

theories and  
methodologies

Siblings, Disability,  
Genre in Jennifer  
Egan's *Manhattan  
Beach*

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JENNIFER EGAN IS KNOWN FOR HER FORMAL AND THEMATIC VIRTUOSITY, A CONSTANT REINVENTION THAT MAKES EACH OF HER NOVELS FEEL fresh and surprising. “If I’ve read it or done it before then I’m not interested,” she claims, describing an “aesthetic . . . guided by curiosity and desire” (Julavitz). But this isn’t the whole story; an exacting reader will find familiar threads running through Egan’s fiction. Among the most consistent is an interest in siblings (or cousins, in *The Keep*): how their relationships evolve over time, as they develop horizontal intimacies apart from the world of parents, and how they negotiate various forms of inequality—for instance, how a more typical sibling contends with a beloved other who is ill or disabled. These themes carry over into Egan’s most recent novel, *Manhattan Beach*. Although many reviewers described it as an abrupt departure (Franklin; O’Rourke; Charles), the novel is consistent with Egan’s previous work in featuring a disabled sibling and in being concerned with how genre—whether mystery, romance, *PowerPoint* presentation, or text message—shapes family dynamics. But where earlier projects are marked by unexpected generic combinations, *Manhattan Beach* hews closely to the contours of two interrelated forms: the historical novel and literary sentimentalism. At the heart of its thick portrait of a particular time and place is a sibling relationship that becomes an occasion for exploring the possibilities and limitations of genre.

Although Egan dismisses memoir as “so boring!” (Schwartz), her recurring interest in sibling inequality has an autobiographical basis. Her beloved younger half-brother, the handsome and athletic Graham, was socially successful until college, when he began to experience the symptoms of mental illness that would lead him to commit suicide at age forty-seven. Describing herself as a “witness” to Graham’s undeserved pain and suffering (Schwartz), Egan has repeatedly—and presciently, since Graham died as she was writing the final draft of *Manhattan Beach*—worked through fictional scenarios in which a healthier sibling testifies to the struggles of a damaged brother or sister. Among her most creative iterations of this plotline

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is the section of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in which twelve-year-old Alison Blake uses a *PowerPoint* presentation to explain her autistic brother Lincoln's obsession with pauses in rock songs. Other versions are narrated more traditionally in *Invisible Circus*, *Look at Me*, and *Manhattan Beach*, where the plot-line involving sibling inequality is refracted through the generic conventions of sentimental fiction and the historical novel.

One of the most remarked-upon aspects of *Manhattan Beach* is the historical accuracy of its richly detailed setting. At the end of the novel, Egan acknowledges the many archives, experts, and books she consulted to learn about New York's World War II-era naval industry (435–38), and critics have noted her keen attention to location, activity, cadence, and viewpoint (Diebel; Franklin; O'Rourke; Charles; Towles). Egan's commitment to historical specificity extends to the generic lenses through which we see the disability of Lydia Kerrigan, the younger sister of the protagonist, Anna Kerrigan. Egan's representation of Lydia is not just one more historical detail but also a fulcrum of the author's foray into historical fiction and, more specifically, her exploration of the role of sentiment in framing disability and siblinghood during the period in which her novel is set. Egan's deployment of sentiment reflects her exceptional command of literary form but, ultimately, offers little ground for thinking critically about the sociopolitical implications of presenting disability through the lens of sentimentalism.

Sentimentality was the predominant mode for representing disability during the mid-twentieth century, when Lydia lived. Mary Klages and Martha Stoddard Holmes trace the relation between disability and sentimental fiction back to the nineteenth century. Klages associates it with the emotional values of the female domestic sphere, which prized "a form of selfhood oriented toward emotionality and toward a recognition of weakness, dependence, and physical differ-

ences, as a means not of denying but of marking adult human status" (6). In this context, disabled people could encourage empathy in others and also develop their own empathy for those who were even less advantaged (7). Focusing on Britain, Holmes shows how sentimental devices were adopted across a wide range of genres, from medical treatises to advice literature about parenting and work to popular fiction by Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and others. In the first half of the twentieth century, charitable and public-health campaigns relied on sentimental tropes to tug at the hearts and purse strings of able-bodied audiences. Polio was a major source of childhood disability in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s (Conis 21; Oshinsky; Shapiro 13–16), and in 1946 the March of Dimes presented its first poster child. Its iconic image featured an adorable wide-eyed white boy: in the background, he is depicted as disabled, barely able to support himself, while in the foreground he strides toward the viewer sturdy and determined. "Your dimes did this for me!" the poster announces, suggesting the power of small donations to translate disability into health and vigor. Although polio is not the source of Lydia's disability—which seems to be cerebral palsy—widely circulating images like this one determined how children like her would have been perceived and understood.

The poster is an exemplar of the sentimental mode at work, depicting the disabled child as a passive recipient of pity and care, but one with tremendous capacity to harness the emotional energies of others and spur them to action. The problem with such images is that they evacuate the disabled figure of agency and personhood, so that their sole value lies in educating and motivating the able-bodied. In *Manhattan Beach*, Lydia does very little, but she catalyzes virtually all of the novel's action: her need for full-time care requires her mother, Agnes, to quit her career as a dancer, leaving her father, Eddie,

the only breadwinner for the family; her need for a wheelchair drives Eddie to seek employment with the gangster Dexter Styles, setting in motion a chain of events that culminates in Eddie's disappearance; Lydia's need for stimulation pushes Anna to pursue the beach outing with Dexter, moving them toward the sexual encounter responsible for her pregnancy; longing for an able-bodied surrogate for her dead sister leads Anna to keep the otherwise unwanted pregnancy; and a newfound appreciation for Lydia humanizes Eddie and gives him the final burst of energy he needs to survive a shipwreck. Lydia also inspires the author herself, prompting Egan to depart from a straightforwardly realist mode and adopt a more experimental approach in the innovative scene of Lydia's awakening at Manhattan Beach.

Disability in the novel is depicted in the terms established by the sentimental tradition. Many of the men Anna encounters in wartime Manhattan have been declared 4-F, unfit for military service. At a time when disability was seen as particularly shameful and unmanly (Serlin), these men do their best to pass as able-bodied. At a nightclub, Anna observes a waiter "with a noticeable tremor" and thinks "4-F," while her dance partner has a "slight limp" (Egan 68). Searching for naval divers, Lieutenant Axel takes pleasure in calling out the flaws in each volunteer: "DelBanco's fatness, Greer's slightness, Hammerstein's asthma, Majorne's 'four eyes,' Karetzkey's flat feet, Fantan's slight limp, McBride's poor balance, Hogan's flatulence, and so on" (204). Although most of the men are too old for the draft, to the hardy lieutenant "they might as well have been 4-F" (204–05). The novel also shows how enlisted men with disabilities had to compensate by proving themselves equal or superior to their able-bodied peers. Eddie's friend Sparks, a ship's radio operator and, Eddie assumes, a survivor of polio, wears a brace on his leg. Sparks avoids alcohol and nightclubs, where

he might experience rejection, and adopts a robust sense of humor that deflects the skepticism and cruelty of his compatriots.

Lydia is the only disabled female character in *Manhattan Beach*, and her impairments are far more severe than those of the men. While those men circulate in public, she is confined to the Kerrigans' tenement apartment, a space associated with warmth, family, and emotional and physical intimacy, as well as such traditionally feminine activities as caregiving, cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Lydia is attractive, possessing all the classical trappings of white feminine appeal: "clear, perfect eyes that bore no trace of her affliction," hair that is "golden, soft with curls, fragrant with the exorbitant shampoo Agnes insisted upon buying for her," and skin "velvety as an infant's" (16). This blazon emphasizes exquisite grooming, evidence that Lydia is the beloved object of her mother and sister's attention. Their care work invests her with value, and her loveliness is a testament to their exertions. Her perfect eyes, fragrant blond hair, and smooth skin work against the disgust her disability elicits, and they heighten the pathos surrounding Lydia, suggesting the opportunities her beauty might have provided were she not disabled.

The responses Lydia evokes in others are also strikingly gendered, in keeping with the sentimental associations of women with feeling, empathy, and interconnection and of men with reason, individualism, and expedience. She arouses in her father, Eddie, feelings of helplessness, disgust, and resentment. He thinks enviously that only a wealthy man like Dexter Styles could afford to cover Lydia's expenses but then wonders incredulously, "[D]id such men *have* children like Lydia?" (17). The implication is that Lydia somehow reflects Eddie's failure to provide for his family, as well as punishment for "some gross misstep of his own" (267). Focusing on Lydia's deficits leaves Eddie at a loss for how to interact with her: "[I]t felt strange *not* to talk to her. What

else could one do with an eight-year-old girl who couldn't sit up on her own, much less walk. Pet and greet her: that took all of fifteen seconds. And then?" (15). Eddie feels the contrast between his helplessness and the seemingly intuitive bonds Agnes and Anna form with Lydia, whom he resents for siphoning off their concern and physical affection. With time, his resentment grows into a compulsive desire to harm Lydia, requiring him to relinquish her full-time care to Agnes.

Where Eddie focuses on deficits, Lydia's female relatives are conditioned to see possibility. Anna and Agnes know that Lydia is not passive but rather has her own subtle way of demonstrating attention to and curiosity about her surroundings. She laughs when tickled, is alert when spoken to, becomes more active when stimulated by new environments, and shows her unhappiness at being carried up and down the stairs by a neighborhood boy. Lydia's ability to listen and understand but not to divulge secrets makes her an ideal confidant for Anna, who confesses the details of her adolescent sexual fumbling with Leon, as well as her work and relationships at the Naval Yard. By focalizing both Eddie's and Anna's perspectives, *Manhattan Beach* shows how Lydia's meaning and potential are determined by others' perceptions as much as by the impact of her impairments themselves—and how much those perceptions are shaped by gender.

Separate spheres of class and gender collide in the climactic scene, when Dexter Styles takes Lydia and Anna to the beach. Dexter initially approaches Lydia with pity, fear, and disgust, identifying with her absent father (whom he does not know to be Eddie). Although Eddie imagined Dexter to be insulated by class privilege (151), in fact Dexter experiences the Kerrigans' apartment as a "familiar" reminder of his own origins. Moreover, gender trumps class when Dexter empathizes with a father's "agony" at "having to look upon this daughter day after day"

(152). But, unlike Eddie, Dexter is more open to conversion, perhaps because he is not burdened by feelings of guilt and responsibility for Lydia. As the day goes on, his understanding of Lydia changes. He recognizes her sweet smell, responsiveness, and beauty as signs of her cherished place in the Kerrigan household. And as the encounter with Lydia stirs recollections of his mother's illness and death, Dexter is reminded that infirmity is no bar to deep love and attachment. Depicted from Dexter's point of view, the scene in the apartment is true to the conventions of sentimentalism, demonstrating the disabled body's potential to awaken and transform the affective landscape of an able-bodied observer (Klages). Lydia provides Dexter with an emotional education, eliciting pity and concern from a character who might otherwise seem too ruthless to merit the reader's sympathy.

The visit to Manhattan Beach is the novel's most stylistically innovative scene, employing multiple perspectives to represent Lydia's awakened consciousness. Where previously Lydia had only been described by others—reinforcing the perception of her inertness—the scene at the beach is partially rendered from her point of view. Language is represented expressively, as Anna speaks it ("right in front of you"), but also receptively, as Lydia hears it ("Rinfronyoo" [161]). Such duality emphasizes the subjective nature of verbal communication, which contains not only the potential for interpretive differences between intended and received meanings but also perceptual gaps between the utterance and its auditory reception. That said, the doubled perspective also provides evidence of communicative success, since it shows that Lydia clearly hears, understands, and responds to her sister's spoken language with utterances of her own. The dialogue between Lydia and Anna is a powerful model of interdependency, a testament not only to Lydia's untapped potential to communicate but also to the way Anna's attentive speech, listening,

and interpretation make her sister's expressions meaningful. With this uplifting scene, the novel toys with the possibility of a comic ending that would bring Anna and Dexter together as a couple and miraculously endow Lydia with health and ability.

Instead, *Manhattan Beach* takes the other route made possible by its generic form. Lydia's dramatic awakening is followed not by further development but by tragedy, since the overstimulation of the beach outing quickly leads to decline and death. Also true to convention, once Lydia's inconveniently needy body is disposed of, it leaves behind a persistent sentimentality that uplifts and educates the novel's able-bodied protagonists, a device that David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have influentially called a "narrative prosthesis." Having initiated the meeting of the two families, Lydia ensures their ongoing conjunction by reuniting Dexter with the adult Anna and showing her his potential for compassion and generosity. When Anna becomes pregnant after their night of passion, she seeks an abortion. But in a melodramatic reversal, just as the anesthetic is taking effect she has a vision of an able-bodied version of Lydia and stops the procedure in the nick of time. Her son, Leon, provides resolution by bringing together the two family lines. He is an able-bodied surrogate for Lydia, promising companionship and affection but also development into adult autonomy rather than life-long dependency.

Lydia's sentimental residue also cleanses Eddie of his moral ambiguity. Eddie is ethically compromised by his hostility toward Lydia, his willingness to serve as Dexter's right-hand man, and his abandonment of his family. However, he also shows potential for redemption in courageously protecting his disabled comrade, Sparks, and reconciling with his former enemy, the bosun, during their ordeal. The black-white bromance between Eddie and the bosun is a perfect instantiation of Leslie Fiedler's account of male

homosociality in American literature in *Love and Death*. And, like Lydia, the bosun conveniently moves to another part of the country after securing redemption for Eddie, who has an epiphany about Lydia while stranded at sea on the verge of death. Having always perceived his daughter as other, he suddenly discovers "their likeness" and is overcome with guilt at having abandoned her (398). In his delirium, he realizes that Lydia was capable of speaking "a language he'd once discounted but now, at last, could understand" (399). Only when he experiences true vulnerability can Eddie identify with and accept his disabled daughter. How convenient that she is already dead! In absentia, Lydia uplifts and humanizes her father without imposing on him the messy burden of her care.

Were Jennifer Egan a less accomplished and virtuosic author, it would be easy to write Lydia off as little more than a plot device drawn from outdated clichés about disability. Instead, I take her character as indicative of Egan's commitment to genre and to the experiment that is *Manhattan Beach*, a novel whose faithfulness to its chosen forms is both an accomplishment and a limitation. Forgoing the kaleidoscopic temporalities and formal variety of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *Manhattan Beach* remains true to its historical setting and the perspectives it offers. This fidelity leaves little opportunity to reflect, at least within the bounds of the novel's plotline, on the consequences of the historical treatment of people with disabilities or on the literary treatment of characters with disabilities. For better or worse, Egan reveals through Lydia the full array of formal and thematic affordances for representing disability offered by sentimental fiction. Doing so is certainly a testament to Egan's command of her medium, although it is less clear that these choices offer the fullest and most ingenuous treatment of disability.

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