

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

>> This is Guy Molinari at the Library of Congress. For the past 10 years, booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word of the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The 2011 Festival, our 11th one is free and open to the public and this year runs for two days, on Saturday, September 24 and Sunday, September 25th. The Festival will take place between Ninth and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. Hours are 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Saturday, the 24th, and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, the 25th. For more details, visit [loc.gov/bookfest](http://loc.gov/bookfest). And now, it is my great pleasure to introduce Jennifer Egan whose latest book, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is a 2011 Pulitzer Prize Winner for Fiction. Egan's novel has also garnered the National Book Critic Circle Award and many other honors. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is set in the rock music world and comprises 13 interlocking stories told from various viewpoints and writing styles. The passage of time in a world where youth is paramount, is one of the novel's major themes. Jennifer Egan, thank you so much for joining us.

>> My pleasure.

>> I think the title of your book is so intriguing and when I heard it, I knew it was something I had to read. *A Goon Squad*, I've always thought of as a group of violent thugs, but that's not the case in your novel. How would you describe what the Goon Squad is?

>> Well, the Goon Squad I guess is really time. I mean there's that point where character alludes to an expression. As you said, time is a good.

>> Right.

>> Isn't that the expression? And you know, I write very blindly and intuitively or at least on my first draft, so when I wrote that, I thought, "Oh, I really -- I like that. I like that expression." It's not -- of course, it's not that everything gets worse over time by any means and that's certainly not the case in the book either. But I think anyone would agree, after a certain point, that I think physically [laughter], time is a bit of a goon.

>> Right, right. You set your novel in the world of rock and roll, and you know, I think of music as an art form that's temporal in the sense that you only listen to it and it exists during that time, but also in many ways, it's -- can be -- it's a -- music is long-lasting because a piece can endure for centuries. Does that permanent yet temporal world have anything to do with why you used the music world for your book?

>> Well, I feel like time and music are intertwined in so many ways. I mean one of my big inspirations in working on this book was actually [inaudible] masterpiece and music figured enormously in his book about time both in terms of plot and also just as a kind of organizing principle of the book itself. And I think we all know that nothing makes

time seem to disappear like a piece of music from an earlier point in one's life and I actually think that the advent of the iPod and you know, other kinds of digital music players have made that even more obvious because we each have our own, you know, selection of important music from our own lives --

>> Right.

>> -- which we're -- listened to kind of bathed in on a regular basis and thereby transported to earlier moments. I think another reason though that I was drawn to the music industry is that, you know, a book about time is almost necessarily about technology, at least nowadays. It feels like we're really hurtling forward and the music industry has been so decimated by the movement to the digital that I think it's made a lot of people nostalgic for, you know, the great time of rock and roll when that business felt like it was growing and thriving and I think it's -- it almost has become a -- it seems to epitomize the uncertainty around technological change and how lots of different endeavors and undertakings will survive it.

>> You have so many fascinating characters in your book, the two of course, who are the most prominent are Benny Salazar, the music producer, and his assistant Sasha. But in no way could you really say the book is only about them. There are so many other characters that are related to them. Can you tell me how you think the theme of the ways in which we become connected to others sometimes for our entire lives, sometimes for only brief periods of time, figure into your novel?

>> Well, I think in the novel, I was trying to create -- to recreate a sense of satisfaction that I often wish for as I'm walking down the street and just looking at other people. You know, I have these moments of being intensely curious about one person or another and just wishing that I could leap inside their lives and find out what they're all about.

>> Uh-hum.

>> So, you know, I wanted to -- in the book, to create that sense of peripheral movement, you know, an idea or a person who may not be important in any kind of central way, catches the reader's eye and hopefully raises a question and then we're plunged into the middle of that person's life. And so often the connections between the people in the book are somewhat peripheral and yet, you know, for the reader, they create this constellation of people that we're following over time. You know, and the ways in which we're connected to people has also really changed, you know, we're -- there are all kinds of ways to be connected to people now, some of which involve, you know, never seeing or talking to them [laughter].

>> Uh-hum.

>> And so I guess -- I guess the very idea of connection and connectedness has become something that we as a culture are very interested in. I would go so far as to say that I think that we're in a

period of really fetishizing it. The very fact of being able to connect is kind of fascinating to us.

>> Right.

>> I -- my guess and I would have to say my hope is that that will -- that fascination will begin to fade as we get more used to being hyper-connected in all the ways that we are.

>> Do you ever find yourself, you mentioned seeing people on the street, do you ever find yourself weaving stories about what they're lives might be like just in your own imagination as you're looking at them?

>> One hundred percent of the time [laughter] and you know, New York is a great place to live --

>> Right.

>> -- if you are that way because I've never owned a car. I'm -- I'm out and about all the time on the subway, on the street. You know, I'm a terrible eavesdropper [laughter]. I just really thrive on all that kind of ambience, contact, and human experience that I brush up against in the course of my daily life.

>> I think one of my favorite characters in your book is Dolly, the Public Relations Person, especially that part where she's trying to remake the image of this dictator by making him wear a furry hat with earflaps [laughter]. How did you ever come up with that idea [laughter]?

>> Well, I think -- that was actually something that I think was inspired by something that I read in the paper but I could never recreate it what it was -- odd use of a publicist that made me -- and literally I suddenly saw this guy in a blue hat. I thought, "I have to write about this." But you know, it's really crazy. Someone recently sent me a link to a story about the fact that Kaddafi's actually right now trying to hire an American publicist to revamp his image.

>> Oh [laughter].

>> So, you know -- you know, I feel like as a satirist, I only -- I only last about six months and then unfortunately, all the things I thought were so wacky come true [laughter]. Clearly, I'm not going far enough.

>> [Laughter] That's right. I want to ask you about this chapter you had on the use of pauses. Ostensibly, it's about songs that purposely have a pause in them for effect. What led you to write about this and I have to tell you, when I turned the page and I saw that it was going to be a PowerPoint presentation, I was completely startled by it. How did you ever come up with the idea of writing about pauses in music and why did you choose PowerPoint?

>> Well, as so often with fiction, I feel like lots of different things tend to converge or one hopes that they do and often, without my conscious understanding of exactly what I'm up to, luckily my unconscious

is a lot smarter than I am because I honestly don't think I could have thought any of that up. I had a few different kind of interest or obsessions that were at work at once. One was, I was dying to use PowerPoint. I didn't really know why. In fact, I had never used it and wasn't even quite sure what it was.

>> Ah.

>> All I knew was that it had become ubiquitous in the form of discourse and therefore, I was interested in trying to use it for fiction. I was also kind of obsessed with pauses in rock and roll songs and that idea came from a book I read about the music industry in the course of my research for this book which is about the band -- a band called, "Semi Sonic."

>> Oh, I know them.

>> One big mega hit, "Closing Time," which has a pause in it and the drummer who write this utterly engaging and fun book which is called, "So You Want to be a Rock and Roll Star " talks about the mixing of that song by a guy named Bob Clearmountain who is so famous for inserting dramatic pauses in songs that they are known as, "Clearmountain Pauses."

>> Okay.

>> So I read that and I just felt it lodge like a bullet in my brain. I thought, "I am interested in that." I didn't know why. So, anyway, all of these interests converged in that chapter and only when I was working on it did I fully understand why I had been so obsessed with these things. PowerPoint is a form that's built around pauses. It is literally moments of information separated by pauses.

>> Right.

>> That's what it is. In a way, that's what Goon Squad is. It's specific moments of intense drama separated by pauses in which time goes either forward or backward. So, in a way, PowerPoint is like a microcosm of the book itself. Also, the unit of the pause is an -- a kind of basic feature of our awareness of time passing. It's when we feel like time has briefly stopped that we most noticed that it's -- that it hasn't stopped. And a - - and the pause is also -- has the same function in music. When you -- when a pause happens in music, there's this question whether the song is over or whether it's just resting for a moment and then when the music returned, we're more aware than ever that it will eventually end.

>> Right.

>> So it's around the unit of the pause that time and music most converge and those are really the twin obsessions of the book and the fact that they converge in a form -- in a genre that is built around the pause seems to just make sense in retrospect. And I will add, actually something a reader pointed out is that the positioning of that chapter which is the second to the last chapter in the book puts it in the -- basically in itself functions as kind of dramatic pause in the book

because it's written very differently from the rest of the book as you say in PowerPoint and we return to more conventional narratives for one more chapter after it ends. So, it in itself, is kind of a pause.

>> How about yourself? Do you have any secret desires or maybe not so secret desires to be a part of the music business?

>> I wanted very much to write about the music business as a journalist but was not able to get an assignment that would work. And I came close -- I wrote about -- I was assigned to write about a pair of identical twin rappers, females, whose first album was just about to come out and I was so excited because I'd been wanting to get an assignment in the industry for so long. But I learned rather quickly that I didn't actually think their album was going to come out [laughter]. It felt sort of like nothing was happening.

>> Right.

>> So when I told my editor that, he of course, immediately pulled me off the story. So, in a way, Goon Squad may be the result of a frustrated journalist, unable to get an assignment [laughter].

>> Okay, that's good. I think of your -- your book in so many ways as being sort of like a [inaudible]. You have it divided into A and B like, you know, two sides of a vinyl album. You have 13 stories like songs, they're interconnected but yet, they could stand on their own as well and that of course, like you say, there are pauses between the chapters when you switch gears and change characters and times and places. Did you know you were going to write it this way when you started the book?

>> Not really and I love that you say that you made the concept album connection. That really was, I think, my model as I was working on the book. You know, those great 1970s concept albums like the Who's Tommy or Quadrophenia.

>> Right.

>> As so often with me, I started it in a pretty intuitive way. I didn't even actually think I was writing a book. I just thought I was writing a story or two and then they -- the stories, you know, it was clear that they were connected and I was having all the fun with it and I thought, "Okay, it is a book. What kind of book is it?" I wasn't quite sure. I hadn't figured out the concept album model yet, but I knew it wasn't quite a story collection and it really clearly wasn't going to be a conventional novel. So, as I moved forward, I really just had three rules that I tried to adhere to, just so that I could make sure I kept doing what I was already doing, and those rules were that each chapter had to be about a different person, each chapter had to be written in a way that was completely different from all of the other chapters, and that's really the concept album analogy because the connected stories are often very similar in [inaudible] and mood. And then finally, each chapter had to stand on its own and then I just pretty much proceeded trying to make sure that I, you know, met that standard with each story. Generally, I either met all three criteria or I met none [laughter]. There were no

close calls. There were a lot of stinkers [ph] that I could include -- not a lot but four or five. Well, it couldn't even come close to finishing much less including. And then it's interesting, in terms of the structure, the order I should say, of the pieces, that was something that I had wrong as I was working on it. I really thought the book would go backwards. But when I read it in the backwards order, this was minus the PowerPoint which was very -- was a very late add-on. When I read it in backwards order, I discovered that it was actually very flat and that the kind of combustion I was hoping for of all of the pieces converging in a way, didn't happen at all. And so, I realized that really, I was -- I was too stuck on linear chronology. I wasn't able to let go of that and backward was just as limiting as forward. So, I decided that I would have to use a more intuitive way of structuring the book and basically, the criteria that I used were, you know, what is the most surprising kind of exciting jolt I could deliver to the reader who has just read Chapter X? You know, what needs to come next? And that really ended up being the way that I structured the book, just asking those kinds of questions rather than any sort of conceptual notion of how it should go.

>> The structure that you chose, you know, the inner connected stories, I could envision you just going on and on with more and more characters. How did you know when you had finished the book?

>> Well, I didn't -- I mean I added on a chapter after I had sold it. So, in a way, I didn't know. I feel like I stopped when I felt I had the bare minimum of what I -- what I could use. I would have loved to have more although maybe I -- maybe it would -- it's good that I didn't have more because, as you say, it could sort of theoretically go on forever. Once thing that's kind of nice is that I feel like I could return to some of this material in a kind of low-stakes way without feeling like I'm working on a sequel.

>> Right.

>> When I finished the book, and it didn't have the PowerPoint, I felt that it was structurally quite flawed because without the PowerPoint of course, we have not seen one of the two major characters, Sasha, in her future. We'd seen Bennie, the other one, you know, in the year 2020 something. We hadn't seen Sasha and I knew that was really a flaw in the book but I couldn't figure out how to get near her at that future point without writing from her point of view again. And then somehow it came to me, partly in trying to solve the problem of how to use PowerPoint without the work having a corporate feeling to it, that as a child narrated it. I would undercut the corporate feeling of PowerPoint and of course, if that child was Sasha's child, I would find a way to render up details about her future life.

>> Wow.

>> So, that was a big addition and I think without that, the book would be a much more mediocre book. So, I think I had less than the minimum when I sold it and with that PowerPoint, I completed a certain arc the best I could do. And you know, and I'm sort of open to returning to it now and then.

>> I can see how you could do that. What did your publisher say when you turned this in? It's such a non-traditional novel?

>> I think honestly, they were pretty wary. I mean they were enthusiastic and they didn't own it. I mean I didn't even want to sell it before it was done because I felt like there was no way to sort of, you know, it [inaudible] the opposite of the situation where you have a proposal and a sample chapter and say, "Well, you kind of get the idea of what this will be." There was no way to get the idea of what it would be because I didn't want anything to be like anything else [laughter]. So, I held onto it. And I think they were -- I think they were wary because from a marketing standpoint, this book is kind of a nightmare. It's very difficult to describe which is never good and it's also very difficult to categorize [laughter].

>> Right, right.

>> Also very tough. So, I think everyone was hopeful but wary and then when I turned in the PowerPoint, that could have been a moment when they would really have been unhappy with me [laughter] because, you know, who wants a 79 slide PowerPoint landing in their computer when they thought they were getting a late revision.

>> Right. It's a good thing you saved it [laughter].

>> Yeah, they were very nice about it thought and in fact, my editor gave me feedback that really, really improved that PowerPoint. It was -- just in terms of storytelling, I made a couple of wrong moves toward the end and she got me back on track. So, I -- it was a real collaboration. Everyone had to be pretty open-minded and honestly, I don't think anyone thought it was going to sell very well, and it really didn't for the first four -- three or four months it came out. I was still signing first editions of that book, four months after publication.

>> I assume the Pulitzer Prize helped that enormously.

>> You know, it really did [laughter]. I often said, "What will it take to make this book -" It turned out it took a miracle. It actually -- I'm being a little glib. It was starting to sell. It kind of kept -- it picked up speed through the fall which is really unusual for a book that came out in June. But I kept doing events because I felt like it had gotten such good reviews that -- and I was continuing to get audiences. I felt like there seemed to be an interest and an appetite. Because I kept doing events, I also got, you know, continued to get interviews and then the first real bolt of good luck was that it got on so many "Best of the Year" lists, really almost all of them it was on. And that was huge because the hard backs were still out there. I was still promoting and we were right in line for holiday sales. So I was signing first editions in September or October, but by December, I think we were into an 11th or a 12th. So, it really, really picked up speed and that was -- and then they decided to move the paperbacks up to March and boom, I got the National Book Critic Circle Award and then the Pulitzer and the paperback really took off. Now it -- now it's selling extremely well.

>> Right. Can you tell us about what you're writing now or do you have so many interview requests that you don't have time to write anymore?

>> Well, [laughter] we have to use the word -- the term writing loosely [laughter]. It has to include thinking [laughter] in order for me to get credit for writing anything right now. I -- it's funny, you know, when I was -- when I started Goon Squad -- when I started Goon Squad, I was actually procrastinating about beginning a different book which was a heavily researched novel that I wanted to work on for a while involving New York in the 1940s and specifically women who built and repaired ships at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. And so, I didn't end up writing that book. I ended up working on Goon Squad by I very much would like to tackle that now and I'm hoping that its sole purpose in my life isn't just going to be to get me to write other books to avoid it. I would actually like to write that book. And I've done a lot of research. Some of the research has been really meaningful unto itself. I got involved in an oral history project interviewing ladies who had worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The Navy Yard is actually creating a museum space and this -- this is all part of that. So, I'm really hoping -- what I'm missing is somehow the time and space to really sink into my research to the degree that I would like and -- because I kind of really begin with the time and a place and out of that grows the story and the characters. So, I have the time and the place but I need to kind of bathe myself in it again so that the story and characters can start to emerge and then most of all, what I need is to sit down and start turning out five to seven pages a day because that's when all the insights happen for me is in the actual writing itself.

>> Okay, well we'll have to look forward to that.

>> Well, thank you. I look forward to it too [laughter].

>> We've been hearing from Jennifer Egan, the author of, " A Visit from the Goon Squad ". Jennifer will appear Saturday, September 24th in the Fiction and Mystery Pavilion at the National Book Festival. She will also be signing copies of her award-winning novel that day. Jennifer Egan, thank you so much for your time and we look forward to seeing you at the National Book Festival.

>> I'm excited to be there and thanks so much.

>> Thank you. I really -- it was delightful talking to you. I look forward to meeting you.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).