



Manhattan Beach, by Jennifer Egan
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, December 2017

Jennifer Egan's *Manhattan Beach* was one of the year's most anticipated novels. Ms. Egan had won the 2011 Fiction Pulitzer Prize for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, her eclectic tome about the music industry and the digital age. Literary critics as well as Ms. Egan's fans were eager to read her long-awaited next book, *Manhattan Beach*.

In subject and in style, *Manhattan Beach* is a departure from Ms. Egan's prior work. In essence, as its title would suggest, *Manhattan Beach* is an all-encompassing New York story. Much of its action takes place in Brooklyn or Manhattan, reflecting the city's wide cultural and social-economic diversity.

The narrative starts out in 1934, during the Great Depression. Eddie Kerrigan, a Brooklyn dock man, brings Anna, his 11-year-old daughter, with him when he visits Dexter Styles, a businessman who lives on an estate in Manhattan Beach. Eddie's younger daughter Lydia, disabled from birth, is at home with his wife Agnes. Needing extra money to buy a specially designed chair for Lydia, Eddie approaches Dexter for a job, no matter how risky: "But it wasn't just the chair that drove him to Dexter Styles; it was a restless, desperate wish for something to change. Even if the change brought a certain danger. He'd take danger over sorrow every time."

Manhattan Beach then moves up in time to 1943. Anna, now 20, left Brooklyn College to work at the Brooklyn Naval Yard to help her financially strapped family. During the war years, with men fighting abroad, women were needed to work as welders, lathe operators, and machinists—jobs previously not open to them. Anna quickly moves up the ranks, but she is restless and seeks a new challenge. She applies to become a diver, a dangerous job, which Ms. Egan assiduously describes. Through her determination and hard work, Anna becomes the first woman diver at the Brooklyn Naval Yard.

But no matter her success, Anna is still haunted by memories of her father's visit to Dexter Styles when she was a child. One evening, at a Manhattan nightclub, she again encounters Dexter, now its owner. Dexter doesn't recognize Anna as Eddie's

daughter whom he had met years ago. Wanting to keep her distance, Anna gives Dexter a false name.

Clearly, the author has intended Anna to be the main character of *Manhattan Beach*. Anna's coming-of-age storyline is front and center. However, in this reviewer's opinion, Dexter Styles is the more intriguing character. Married into old New York money, Dexter straddles two worlds: the Beekman Place environs of his wife's family and the shadowy realm of organized crime. How Dexter balances the two disparate sides of his life makes for a captivating subplot.