

# Reading between Past and Future in Jennifer Egan's A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD (2010) and THE CANDY HOUSE (2022)

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*Abstract:* The question of how practices of reading literature are affected by digitalisation is a recurring theme in the works of the American author Jennifer Egan. This article examines how Egan's novels A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD (2010) and THE CANDY HOUSE (2022) construe reading at the intersection of retrospection and future (digital) developments. While retrospective concepts such as memory and nostalgia strongly resonate in the novels, alluding to reading practices associated with the past, digital media also play a major role on thematic and formal levels, speculating about future reading practices. The article analyses the spectrum of reading practices Egan's works present by drawing simultaneously on the past and the future, including practices such as multimodal reading, re-reading, non-linear reading, or serial reading.

*Keywords:* contemporary literature, reading practices, retrospection, mediality, Egan

## *Introduction*

“[T]he problem was *digitization*, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead” (Egan 2010: 26). Many contemporary commentators would urgently add another aspect to this list of media (practices) threatened, if not extinguished, by digitalisation as it is brought forward by the character Bennie Salazar in Jennifer Egan's 2010 novel A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD. Western critics such as Sven Birkerts and Nicholas Carr advance a discourse on the loss of reading resulting from digitalisation. The internet, it is claimed, spawns an overabundance of addictive and attention-grabbing content, which diminishes users' abilities to focus on a single text and hence makes reading impossible (see Birkerts 2006: xiv; Carr 2010: 5-7). Because reading is strongly associated with humanist values, its alleged

loss is anticipated with panic and the vision that humanity is entering a “widening path toward mental impairment on the one hand and socio-cultural decline on the other” (Gitelman 2020: 378). The understanding of reading implied by the discourse, which I refer to as *established reading*, is decidedly narrow and excludes, among other practices, engagements with digital texts. Established reading equals the image of being lost in a good book (see *ibid.* 378). As an act of deciphering textual inscriptions in a print book, it is characterised as a solitary and focused, linear, slow, immersive and uninterrupted (see Pressman 2020: 28; Brillenburg Wurth 2017: 219; Mikics 2013: 41; Birkerts 2006: 121).

The discursive position that reading declines in the current digital age suggests that more ideal conditions for reading were available in the past. The relegation of reading to previous times matches a second prominent Western discourse stating that there is a return of the past in the present: “[I]n our own time, the past has returned in many ways [...] In this context we may observe a broad spectrum of possibilities, ranging from a nostalgic repetition of the past up to unwanted intrusions of a traumatic past” (Assmann 2020: 228–229). Similar to the discourse on the loss of reading, digitalisation comes into play again as it is argued that the past provides a refuge from the fast-paced digital world (see Huyssen 1995: 7).

The subject matters of the two discourses are addressed by a vast amount of recent research. Following the observation that reading cannot be narrowed down to a unified definition (see Rubery/Price 2020: 1) with understandings ranging from decoding visual written texts (see Kestemont/Herman 2019: 1) to the broader “recognition and interpretation of socially-constructed semiotic signs” (Burke 2011: 26), scholars have begun to conceptualise reading as a range of practices. These reading practices can differ according to the parameters of who reads, in which ways they read, with which aim or intention they read, and which media they use to read. Investigating the contemporary role of the past, scholars have developed different concepts of engaging with it, which encapsulates accessing, negotiating and devising it. These concepts, for which I use the label *concepts of retrospection* as an umbrella term, include memory, nostalgia, retro, trauma, hauntology and the archive.<sup>1</sup>

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1 I use the term *retrospection*, commonly defined as a “contemplation of the past” (OED Online 2010) as a superordinate category because the other terms I list exist side by side in research. While all of these terms refer to engagements with the past, the exact natures of these engagements vary among the different concepts.

Apart from these discursive and academic explorations, contemporary literature is also concerned with the impact of retrospection and digitalisation on current understandings of reading (practices). The topics recur in writings of US-American author Jennifer Egan whose “work traces shifting perceptions of time, memory and technological change in the contemporary era” (Butchard 2019: 360), as the example quote from Egan’s *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* my essay opens with shows as well. Because of its network aesthetics, its narrative experimentations, and its retrospective engagement with changing media environments, this Pulitzer Prize winning novel can be linked to questions of how reading develops in a digital age. However, reading and different reading practices have not been closely scrutinized in previous research on *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* so far. My essay does not only aim to address this aspect in more detail, but also to add Egan’s newer novel *THE CANDY HOUSE* to the discussion. The novel has not yet been studied in depth because of its recent release.

Published in 2022, *THE CANDY HOUSE* revisits most of the themes, characters and narrative experiments of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*. In both novels, the different chapters present the stories of different characters that are positioned in different places and times. Narrative perspective, register and textual genre vary across the chapters in both cases. Instead of a superordinate plot structure which spans the entire novel, the different chapters tell stories of their own. Despite this variation, the characters are connected to each other. Egan’s two novels tell stories of human interrelations, covering family relationships, professional relationships, and friendships. In *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* a large share of the characters are former employees of the music industry, frequently commenting on the passing of time and media changes evident in the context of music. In *THE CANDY HOUSE* these themes play a role as characters use newly invented digital technologies for engaging with their memories. In my analysis, I turn to the questions of which features *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* associate with reading and which reading practices varying features create. My analysis aims to uncover how Egan’s two sibling novels, as she calls them (see Greif 2022), conceptualise reading (practices) in digital contexts by simultaneously exhibiting a retrospective attitude and speculating about the future.

Whereas various forms of retrospection such as nostalgia are often perceived and criticised as regressive and reactionary, romanticising the past (see Tannock 1995: 455; Boym 2001: 41), concepts such as reflective nostalgia (see Boym 2001: 49), retrofuturism (see Guffey 2006: 152) or the

postdigital (see Cramer 2014: 17) suggest that retrospection can potentially be a constructive phenomenon in which humans access the past to imagine the future, uniting “the space of experience with the horizon of expectation” (Assmann 2020: 203). This assumption guides my analysis of Egan’s *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* in which, I claim, retrospection inspires the emergence of reading practices in a digital age that go beyond a return to discursively established reading. This includes practices such as multimodal reading, re-reading, non-linear reading, or serial reading.

### *Retrospection: The Past Reappears*

References to the past and cases of retrospection are abundant in both of Egan’s novels. *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* contains an epigraph taken from *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME* by Marcel Proust, who is popularly viewed as a literary patron saint of nostalgia, the concept of retrospection which can be defined as “a bittersweet longing for former times” (Niemeyer 2014: 1). Proust’s version of nostalgia that arises while his protagonist eats a madeleine is an example quoted on a regular basis: “About a century ago, Marcel Proust thought it necessary to write five pages on the experience of biting into a piece of cake, and this moment has come to symbolise a certain type of remembrance that results unexpectedly from a sensory trigger” (Scott 2015: 100). While the topic of Proust’s madeleine appears in the form of a character called Madeleine in *THE CANDY HOUSE* (see Egan 2022: 97), *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* replicates the experience of nostalgia triggered by a sensory input with bath salts:

He went back to the tub and fiddled with the knobs and shook in some of the salts, and the room instantly filled with a steamy plantlike odor that was deeply familiar to Sasha: the smell of Lizzie’s bathroom, from the days when Sasha used to shower there after she and Lizzie went running together in Central Park (Egan 2010: 19).

Similar to the taste of the madeleine, the smell of bath salts takes the character Sasha back to a benign past. Egan’s evocations of Proust are not the only reason why reviewers (see Churchwell 2011) and scholars (see Schober 2016: 361) frequently label *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* a nostalgic novel. The term *nostalgia* itself appears numerous times, for instance when the character Stephanie enters a tennis court and experiences nostalgia for

her childhood: “Stephanie recognized a distant *thop, thop* of tennis balls. The sound induced a swoon of nostalgia. [...] Stephanie had achieved a certain greatness at around age thirteen. She hadn’t played since” (Egan 2010: 128-129).

Apart from nostalgia, memory plays a major role in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* – the concept of retrospection in which subjects recall experiences from the past stored in the form of memories (see Boyer 2009: 3, 14). Some of the chapters in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* immediately address the notion of memory in their opening sentences, for example Chapter 2, “The shame memories began early that day for Bennie” (Egan 2010: 22), or Chapter 4, “Remember, Charlie? In Hawaii?” (ibid. 68). Memory can, but does not have to be, the basis of nostalgia, which also becomes clear in Egan’s work. When the character Benny tries to exorcise some of his memories at one point in the novel (ibid. 35), his actions form a stark contrast to a nostalgic embrace of the past. The verb *exorcise* instead rather evokes the retrospective concept of hauntology, of being haunted by the past (see Eaglestone 2019: 315).

After some of the characters in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* spend their holidays on a safari during which a lion almost kills one of the travellers (see Egan 2010: 80-81), the narrator concludes: “The members of Ramsey’s safari have gained a story they’ll tell for the rest of their lives. It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to ...?*” (ibid. 81). The interactions between retrospection and digital media introduced in this passage become more explicit in *THE CANDY HOUSE*. A central element much of the second novel’s action revolves around memory externalisation. Newly invented in the novel and commercialised by the company Mandala founded by the character Bix, memory externalisation enables users to digitise their memories and upload them to a collective consciousness where human memories become shareable and accessible. Egan’s speculative idea of memory externalisation forges links with various concepts of retrospection in addition to its obvious significance in terms of memory. It is not only considered a means for trauma therapy by some characters (see Egan 2022: 59, 132), but also returns to notions of nostalgia explicated in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*. The motivation for the character Roxy to externalise her memories, for instance, is that “[s]he wants only to relive her best days – times she knows won’t be matched by anything to come” (ibid. 145).

The return of the past thus configures a conspicuous theme in both of Egan's works. As Dorothy Butchard (2019) states while providing an overview of Egan's writing, the past is often coupled with the future. Egan's characters cherish the "glittering quality of moments marked out for future recollection. [...] [N]arratives zoom in on characters in moments when they pause to imagine the significance of particular events and sensations for their own future recollection" (361). An example of this is the following flash-forward inserted in the action when the character Ted finds his runaway niece Sasha in Naples:

On another day more than twenty years after this one, after Sasha had gone to college and settled in New York; after she'd reconnected on Facebook with her college boyfriend and married late [...] and had two children [...]; when she was like anyone, with a life that worried and electrified and overwhelmed her, Ted, long divorced – a grandfather – would visit Sasha at home in the Californian desert. He would step through a living room strewn with the flotsam of her young kids and watch the western sun blaze through a sliding glass door. And for an instant he would remember Naples: sitting with Sasha in her tiny room; the jolt of surprise and delight he'd felt when the sun finally dropped into the center of her window and was captured inside her circle of wire (Egan 2010: 267).

Retrospection can thus be future-oriented in Egan's novels; past and future are not isolated from each other.

### *Regarding Reading: Levels of Analysis in Contemporary Literature*

While retrospection directly appears as a thematic element in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE*, the two novels' treatments of reading are more indirect. Reading is not featured as a prominent theme on a content level, even though some comments on reading can be found in the two works. The intertextuality of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and Proust's writing does not only highlight the notion of retrospection, but also links Egan's novel to a reading practice that is in line with a certain literary tradition based on the Western canon. *THE CANDY HOUSE* contains a similar example in which the character Bix carries a copy of Joyce's *ULYSSES* with him to indicate that he is a committed, intellectual reader (see Egan 2022: 17, 313). Another direct reflection on reading occurs when *THE*

CANDY HOUSE assumes the narrative perspective of the dyslectic character Roxy:

Had she learned to read for real, rather than the pecking way that's still the best she can do – had she happened to read Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*, for example, which Molly Cooke read aloud at Bright Day in three instalments – she would have discovered that the *exact* emotions she experienced after a trip to London with her father, at sixteen, a trip that broke her, had been felt by others. She was not unique, but neither was she alone. Reading might have saved her (ibid. 145).

Including another literary reference, this passage also concurs with the classic contextualisation of reading and humanist values, hypothesising that reading could have taught Roxy to empathise with others.

The content level is not the only level on which literary works can engage with reading (and retrospection), and it is specifically on these further levels that Egan's two novels turn to (retrospective) reading, adding to the brief discussions of reading on the content level I have pointed out so far. The form that a work's text takes, its layout and its arrangement on the page, can influence reading practices, for instance by highlighting certain parts, setting them apart from each other or determining a certain sequence in which they should be read.

The level of mediality constitutes a further important lens through which reading can be studied.<sup>2</sup> A major area of reading studies regards the impact different media have on reading practices. A prominent line of argument – which the discourse on the loss of reading also absorbs and fixates on – contends that print books and digital screens induce different reading practices or evoke different expectations and attitudes in readers because of different media-specific features, meaning that the interplay between materiality and its potential signifying strategies can differ between media (see Hayles 2004: 72): “[B]ecause digital reading is deeply influenced by web practices, there is also a tendency to skim and skip, without the compulsion to finish a text that the codex's linear progression often induces” (Hayles 2020: 156). In the context of reading and mediality, scholars dedicate particular attention to the medium of the print book, which, according to

2 The terms *medium* and *mediality* are used in an ambiguous way in research, as Gabriele Rippl (2012) illustrates in her discussion of different approaches to them. My understanding of the terms in this article recognises media as channels transmitting messages while also respecting technological aspects, notions of media as social practices, or as objects with certain material qualities (316–317).

Jessica Pressman's (2020) concept of *bookishness* has regained popularity in the digital age (see 2). They touch upon the influence of book design, "the format, materiality, and aesthetics of the codex" (ibid. 119), on "the media-specific protocols that arrange information on the page and shape readerly practices" (ibid. 133).

As a strong pillar in research on reading, the print book is not only important as a medium of reading. It also spotlights a further level on which reading can be studied, the product level. Readers can access texts by buying print books, so that reading practices are entangled with economic processes, which in turn can rely on retrospection. The way a book is conceptualised and promoted as a product can guide readers' attitudes, expectations and approaches to the text in the form of different reading practices.

The different levels on which literary texts can attend to reading – the level of content and form, the level of mediality, and the level of the product – include textual representations as well as evocations of reading practices. These practices become subjects to change under the influence of retrospection and digitalisation extending into the future.

### *Medialities of Retrospection and Reading*

Parallel to the significance of mediality for reading and conceptualising different reading practices, retrospection is also intertwined with mediality. In the case of retrospection, media can provide possibilities to engage with the past, and it does not even have to come to memory externalisation and memories' digital containment as in THE CANDY HOUSE for that. Observing a growing fascination with and re-popularisation of "artefacts such as the Polaroid camera, Super 8 film, vinyl records, the Walkman, VHS tapes, floppy discs, and arcade video games" (Van der Heijden 2015: 103), scholars refer to the concept of media nostalgia to account for this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> The underlying argument is that

[m]edia produce contents and narratives not only in the nostalgic style but also as triggers of nostalgia. Media, and new technologies in particular, can function as platforms, projection places and tools to express nostalgia. Furthermore, media are very often nostalgic for themselves,

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<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, some also use the term *analogue nostalgia* (see Marks 2002: 152), stressing that it predominantly centres analogue media (see Schrey 2017: 28).

their own past, their structures and contents. Perpetual media changes render media nostalgic for their non-existent end. [...] In this sense, media practice becomes an essential element of nostalgia, increasing with the recent development of new communication technologies (Niemeyer 2014: 7).

The attraction of contemporary audiences to media from the past does not always have to stem from nostalgic longing for these media. A second explanation for the return of past media resides in the concept of retro. Rather divorced from personal experiences of the past, retro objects, among them media, serve as “de-politicized markers of cultural style and taste” (Hartmann and Brunk 2019: 681) in a playful way (see Reynolds 2011: xxx-xxxi): “Consumers valorize past-themed brands purely as ironic, hipsterian, and quirky fashion items that enliven the present” (Hartmann and Brunk 2019: 679).<sup>4</sup>

In Egan's novels, especially in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*, a considerable portion of retrospection is related to music. Many of the characters in the first novel are (former) employees of the music industry which goes through changes in the course of the novel and causes characters to reconsider its past. The music manager Bennie remembers one of his bands selling “twelve thousand CDs off the stage” (Egan 2010: 22) before illegal downloads (see *ibid.* 26) and platforms such as Napster (see Egan 2022: 123). Benny listens to acts such as Cindy Lauper (see Egan 2010: 22), Blondie, Iggy Pop (see *ibid.* 63), “the Sleepers and the Dead Kennedys, San Francisco bands he'd grown up with” (*ibid.* 26) while judging music released at later points in time bloodless (see *ibid.* 26). A second character who ponders music and the past is the child character Lincoln. He likes to occupy himself with collecting and documenting songs that include pauses. A diagram of the songs Lincoln has gathered presents a selection in which only two out of 13 songs were released after the year 2000 while the majority of them is from the 60s and 70s (see *ibid.* 339) – despite the fact that the particular chapter is set in the 2020s (see *ibid.* 269). Moreover, the songs' pauses are linked to their haunting power in the diagram (see *ibid.* 339). Music also affects Egan's two novels on a more formal level. *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* is subdivided into two parts labelled *A* and *B* like the two sides of a vinyl record and a cassette tape, hence specifically

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4 The renaissance of cassette tapes in an age group too young to have used cassettes when they were first popularised (see Browne 2022) can be considered a recent retro trend, for example.

analogue media from the past used for transmitting music. The four parts THE CANDY HOUSE consists of, *Build*, *Break*, *Drop*, and *Build*, “riff off of the supposedly popular genre of electronic dance music” (Dey 2023) and the typical song structure in this genre.

The retrospective approach to listening, music and analogue audio media holds true for reading and its media in a similar way. In THE CANDY HOUSE books are placed next to faded photographs as remainders of the past (see Egan 2022: 12). The letters *A* and *B* of the novel’s two main parts reappear in A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD when the character Scotty demands “to know what happened between *A* and *B*” (Egan 2010: 115) in which *A* represents him and Bennie playing in the same band as teenagers and *B* their adult lives which have diverged from each other considerably. *A* and *B* thus represent a number of things in A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD – the two sides of a music album, the two parts of a book, two events in its action. As a result, *A* and *B* are one of the instances in which Egan’s works join reading with other media practices, in this case listening to music.

Retrospection ties up listening to music and reading in the two novels. There is a strong resemblance between the retrospective framing of listening to music in Egan’s texts and the discourse on the loss of reading, claiming that reading used to be more abundant and better in the past. This intermedial conjunction questions the singular status of reading which elevates it over other media practices – “to check Facebook is to succumb to laziness, to read a novel cover to cover is to find a stable self” (Price 2012: 68). It offers “an invitation to rethink the role of literature in creating the contemporary cultural Imaginary” (Hayles 2005: 5). It also diverges from the monomediality the discursive construction of established reading posits as a vital feature, evident, for example, in the preference of print books over e-readers:

We want the e-reader to supply the intimacy of a book: we want to browse, flip pages, write a note in the margin. To put it another way: e-readers are wonderfully convenient, but is there anything they can do that print books cannot? E-readers can link to music, art, and video in ways that books can’t. But books ask for our full attention, so that such electronic extras usually just get in the way (Mikics 2013: 22).

In contrast to that, different media practices such as listening to music and reading become comparable in Egan’s works, to a considerable extent through retrospection. A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD and THE CANDY HOUSE create overlaps between these practices. Structured like records or

songs, the works invite their audience to read the texts like music and to integrate aspects of listening into their processes of reading. Readers can listen to the songs listed by Lincoln and let it affect their reading experiences.

The reading practices emerging from Egan's retrospective intermediality resemble what reading scholars have recently begun to categorise as multimodal reading, meaning that "activities such as listening, seeing, and touching take part in the meaning creation of culturally situated processes of reading" (see Stougaard Pedersen et al. 288–289). Interestingly, the term was specifically coined in the context of "the digital reading condition" (see Engberg/Have/Stougaard Pedersen 2023) and the choices between "more semiotic resources (e.g., language, voices, gestures, images) and modalities (e.g., visual, aural, haptic, tactile)" (*ibid.* 2) it brings to readers:

We begin reading an article in a print magazine on the bus; when we get to work, we finish reading it on the magazine's website. In the living room, we read novels on our tablets; in bed, we thumb the pages of a paperback. Reading a photocopied scholarly article, we discover another article we would like to consult; opening our laptops, we head for the library website and download the PDF (Hammond 2015: 4).

Retrospection in Egan's work does hence not lead to the type of established reading the discourse on the loss of reading situates in the past, but to reading practices associated with the digital age, building a bridge into the future.

With memory externalisation as a speculative digital medium for engaging with memories of the past, THE CANDY HOUSE even more clearly moves on to digital media practices converging with reading. The character Gregory who is an author and initially critical of memory externalisation commercialised by his father Bix combines attending to externalised memories and reading stories towards the end of the novel:

He knew what the vision meant: human lives past and present, around him, inside him. [...] *Finish your book!* Here was his father's parting gift: a galaxy of human lives hurtling toward his curiosity. From a distance they faded into uniformity, but they were moving, each propelled by a singular force that was inexhaustible. [...] He was feeling the collective without any machinery at all. And its stories, infinite and particular, would be his to tell (Egan 2022: 323).

Past and present lives can be turned into future stories and be read through different media (practices).

### *Crisscrossing Times and Texts*

An app containing a digital edition of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* released in 2012 mixes up the novel's different chapters and displays them to readers in new orders (see Butchard 2019: 370). While this feature offered by the digital app version may serve as yet another example of (inter-)mediality, adapting the novel to a digital medium and invoking the shuffle function of digital music playlists, it also highlights the objective of temporal order in Egan's fiction which makes significant statements about retrospection, reading and their relations. With and without rearranging the order of chapters, the action in Egan's novels does not consist of a chronological sequence of events forming a linear plot as the chapters alternate between various temporal (and spatial) settings. In part *A* of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* as a subsection representing this phenomenon in both of Egan's works as a whole, the first four chapters (of the fixed print novel – of course the order is even more arbitrary in the app) follow a reversed temporal order, going back in time. The remaining two chapters are set at later points than the first chapter, even though the exact order is difficult to determine because some events might happen simultaneously.

This fragmented timeline reflects how retrospection can be overwhelming and confusing for characters. In retrospective concepts such as trauma, which also shapes Egan's works on the content level of some scenes, engagements with the past are far from ordered and linear; instead, they are rather uncontrollable and fragmented. The death of the character Rob, a close friend of Sasha, is initially mentioned in the first chapter of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* (see Egan 2010: 16), but only narrated in detail in the novel's tenth chapter. The event is picked up again in the twelfth chapter of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* (see *ibid.* 306) as well as in the first and third chapter of *THE CANDY HOUSE* (see Egan 2022: 6, 58). The non-linear sequence of chapters affects reading in a similar way as retrospection, concurring with a comparison between reading and approaching (its) history the author Alberto Manguel (1996) recommends in his *HISTORY OF READING*: "Like the act of reading itself, a history of reading jumps forward to our time [...] and then goes back to an early page in a distant foreign century. It skips chapters, browses, selects, rereads, refuses to follow conventional order" (23). Through their chapter structures, *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* lie at odds with forward-moving plots (see Lupton 2018: 95) which progress in a coherent and linear way

and typically prescribe the sort of linear reading favoured in the context of discursively established reading. Even though certain events and characters connect the chapters in Egan's works to each other, the chapters can also be read independent of each other and – as the app shows – in a variety of orders.<sup>5</sup> In the two novels, neither the retrospective journey back to the past nor the reading practices accompanying this process occur in and return to a linear way.

In addition to the non-linear narrative structure, Egan's two novels uphold the impression of textual fragmentation by playing with different narrative perspectives, text types and language registers in an experimental way. Each chapter assumes the perspective of a different character, but narrative focalisation is not represented in the same way in each of them, and there are cases of first-person narration as well as figural third-person narration. Apart from novelistic prose chapters, the two novels contain a PowerPoint presentation (see Egan 2010: 268–343), a tabloid article on a celebrity (see *ibid.* 190–212) “peppered with subversive footnotes” (Jordan 2011), a report on a spy mission written “aphoristically in the second person” (Egan 2022: 251) for which the respective chapter's pages are subdivided into two columns of text (see *ibid.* 197–229), an exchange of e-mails (see *ibid.* 251–302), an anthropological study (see *ibid.* 25–47) and a chapter that begins like a fairytale: “Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a forest” (*ibid.* 129). This great degree of formal variation between the different chapters of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE*, once more, disrupts linear and immersed reading in the sense of established reading. Instead, it requires “the reader to switch between different forms of ‘reading,’ from textual-linear to non-linear to the visual reading of diagrams and flow charts. Evoking metatextual awareness, the novel thus creates a non-chronological network of different modes of information” (Schober 2016: 373). Every new perspective, text type and register can evoke its own expectations and textual approaches in readers, resulting in varying reading practices.

While paving the way for these different practices, *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* are nevertheless able to be critical of strict separations of them, for example between print reading and digital

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<sup>5</sup> Because of this, some authors have brought up the genre of short stories in their descriptions of the works: “It is neither a novel nor a collection of short stories, but something in between: a series of chapters featuring interlocking characters at different points in their lives, whose individual voices combine” (Churchwell 2011).

reading, by subverting some of the readerly expectations of individual chapters. The tabloid article in Chapter 9 of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* is a text to be potentially skimmed as readers of magazines and newspapers may skip articles they are not interested in after checking out the headline. The chapter combines the tabloid article with footnotes, usually associated with seriousness and close scrutiny. It therefore evokes contradictory reading practices. The PowerPoint presentation in Chapter 12 actually maintains the linearity typically viewed as a feature of literary written texts, as the literary scholar Moritz Baßler (2022) illustrates by opposing the narrative order of PowerPoint to the alternative programme Prezi in which users can zoom in on details of a whole (see 268). A final example in this context is the last chapter of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*, *Pure Language*, which presents a future setting where exchanging abbreviated text messages has become the communicative standard. Reading and understanding these messages is not as easy as it seems because of missing letters, for instance in the following conversation about a construction site:

“Up goes the building!” he would say each day [...]

*up gOs th bldg*, the T’d Lulu now [...]

...*bldg?* came Lulu’s response.

*nxt 2 myn. no mOr Ar/lyt*

*cn u stp it?*

*tryd*

*cn u move?*

*stuk*

*nyc*, Lulu wrote, which confused Alex at first; the sarcasm seemed unlike her. The he realized that she wasn’t saying “nice.” She was saying “New York City.” (Egan 2010: 364)

Reading this example requires concentration instead of the superficial type of skimming often equated with reading digital texts. What could be read as a dystopian perspective on a decline of language and on reading longer texts in *Pure Language* might also permit an optimistic outlook, according to some interpretations of the chapter: “The novel thus rather optimistically stresses the progressive potential of a new media culture, suggesting that we are only just learning a new language that corresponds with the transformation of our media environment” (Schober 2016: 374).

Furthermore, *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* feature meta-comments on what can be included in a category of readable narratives, extending the spectrum of possible reading practices further. In

A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD, Sasha likens the course her life begins to take during therapy to a story with a happy ending (see Egan 2010: 7, 19); in THE CANDY HOUSE the process of following a basketball game is discussed as a reading practice (see Egan 2022: 14). Literary narrative forms are linked with mathematical abstraction when Lincoln tries to determine “*x: the unknown value required to secure M’s [his crush’s] love*” (ibid. 74) in the chapter *Rhyme Scheme* or when the character Chris works on

the task of scouring movies and TV shows for every possible stock element (“stockblocks”), and then cataloguing and converting them into one algebraic system, he’d [first] thought [...] impossible. He’d been an English major at Stanford; he loved to read and still devoted his scant free time to the practice. But it turned out that representing stock narratives algebraically was easier than he’d expected (ibid. 160)

in the chapter *i, the Protagonist*. The piece of advice that “[t]he secret to a happy ending [...] is knowing when to walk away” (ibid. 249) opens up further possible insights into where a text might start and end, where readers might enter or leave it. In the light of this statement, the final words of THE CANDY HOUSE – “Anything you want” (ibid. 334) – almost sound like an offer to the readers to start and stop reading at will, to omit or to let the narrative continue in their imagination.

### *Rereading and Recontinuing*

The fragmented and non-linear structures of Egan’s novels, it can be argued, encourage re-reading. Readers might return to earlier chapters to remind themselves of events and characters alluded to earlier in the text or to understand their relations more thoroughly: “Desperate to piece together their ‘complete hermeneutic system’, we are prompted to re-read these books” (McNally 2013: 71). One way to conceive re-reading is to align it with a general sense of retrospection, as Christina Lupton (2020) points out in REPEAT, her essay on variations of re-reading:

Like the memories Proust conjures to life, mine come rushing back through that keyhole of contact with the first volume of the paperback edition on our shelves. The pink and orange cover transports me back to the heady days of meeting my first great love, when we read Proust aloud to each other in the evenings. All six volumes. Twenty years ago. French names, stumbled over forgivingly. I even find a slip of paper, the

user's manual for a digital alarm clock, which we'd used as a bookmark. Rereading takes me right there (153).

Like many other texts, among them *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*, Lupton's essay references Proust to depict a nostalgic return to the past, made possible by the act of re-reading and repeatedly enjoying beloved texts. An equivalent to the return to these texts through re-reading appears in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* when Benny listens to the music of his youth again: "But the deep thrill of these old songs lay, for Bennie, in the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness they induced" (Egan 2010: 26).

However, as Lupton makes clear in the course of *REPEAT*, re-reading does not always have to be motivated by this type of retrospection and can – much like reading in general – be broken down into numerous further practices. Re-reading a text, readers may develop a new perspective on it or notice new details changing their first reading (see Lupton 2020: 154). While this practice of re-reading seems to be more thorough than the first encounter with the text, the opposite can also be the case when readers only focus on the sections of the text they remember finding interesting: "What of the reader who goes back to the erotic scenes of a novel or uses the index to return/revisit as quickly as possible the sentimental ones she remembers best?" (ibid. 158). While this practice only neglects parts of the texts, other cases of re-reading are completely based on forgetting:

Re-reading so you don't have to remember: Rereadings of the Bible and favorite songs, recipes, forms we've filled in before, and brand names on the toothpaste tube work like this. [...] Repeat readings can be like the instructions for emergency landings given out on airplanes – we know what they say but have stopped hearing them (ibid. 155).

By highlighting re-reading as a possible approach to *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE*, the two novels draw attention to a range of practices which carry a retrospective component, but are not congruent with a return to a past of discursively established reading. This is due to strong variation, concerning, for example linearity, immersion and disruption within re-reading.

A further important way in which Egan's two novels initiate re-reading and open themselves up to reading practices diverging from established reading is seriality. In their entirety, the two novels provide a first instance of seriality through their relationship. *THE CANDY HOUSE* has been labelled a companion novel, a fraternal twin (see Silcox 2022) or a sibling novel (see

Greif 2022); put more simply, it could also be called a sequel following up on *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*. All main characters of *THE CANDY HOUSE* also appear in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and many of them, such as Bix, Lincoln and Lulu, are shown at later points in their lives in *THE CANDY HOUSE* than in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*. The time period of twelve years that lies between the publications of the two novels may prompt early readers of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* to re-read the novel, remember its details and incorporate them into their reading of *THE CANDY HOUSE*.

Additionally, the serial relationship between the two novels invokes the creed of seriality in popular culture that successful texts are serialised immediately for profit (see Baßler 2022: 121). After all, Egan won the Pulitzer Prize for *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and picks up on this successful work again in *THE CANDY HOUSE*. Created based on what has proven to be popular and successful in the past, serial texts are considered (and frequently criticised) as highly retrospective. By extension, I therefore view revivals, reissues and remakes (see Reynolds 2011: xi) as serial texts in this article, drawing on and upholding past texts. This notion of seriality which emerges from the existence of Egan's two novels can also be found on their content level when musicians make comebacks (see Egan 2010: 144; Egan 2022: 282): "The only route to relevance at our age is tongue-in-cheek nostalgia, but that is not – let me be very clear – our ultimate ambition. Tongue-in-cheek nostalgia is merely the portal, the candy house, if you will, through which we hope to lure in a new generation and bewitch them" (Egan 2022: 298-299). The seriality of Egan's novels points out possible parallels between reading and engaging with popular culture, leading to an opportunity to critically discuss how "serial media have for long been associated foremost with a market logic and rhythms of an industrialized market logic that was thought to go against their 'literariness [...]' (Van de Ven 2019: 137). The retrospective component of seriality in this case hence clashes with the elevation of established reading over other practices of engaging with (popular) culture.

### *Conclusion: Reassessing Reading between Past and Future*

The collections of different chapters, of different texts which vary in form to a considerable degree, that make up *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* can be interpreted in two ways mirroring the oscil-

lation between past and future as an overarching phenomenon in the two works. On the one hand, the collection of chapters resembles an archive; on the other, an accumulation of digital texts on the internet.

Towards its end, *THE CANDY HOUSE* reflects on the limits of digital memory externalisation and juxtaposes it with fiction: “Even so, there are gaps: holes left by eluding separatists bent upon hoarding their memories and keeping their secrets. Only Gregory Bouton’s machine – this one, fiction – lets us roam with absolute freedom through the human collective” (Egan 2022: 333). The writings of the author character Gregory, it is stated, provide a better grasp of human stories. *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* are examples of this – the phrase *this one, fiction* even establishes the possible interpretation that *THE CANDY HOUSE* is his novel and that he is its implied author on a textual level. As a consequence, Egan’s novels are set up as archives of human stories. As a concept of retrospection, the archive can be defined as a “repository or ordered system of documents and records” in which “historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered” (Merewether 2006: 10). Through the archival features included and discussed in Egan’s works they can become portals to the past and align reading with retrospection.

An alternative perspective on this formal and structural aspect that makes it possible to read Egan’s two novels as archives is to view *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* through a digital lens. To scholars who have brought forward this perspective, Egan’s writing

alludes to the multimedia collage of the Internet with different file formats [...] Evoking metatextual awareness, the novel thus creates a non-chronological network of different modes of information. These links resemble the hypertextual structure of the Internet in that characters function as links which, once “activated,” open up further narrative windows in which they then become focalizers (Schober 2016: 373).

According to this line of argument, Egan’s novels engage with digital texts which already exist and may develop further in the future, leading to new future reading practices. These practices nevertheless remain in dialogue with the past because of the link between reading past and future texts as reading materials and media: “For Egan, *The Candy House* resembles the internet in the same way all literature already resembles the internet: as an amalgamation of stories” (Dey 2022).

The significance of past as well as future is addressed in many other aspects of *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE*, as

my analysis has shown. The past reappears throughout the action, in characters' attitudes, in the works' treatments of mediality. Reading becomes entangled with retrospection, especially through discussions of past medialities in which listening to music parallels reading. Most of the time, however, links to the future are included. Chapter 12 in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* which consists of a PowerPoint presentation proposes future practices for reading (in) digital media which may include many graphic elements. At the same time, the chapter maintains the linearity of earlier reading practices. From a current perspective, it can be considered a case of retrofuturism. This is because the chapter is set in the year 2020 and imagines a future in which humans read PowerPoint presentations like literary texts. However, the chapter operates with the PowerPoint template of the 2010s, the period when the novel as a whole was released. What emerges is therefore a past version of the future that differs from the actual media (practices) of the 2020s to some extent.

The past decidedly plays a role for conceptualising reading in *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD* and *THE CANDY HOUSE* as the novels face future digital developments, but not in the sense of a return to established reading and its narrow definition of reading which is discursively constructed as the ideal reading practice located in the past. Instead, Egan's works initiate practices such as multimodal reading and various forms of re-reading. Reading certainly changes in the digital age extending into the future, and as understandings of reading change, more practices can be included into definitions of reading. In this context, the attitude towards the discourse on the loss of reading in Egan's novels can best be captured by the reassuring statement of Chris's grandmother in *THE CANDY HOUSE*: "You are bemoaning an occurrence that has not occurred" (Egan 2022: 171).

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