

Starr Lecture brings Pulitzer winning author to campus

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What do a Vassar freshman and a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist have in common? One might laugh at that comparison, but according to Dean of Freshmen and Associate Professor of English Susan Zlotnick, though the divide is wide, in essence the two are not all that different.

“Yes, there’s a big gap between being in a freshman writing sem-

inar and being a Pulitzer prize winning novelist, but writing is writing and they have to start imagining themselves as writers,” Zlotnick said.

“Therefore, they can be in dialogue with this Pulitzer prize winning novelist, because she may be particularly successful, but they’re all writers and that’s how we want them to begin to see themselves.”

This summer, the common reading for the class of 2017 was A

Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan. Egan, who has written other novels and short fiction including *The Keep* and *Emerald City*, won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for *Goon Squad* as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award in Fiction.

Egan will present the William Starr Lecture, which traditionally is given by the common reading’s author, on Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. in the Villard Room.

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courtesy of Pieter M van Hattem/Vistalux

Members of the Class of 2017 were asked to read *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, pictured above. The Pulitzer Prize winning author will present the William Starr Lecture on Wednesday, Sept. 18, at 5:30 pm.

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Her talk, titled “The Sausage Factory: Making Fiction out of Instincts, Hunches, and Glaring Mistakes,” will discuss the writing process, and she will also meet the next day with students in senior composition.

“[The Starr Lecture] is supposed to focus on writing, so writers don’t just come and talk about their writing; they talk about the writing process, and that’s why it’s linked to the freshmen seminar program,” explained Zlotnick.

In their statement of academic interests, every freshman was required to reflect and write on a passage or passages of their choice from the novel.

In addition, during orientation the English department held a presentation on the novel that was attended by prospective English majors.

This presentation and the reflection are some of the few ways that students engage with the novel, as professors have historically struggled to incorporate the common reading into the freshman writing seminars.

Zlotnick explained that the faculty decided on *A Visit from the Goon Squad* because of its inventive narrative structure and genre-bending nature. “It’s really interesting narratively,” she said. “It almost feels like a short story collection, but it’s together all these different chapters. So it’s a group of characters that are related—a linked series of stories,” she furthered.

Egan has stated that the book deals with time, and that by focusing on the music industry, which has struggled among the vast technological changes of the modern era, one can analyze time because of the industry’s difficulty and because of the timelessness of songs themselves.

“I think for one thing, all of us remember those teenage years and those songs that we fell in love with and the music scene that we were part of, so in a certain way music cuts through time like almost nothing else,” Egan said in an interview with the Public Broadcasting Station’s *NewsHour* (7.1.10).

“It makes us feel like we’re back in an earlier moment. And then I think on the other side, the music industry is an interesting lens through which to look at change, because it has had such a difficult time adjusting to the digital age,” she further explained. (7.1.10).

Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad* focuses on Bennie Salazar, a burnt out, older rock music executive, his personal assistant Sasha and other friends. The short stories detail struggles with addiction, aging and redemption.

Though the book is generally described as a novel, some may describe it as a series of short stories that are linked together through common characters and themes.

And Egan further distinguishes the narrative structure of the novel through non-linear composition. The stories jump across various time periods and settings—one chapter may be during the 1970s, while another is in present day or a few years in the future. Egan also includes a chapter that is in the format of a PowerPoint presentation.

Egan explained to *PBS NewsHour* how she developed the narrative structure of the novel. “Well, I had the thought of just going backwards, because initially as I was writing these chapters I was moving backwards, but then I found that the power, the whole didn’t seem to be greater than some of the parts when I followed that backwards format,” she said (*PBS NewsHour*, 7.1.10).

She continued, “I think what I was most interested in were the moments of surprise when we realized that time has passed. You know, it’s moving slowly and incrementally, but we only notice it in sudden quantum leaps where we think, ahh, this has changed.” (*PBS NewsHour*, 7.1.10).

For English majors and any students interested in writing, Egan will further illuminate her unconventional writing process—typified by “instincts, hunches, and glaring mistakes”—during the Starr Lecture.