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Manhattan Beach

Jennifer Egan
Scribner
448 pp.

At first glance, one could view *Manhattan Beach* by Jennifer Egan as just another novel set on the American home front during World War II. Yet, her elegant prose and complicated characters help it transcend beyond a simple work of historical fiction. Here, she tells a story of how the past affects both the present and the future, and how chaos can lead to new worlds for both individuals and an entire society.

Egan creates multiple narratives over the course of her novel, all existing parallel to one another until they eventually intertwine in unexpected ways. New York City during the height of World War II provides the setting for Egan's cast of characters. The main protagonist is a young woman named Anna Kerrigan, who has come to work at the city's docks as part of the war effort, helping fill jobs traditionally meant for the men fighting overseas. Anna is also a woman raised primarily by women. Her father, Eddie, disappeared when she was a child under mostly unknown circumstances. This fact haunts Anna into adulthood and shapes the way she views a world around her that is still dominated by men. She must juggle being thrust into the workforce with a frustrating home life that includes a bitter mother, a chronically ill sister, and an often absentee aunt.

The other main character Egan focuses on is a gangster of moderate success named Dexter Styles. Styles used the Great Depression years to make a small fortune through the ownership of clubs and roadhouses in and around the city. His wife's family comes from more respectable means, as shown by one scene in the novel where Styles must overcome his discomfort with the traditional 'country club' culture of the old New York rich. Like Anna, he experiences an old world that has always existed, but is also changing due to the war that rages at the periphery of the novel.

These two primary narratives eventually come into contact in the present, though Egan uses a number of flashbacks to show that they were related all along due to Anna's father, Eddie. Eddie tried to survive the turmoil of the Depression by working jobs at the edges of the law, first for a local union boss and then for Styles himself. One of the opening scenes of the novel shows Anna's first brief meeting with Dexter at his seaside home, as Eddie brings her along for what equates as a job interview. A chance encounter between the two years later spurs Anna into trying to uncover a past that has remained painfully murky as she navigated childhood mostly alone.

Perhaps it is this past where Anna is often forced to fend for herself that gives her the strength to thrive in a world changing around her. The ocean is a constant source of fascination for her, so it only seems natural that she is drawn to the divers in their massive metal suits who work on the damaged warships at the docks. Anna seeks to become a part of this mysterious world, which is dominated by men mostly hostile to her presence. In beautifully detailed scenes by Egan, Anna finds that the one place

she feels free of everything negative in her life is underwater. The driving force of the novel is often Anna's determination to exist in places where she is unwelcome. However, she often comes to be accepted in these new circles due to her refusal to back down in the face of discouragement.

To use a cliché, the characters in Egan's story must journey into uncharted waters, both metaphorically and literally. Anna and Dexter form a complex relationship as both struggle to find where they personally belong in a world of upheaval. We also discover that Eddie is alive and serving on a war supply ship, adding another layer to this already intricate novel. Like Anna and Dexter, he is also intent on surviving, as shown when a German U-Boat sinks the ship he is on later in the novel. All three must deal with pasts haunted by family expectations and the successes and failures that go along with them. Their journeys are filled with insecurities as each is forced to change rapidly due to forces outside of their control. Egan shows through them that nothing, not even the past, can stay the same forever.