

# Hey Jack! Short Guide

## Hey Jack! by Barry Hannah

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# Contents

<a href="#">Hey Jack! Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Key Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Precedents.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>



# Characters

Homer, the Korean War veteran narrator, is in love and newly wed to his blonde forty-one-year-old wife.

He struggles with his affection and attachment to her and his affection and desires for other women. His stories of the dentist, the professor, and the Foot family are tragic tales of self-destruction in a small Southern town. Tying these stories together is Homer's attempt to help his friend Jack stop his daughter's self-destructive love affair with rock star Ronnie Foot.

Jack is the namesake in the title.

Jack, a former sheriff and currently a shopkeeper, has known the dentist, the professor, and the rock star. He is a classy, well-dressed man whose former wife committed suicide. Alice is Jack's daughter who has a one-time tryst with Homer and a fatal attraction to Ronnie Foot and his lifestyle. Alice is a forty-year-old teacher who decides the liberal arts got her nothing and who wants a "chance to be shallow." Jack's enemy is Ronnie Foot, the rock star come home to conquer the women in this small town.

Ronnie, already aged at twentythree, is the offspring of the Foot family — a greasy, voracious, white trash clan. The Foots live in a mansion bought by Ronnie and are too dumb and stupid to know how to live in the "big house."

The dentist, a latent homosexual who hates blacks; his son, who decides society is junk and abandons it; the professor who "enjoyed the despair of others"; and his addict daughter who desires the salvation of marriage, all have their stories told by Homer.



## Social Concerns

Violence, family, and self-destruction are the primary social issues in *Hey Jack!* The personal and indiscriminate violence manifested within and among families, communities, and societies (i.e. war) are familiar components of many of Hannah's works.

Although the narrator is older and feels wiser, during times of excitement and stress he has frequent flashbacks to Chosin Reservoir in Korea where "man [was] shooting at what was not himself."

Frequently, the violence is self-inflicted by family members who commit suicide or who are already dead because of addictive behaviors. Delia, drug addict and daughter of a hypochondriacal and now dead professor, is described as "dressed like a violent queen skeleton of the Nile, dying and mysterious," during a Ritalin binge in the Peabody Hotel. Jack's daughter, Alice, is a school teacher who finally hits adolescence at forty. She becomes addicted to cocaine and Ronnie Foot. In a bad mood, her lover kills her with his Grampa's .44. Her father then tries to commit suicide, just like his wife had.

This violence impacts this tragic community just like a war — leaving the wounded, the victims, and the dead.

John Bradshaw, the nationally noted speaker and writer, tells us that our families are sick because we are living by inherited rules we never wrote, referring to the survey that 96% of families are to some degree emotionally impaired in American society.

Through his stories Hannah tells us the same facts, only with fictional faces and names. Just as many Americans, through the phenomenon of the "selfhelp" movement, are survivors striving to cope with adult lives, Jack and Homer are survivors who live with the triumphs and tragedies of family.

# Techniques

Homer begins, "You will find me changing voices as I slip into — let us say — mode of the closer participant.

My eyes get bigger than ever over the situation of this town and my passing through it." And so begins the telling of the story of Hey Jack! Because of Hannah's achronological narrative style, it is sometimes difficult to determine past or present events — even though in this community the past is the present.

Hannah's raconteur style also familiarizes the reader with the town and its cast of tragic and addictive characters.

Community is not created out of historical facts and voluminous details, but created through the actions, inactions, thoughts, and desires of people who live or once lived. This is what makes community. Mark Charney in his interpretation and criticism of Hannah in "Establishing the Community: The Juxtaposition of Images in Hey Jack! and Boomerang" (1989), states that "Hannah both extends and modifies the montage techniques introduced in *Power and Light* [1983]. He returns to the more familiar first-person narrative style, abandoning the objectivity and distance created within his novella, yet because he retains the story's fragmented style and juxtaposed clumps of narrative, he is equally uninhibited by spatial and temporal restrictions."

# Themes

As in *Ray* (1980), death and despair are all too much a part of life in the Southern town Homer describes. Jack implies that without death and despair, we cannot know life and joy. Even though Jack has suffered the loss of a wife and daughter, he is able to continue living. Even though Homer cannot forget the war, he falls in love.

The past weighs heavily on Homer's community. "These old men . . . you cannot ignore their wisdom and you cannot ignore the fact that it takes a certain strength to sit out in such a hot shade . . ." Family and the despair it can pass on to the individual recurs throughout Homer's storytelling. The addictive characters of Delia and Alice continue a family tradition of self-destruction — a tradition passed on like holiday celebrations. Alice and Ronnie cannot escape their family traditions of violence. Ronnie and his family cannot even use his new found rock-n-roll millions to escape the family heritage of slovenliness and stupidity.



## Key Questions

Like William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and other Southern writers, Hannah explores violent and eccentric behaviors in the context of family and community. Consider these threads in Southern literature when discussing Hannah and his works.

1. "One could pity him for his dead fathers. But all of his folks have been dead since they were born." What does this statement portray about the past, particularly in relationship to Homer's description of Ronnie Foot?
2. How does Hannah's narrative structure cover storytelling?
3. How does this work compare or contrast with earlier or later works by Hannah?
4. If you have read works by Southern authors such as Faulkner, Welty, O'Conner, how are Hannah's works similar or dissimilar to these classic Southern authors?
5. Homer confesses a deep hatred of Harmon — the character who "likes to beat women, is cocky, conceited, prejudiced, and thinks he is a free power."

What do you think Harmon represents or personifies for Homer's community?

6. Homer's view is that "the worth of each individual is directly related to his or her contributions to the community," according to Charney. Why does Ronnie Foot deserve to die and not Cooper?
7. Discuss the possible meanings of the final statement in the novel, "They gave me and you a certain hell, Homer . . . [t]hey made us know everything."
8. "Nobody hates reality on a sunny day in the town more than I do . . . The Civil War was not started by Harriet Beecher Stowe. . . or economics ... It was started by about a thousand towns like this, bored out of their minds."

What do you think Homer means by this?

9. Greed; fear or "shooting at what we do not know"; boredom, the "vast carelessness"; and desire, "the hungry dark beneath our bright and serene veneers," are all causes of violence and destruction in many of the characters' lives Homer relates to his readers. Give some examples of how the above emotions affected their lives. Does Hannah offer us valid insights into how these emotions evolve and affect people?

## Literary Precedents

According to Charney in his analysis of *Hey Jack!* the novel does "pay homage to such Faulkner novels as *As I Lay Dying* [1930] and *The Mansion* [1959]" with Homer's description of the decaying white-trash, nouveau-riche Foot family. However, the reader only gets glimpses of the family. In an interview, Hannah "describes them as the thinnest, most stereotypical characters in the novel." The author is continuing the Southern tradition of the raconteur where literature comes from the people who sit on the front porch, just as their fathers and mothers did before them.

Although Hannah speaks with a Southern voice, his fiction is contemporary.



## Related Titles

Hey Jack!, Ray, and Boomerang are strongly autobiographical, with male narration in a disjointed, flashback narrative style. They feature small town Southern settings and eccentric characters leading lives of despair and hope.



# Copyright Information

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