

## **The Dystopian Future in *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

by Jacob Hall

The fragmented storytelling in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* extends the timeline into the future, even going so far so to enter the realm of science fiction. The final two chapters of the book, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" and "Pure Language," are the only two sections set entirely in the future. Yet just by analyzing these two chapters, it becomes possible to see Egan's satirical views on the environment, technology dependence, the upcoming generation, government oversight and other concerns that have developed negatively in her futuristic vision. Egan crafts a dystopian future that is only a few steps beyond modern times, and through this portrait provides a chillingly believable vision of life in the coming decade—one which many might miss because of just how close it is to modern times, and the desensitization that occurs because of it.

Beyond having the distinct novelty of being a PowerPoint chapter, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" is also the only story told from a child's perspective. Alison is the first character to give readers a glimpse into the future, and it is already evident that humans have dealt a terrible blow to the planet. While only a few new aspects of the future are revealed to readers, what is provided proves that the natural world is making way to the mechanical one. Lawns are a purchasable luxury now, and clean energy seems to have become a necessity far too late, as Alison demonstrates when she stands "watching the solar panels move. They remind me of robotic ninja warriors doing Tai Chi" (Egan 294). This is not the view of a desert landscape that provides tranquility, or even the wide-scape view of an open and desolate wasteland portrayed by a typical American Western film. What is painted is a landscape that is devoid of life; nature has become a commodity.

The cost is more than just lawns lost, however. In “Pure Language,” an even starker reality has come to New Yorkers:

The sun had dropped behind the water wall by the time they reached the Hudson, but when they climbed the steps to the *WATERWALK!* as the wall’s boarded rampart was exuberantly branded, they found the sun still poised, ruby-orange and yolklake, just above Hoboken. “Down,” Cara-Ann commanded, and Rebecca released her. She ran toward the iron fence along the wall’s outer edge, always jammed at this hour with people who probably (like Alex) had barely noticed sunset before the wall went up. Now they craved it. (Egan 323)

The rising water levels have not destroyed Manhattan. This is not a scene of a city in danger, but of one imprisoned. To see the sunset, city dwellers must crowd to the top of their cage and savor what they lost. As with the lawns, it is the little things that Egan focuses on most environmentally. There is not mention of terrible smog, mass extinctions or eminent danger—just the presence of something lost that the people of New York will never be able to regain. With theories abound about global warming and the real causes (and rate) of rising ocean levels, this prediction from Egan might seem a little far-fetched, but if so, it is one of the only ones that is difficult to imagine.

It is not at all uncommon to see children interacting with technology at surprisingly young ages. The frequency with which it occurs has led to the quickly-becoming-old adage, “my 3 year old knows how to work my tablet better than I do,” from many parents. Egan has some fun with this in “Pure Language.” As revealed in the chapter, “Cara-Ann had never touched one,

and Rebecca and Alex had agreed that she would not until age five” (Egan 313). The reference here is to Starfish handsets, a progression from tablets that is capable of purchasing with just pointing, a feat achieved by a child in the novel that had not even had its first birthday. The curious decision by Egan to split Rebecca and Alex from other parents with their view on children and technology is definitely meant to resonate with readers, but it is even more telling to see Cara-Ann’s reaction to her limited involvement with technology. Alex does slip up and give Cara-Ann access to his handset, but the importance of this moment is not in Alex’s action, but Cara-Ann’s words later on when she notices the handset again: “‘Das *mine!*’ Cara-Ann proclaimed with guttural indignation, stretching from her sling and stabbing her pointer at Alex’s pocket. Inside, the handset was vibrating” (Egan 322). Egan has taken care to lend weight to the decision Alex and Rebecca have made by using Cara-Ann’s voice to demonstrate the desire (and even dependence) of the next generation on these handsets. This might be a product of Egan’s own response to the proliferation of technology. In an interview for *BOMB Magazine*, Egan reveals that “I’m always really interested in technology and how it changes culture.” While Egan might be interpreted as praising technology here, it would be unfair not to note that Egan herself does not utilize much technology in her creative writing. In another interview, this one published in *Seattle Met*, Egan talks about writing by hand: “it seems like my mind has a different connection to the writing if I’m writing by hand than it does if I’m on a computer. If I’m on a computer, I’m in a basically analytical mode.” These views combined might play a role in Egan’s presentation of Cara-Ann, and even the entire upcoming generation.

Consider Allison’s point of view in “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.” Egan is being experimental with the PowerPoint slides, but she has deliberately chosen to use the voice of a 12 year old to do so. Allison is journaling with this chapter, but she is doing it in the fashion of the

next generation, preferring limited text and stronger visuals, with an emphasis on faster paced movement. In fact, “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” is easily the longest chapter in terms of the number of pages it takes up, but most readers will find themselves getting through it quite quickly (although it would be remiss not to note that the full experience of the chapter is best achieved online with the addition of sound and colors.) Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote a book called *Alone Together* that deals entirely with the role technology plays in shaping the current generation. She argues “technology, put in the service of the always-on communication and telegraphic speed and brevity, has changed the rules of engagement” (Turkle 172). The basis for this claim comes from Turkle’s extensive studies of the current generation’s constantly tethered lives, and it is very possible to extrapolate from this a system of dependence on technology that would only be more prevalent in future generations. The result of this is an entirely different method of social interaction, which Cara-Ann and Allison represent.

These two characters are not the only representatives of the next generation’s changes. Lulu, perhaps the most unique character in the novel, is shown to be unnaturally successful in the social hierarchy of her childhood life. She, like Cara-Ann, is disconnected from her parents to an exceptional degree. Her social interaction with others is also extremely disconnected, as she chooses to “T” through her handset rather than verbally communicating with Alex. He chooses to respond back verbally at one point, starting “‘Wow. I’m sorry,’ he said, looking up at Lulu, but his voice seemed too loud—a coarse intrusion” (Egan). The use of verbal communication has drifted away, even becoming an uncomfortable format when in immediate proximity. This extreme moment is not difficult to imagine when the massive use of text messaging is considered, a format more than a few people have acknowledged is their preferred method of

communication. Sherry Turkle noted this as well in *Alone Together*, stating “people come together but do not speak to each other” (Turkle 155). The futuristic vision of texting each other at the same table is already becoming a reality.

It would not be fair to characterize Egan’s portrayal of Lulu as entirely negative. Nothing about Lulu’s methods is criticized, and her effectiveness as a communicator and social charisma is constantly present throughout her presence in the novel. Consider the way Lulu is presented as she meets Scotty just outside his trailer, with “slanted winter sun igniting Lulu’s hair, making a nimbus around her face” (Egan 334). She is most certainly a character of exceptional importance, and while the next generation is most certainly one that is tethered and yet extraordinarily disconnected, it is also one that is quick and capable.

Parroting—the use of social networking to promote something for a profit—is the purpose for Alex’s and Lulu’s meet-up. False Yelp and Amazon reviews come immediately to mind, but the extent that Alex goes to by finding 50 people to help promote Scotty’s concert is a little disconcerting. Yet while Rebecca blasts the practice, and it’s generally given a very negative connotation in final chapter, it must also be noted that the effect was immensely successful. The concert was enjoyed, and served to unite this entire generation behind something that was finally worth their interest. This is important because it highlights the key to Egan’s vision: the interpretation of the future and what it means for society today is entirely left to the reader, at least up to this point.

As the concert for Scotty convened, Alex is left to make one final statement about the future:

Traffic had stopped, and choppers were converging overhead, flogging the air with a sound Alex hadn't been able to bear in the early years—too loud, too loud—but over time he'd gotten used to it: the price of safety. Today their military cackle felt weirdly appropriate, Alex thought, glancing around him at the sea of slings and sacs and baby backpacks, older children carrying younger ones, because wasn't this a kind of army? An army of children: the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left.

*if thr r childrn, thr mst b a fUtr, rt? (Egan 330)*

Police surveillance, already a frequent occurrence with cameras positioned in high-crime urban environments and frequent traffic violation areas, has been taken to a new level. In a post 9/11 society, it is not impossible to imagine the progression of “the price of safety” to lead to acceptance of a total loss of privacy. Perhaps, if left on its own, this presentation of futuristic safety measures could have been left to interpretation like all the others. Egan finally makes her point, however, with the “T” about the future in the abomination of language that texting has evolved into. What is a future? Egan is saying something about the progression of the next generation, and her opinion is made clear—it is not good progress. This is a dystopia, which encourages a loss of freedoms, increases dependency on technology, and devolves social interaction to internet chatter, all set in a world with an environment that has been permanently damaged by human recklessness.

As if to solidify this point, Egan decided not to end Lulu's plotline with the close of the novel, choosing instead to create one last story set even further in the future. “Black Box” was originally published in *The New Yorker*, on June 4 and 11, in two parts. Egan wrote the entire story as Tweets, so each section of text had to be less than 140 characters to accommodate the

rules of the website. Her aversion to technology remained, however, as she tells Deborah Treisman in an interview for *The New Yorker* about her writing process: “I actually wrote this by hand. Although when I started trying to do it, it didn’t feel right to be writing these long lines. I noticed that a friend had a notebook that had eight rectangular boxes on each page ... So I wrote the story by hand, with each paragraph in one of these rectangular boxes.” Being experimental yet again, Egan also manages to choose an effective format of delivery for this communication style.

In “Black Box,” we meet an unnamed character who is revealed to be Lulu when she talks about her mother in a distant tone, stating that “publicists occasionally have flings with their movie-star clients” (Egan 89). Once we know the character is Lulu, the plotline of the story begins to make a bit more sense in its correlation to the original stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Lulu is an undercover spy attempting to collect information from criminal rings by attaching herself to powerful criminals as their “beauty,” or lover. She communicates with recorded snippets of thought, which the reader gets to view in Tweet format. Her brevity of speech and penchant for communicating indirectly makes her a perfect fit for a Twitter-fashioned short story. While the plot is not as strong as the original chapters, Egan did spend a great deal of time on the story, particularly due to formatting, acknowledging in the Treisman interview that “it took me a year, on and off, to control and calibrate the material into what is now ‘Black Box.’” What she did manage of note was a story filled with new advances in technology, and a feverish sense of national pride, and a confirmation of her vision for the future.

Lulu is entirely reshaped in this story as a patriot out to stop criminals by risking her life to infiltrate the upper-echelons of the criminal world. This drastic change in character, from social queen to undercover spy, is the best insight readers can gain into the future Egan had

mapped out for the world. A variety of responses are possible to the new Lulu, who is willing to acknowledge the “narcissism of America” while also focusing intently on her sole goal of becoming a hero for her nation (and hopefully returning home alive in the process.) The technological advances include body implants, incredible communication devices, and even the means to record data directly to a human mind—at the expense of some of memories. The capability to use the mind as a hard drive, and the willingness to implant people to “record data” simply by being present is the culmination of the increased surveillance and destruction of privacy.

Yet this is not the biggest issue with this dystopian future that Egan creates. The willingness of Lulu to put herself in danger and allow her own memories to be violated in the name of stopping crime might seem noble, at first glance, but reeks of devaluation of human life. In a world where sex is a tool for information gathering, the mind is a malleable storage device, and human life secondary to the mission at hand, the future has been lost. It is important to note that Egan never explicitly states what the criminals in the story are even up to. There is no need. They are enemies in some fashion, and Lulu volunteering her life like hundreds of others is as natural as breathing—even if it means leaving behind her husband and taking a gunshot wound in the process. In “Black Box,” this is called “new heroism.” Lulu defines this, informing reader’s that “in the new heroism, the goal is to throw off generations of self-involvement” (Egan 91). Imagine military servicemen who are not interested in, or encouraged to, seek betterment or promotion; the only goal is benefitting the country and its goals, which are not clear, even to Lulu.

Egan is using some satire in all of her futuristic writing, and yet the question is: are we meant to laugh, or do we do so in self-defense? The question is a frequent one when satire comes

into play. In a review of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, a staple in American satire, Terry Southern of the *New York Times* comments "Like the best of contemporary satire, it is work of a far more engaging and meaningful order than the melodramatic tripe which most critics seem to consider 'serious.'" Egan is taking on the role of satirist in her dystopian finale, but she does so with the intent of all great satire: to make us see what we do not want to see.

The proximity of these events is agonizingly dangerous. Even the one admitted instance of a potentially far-fetched prediction, the waterwall around Manhattan, is not difficult to imagine elsewhere; New Orleans deals with the concern of ocean levels on a daily basis. The revelations coming out about the National Security Agency are only continuing to shock the world with how extensive the surveillance has become. Technology, for better or worse, is irrefutably in the hands of many children before they can even speak. Egan is not drawing on science fiction—she is channeling Twain, Vonnegut and others in showing readers a future that is immediately ahead.

The chilling impact of this does nothing to detract from the excellence of the novel (I would argue it adds to it.) The overarching themes of time and regret remain at the forefront of Egan's ambition with *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, but a legitimate concern is raised here. There are problems in American culture right now, and left unchecked, there is a sincere possibility that the future will be one where the regret does not come from failed bands, relationships or lost friends. It will come from a failure to act on the problems facing modern society. Jennifer Egan is not a pessimist, in my humble opinion. She is a writer allowing people to see the world from a perspective they might otherwise miss, and once seen, it would be nothing short of irresponsible to not put that new-found knowledge into action.

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