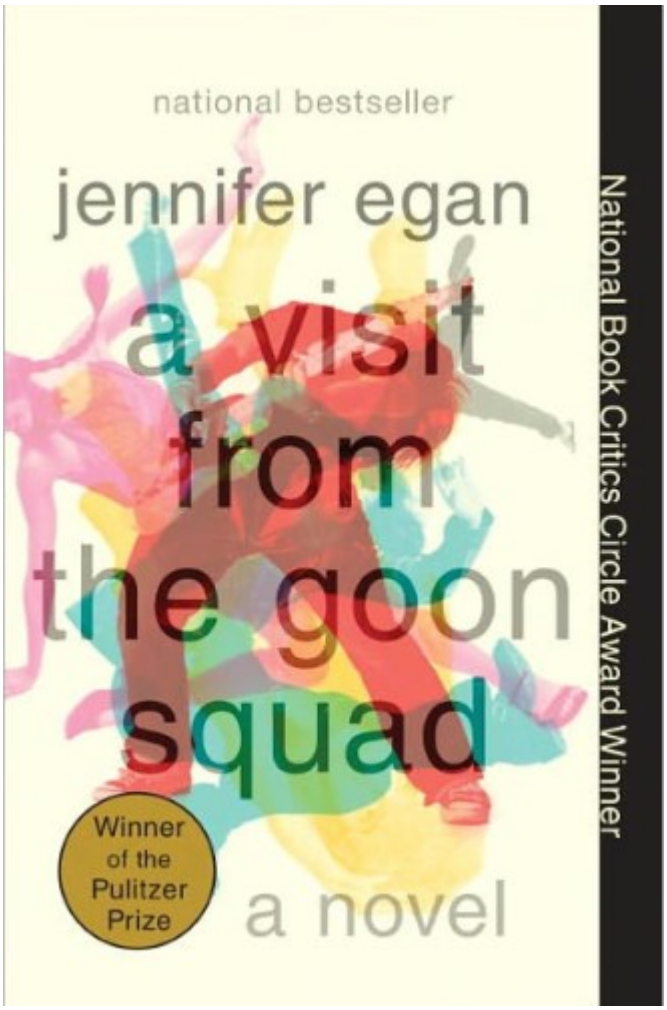
A Visit from the Goon Squad, by Jennifer Egan

reviewed by Ted A. Smith in the October 18, 2011 issue

In Review



A Visit from the Goon Squad

By Jennifer Egan
Random House

Jennifer Egan's novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and a clutch of other awards this year. It is at once a sharp social commentary, a showcase for the author's virtuosity, and a constellation of stories so good they invite fast, compulsive reading but also reward more careful attention. It is also a book with particular relevance for Christian theology and ethics.

The language of outsider authenticity has done much to orient Christian reflection in recent decades. There have been calls from many angles for some kind of Christian counterculture. Calls to let the church be the church, to keep it real and to resist empire have different content and suggest different courses of action. But they also share a vocabulary that emphasizes the need to carve out an identity against some overwhelming mainstream or another—capitalist, liberal, racist, consumerist, imperial, bourgeois, secular, denominational. In pointing out the pervasiveness of this vocabulary I don't mean to lump all these movements together. The differences between them matter very much. I also don't mean to caricature these movements in order to cast them aside. I count them as some of the most important directions of thought in our time. I only mean to argue that the shared vocabulary of outsider authenticity demands more critical attention. Egan gives readers just that.

The novel assembles a series of stories about people involved in social scenes where the rhetoric of authentic counterculture and sold-out mainstream has burned with special intensity: punk rock and public relations. If these scenes seem miles apart by the measure of authenticity, most of the characters in the novel find themselves moving between them. One of the most vividly drawn characters, Sasha, leaves home to travel with a band, turns tricks and robs tourists to get by in Naples, gets back on her feet at NYU, endures the death of her best friend, goes to work for a record label, finds her old habit of stealing coming back, marries a man with whom she shares a tragedy and, at the end, assembles found bits of life into sculptures—and a family—that she knows will not last forever but loves all the more fiercely for that.

The book is full of characters like Sasha. Their lives confound the mythical narratives generated by the rhetoric of outsider authenticity. They don't fit the story of starting pure and selling out (Green Day, Billy Idol), and they don't fit the story of staying pure without counting the cost (Negative Trend, Darby Crash). Those twin stories shape the imaginations of Egan's characters, even as the ironies of their lives tie these stories into knots. The kid with the Mohawk who becomes president of a

recording company finds himself encountering racism at the country club. This leads to the collapse of his marriage and makes him more of an outsider than ever. He ends up old and irrelevant, trying to scratch his way back into the action, just like when he started out. And the fat, middle-aged rock star who launches a "suicide tour" in a desperate bid to regain his street cred ends up retiring happily to a dairy farm.

The drive for purity leads sometimes to a dairy farm, sometimes to rehab, sometimes to death, but never to a beautiful corpse. The myths are always present but never quite true. Egan's core characters know this. They don't completely believe in the narratives of outsider authenticity, even as they use those narratives to make sense of their lives.

Egan, born in 1962, gives us stories of people who grew up in the rubble of the Age of Aquarius. "Nineteen eighty is almost here, thank God," says one of Egan's characters, a young woman who is in but not quite of the Bay Area punk scene. "The hippies are getting old. . . . We're sick of them." Egan's characters grow up knowing they'll get old too and sell out—or that they'll die young. One way or another, the passage of time will rob them of the purity of outsider adolescence. "Time's a goon," one character says. And Egan's characters live with the knowledge that the goon squad comes for everyone.

The stories of these characters interlock in intricate ways. They jump between past and future times spanning almost 50 years. Characters the reader meets around the edges of one chapter move to the center of another. The book doesn't follow every lead. Not every person who enters the story gets a chapter of his or her own. But the book follows enough leads, and in surprising enough ways, that it invites readers to meet every character as someone who is the center of her or his own story. One of the great gifts of the book is its ability to enlarge readers' sympathies. It encourages us to meet what look like the flattest of stock characters and to learn to know them as people with joys, sufferings, and plans of their own.

The multiplicity of characters is matched by a staggering variety of narrative styles. Egan offers chapters of first-person narrative, second-person narrative and more-and-less omniscient (and more-and-less reliable) third-person narrative. She has written a chapter that is a brilliant parody of celebrity journalism—that most sold-out of genres—as it might have been done by an acolyte of David Foster Wallace, the great outsider. She tells what is perhaps the most moving story of all in a series of

slides that could have been composed in PowerPoint. Egan's virtuosity is at odds with the stripped-down brutalism of the book's punk icons of purity. They might spit on such technical mastery as a kind of selling out. But Egan pulls it off with grace, wit and unwavering fidelity to her characters.

All the chapters are connected, but they never fit together as a whole, so the form of the book embodies the experience of time it describes. With a nod to Proust's "episode of the madeleine," Egan uses pop songs to launch reveries in which her characters recall the lost time of outsider adolescence. The recollections are always marked by consciousness of a discontinuity—a pause—between past and present. Egan's characters experience time not as epic but as episodic. They find themselves wondering how they got (in a phrase that structures the whole novel) "from A to B." "I don't know what happened to me," one character says. "I honestly don't." "You grew up," his companion replies, "just like the rest of us." But how did it happen? There are gaps in the story that can't be filled.

The final chapter makes clear the grace of those gaps. Set in a dystopian time not too far into the future, it describes a world that has perfected the process of producing outsider authenticity as an effect. In that setting, public relations professionals generate word-of-mouth communication through "parrots." The best parrots have some semblance of authenticity themselves, and Alex, who remembers the lost time of "his young self, full of schemes and high standards," fits the bill. But he worries about selling out. Lulu, the coolly brilliant publicist, talks him into it. Manufacturing authenticity is just like any other work, she says. "I mean, is a person who sells oranges *bought*? Is the person who repairs appliances *selling out*?" Lulu is a generation younger than Alex, and she grew up believing that authenticity was an effect all along. She does not recall a lost time of purity. With no lost time, there is no gap in her life story.

The contrast between Lulu and Alex illumines the glorious tangle of stories that have come before. As Lulu realizes, the ideal of outsider authenticity becomes a fiction as soon as it is deployed—whether to sell records, create a crowd or win a hearing for a theological argument. But something precious is lost if we give up any attachment to the ideal of outsider authenticity. The recollection of a lost time of purity, even if it depends on an ideological forgetting, can interrupt a narrative that is driving toward death. It can create the gap, the pause, that opens up the possibility of new life on the other side.

A Visit from the Goon Squad ends a little too neatly, with the husk of an outsider's performance catching fire to become the real thing. Egan has already given us too many reasons to question that reality for the ending to be satisfying. But her turn as a punk-rock Proust still has much to teach those of us trying to imagine forms of Christian life today. The novel can expand our sympathies, complicate our breezy talk about narrative and press us to think again about the time of redemption. Most of all, it can help us understand the need for countercultural dreams in an age when they are so readily co-opted by the very powers they would oppose.