theories and methodologies

Notes from an Academic Interloper

JENNIFER EGAN

FIVE YEARS AGO, I ATTENDED A SCHOLARLY SYMPOSIUM ON MY WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON—A SURREAL EXPERIENCE. ONE OF THE scholars presented a tally comparing the proportion of academics among characters in my novels with that among people in the general population. It turns out that my novels and stories contain an unusually high incidence of people engaged in scholarship.

This is no accident. During my undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania and afterward, as a postgrad reading English literature at St. John's College, Cambridge, I found the practice of literary analysis and argument every bit as urgent and creative an enterprise as writing fiction. Though I've ended up throwing in my lot with fiction, my novels still tend to begin with abstract questions that might seem equally—or better!—suited to academic writing: To what degree has image culture affected human identity (*Look at Me*)? Has the rise of virtual experience and disembodied communication rendered obsolete the real/unreal binary as a measure of human experience (*The Keep*)? How does our basic human longing for transcendence inform our experience of mass media (*The Invisible Circus*)?

All this is to say that it is an honor to find my new novel, *Manhattan Beach*, the object of scholarly rigor. I read these essays in a dissociated state of pleasure akin to what I felt during the conference in London. But the ultimate impact of that conference went beyond pleasure. When I attended it, in 2015, I was at an extreme low point in my work on *Manhattan Beach*. I had grave doubts about whether the book would work out and dreaded attending a conference devoted to my work at a time when I was depressed about my writing future. I entered the room feeling fraudulent. In the course of the day, a scholar argued that I had focused on one of the five senses in each of my novels: sight in *Look at Me*; sound in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*; smell in *The Keep*. As I listened, I realized that he was right—and, thrillingly, that my novel in progress was built around the sense of touch, thus amplifying the pattern he had identified. I emerged

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from the conference with a renewed faith in *Manhattan Beach* and a sense of indebtedness to the scholars for revealing to me facets of my work that I hadn't consciously recognized.

Reading the essays collected here put aspects of *Manhattan Beach* in scholarly contexts I was unaware of. I had never heard, for instance, of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's thesis on disability narratives—though rest assured that I won't soon forget it. I cannot say I enjoyed learning that I'd adhered to shopworn tropes in my approach to physical disability, as was pointed out by Rachel Adams, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Janet Lyon, but I'm better off knowing it.

Some of the essays were fascinating in their ability to amplify and codify elements of my storytelling that I had understood more intuitively than intellectually. This was true of both Margaret Anne Cohen's and Jordynn Jack's essays on wartime gender and labor. John Fabian Witt's piece on inarticulateness described, better than I've ever been able to, the paradoxical urge I always feel when writing fiction: to use language as a means of approaching the recesses of human consciousness that are beyond its reach.

George Hutchinson's essay, which identified some of my literary sources and touchstones with eerie accuracy (Raymond Chandler; Carson McCullers; Ralph Ellison; Anatole Broyard; Charles Jackson), also reminded me of some of the basic structural principles that have fascinated me throughout my career: specifically, that binaries and dislocations can be useful tools toward the goal of suggesting universality. And Allan Hepburn—who may know my oeuvre better than I do—helped me better understand, in his wonderful piece on vanishing and returning, why the power of absence has preoccupied me from my very first novel, *The Invisible Circus*.

As it happens, I read these essays while working on fiction set in an interdisciplinary discussion group composed of professors and graduate students at Columbia University—my highest concentration of academic characters yet! Who knows whether that piece will work out. Because my books are so idea-driven, scholar characters sometimes serve as intermediaries, bringing theories into my fiction as an early step toward full absorption (at which point the scholars themselves sometimes bow out). For example, before I managed to write the *PowerPoint* chapter in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I had an academic character whose work focused on the pauses in rock-and-roll songs. But her lengthy disquisitions on the fascinating functions of musical pauses made dull reading; in the end I needed to pry those ideas free from the academic realm in order to animate them.

This year, I've returned to the University of Pennsylvania as an artist in residence and am currently teaching a literature lecture course that I designed: Self, Image, Community: Studies in Modern Fiction. We began with Anthony Trollope and will conclude with Joan Didion. The work and thought required to create a decent hour-and-a-half lecture every week have sharpened my awe of the professionals. And the practice of pushing against literature from a multitude of angles has deepened my conviction that it can be used to do almost anything—from philosophy to cultural analysis. My stint as Professor Egan makes me even more grateful to those of you who have found my work worthy of inquiry; your insights inspire me and, I hope, will make me do better.

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