a bad move in chess, it's very satisfying to be watching the chess board. I have a son who plays a lot of online chess and also watches streamers play. It's very satisfying to watch the bad move. Watch them realize that they made a bad move and see the facial, their reactions and then hear their, you know, miserable wailing and response because it's like, we're right in there. But it's the audience is always there, and of course, there's an awareness for that and streaming is performative and streamers go, get offline and have their own lives too. So that paradox is always interesting to explore and the will towards self-revelation is in a way always disappointed, if you will, by the fact that we can't do it. We're locked inside our own consciousness no matter what we do.

In a way fiction, I think, is a more honest way of approaching the wish to experience other consciousness. And maybe in the case of autofiction, which I don't write, and I certainly can't speak for what drives that aesthetic, but maybe part of it is a sense that that is the best way to actually reveal oneself, that it's more honest to do it artfully than to, you know, pretend a kind of artlessness that is in fact, you know, illusionary.

IK

One thing I really admire about your work is the intelligence and range and interest in the way you work with genre and you play with genre in interesting ways and move around among genres.

JE

I feel like genre is a kind of lifeline for me, because what I can't stomach is the feeling that I'm doing the same thing twice. And at a certain point, you know, I worry that I'm just going to run out, like what else am I going to do that I'm able to do, without veering into any genres that involve the visual which I'm open to, but I don't really see myself doing, like I absolutely will not write for television. That is a very strict principle because I'm worried about internalizing those formulas, even though people will tell you there are no formulas. I don't believe it. And I'm worried about being able to shed those.

So anyway, for me, what's so great about genre is it's a kind of ready-made world, where there are rules, which is fun, but where the challenge is, how to sort of use those rules and yet somehow bend them and work around them as well as with them. Which is always what people who write in a genre, I think, are trying to do. There's nothing amazing about that goal. I think that's the fun of it.

But for me, it just feels like genre is a portal. Let's say we're talking about portals. A genre is a portal into a world where if I've never worked in it before, it's going to feel new and there's the possibility that I might be able to do something interesting there that I haven't done before.

IK

Yeah, I mean *The Keep* is maybe the clearest example of that where it's such a clear engagement with the Gothic and I know people who've ended courses on the Gothic with *The Keep* and felt it worked really well.

Did you feel that, you know, the sort of historical fiction mode of *Manhattan Beach* was the same kind of genre? Or is it a looser one or less?

JE

It had a slightly looser relationship to genre, in that...I mean, with *The Keep* I knew I was going to write a Gothic novel. I read nothing but Gothic work for

years. It was a pleasure and an appetite that I enjoyed reveling in for that period so that was very clear.

With *Manhattan Beach*, I would say that the portal genre, if you will, was the noir. I was really interested in sort of World War II New York through a noir lens and some of that arose, there was always a dialectic between the research and the story, because I begin without any idea what my plot will be so.

One autobiographical aspect of my fiction is that I really use times and places that I know from my life, so I felt kind of hamstrung, even though I did have genre to help me, an idea of New York during World War II through the lens of the noir, that was not enough for me to do anything because I didn't have any access to that period. So, I did some research very early, actually, while I was still working on *The Keep*, not to speak of *Goon Squad*. But certain refrains began to emerge right away. You know, the waterfront, because that's really where commercial life still took place and most travel at that time. And then arising from the waterfront, you know, crime for sure. It was, you know, corrupt in multiple ways and from multiple angles. Women doing war work, that arose very naturally. You know, shipping, although I tried to resist that because I had a sense that that was going to really cost me a lot of time and energy and it did. I've barely even sailed in my life. I know nothing about boats.

So those elements emerged naturally. But the thing that was really surprising, genre-wise, about *Manhattan Beach* was that once I had, one sign, I should say that I was going to go to sea in the book, despite my fervent wishes not to was a sudden and just acute inclination toward fiction of the sea.

And so of course that is a genre too. And you know, there's a certain feeling I get when I'm in the right area of something that's going to help me with fiction, a kind of excitement. And that started to happen around anything to do with boats or shipping. So, *Moby Dick*, oh my God, I was in transport.

You know, Patrick O'Brian, even though completely the wrong era, not even the right kinds of boats, it didn't matter. You know, endless oral history accounts of people lost at sea from all periods. So, all of that became really exciting.

And then I thought, well, wait a minute. I've already got a genre going here. How can I work in these two different genres? Alfred Hitchcock did it in

Lifeboat. It is noir. It is in a lifeboat. It is at sea. It is not his best movie because the noir is a very urban genre. I think in its nature, it's an existential threat that comes from human life and kind of human evil.

But what I realized is that actually sea stories are totally analogous. It's a situation that is inherently dramatic, in which an existential threat exists at all times, but it's diametrically opposite in that the existential threat is coming from the natural world. It's a pocket of humanity surrounded by danger. But the danger is exactly of the opposite kind, so the fusion of those two genres actually ended up making sense to me intellectually, which was a relief. And so, I would say that that book is, you know, somewhat genre-esque in many of its parts.

IK

That's interesting. You know, this also reminds me of something else I want to ask about, which has to do with subcultures and lingos and dialects and jargons, which in a way, I mean, it's a slightly different topic but maybe related in that every genre has sort of an idiolect or a dialect.

And I find that this seems something you're quite interested in. I mean, like there's a good line in *Manhattan Beach*, Dexter is "electrified by the hidden landscape. He discovered a latticework of codes and connections that shrank the everyday world into nonexistence." And I feel like there's many moments like that in your fiction where a character stumbles on a private world or it comes with a secret language. And can you maybe speak to jargons and codes and how those operate in your work?

JE

I mean, I think in a way, you know, any genre is in a sense about learning a language. Learning the language of that genre and then somehow transcending it, so that what one does is not just a generic reiteration of the genre, but actually does something, somehow pushes into something that feels new.

And in a way I think some of this really may come from my experience as a journalist because I have done a fair amount of journalism. I've moved away from it in recent years and I'm not sure whether I'll go back to it or not because as I do more historical work, I really have to spend a lot of that research time doing the research which I approach in very similar ways to the way that I would approach

journalism. But kinds of journalism that I did for the *New York Times Magazine*, really involved walking into a complex world knowing nothing and being therefore kind of incompetent to represent it in any way, and acquiring a brief expertise and in all aspects of a thorny problem, and often a subculture, those are my favorite kinds of articles, and then distilling that into a fairly long but really relatively short, given the complexity of real life, article that a general reader could read and learn from. And that feeling of starting out knowing nothing and feeling completely confused by everything that I'm being told, to go from that in a matter of a couple of months to a sense of actually understanding very clearly what the situation is that I'm trying to understand. That acquisition of knowledge is so exciting.

And I think it's been a really formative discovery for me, and it kind of gets back in a way I don't know if it really relates or not, but this sort of question of what motivates a person to write fiction, you know. Again with the journalism that I was doing involves a kind of self-erasure or that was how I experienced it, you know. I just forgot who I was or where I came from to just try to understand what was around me. And often I would actually sort of behave in chameleon-like ways that I wasn't even fully aware of, like as one example when I was writing about Catholic seminarians and spending lots of time at this very conservative seminary where there were only men, it was Catholic, one of the guys pointed out to me that I had taken to wearing black slacks, a black V-neck sweater and a white T-shirt. I was wearing clerics without even consciously realizing it.

So, my inclination is that kind of camouflage. And so that is very much what motivates me as a fiction writer as well: the transformation, the escape and kind of shedding of my life in order to enter a world where I become expert briefly. That's what the whole thing is for me. That's what the joy is. What I think fiction actually does.

I mean, I've talked about the advantage that I think it has that other forms don't, but what I actually think it is...and this is over time. I've sort of come to this view. I really think it's a kind of a dream life, a collective dream life of the larger culture. It's a narrative that pulls together, all kinds of different forces that are acting on all of us and transmutes them into a symbolic, into a narrative with symbolic meaning, which none of us writers often really understand. We understand some of it, but if it's really good, there should be a lot of stuff in there

that we're not even aware of. And so, I do think that, you know, fiction writers are conduits as much as anything else, and crystallizers of an enormous amount of information that's operating through us. And our job is really just to do that to be as open as possible to bring in as much as possible so that these artifacts end up being rich, immediately and over time.

JP

I think that “stream,” “conduit,” and “portal” make a really great set of metaphors here that sort of knit everything together. But Jenny, maybe I can just pivot to the very last moment here by asking you, we have basically a signature question for the podcast, and it's meant in the broadest sense. It's, what is your favorite treat while you are in the midst of writing? What do you do or what do you play or what do you eat when the going gets really tough for you?

JE

Oh wow, see this is where I should have done my homework and had an answer ready for you. A treat. What is a treat...? Oh, I, you know, in a way this is an easy one. It's kind of gardening actually. I like to, first of all, I like to work outside and because I write fiction by hand. I am mostly not using a machine and so it's easy to write wherever. I like to be outside, we have a tiny little Brooklyn backyard that we have access to, and I'm often, you know, over distracted by composting, worms, weeding, you know, some sort of engagement with these small tasks of trying to create a physical landscape that is my liking.

And during the pandemic, the one new development that's been pretty enormous is a quasi-obsession with birds. You know, I always thought birding seemed really boring, but I now realize that, to continue with our metaphors, birding is sort of like a portal into another dimension, the bird dimension which is always present, but one can go through one's whole life and not even think about it. Once I have found that, once I was aware of it, I'm distractingly attentive to it in every circumstance so that I'm sort of always listening for birds, I feel that it really has extended my worldview.

JP

Yeah, I mean there's a jargon for you, right? I mean, birdsong, it's like a jargon.

IK

Absolutely.

JE

Incredible, incredible.

JP

You know you're like, you're talking to a pair, we're not just connected by being Victorianists, but we're also chicken owners, Ivan and I, so we're with you on this one, yeah.

JE

Oh my gosh wow, the idea of finding eggs. I can't even imagine people actually do keep chickens in Brooklyn, but we have a cat so that would be a bit of a bloodbath.

IK

Oh, chickens and cats usually get along fine. You just have to get big enough chickens.

JE

Actually, I believe that 'cause our cats are terrified of squirrels.

IK

Oh yeah, yeah, they can usually hold their own.

JE

Yeah, so I would say it's gardening. Gardening is the perfect antidote to fiction writing.

JP

Yeah, that's great. Well, so, as we come to the end of another Novel Dialogue, Aarthi and I would just like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship of the podcast and acknowledge support from both Duke and Brandeis University.

Since the beginning, Nai Kim has been our production intern and designer and Claire Ogden our sound engineer. Please subscribe, rate us. Leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher or Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. And please do tell your friends about us.

Novelists from season one included Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, and Helen Garner. So, you can go back if you missed those, while this season airing through the fall includes Sigrid Nunez, Caryl Phillips, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.

So, Jenny, Ivan, thank you so much. This has been a wonderful conversation.

JE

Such a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

IK

Thank you, yeah this is a total delight.

JP

Yeah, it's a delight and thank you all for listening and hope to talk to you again soon.