# Great Jones Street Short Guide

## Great Jones Street by Don Delillo

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# Characters

There are many characters in Great Jones Street, but the narrator, Bucky Wunderlick, his agent Globke, the megalomaniacal head of Happy Valley, Bohack, and the wizard of drug dealing, Dr. Pepper, are the primary antag onists. Bucky's sometime girlfriend, Opel, plays a significant part in the plot, primarily by dying, and delivers a thematically important monologue about the relationship between "identity" and the phenomenal world. That sequence is scarily terminated by one of DeLillo's stunning but simple sentences: "When I turned from the window, Opel was dead."

Globke, the head of Transparanoia, is a nightmare version of a nightclub comedian's description of his agent.

His attention acknowledges only moneymaking options; he has no personal or aesthetic interest in the artists he manages; he is a monster of manipulation. In an especially revealing moment, he telephones Bucky on a line Bucky thought was inoperative: "They did it from their office. The phone company. It wasn't broke, understand?

It was just turned off. So we had them turn it on." The bland assumption of the right to intrude on another's privacy, represented by the nearly universal notion that everyone must have a telephone in order to satisfy everyone else's "right" to call them, is typical of Globke's belief that reciprocal rights to manipulate are the foundation of business relationships.

Dr. Pepper is an amusing parody of the "genius" — self-proclaimed, selfvalidated — who preys parasitically on a culture that has no basis for understanding or evaluating his claims, but that becomes dependent on him in order to pursue its own fantasies.

While Pepper depends on his reputation for genius, Bohack depends on his ruthless pursuit of a reputation for charismatic leadership to sustain his power in the Happy Valley commune.

An enigmatic, and probably unassimilated, character is Fenig, a failed writer who lives in the loft above Bucky's on Great Jones Street. He is a throwback to a pre-1960s type, (though many living people continue to live as he does), and gives DeLillo opportunities to comment from a completely different perspective on the obsessive paranoia — systematic paranoia — of Bucky's world. Fenig is truly threatened, and has evolved comical survival techniques appropriate to an earlier age. His notion of fame and fortune is contemporary with that of Thomas Wolfe, or perhaps Henry Miller, and about as bankable in the 1960s.

Bucky's voice tells readers, on the first page of the novel, "Perhaps the only natural law attaching to true fame is that the famous man is compelled, eventually, to commit suicide." While Bucky's fate, in this novel, brings him close to confirming this law, it is an ironic confirmation, since he passes though his "death" to a new freedom that makes it possible for him to choose the life he wants. It would be foolish to consider the

conclusion of the novel a positive development, but the last pages are the first that are free from the constraints of all the earlier ones.

# Social Concerns/Themes

Drugs and rock music are the overt topics of Great Jones Street, which some readers might be inclined to treat as a roman a clef, searching for clues to the true identity of rock star Bucky Wunderlick (Jagger? Dylan? Jim Morrison?), although such a question is clearly irrelevant. The central question is the relationship between the public persona and the "self." There is no presupposed answer, and certainly not the conventional humanistic answer — the "self" is real, the persona a sham and artificial creation. There is no lack of artificiality, no question that rumor and publicity are at least as "real" as the private self. Bucky Wunderlick hears constant reports of his whereabouts and exploits, while he, and the reader, are well aware that he has been nowhere (except on Great Jones Street) and done little or nothing (except listen to other people try to manipulate him).

If cause and effect relationships in the "real" world are evidence, then clearly the self is irrelevant and vulnerable, while the public persona — the product of rumor, greed, paranoia — is not only real, but has practical consequences. The tendency of self-interest to distort, divide, and subvert all philosophies and values is explored here, but the impossibility of avoiding destruction by withdrawing to a "neutral" stance is equally apparent.

Bucky's effort to step off the stage and become a private person is instantly parodied and made potentially destructive by the Happy Valley Farm Commune. They respect his effort to affirm the right to "privacy" in a consumerist, media-oriented society. They are also no longer rural, but urban communards, no longer united but splintered, no longer pacifist but distinctly violent.

As is so often the case with names and titles in DeLillo's novels, they are everything their label says they are not.

Whether in the name of business, counterculture, crime, or just simple greed, all activity becomes bound up in selfcontradictory and ironic situations.

# Techniques

While Endzone (1972) features a narrator who is essentially an innocent confronting a complex and malevolent world, like Candide, Great Jones Street offers an all-too-knowledgable narrator who expects the worst in every context except his own life, and who is startled repeatedly by the ability of his "culture to produce familiar people in unfamiliar roles." (Of course, Bucky never loses his cool, and so never acknowledges overtly his amazement.) Some die unexpectedly, others betray without warning, and almost all demonstrate that their own lives are not nearly so invulnerable as they had thought.

The satiric direction of Great Jones Street is, therefore, inward, rather than outward, since Bucky must necessarily correct his own misperceptions at every turn, whereas Gary Harkness's innocence provides a corrective vision of the world around him. In both, the pervasive irony engages and distances the reader simultaneously.

# Literary Precedents

The greatest account of an artist's effort to withdraw from his public role in order to live as he wishes is found in Rousseau's Confessions (1782), and his related autobiographical writings.

This may seem to be an irrelevant or needlessly grandiose comparison, but the impossible complexity of the artist's role in society since the mid-eighteenth century is an important issue, and many autobiographies, biographies, and novels have explored it.

(Works by Henry James, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann come readily to mind.) DeLillo uses the framework of a rather tawdry effort at exploitation (Bucky is made the custodian of a putatively valuable wonder drug for which several underground groups are competing), but questions of the integrity of the artist, and the ability of the artist to communicate, consistently arise in this novel. From another perspective, the absurdity of claiming "artistic stature" for a mere pop singer (imagine if he were modelled on Billy Idol) might also be a significant factor in this narrative, and the pretentious quality of Bucky's selfimage would underline the inanity of the lyrics of the "mountain tapes."

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