

# THE CIRCLE

*a novel*

DAVE EGGERS

**Background:** For this section, all you need to know is that Annie and Mae are old friends since college, and now they work together at The Circle, a company very much like Google, or at least Google as we on the outside might imagine it to be, either now or in the near future. Annie is very high up in the company, but Mae is an eager newcomer. This is Mae's first week on the job, and her first impression (as she says in the opening line of the book) is "My God . . . It's heaven." In the section reprinted here, Annie is using her insider status to introduce Mae to the company founders' inner sanctum.

Notice how Dave Eggers, in painting this scene, both shows and tells us volumes about the values of this company. Notice both the details of the setting and the description of the founders, "the Three Wise Men." Also notice how much we learn about Annie and Mae through their dialog, actions, and the background and insights provided by the omniscient narrator. The questions at the end of the piece are meant to guide your reading, and they might also be the basis for a quiz or in-class writing. Be sure to bring this to class with you (or bring the book, if you have it.)

Annie stopped a man named Vipul, who, Annie said, would soon be reinventing all of television, a medium stuck more than any other in the twentieth century.

"Try nineteenth," he said, with a slight Indian accent, his English precise and lofty. "It's the last place where customers do not, ever, get what they want. The last vestige of feudal arrangements between maker and viewer. We are vassals no longer!" he said, and soon excused himself.

"That guy is on another level," Annie said as they made their way through the cafeteria. They stopped at five or six other tables, meeting fascinating people, every one of them working on something Annie deemed *world-rocking* or *life-changing* or *fifty years ahead of anyone else*. The range of the work being done was startling. They met a pair of women working on a submersible exploration craft that would make the Marianas Trench mysterious no more. "They'll map it like Manhattan," Annie said, and the two women did not argue the hyperbole. They stopped at a table where a trio of young men were looking at a screen, embedded into the table, displaying 3-D drawings of a new kind of low-cost housing, to be easily adopted throughout the developing world.

Annie grabbed Mae's hand and pulled her toward the exit. "Now we're seeing the Ochre Library. You heard of it?"

Mae hadn't, but didn't want to commit to that answer.

Annie gave her a conspiratorial look. "You're not supposed to see it, but I say we go."

They got into an elevator of plexiglass and neon and rose through the atrium, every floor and office visible as they climbed

five floors. "I can't see how stuff like that works into the bottom line here," Mae said.

"Oh god, I don't know, either. But it's not just about money here, as I'm guessing you know. There's enough revenue to support the passions of the community. Those guys working on the sustainable housing, they were programmers, but a couple of them had studied architecture. So they write up a proposal, and the Wise Men went nuts for it. Especially Bailey. He just loves enabling the curiosity of great young minds. And his library's insane. This is the floor."

They stepped out of the elevator and into a long hallway, this one appointed in deep cherry and walnut, a series of compact chandeliers emitting a calm amber light.

"Old school," Mae noted.

"You know about Bailey, right? He loves this ancient shit. Mahogany, brass, stained glass. That's his aesthetic. He gets overruled in the rest of the buildings, but here he has his way. Check this out."

Annie stopped at a large painting, a portrait of the Three Wise Men. "Hideous, right?" she said.

The painting was awkward, the kind of thing a high school artist might produce. In it, the three men, the founders of the company, were arranged in a pyramid, each of them dressed in their best-known clothes, wearing expressions that spoke, cartoonishly, of their personalities. Ty Gospodinov, the Circle's boy-wonder visionary, was wearing nondescript glasses and an enormous hoodie, staring leftward and smiling; he seemed to be enjoying some moment, alone, tuned into some distant frequency. People said he was borderline Asperger's, and the picture seemed

intent on underscoring the point. With his dark unkempt hair, his unlined face, he looked no more than twenty-five.

"Ty looks checked out, right?" Annie said. "But he couldn't be. None of us would be here if he wasn't a fucking brilliant management master, too. I should explain the dynamic. You'll be moving up quickly so I'll lay it out."

Ty, born Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, was the first Wise Man, Annie explained, and everyone always just called him Ty.

"I know this," Mae said.

"Don't stop me now. I'm giving you the same spiel I have to give to heads of state."

"Okay."

Annie continued.

Ty realized he was, at best, socially awkward, and at worst an utter interpersonal disaster. So, just six months before the company's IPO, he made a very wise and profitable decision: he hired the other two Wise Men, Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton. The move assuaged the fears of all investors and ultimately tripled the company's valuation. The IPO raised \$3 billion, unprecedented but not unexpected, and with all monetary concerns behind him, and with Stenton and Bailey aboard, Ty was free to float, to hide, to disappear. With every successive month, he was seen less and less around campus and in the media. He became more reclusive, and the aura around him, intentionally or not, only grew. Watchers of the Circle wondered, *Where is Ty and what is he planning?* These plans were kept unknown until they were revealed, and with each successive innovation brought forth by the Circle, it became less clear which had originated from Ty himself and which were the products of the

increasingly vast group of inventors, the best in the world, who were now in the company fold.

Most observers assumed he was still involved, and some insisted that his fingerprints, his knack for solutions global and elegant and infinitely scalable, were on every major Circle innovation. He had founded the company after a year in college, with no particular business acumen or measurable goals. "We used to call him Niagara," his roommate said in one of the first articles about him. "The ideas just come like that, a million flowing out of his head, every second of every day, never-ending and overwhelming."

Ty had devised the initial system, the Unified Operating System, which combined everything online that had heretofore been separate and sloppy—users' social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user names, preferences, every last tool and manifestation of their interests. The old way—a new transaction, a new system, for every site, for every purchase—it was like getting into a different car to run any one kind of errand. "You shouldn't have to have eighty-seven different cars," he'd said, later, after his system had overtaken the web and the world.

Instead, he put all of it, all of every user's needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou—one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the *TruYou*, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank,

and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online.

To use any of the Circle's tools, and they were the best tools, the most dominant and ubiquitous and free, you had to do so as yourself, as your actual self, as your TruYou. The era of false identities, identity theft, multiple user names, complicated passwords and payment systems, was over. Anytime you wanted to see anything, use anything, comment on anything or buy anything, it was one button, one account, everything tied together and trackable and simple, all of it operable via mobile or laptop, tablet or retinal. Once you had a single account, it carried you through every corner of the web, every portal, every pay site, everything you wanted to do.

TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. Though some sites were resistant at first, and free-internet advocates shouted about the right to be anonymous online, the TruYou wave was tidal and crushed all meaningful opposition. It started with the commerce sites. Why would any non-porn site want anonymous users when they could know exactly who had come through the door? Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness.

And those who wanted or needed to track the movements of consumers online had found their Valhalla: the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision. Most TruYou users, most internet users who simply wanted simplicity, efficiency, a clean and streamlined experience, were thrilled with the results. No longer did they

have to memorize twelve identities and passwords; no longer did they have to tolerate the madness and rage of the anonymous hordes; no longer did they have to put up with buckshot marketing that guessed, at best, within a mile of their desires. Now the messages they did get were focused and accurate and, most of the time, even welcome.

And Ty had come upon all this more or less by accident. He was tired of remembering identities, entering passwords and his credit-card information, so he designed code to simplify it all. Did he purposely use the letters of his name in TruYou? He said he realized only afterward the connection. Did he have any idea of the commercial implications of TruYou? He claimed he did not, and most people assumed this was the case, that the monetization of Ty's innovations came from the other two Wise Men, those with the experience and business acumen to make it happen. It was they who monetized TruYou, who found ways to reap funds from all of Ty's innovations, and it was they who grew the company into the force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe and Quan.

"Tom doesn't look so good here," Annie noted. "He's not quite that sharky. But I hear he loves this picture."

To the lower left of Ty was Tom Stenton, the world-striding CEO and self-described *Capitalist Prime*—he loved the Transformers—wearing an Italian suit and grinning like the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. His hair was dark, at the temples striped in grey, his eyes flat, unreadable. He was more in the mold of the eighties Wall Street traders, unabashed about being wealthy, about being single and aggressive and possibly dangerous. He was a free-spending global titan in his early

fifties who seemed stronger every year, who threw his money and influence around without fear. He was unafraid of presidents. He was not daunted by lawsuits from the European Union or threats from state-sponsored Chinese hackers. Nothing was worrisome, nothing was unattainable, nothing was beyond his pay grade. He owned a NASCAR team, a racing yacht or two, piloted his own plane. He was the anachronism at the Circle, the flashy CEO, and created conflicted feelings among many of the utopian young Circlers.

His kind of conspicuous consumption was notably absent from the lives of the other two Wise Men. Ty rented a ramshackle two-bedroom apartment a few miles away, but then again, no one had ever seen him arrive at or leave campus; the assumption was that he lived there. And everyone knew where Eamon Bailey lived—a highly visible, profoundly modest three-bedroom home on a widely accessible street ten minutes from campus. But Stenton had houses everywhere—New York, Dubai, Jackson Hole. A floor atop the Millennium Tower in San Francisco. An island near Martinique.

Eamon Bailey, standing next to him in the painting, seemed utterly at peace, joyful even, in the presence of these men, both of whom were, at least superficially, diametrically opposed to his values. His portrait, to the lower right of Ty's, showed him as he was—grey-haired, ruddy-faced, twinkly-eyed, happy and earnest. He was the public face of the company, the personality everyone associated with the Circle. When he smiled, which was near-constantly, his mouth smiled, his eyes smiled, his shoulders even seemed to smile. He was wry. He was funny. He had a way of speaking that was both lyrical and grounded, giving his audiences

wonderful turns of phrase one moment and plainspoken common sense the next. He had come from Omaha, from an exceedingly normal family of six, and had more or less nothing remarkable in his past. He'd gone to Notre Dame and married his girlfriend, who'd gone to Saint Mary's down the road, and now they had four children of their own, three girls and finally a boy, though that boy had been born with cerebral palsy. "He's been touched," Bailey had put it, announcing the birth to the company and the world. "So we'll love him even more."

Of the Three Wise Men, Bailey was the most likely to be seen on campus, to play Dixieland trombone in the company talent show, most likely to appear on talk shows representing the Circle, chuckling when talking about—when shrugging off—this or that FCC investigation, or when unveiling a helpful new feature or game-changing technology. He preferred to be called Uncle Eamon, and when he strode through campus, he did so as would a beloved uncle, a first-term Teddy Roosevelt, accessible and genuine. The three of them, in life and in this portrait, made for a strange bouquet of mismatched flowers, but there was no doubt that it worked. Everyone knew it worked, the three-headed model of management, and the dynamic was thereafter emulated elsewhere in the Fortune 500, with mixed results.

"But so why," Mae asked, "couldn't they afford a real portrait by someone who knows what they're doing?"

The more she looked at it, the stranger it became. The artist had arranged it such that each of the Wise Men had placed a hand on another's shoulder. It made no sense and defied the way arms could bend or stretch.

"Bailey thinks it's hilarious," Annie said. "He wanted it in the main hallway, but Stenton vetoed him. You know Bailey's a collector and all that, right? He's got incredible taste. I mean, he comes across as the good-time guy, as the everyman from Omaha, but he's a connoisseur, too, and is pretty obsessed with preserving the past—even the bad art of the past. Wait till you see his library."

They arrived at an enormous door, which seemed and likely was medieval, something that would have kept barbarians at bay. A pair of giant gargoyle knockers protruded at chest level, and Mae went for the easy gag.

"Nice knockers."

Annie snorted, waved her hand over a blue pad on the wall, and the door opened.

Annie turned to her. "Holy fuck, right?"

It was a three-story library, three levels built around an open atrium, everything fashioned in wood and copper and silver, a symphony of muted color. There were easily ten thousand books, most of them bound in leather, arranged tidily on shelves gleaming with lacquer. Between the books stood stern busts of notable humans, Greeks and Romans, Jefferson and Joan of Arc and MLK. A model of the *Spruce Goose*—or was it the *Enola Gay*?—hung from the ceiling. There were a dozen or so antique globes lit from within, the light buttery and soft, warming various lost nations.

"He bought so much of this stuff when it was about to be auctioned off, or lost. That's his crusade, you know. He goes to these distressed estates, these people who are about to have to sell their treasures at some terrible loss, and he pays market rates for all this, gives the original owners unlimited access to the stuff

he's bought. That's who's here a lot, these grey-hairs who come in to read or touch their stuff. Oh you have to see *this*. It'll blow your head off."

Annie led Mae up the three flights of stairs, all of them tiled with intricate mosaics—reproductions, Mae assumed, of something from the Byzantine era. She held the brass rail going up, noting the lack of fingerprints, of any blemish whatsoever. She saw accountants' green reading lamps, telescopes crisscrossed and gleaming in copper and gold, pointing out the many beveled-glass windows—"Oh look up," Annie told her, and she did, to find the ceiling was stained glass, a fevered rendering of countless angels arranged in rings. "That's from some church in Rome."

They arrived at the library's top floor, and Annie led Mae through narrow corridors of round-spined books, some of them as tall as her—Bibles and atlases, illustrated histories of wars and upheavals, long-gone nations and peoples.

"All right. Check this out," Annie said. "Wait. Before I show you this, you have to give me a verbal non-disclosure agreement, okay?"

"Fine."

"Seriously."

"I'm serious. I take this seriously."

"Good. Now when I move this book . . ." Annie said, removing a large volume titled *The Best Years of Our Lives*. "Watch this," she said, and backed up. Slowly, the wall, bearing a hundred books, began to move inward, revealing a secret chamber within. "That's High Nerd, right?" Annie said, and they walked through. Inside, the room was round and lined with books, but the main focus was a hole in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a copper

barrier; a pole extended down, through the floor and to unknown regions below.

"Does he fight fires?" Mae asked.

"Hell if I know," Annie said.

"Where does it go?"

"As far as I can tell, it goes to Bailey's parking space."

Mae mustered no adjectives. "You ever go down?"

"Nah, even showing me this was a risk. He shouldn't have. He told me that. And now I'm showing you, which is silly. But it shows you the kind of mind this guy has. He can have anything, and what he wants is a fireman's pole that drops seven stories to the garage."

The sound of a droplet emitted from Annie's earpiece, and she said "Okay" to whomever was on the other end. It was time to go.

#### Questions:

1. What are some key **descriptive details about the setting** that give you a sense of what Eggers means to be the dominant impression of the company? Mark them as you read.
2. What are some key **descriptive details about the people** that contribute to the picture Eggers is painting of this community? Consider the whole range: looks, actions, statements/dialog, background details, thoughts and feelings as revealed by the narrator.
3. In the description of Ty, Eggers also gives us an extensive passage about one of his most earth-shaking innovations: **TruYou**. What does this add to our portrait of this company as a whole, particularly its values and ambitions? Do you think Eggers wants us to see TruYou as mostly a positive development, mostly negative one, or is he neutral? Find evidence to support your answer, specific details and lines.