The Deuce Short Guide

The Deuce by Robert Olen Butler

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BOOKRAGS

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Characters

The main character's name as given to him by his birth mother in Vietnam is Vo Dinh Thanh. Taken to the U.S. by his father, Kenneth Hatcher, the boy is given the name Anthony James Hatcher. On the streets of New York, he takes the name "The Deuce," adopting the street slang for Forty-Second Street as his own.

Discussing each name in the first chapter, Tony summarizes the identities and relationships which correlate with each; for example: "The me that's Tony Hatcher is from the Jersey Shore, just outside of Point Pleasant, which is about the most pansy-assed name for a place you could think up."

Tony explains his attempt to run away to Canada as an attempt to join the Vietnamese refugee community that he has heard of in Montreal. There, he imagines, he would belong to the group without the intrusions of having to relate to a European-American father and the American middle-class culture that seems to have no place for Tony's Asian facial features and his memories of Vietnam. In school, Tony tells of being obnoxious with a new Chinese-American student because her name is "Nancy." He expects an ethnic personal name. She, however, asserts her American nationality over her ethnicity: "And I'm not Chinese. I was born in Hackensack." Still, despite his impulse to assert his Asian identity, Tony rejects a Korean shopkeeper's attempts to befriend him on the premise that the Korean man knows less than he claims to about Vietnamese character.

Eventually, dealing with the police investigating Joey's death, Tony pretends to be Joey's son and invents additional names to cover his identity, but Kenneth has produced and distributed "missing child" posters bearing Tony's picture and true identity. The authorities recognize him and call Kenneth to the police station, reuniting the pair. Tony's life in the New York underworld has shown him many negative consequences of personal weakness or bad choices, and returning to live with Kenneth in quiet and comfortable suburban New Jersey brings him to resolve some of his personal conflicts over the contradictions in his feelings about identity. He recognizes how much of his father's and mother's love and concern he has rejected over the years.

He has also experienced a single night of passion with Norma who subsequently returns to prostitution for her livelihood, enacting in brief the same kind of passion which had brought his parents together.

Once he can accept their humanity and forgive them for their mistakes, he can accept the strengths of their love and their disparate cultures and accept himself as a product of two worlds, yet as a whole person.

Kenneth Hatcher, as seen through his son Tony's eyes, is often the remote father. His marriage to an American woman ends because of his primary commitment to his career as a prosecuting attorney, and his family commitment to his son that leads him to keep trying to connect with the boy: "We had one trip to the Bronx Zoo, one trip on the Staten

Island ferry and then to the Statue of Liberty, one baseball game in Yankee Stadium, one hike in the woods in some mountains upstate . . . I guess if I'd come back from any of that and said, Wow that was fun, Dad, let's do it again, we would've done it over . . . ." Ultimately, the wife decided Kenneth had too little time for her and left.

Kenneth has taken his son at age six from Saigon to New Jersey because Nghi, the mother is a heroin addict and prostitute who fears she cannot change for the better, even in a different place, and who fears she will not be able to provide well for her son in the future she foresees for herself. Kenneth does well as an attorney, but struggles to maintain quality relationships with women. He has postdivorce girlfriends, and when Kenneth becomes serious about Tracy, Tony becomes especially spiteful and insults her, then decides to run away. Kenneth makes attempts at father-son conversations to work out understandings with Tony, but Tony disdains any substantive response to Kenneth's explanations of past or present, keeping a sullen, cynical shell between his father's attempts to be loving and the welter of conflicting feelings of love and anger that he cannot readily interpret or understand.

Vo Xuan Nghi is the mother whom Tony remembers frequently during the narrative. As a bar girl, she has survived in wartime Saigon by getting GIs to buy her watered-down drinks at the Texas Girls Bar, and taking some customers home to her tiny apartment for a night or a week or a month. Her lifestyle keeps her on the scorned fringes of Vietnamese society, and she eases the pain of life in the underworld by using heroin. She knows Kenneth Hatcher is the father of her son Thanh, but she does not keep an exclusive relationship with Hatcher.

Eventually, all the soldiers go away, so it is not worth while—emotionally or economically—to stay with only one man who does not tolerate her drug habit.

Nghi at times can be an attentive and indulgent mother to Thanh, giving him money to buy sweets in the market place, playing simple games with him, or cooking favored foods for him. She also, at times, obviously sends him off to play because she has another drunken soldier to service sexually, and she would prefer her son not see her in the process. At times, too, she has passed out from drug ingestion, and Thanh can rifle her purse and run off to buy whatever he likes.

Faced with the issue of Thanh's future when Kenneth is due to rotate back to the States, Nghi decides to send her son to his father's homeland. In Vietnam, the boy would be slighted for his mixed heritage. In the U.S., he would have a parent free of drug problems who would be able to provide for his material and educational welfare far better than Nghi could do in a Saigon slum.

Joey Cipriani makes his living on the street. Tony, first noticing the man, says, "On his chest is a cardboard sign: HELP OUT AN UNEMPLOYED VIETNAM VET. He's shoving an upturned helmet liner at a business suit and he says, 'I fought for you in Vietnam . . .'" Tony is drawn to Joey because of his Vietnam connection, yet resists divulging too much about himself too soon. Joey plies Tony with questions, recognizing the teenager is "half Vietnamese." Tony accepts an invitation to sit next to Joey, and

realizes the he likes the fact that Joey is telling people he was in Vietnam as part of his usual appeal for help. Joey later takes Tony to the apartment he occupies in an abandoned building and warns the teen about various risks of life on the street. Most especially, Joey warns Tony about the arcade owner, Treen, who runs a stable of young male prostitutes and who has a reputation for using a knife on people who cross him.

From Joey, Tony learns tricks for effective panhandling. As the two get better acquainted, Joey admits to being an alcoholic, and to using whatever war stories seem convenient in persuading passersby to donate a little money to support a veteran down on his luck. One night while under the influence of alcohol, Joey tells Tony about his lost love in Saigon and shows him her picture. Pondering Joey's feelings for the long-lost Mai, Tony recognizes a genuineness in the love the two shared for their time together. Joey's openness with Tony prepares the boy for coming to terms with his own father and mother's relationship. Losing Joey creates even more pressure on Tony to come to terms with his family relationships and with himself.

Social Concerns

The lead character in The-Deuce, Tony or Thanh or "The Deuce," takes his name from one of the streets he "works" as a runaway teenager. His personal anxieties and his rebellion against his father allow the reader to explore issues of an average middle-class American teenager's identity crisis complicated by several factors.

Tony's father is of European-American heritage. His mother, whom he has not seen since leaving Vietnam, was Vietnamese. Tony's father is an attorney who provides a comfortable suburban home in New Jersey, excursions to Coney Island, education, church contacts, and other middle-class experiences. Tony, however, resists the father's attempts to be close and resists mothering from both the stepmother and from his father's girlfriends after his parents' divorce is final. Tony frequendy thinks about his mother, remembering both good times with her and bad times traceable to her status as a drug-using bar girl and prostitute. He both resents her relationships with many men and her inability to care for herself or for him when she was high on heroin and treasures the memories of playing games with her. He also thinks deeply about his identity as Vietnamese and reminisces about cultural factors such as keeping crickets for good luck—factors that contrast his maternal heritage and Asian identity to his paternal heritage and his American identity.

Falling in with Joey, a homeless Vietnam veteran who usually begs for a living, Tony avoids linking up with gangs, and often stays in an abandoned building with the older man. Tony learns that Joey had fallen in love with a Vietnamese bar girl during his tour of duty, and that the older man still cherished the woman's memory.

He also discovers that, while Joey had served in Vietnam and had seen some combat, many of the stories or claims Joey used when begging for money on the streets were fabrications. Even though Joey is an alcoholic, he alerts Tony to the risks of close contact with Treen, a man who collects boys for his own use and for male prostitution, and is able at times to shield Tony from the predatory Treen.

The passage from comfortable New Jersey suburban home life to the street life of New York City's homeless, derelicts, and runaways brings into focus several significant problems in modern American society. Tony embodies the sense of alienation that carries many a teenager away from home, although Tony has not suffered physical abuse in his home life. He also embodies the conflicts society may have over ethnic identification and acceptance of individuals regardless of race. At times he is very race-conscious; at times he is not. Surviving among the poor and the outcast, Tony recognizes the desperate logic of abandonment and addiction that brings very many to theft, street scamming, begging, prostitution, and other negative or parasitic behaviors.

Techniques

Butler presents The Deuce in a format of twenty-one conventional chapters, some brief and some moderately long. The primary delivery of the narrative is by interior monologue—the reverie of Tony, the main character. Occasionally, Tony relates the dialogue between people in anecdotes recalled from the past, as when he had conversation with his mother in Saigon, or with his father in New Jersey.

Often Tony guesses what other characters may be thinking, but the point of view remains in first person throughout the novel. A given chapter may contain memories from Vietnam and memories of earlier years in New Jersey mixed with description of the narrative present in New York City.

Since Tony is a rebellious teenager, he frequently laces his narrative with foul language to a degree not common in most other works by Butler. The feelings he expresses are often contradictory. The images he employs come from his experiences on the streets of Saigon as well as on the streets of New York. Butler, therefore can introduce factors of Vietnamese culture and folklore, such as the keeping of crickets for luck, or the use of incense in Buddhist prayers, or the observation of the Wandering Souls' Day festival, along with traits of Judaeo-Christian tradition such as the library mural of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai, or the street preacher's reference to God watching even the fall of a sparrow.

While Tony's reveries range from his immediate context to his pasts in New Jersey and in Vietnam, the details of the experiences cited remain realistic. Tony does not get lost in remaking bits and pieces of his conflicting feelings into a surrealistic dream world. He acknowledges the grey and gritty realities of broken lives around him along with the comforts of a clean bed and a full stomach when they are available.

Themes

While little is made of Tony's religious upbringing, Butler uses a mural of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments in the New York Public Library and a street preacher's harangue to bring questions of morals and judgment to Tony's mind. A love child himself, Tony holds conflicting notions about casual sexual contacts. He loves his mother's memory, he understands the socioeconomic pressures that led her to prostitution, but still he resents the degrading nature of her work that frustrated a good relationship between them. He has feelings for Norma, a girl who hits the streets when he does; he welcomes a passionate interlude with her, then resents her continued life as a prostitute. Even so, as he considers the image of Moses enraged at the sight of Israelites involved in prostitution as part of the worship of the Golden Calf at the base of Sinai, Tony wonders why Moses should be so judgmental of others' mistakes. Similarly, Tony also ponders the street preacher's contention that God cares for everyone, regardless of status. As the man explicates the imagery of God accounting for every sparrow that falls, Tony remembers his mother killing and cooking sparrows purchased from the animal market in Saigon, sparrows that he had expected they would keep as pets.

Without specific connection to its scriptural precedent, Butler employs the Old Testament proverb "Pride goes before a fall" in the life of both Tony and Treen. Tony is very certain he can take care of himself on the wild streets, and yet he does have to rely on other people to survive physically and emotionally.

Only when he acknowledges his need to relate to his father and accepts that his father had genuinely loved his mother does he begin to resolve his sense of personal identity.

Treen, the homicidal sexual predator, repeatedly says Tony will eventually "belong" to him. Ultimately, Tony lures Treen into a dangerous chase, tempting the man with his own body, but securing a form of justice in the night by running up a long-incomplete freeway ramp with a gap that Tony knows but Treen does not. Tony knows when to make his "leap of faith," while Treen, convinced he will capture his prey, falls to his doom.

From his Vietnamese Buddhist roots, through a line in Vietnamese Tony tore from his farewell letter from his mother, Tony carries the memory of "Wandering Souls' Day." Early in the narrative, Tony explains the Buddhist practice of praying for the dead whom God may, if sufficient prayers are offered on the special festival day, permit to pass from misery to paradise. He himself is still unwilling to forgive her for handing him over to his father to be taken to America: "As far as was concerned, she could wander around in the fire . . . forever." As he matures, though, he becomes able to accept his mother's choice. His love for her overrides his angers about her lifeStyle and her surrender of him, and he decides that he will pray for her soul as she has asked.

Key Questions

In reality, some Americans who had relationships with Vietnamese women saw to the formalities of marriage and registration of the marriage with U.S.

authorities, and then to the paperwork necessary to bring Vietnamese wives and children to the U.S. However, tens of thousands of military men and civilian workers simply abandoned their relationships of convenience when they left Vietnam. Those who returned home and who persisted in applying for their Vietnamese dependents to immigrate to the United States saw varying results. In the flood of refugees following the fall of Saigon in April 1975, some Vietnamese wives were able to flee to refugee camps with their Amerasian children and to regain contact with their American husbands. Many others were frustrated by the decades of diplomatic tangles while the U.S. government refused to establish diplomatic relations with the Hanoi government.

While an Orderly Departure Program was established to allow people who had worked for U.S. military or civilian agencies to leave Vietnam, and a similar program was established to review the special concerns of Amerasian children, the numbers of people well served by the programs were far fewer than those actually eligible and desiring to leave Vietnam.

Documentation of valid claims was often difficult. Many South Vietnamese feared that their connections with the Americans would mean trouble for them under the Hanoi government, and thus they destroyed photographs, pay records, certificates of marriage and other such proofs of their relationships. Subsequently, when official records were needed to validate that these people we're eligible for emigration under the terms agreed upon by Hanoi and Washington, D.C., they were no longer available.

In The Deuce, Butler features a character who shares Asian roots with almost a million other Asian-Americans who arrived between 1975 and 1985, but whose transition from Vietnam to the U.S.

includes far less drastic suffering and tragedy than many actually endured in escaping war-torn homelands and then waiting for years in refugee camps before resettling in the U.S.

1. In The Deuce, Tony is the product of a relationship between an American soldier and a Vietnamese bar girl. Officially, American military authorities often "discourage fraternization with locals" when troops are stationed overseas.

Should more be done to prevent the "fraternization" that produces mixed-race children who will be left as second-class citizens and objects of scorn in the mother's culture?

Should American immigration law favor abandoned children of American military or government personnel overseas?

2. Early in the novel, Tony explains the Vietnamese Buddhist Wandering Souls' Day. Why does he explain the festival and the ideas behind it? Why does it seem to be important to Nghi?

3. What are the contents of Nghi's letter to Tony? What does Tony do with the English section, and why? What does he do with the Vietnamese section?

When does he translate the Vietnamese section of the letter? Where does he do the translation, and why?

4. As Tony presents his view of "Mrs. Kenneth," his stepmother, how well does he seem to understand the woman? How well did he relate to her? What rationale does he give for his attitude toward her?

What rationale does he give for his disdain for Kenneth's other girl friends?

5. Why does Tony say he had run away many times? What prompted him to leave his mother's apartment at various times in Saigon? What prompts him to leave Kenneth's home in New Jersey?

6. As Tony struggles with being "Vietnamese" or "American," how many encounters with people does he relate in which the issue of ethnic identity is paramount? Does his status as a person of mixed race bring prejudice from other people in each of the encounters he cites?

Why does he not succeed in running away to Montreal to join the Vietnamese community there? If he had made it to Montreal, would he have been fully accepted as "Vietnamese," or would he have suffered discrimination as a "con lai"—a child of mixed race.

7. Joey Cipriani is a Vietnam veteran who works the streets as a panhandler.

To what extent does he represent a social problem in the USA? How much of Joey's appeal to passersby was legitimate or true, and how much was convenient fiction? Why does Joey take care of Tony as much as he does? Why does Tony come to rely on Joey? Could Joey get off the streets and into a "normal life" if he really wanted to?

8. Treen, the arcade owner, is presented as a pimp for street boys. To what extent does his sexual orientation shape his character? Is he presented as being a sexual predator because he prefers boys to women? What motivation, if any, is given for his impulse to kill people who obstruct his plans? Why does Tony attract Treen's attention? Why does Joey Cipriani run afoul of Treen?

9. As Tony details his alienation from his father, how many ways does he acknowledge that Kenneth tried to establish good father-son bonds over the years?

What issues keep Tony from responding to Kenneth with genuine warmth? What contradictions must Tony resolve within himself before he can accept his parents' love for one another and for him?

10. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, cross-ethnic marriages and transcultural adoptions have made more and more families in the USA multiethnic. While much of the early settlement of Europeans in North America brought people very much aware of their ethnicity as "English" or "Scot" or "Italian" or "German," many people who would now be classed as "white" trace their roots to a mixture of European ethnicities or nationalities. How well does Tony represent legitimate questions of identity in modern American society? To what extent does he represent the average American of the next century?

11. How many situations of nonmarital sex does Tony tell about? In which situations does he seem to consider the relationships "wrong" or "right," and in which situations does he seem to refrain from making a moral judgment?

12. In his narrative, Tony frequently uses harsh language. Is the "street language" appropriate to his character as a rebellious teen, or could it be omitted?

Some school settings have banned books because of the use of four-letter words.

Would this novel be a useful work of "adolescent fiction" because it engages issues of identity and race, or is it too graphic for a teenaged reading audience?

13. Tony mentions that Kenneth saw to it that he had some religious upbringing and attended church activities for several years, but regarding Kenneth's religious observance, said, "his heart was not in it." What overtly religious images or ideas does Butler incorporate in the novel from Judeao-Christian tradition or from Buddhist tradition? Are the inclusions consistent with the development of the plot and the character? Are they integral or are they superficial to the story?

14. How many of the important characters in the story are male and how many are female? Given that all the reader knows is filtered through the perceptions of a teenage boy, how well are the female characters portrayed? Would a woman writer have drawn the personalities of Nghi or Norma or Tracy or "Mrs. Kenneth" any differently?

Literary Precedents

From ancient times, stories have featured adventurer-wanderers, sometimes noble and heroic, sometimes not. The epics of Ancient Greece, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey chronicle the Greek seige of Troy, and Odysseus' twenty-year wandering en route home. Within Old Testament biblical tradition, the young David, hunted by King Saul, who knew the shepherd youth had been annointed to succeed him, survived in the wilds with a small band of men, living by his wits and—at times—by raiding various locales for supplies. Eventually, David claims the throne, "coming home" to his family and his people.

The New Testament Gospel of Luke contains the brief parable of the Prodigal Son, a young man who demanded his inheritance, then went off to enjoy himself in a foreign country, eventually losing all he had, and coming back to his father's house, asking forgiveness. The parable of Prodigal carries through medieval and Renaissance tradition in scores of stories and plays, including Philip Massinger's The City Madam. American literature reflects some aspects of the Prodigal impulse in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn.

The free-spirited Huck takes to the river, running away with the slave, Jim. Their encounters with people—some kindly, many sorely prejudiced, some jovial scam artists, and a few murderous scoundrels— bring Huck to recognize some of the contradictions in his own attitudes as well as the great possibilities for good or evil in himself and in others.

Without presuming that Twain's Huck provides a conscious model for Butler's Tony, a reader still finds some interesting parallels in the elements of the two novels. Both main characters are runaways.

Both travel on or near major modes of transportation for their era—Huck rafts on the Mississippi River, and Tony hustles change in or near the Port Authority bus terminal, along 42nd Street in New York, and on the stub of abandoned freeway overpass. Both characters are concerned with ethnicity and belonging—belonging to persons or social groupings different from what they have found in their respective home settings.

Both characters rely at times on older men as mentors: Huck Finn learns from Jim, and Tony learns from Joey Cipriani.

Both of the older mentors are marginalized men who suffer: Jim is a black man trapped in the brutalities of a slave-holding society, and Joey Cipriani is a war veteran trapped in alcoholism and despair. Both Huck Finn and Tony Hatcher eventually are returned to home territory by authorities they cannot ultimately outwit or outrun, and both have come to terms with adult life after having seen death up close on more than one occasion.

Hatcher, however, carries ethnic issues within his very being, while Huck Finn, runaway son of an abusive, alcoholic father, belongs to the dominant ethnic group and begins to come to terms with racial identity issues through daily life with Jim. Tony, too, is by nature connected with the divisive history of an unpopular war.

Giving due attention to the differences in Vietnamese-American and ChineseAmerican histories, and remaining sensitive to differing approaches that male and female authors may pursue, readers may also wish to compare with Hatcher's concerns the Chinese social experiences displayed in Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth (1931), and the Chinese and Chinese-American experiences in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club (1989; see separate entry). Buck, who lived for many years in the early twentieth century in China, offers views of an extended Chinese family which confronts suffering, separations and losses in war, then recovers a semblance of stability in peace time.

In The Joy Luck Club, the older women born in China had experienced growing up in one culture, then came to another which posed individual independence equal to, if not above, family unity. They had known the dominance of family elders, and the chaos and losses of a wartorn society. Their children, born in the U.S. and not conditioned by a strongly authoritarian society or by war trauma, view the world very differently from their traditional Chinese elders.

Butler's Hatcher has been brought as a child into his father's culture in America.

He has been shaped more by his mother's commercial relationships with soldiers than by combat trauma, yet his need to reconcile with the memory of his mother and with his Vietnamese heritage prevents him from developing a satisfactory relationship with his father during most of their life together. Remaining emotionally remote, then physically running away has been Tony's method of dealing with life.

Related Titles

The Deuce, covering the conflicts of an Amerasian teenager, fits well with several of Butler's other novels. The Alleys of Eden (1981; see separate entry) is set half in Saigon and half in the U.S., and follows the relationship of an American soldier and a Vietnamese bar girl—in some ways paralleling a background relationship in The Deuce. Similarly, On Distant Ground (1985; see separate entry) follows an American soldier back to Saigon to find a former lover and her son in the closing days of the Republic of South Vietnam.

Among Butler's works which do not draw on the Vietnam experience, Wabash (1987), set in rural depression-era Illinois, features a woman who works to understand why her mother and aunts have broken their relation with their sister who has turned Catholic—paralleling in The Deuce Tony's struggle to understand and accept the divisions in his family. Butler's Pulitzer Prize-winning A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain (1992; see separate entry) is a collection of fifteen short stories, all featuring Vietnamese refugees resettled in America. The relationship of father and son is explored from a father's point of view in "Crickets," and the need for communication between father and daughter forms the basis of "Letters from my Father." In Buder's second collection, Tabloid Dreams (1996; see separate entry) the story "Boy Born with Tattoo of Elvis" portrays the experiences of a boy whose mother passes from lover to lover—a Southern American parallel to Tony's early life in The Deuce.

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