



The Invisible Circus

Jennifer Egan

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In Jennifer Egan's highly acclaimed first novel, set in 1978, the political drama and familial tensions of the 1960s form a backdrop for the world of Phoebe O'Connor, age eighteen. Phoebe is obsessed with the memory and death of her sister Faith, a beautiful idealistic hippie who died in Italy in 1970. In order to find out the truth about Faith's life and death, Phoebe retraces her steps from San Francisco across Europe, a quest which yields both complex and disturbing revelations about family, love, and Faith's lost generation. This spellbinding novel introduced Egan's remarkable ability to tie suspense with deeply insightful characters and the nuances of emotion.

The Invisible Circus Details

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Author : Jennifer Egan

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Marie says

Phoebe lives most of her life reeling from the grief of having lost her father and then her older sister, Faith, before she reached her adolescence.

Her sister was a flower child and fell to her death from a cliff in an Italian seaside town. At the age of 18, Phoebe decides to pursue her sister's ghost through Europe to see if she can decipher what really happened to her.

She explores the shadows of the 60s and the flower children and skirts the memories of her childhood. This book is an excellent exploration of the pathways of grief, and the emptiness experienced by a child who clearly understood that she was never her parent's "favorite."

Katerina says

Okay, two things are clear:

1. Jennifer Egan must not be allowed to dwell onto historical fiction.
2. She is a great emotional story-teller, please go on.

Consequently,

3. Manhattan Beach needs rewriting.
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Ken says

And unbelievable first novel, yet I was only familiar with Egan's later works, and was anticipating the audacious intellectual flights of fancy of, LOOK AT ME, or the intricately and bizarrely plotted story-line of, A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD. However, THE INVISIBLE CIRCUS is a very solid and readable examination of a family, and how the mood and tone of the radical sixties changed them forever. Although, the focus is on this particular family dynamic, the book also operates as a metaphor to demonstrate how some 'carefree hippies' of the 60's mutated into 'neo-marxist terrorists' of the early 70's, and, I think that Egan aptly shows how Faith O'Connor embraced, and became ensnared in this strange and intoxicating riptide of history, and how her adoring younger sister, Phoebe, finally comes to accept the fallout of her actions.

Kate says

Egan's freshman novel, about a girl who, along with her widowed mother, is frozen in time since the suicide of her hippie sister the decade before. Set in 1970s San Francisco and Europe, where the protagonist traces her sister's footsteps. Started off a bit rough but it's smooth now, and quite vivid. One scene on the beach with the sisters and the dying father made me put the book down for a few days -- the narrator's childhood memory was so real and painful. By the end, Phoebe has shed a great deal of her naivete and bravely come to face painful truths about her family and her idealization of them and of the flower-child generation she just

missed growing up in.

One thing Egan does beautifully that I really appreciate is to not tie anything up neatly. Like a more internalized Iris Murdoch, Egan doesn't let a character abruptly graduate to peace, acceptance, comfort -- she'll describe, e.g., a Zen moment that Phoebe experiences, and then slap her right back down into misery, the way real life works. Change comes with time and patience and with repeated slips backward. I was left thinking about this book for many days.

Kit Fox says

Like, oh my god. This soooo reminds me of the time I deferred my enrollment at U.C. Berkeley to go traipsing around Europe in an attempt to retrace the footsteps of my crazybeautiful older sister who's untimely suicide from an Italian sightseeing spot served as the catalyst for my burgeoning maturity and stuff. And I slept with people. (Sorry.) Just a pretty obvious "good but not great" first novel from a young author; super heavy on extraneous descriptions of buildings/cafes/European streets that serve very little purpose. That being said, while I didn't feel this showed hints of what an awesome novelist Jennifer Egan would eventually become, I'm glad she got this one out of the way and moved on to bigger and loftier things.

Ayelet Waldman says

I think I read this years and years ago but I remembered nothing. Why is it that I retain so little, even from books like this one, which I enjoyed? I'm so envious of people who can recall with amazing accuracy everything that they've ever read.

Jim says

If you're coming to *The Invisible Circus* after reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad* or *The Keep*, as I did, you're likely to be disappointed. It's different kind of book, more straightforward, with all the earmarks of a novel whose protagonist, Phoebe, is destined to lose her innocence.

“The dullness of Phoebe’s bedroom met her like a blow: polar bear wallpaper, rows of faded stuffed animals, a wicker chair that crackled when you sat in it.”

After graduating from high school, Phoebe decides to travel to Europe and follow in the footsteps of her elder sister, Faith, who made a similar trip 10 years earlier. The problem is, Faith committed suicide in Italy. Phoebe is more levelheaded than her sister but (doppelganger alert) becomes more like her at each stop, culminating in an epic freak-out in a medieval castle.

If this sounds somewhat similar, remember that Sasha, who appears in three of the stories in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, also had serious problems in the old country. Furthermore, it raises the question: What the hell happened to Egan in Europe? In interviews, she’s discussed how a trip abroad replete with petty theft and crippling loneliness was instrumental in her decision to become a writer.

Although the payoff is fulfilling, the prose is a bit flatfooted compared with the hyper-realistic hijinks on display in the novels that follow.

Diane says

Jennifer Egan is one of my favorite authors. Like many readers, I was wowed by "A Visit from the Goon Squad" (2010), but I was dazzled just as much by the novel that preceded it, "Look at Me" (2001), whose intricate plot is part thriller, part social satire, and part multi-layered identity drama. In addition to being stylistically unique, the narratives in both these previous books shift around in time, even looking ahead into the near future. "Look at Me" was even uncannily prescient about Facebook, which had not yet become a "thing" when the book was written, and the terrorist mentality that led to 9/11. Given all this, I really looked forward to reading the first of Egan's four novels, *The Invisible Circus* (1995), especially since it deals with many issues that interest me: coping with grief, the time period of the Sixties and Seventies, the reverberation of youthful experiences on adulthood, and a female protagonist coming of age.

Parts One and Two are interesting enough, and very vivid. However, as parts Three and Four wear on, something goes terribly awry with this novel, so much so that, as the plot twisted—confoundingly, implausibly—through one gratuitous passage after another, I wondered whether any editor had laid eyes on it prior to publication. "Okay, we get it!" I thought. "She was overshadowed by her sister! She's young and insecure! She wishes she'd been part of the Sixties!" etc. Because it was Egan, I was unprepared for the tedious belaboring of themes. Nor did I expect to have my credulity challenged. At first I bought the amazing coincidences that landed Phoebe in the Munich apartment of Faith's old boyfriend, Wolf. It is not until we learn that he has withheld the circumstances of Faith's death—and the fact that he was present at it—that Egan loses me entirely, so obvious it is that this withholding of information is purely for the convenience of the plot. Worst of all, she introduces an awkward structure to tell Wolf's and Faith's backstory, moving between (and sometimes blurring) accounts by Wolf in first person and flashbacks told in close third, both styles containing many fine details that would not be included in such an account.

Did I say the awkward structure was worst of all? Sorry, I meant the 20-page "lost week(end)" sequence in which Phoebe and Wolf become sex addicts on their way to the scene of Faith's suicide, barely leaving their hotel room for days on end. Is this supposed to be a nod to the excesses of the Sixties? An indication of how freaked out they are by the prospect of confronting their traumatic memories? I can't figure out what purpose these pages serve with respect to either the plot or the characters. And twenty pages of belabored prose that serve no purpose? Practically unforgivable.

I still admire Egan greatly, but in the end, perhaps the greatest value I derived from reading "The Invisible Circus" was insight into her development as a writer and how she cleaned up her excesses in subsequent works.

Afkham says

when I was reading I knew it'll be a definite five-star though the rating wasn't that high. I really enjoyed the reading. It was kind of fluidal, just going easily and smoothly in its bed, the picture so vivid.

In the end, slightly near the ending, it changed a bit, there was a tumult, a bit out of ordinary things happening, apparently to absorb the reader even more, but it worked vice versa and the worst part was it got predictable.

Anyhow it's a spectacular piece of writing, expertly written.

Yuckamashe says

I love books about the hippie generation. Not the political side as much as the freedom and adventure! I am obsessed with the idea of letting go and experiencing life. Which I am too rational to do myself. This book shows the paradox between the sheer beauty and danger of that crazy time period. It's about sisters and the tug of war between past and present.

James says

I think Jennifer Egan is a tremendous writer. Her first book shows this talent to great effect, the first part of the book is a brilliantly sad exploration of families and the best of intentions going awry. It's smart, clever and wonderfully well written, each line packs an incredible emotional punch. It then all takes a turn into this odd love story which left me deeply unmoved. If you liked her other books, it's interesting to see how it all started.

Christine says

The protagonist, a teenager living in San Fran in the early 70s, has lived her entire life in the shadow of her flower-child older sister, who has long been dead due to mysterious circumstances.

In what turned out to be an extremely satisfying coming-of-age novel, she goes to find out what happened, travelling to Europe in her sisters footsteps and encountering bohemian characters (and sometimes tragic burnouts, junkies and users) from her sister's life. The mystery's resolution was surprising to me, though perhaps not to someone savvier. The story was great.

I've read all of Egan's books (I think) and this debut is the best of the bunch.

Selene says

Finished this book at 1AM. Jennifer Egan is such a beautiful writer, it's almost inconceivable. It is perhaps problematic to read "The Keep" prior to her other novels, because "The Keep" is so perfect, what with the castle and the baroness and the prison writing program and the descriptions of really good food. "The Invisible Circus" had lost revolutionaries, which are like kryptonite to me--I'm powerless to resist their appeal (is kryptonite appealing to those it renders powerless?). But also, it's hard to write about the 60's and their aftermath. We know the outside shape of them so well. Sometimes I felt a little stuck with that shape--maybe I was in the same predicament as the people moving across the page. I don't know. To Jennifer Egan: please write more...

Saffron says

3.5 Stars!

I have been working my way through all of Jennifer Egan's books. Because let's face it this woman knows how to write. She depresses me with her beautiful and profound writing. And I absolutely adore her for this.

As for this one, I liked it. I stared long and hard at her beautiful, poetic words but her main character bugged me a lot. I never understood her goals. I mean, I did but I just didn't get the consequence of it. She was extremely naive and then she took a trip to Europe to find out what happened to her dead sister and then she grew up. Which is good really. Very interesting premise but no...I didn't feel it.

Well, in any case the rating is based on JE's beautiful, perfect, flawless writing :)

Elisabeth says

This is a wonderfully descriptive book, set in the late 70's. Phoebe has just finished high school and sets out on an impromptu quest to find out more about how her sister died. She heads to Europe, following the path her sister made years before.

The story is rich, both historically and in terms of her own and her sister's internal/emotional struggles. I imagine that most who read this would be able to relate on some level to the insecurities and difficulties that the characters face. And, if not, there is always the wonderful lighthearted descriptions of travels through Europe. Anyone who has slept in a shitty youth hostel in Paris will find themselves at home here.

I was glad to have been recommended this book, and even more so in that my friend warned me about the book having something of a rocky start. It is true! I am not quite sure what went wrong, but the beginning is just a bit off. I can't remember when it got better, but a key here is to push through it--a large part of the book, as well as the ending, is worth its awkward start.

Sarah says

I love Jennifer Egan. I read her books in reverse order (starting with 'The Keep', then 'Look At Me', and then 'Invisible Circus'). I love that she explores different themes in each book -- all three are very different. 'Invisible Circus' gets a firm 3 stars from me. I loved the overall feeling of living in the world during a time of great change, but not being able to identify just what it is that is happening even though you still want to be a part of it. Still, she uses a lot of exposition and towards the end-- much of the story is told to Phoebe by Wolf (something that annoyed me in the Harry Potter Books, particularly the last one with Dumbledore telling stories of the past to Harry).

Angela Elizabeth says

Pat Conroy is quoted as having said about Egan's precocious debut that 'if there were any justice in the world, no one would be allowed to write a first novel of such beauty and accomplishment.' I completely agree! I wouldn't say 'The Invisible Circus' is perfect, but it comes very damn near. It's a story about love and loss, about growing up and about all those significant things in life. It circumnavigates the globe and transcends time, taking its young heroine from San Francisco to the mountains of Italy, from the 1960s of her

childhood right through to 1978 where she finds herself suddenly a young adult with no idea where to go next.

Phoebe O'Connor is your average, aimless teenager. Just graduated high school, she's eighteen and has secured herself a spot at Berkeley. However, this is 1978 and the end of the 1960s has left a nostalgic tint on the world's glasses. Phoebe ponders desperately what became of the idealistic hippies her sister Faith hung out with and eventually left the country with before committing suicide on the cusp of a new decade, in 1970. Eventually, she escapes to Europe to find out and along the way finds herself on a journey not just to discovery of her sister's true identity but also of her own. It may sound corny, but Egan handles the subject matter deftly. Phoebe is a character you feel a great deal of sympathy for, and her sister Faith flits in and out of the narrative, an adventuresome sprite you as the reader yearn to know more about. A very satisfying read. And marvelous for a first novel!

Rosie says

This book was recommended by a friend. I see now that it is in part 'her story', i.e. dead father, suicide sister, etc. so I'm not surprised that she enjoyed it. I, however, feel that I learned absolutely nothing from this book. The main character is an immature young woman, self-indulgent, self-referential, passive-aggressive in her behavior, not particularly likeable. The dead sister's boyfriend is a typical predatory male of the 'I couldn't help myself' variety, prepared to hit the road on a whim & fuck his dead lover's little sister having left his understanding fiancée behind in their Berlin apartment. All very clichéd and dull ... painfully long scenes of the lustful couple banging away at one another in rooms, cars, in parks, behind rocks, etc. Recommend skimming or speedreading if you want to attempt this one. [How do these people win Pulitzer's?? friends on the panel????]

Jenny says

I like Jennifer Egan's writing, in its fluidity. The story itself often makes me feel like I am swimming in words. But sometimes, I feel like I am being deceived - the characters only appear to have complexity and vulnerability. It is like watching a movie that you like because it has a lovely way of unfolding, but there is nothing that will linger, afterwards. I feel often like the language is much more meaningful than the meaning it is trying to (or not trying to) convey.

Offbalance says

After a promising start, this book failed to go anywhere. I lost all patience with the annoying main character, and really had no interest in her quest to find "answers" about her sister after awhile. Her naivete grew wearying, and I longed for the ability to reach between the pages and slap her.

Egan has a gift for description, but needs work on her pacing. Perhaps that improved with her subsequent works.
