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KURT VONNEGUT

Born: Indianapolis, Indiana
November 11, 1922

Short-story writer and novelist Vonnegut is noted for his satiric humor, social commentary, frequent use of science fiction, and increasingly postmodern techniques.

BIOGRAPHY

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922, the son of Kurt and Edith Vonnegut. He was the youngest of three children. His ancestors had come from Germany in 1855. They were prosperous, originally as brewers and merchants, down to Kurt's grandfather and father, who were both architects, and they were prominent in the heavily German Indianapolis society. Then World War I left a residue of anti-German feeling in the United States and prohibitions on the use of the German language, dimming the family's pride and its cultural heritage. Prohibition brought an end to the brewing business, and the Great Depression of the 1930's left Vonnegut's father without work for essentially the rest of his life. Vonnegut writes frequently of the Depression and repeatedly portrays people who, like his father, are left feeling purposeless by loss of occupation.

At Shortridge High School, Vonnegut wrote for the *Shortridge Daily Echo*. The rigor of writing daily to deadlines helped shape his habits as a writer. In 1940, he went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where he majored in biochemistry and wrote for the *Cornell Sun*. By January, 1943, Vonnegut was a private in the United States Army. In May of that year, his mother committed suicide, an event of which he would write as having left him a "legacy of suicide." Soon thereafter, the Army sent him to Europe, where he was captured and held as a prisoner

of war in Dresden, Germany. There he experienced the event that forms the basis of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the firebombing that virtually destroyed Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945.

After discharge from the Army, Vonnegut undertook graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He also married his former high school sweetheart, Jane Cox. While a student, he worked as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. Vonnegut left Chicago without a degree, although in 1971 his novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963) was accepted in lieu of a thesis, and he was awarded an M.A.

In 1947, Vonnegut moved to Schenectady, New York, where he worked as a public relations writer at the General Electric Research Laboratory. There he began writing fiction, and his first published short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," appeared in *Collier's* in February, 1950. Encouraged by his success as a short-story writer, he resigned from General Electric and moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to devote himself full time to writing. He continued to publish in popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Collier's*, and *Cosmopolitan*, but he also placed stories in science-fiction journals such as *Galaxy* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*. His first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), was reissued by Bantam in 1954 with the title *Utopia 14*. Largely because of his success with short stories, which often paid well, Vonnegut did not produce his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), until seven years after *Player Piano*. Those first two novels, together with a number of the short stories, earned for Vonnegut identification as a science-fiction writer,

a label with which he was not always happy, because that genre was disdained in many quarters. During this time, Vonnegut faced personal hardships. In October, 1957, his father died, and in 1958, his sister Alice was stricken with cancer. Days before her death, her husband, John Adams, was killed when his commuter train crashed from a bridge. After this double tragedy, Vonnegut adopted three of their four orphaned children, doubling the size of his family.

The 1960's began as difficult times for Vonnegut but then saw his gradual emergence to fame. Television dried up the magazine market for short stories, and he turned to the paperback book market, first publishing a collection of short stories called *Canary in a Cat House* (1961), then the novel *Mother Night* (1961). Neither achieved great sales. The next two novels, *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), appeared in hardcover. In 1965, he went to teach at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he met other writers and critics who influenced him, particularly in encouraging him to enter his fiction more personally. This led to his adding a new and highly personal preface to the 1966 hardcover edition of *Mother Night*; in many of his subsequent works, such as autobiographical introductions have become a popular feature.

In 1966 and 1967, Avon and Dell reissued all of his novels in paperback, and *Player Piano* and *Mother Night* were reprinted in hardcover. The coincidence of these events brought greater public attention to his work, and his fame began to build. A new collection of his short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, appeared in 1968. Meanwhile, Vonnegut had won a Guggenheim Fellowship to revisit Dresden and research the event he had struggled to write about for years, the great air raid he had experienced. This led to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The novel, and the film that followed it, brought Vonnegut broad popularity and financial security.

Success, however, brought its own difficulties. Having faced in fiction the event that had motivated so much of his writing, Vonnegut now struggled. He even considered abandoning the novel for other forms, writing the play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1970). A compilation from his works appeared as a teleplay called *Between Time and Timbuktu* (1972). His marriage to Jane foundered, and he moved alone to New York City. At last, in 1973, he published another novel, *Breakfast of Champions*,

different in form from his previous work and illustrated with his own drawings. It drew mixed reviews but achieved excellent sales, with a first printing of a hundred thousand copies.

In 1974 came the publication of a collection of Vonnegut's essays, speeches, stories, and biography called *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon's (Opinions)*. Two more novels, *Slapstick* (1976) and *Jailbird* (1979), followed, in what Vonnegut has asserted was a difficult decade for him as a writer. He achieved a feeling of completion with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he said, and found little that provided stimulation in the society of that period. By 1979, however, Vonnegut had remarried, to the photographer Jill Krementz, and adopted a baby daughter, Lily. Also in 1979, he had a return to the stage when his daughter Edith produced a musical adaptation of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in New York. He wrote the text of a children's Christmas story, *Sun Moon Star* (1980), illustrated by Ivan Chermayeff. *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (1981) was another collection, and it was followed by the novels *Deadeye Dick* (1982), *Galápagos* (1985), *Bluebeard* (1987), *Hocus Pocus* (1990), and *Timequake* (1997). Also, *Bagombo Snuff Box*, a collection of Vonnegut's early stories, was published in 1999, as was *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, a collection of fictional interviews, and *Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation About Writing*. Finally, a collection of essays, *A Man Without a Country*, was published in 2005.

Having become a major figure in the American literary establishment, Vonnegut has been much in demand as a speaker, frequently using the title "How to Get a Job Like Mine" to embark upon a rambling and highly entertaining evening something in the manner of Mark Twain. He has also been much in demand for articles in magazines and even for advertisements—an ironic echo of his beginnings as a public relations writer for General Electric.

ANALYSIS

Vonnegut has spoken of his experience of being in Dresden in 1945, when that city was firebombed and perhaps a hundred thousand lives were lost, as being an early motivation to write. Although it was not until his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that he actually based a book on that experience, his first five novels point in that direction. Notably, there is

an apocalyptic event involved in each of those novels. There is also the descent into an underground place—much as he went underground to survive Dresden—from which the protagonist emerges with a new view of the world. In this way, Vonnegut weaves together personal experience with the mythic pattern of descent (Jonah into the belly of the whale, Orpheus into the underworld) as prelude to rebirth, transformation, or new knowledge.

Other patterns discernible in Vonnegut's novels clearly draw on personal history. Vonnegut's father was a retiring person who, after his prolonged unemployment, became reclusive. The novels contain numerous father-son relationships in which the father is distant. Vonnegut's mother committed suicide, and he speaks frankly of his "legacy of suicide" and his proneness to depression. He repeatedly treats the themes of isolation, depression, mental illness, and suicide in his characters as manifestations of the stresses of society.

Vonnegut was very close to his sister Alice—in *Slapstick*, he speaks of her as the imaginary audience to whom he writes—and her death touched him deeply. Perhaps the early loss of the two women closest to him gave rise to a fear of entrusting love to women, as seen in his earlier fiction, in which women frequently withdraw, die, or betray. Certainly a triangle of two men and a woman, reflecting his family structure of the two brothers and the sister, is repeated.

Apart from Dresden, Vonnegut speaks of the Great Depression as being the other shaping event in his life. It gives rise to his interest in socioeconomic topics such as how to achieve full employment, how to distribute the wealth of the nation equitably, how to preserve a sense of individual worth in an automated system, and how to ensure that technology is applied with thought for human needs. Novels such as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Jailbird* make issues of economics and ethics their main themes, and these issues also make up one of the most persistent themes throughout Vonnegut's work.

Because his prewar education had a science emphasis, because his brother was a scientist, and because he worked for General Electric's Research Laboratories, his interest in science and technology was always considerable. In fact, he has said that he did not write science fiction but simply wrote about the world he saw, which was a techno-

logically sophisticated one. He is the product of a generation that saw science produce the atomic bomb and hoped-for breakthroughs such as the insecticide DDT prove poisonous. Science, technology, and the moral and ethical issues raised by their uses occupy a major place in Vonnegut's fiction. As early as his college years, Vonnegut wrote antiwar columns, and his subsequent works continued such antiwar sentiments as themes, most conspicuously in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Other recurrent motifs bear on social issues: how to overcome individual loneliness in an indifferent urban society; the treatment of African Americans, Native Americans, and women in American history; the plight of the homeless; and the inadequacy of the small nuclear family to deal with the stresses of modern life. Vonnegut describes himself as being like a shaman who responds to and comments on the flux of daily life. This description makes him sound solemn, whereas he is, for many, a comic writer. Much of his humor is satire, mocking the foibles of human behavior and ridiculing aspects of modern society. He sees himself in the tradition of previous satirists such as Voltaire, Jonathan Swift, and Twain.

Such mythic humor is often barbed. At other times, Vonnegut is farcical, finding humor in odd-sounding words, ludicrous situations, comical names, oddly proportioned bodies, and almost anything that might provoke laughter. It is laughter, he sees, that helps people through many testing moments in life. Growing up in the Depression, he saw how the comedy of such entertainers as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, W. C. Fields, and Jack Benny boosted public morale. Vonnegut has even described his books as being like mosaics, where each tile is a separate little joke.

A characteristic of the slapstick comedians such as Laurel and Hardy whom Vonnegut applauds is that they "bargain in good faith with destiny." They are decent people who honestly try and who naïvely expect fair return. Vonnegut sees most people as being like that, which is one reason why there are few villains in his books. Romantic love, he argues, is overestimated, but what is important is treating other people with "common human decency," a phrase he often repeats. That also may account for the kindly tone that persists in Vonnegut's fiction, however sharp the satire.

Stylistically, Vonnegut's work suggests the influ-

ence of his early work in journalism. There is little flourish, elaborate description, or prolonged psychological characterization. His prose is compressed, functional, and curt. In the middle novels, notably *Cat's Cradle* and *Breakfast of Champions*, exaggeratedly short sentences, paragraphs, and chapters are conspicuous.

Vonnegut's mature fiction also displays characteristics associated with postmodernism, such as declaring its own fictionality, refusing to be consistent in form, and not trying to order a chaotic world. Such elements are seen in the chopped-up and shuffled chronology of *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Vonnegut's own appearance in *Breakfast of Champions* as the author, discussing what he will do next with the characters; his use of drawings and his mixing of history and fantasy in that same book; his basing the world of *Deadeye Dick* on the characters and setting of his previous work *Breakfast of Champions*; and the number game ending of *Hocus Pocus*, in which the reader must unravel a sequence of numerical puzzles to learn the answer to questions posed by the novel's narrator.

Such characteristics add up to a highly individualized style. This effect is heightened by the way in which Vonnegut enters many of his novels directly and personally. Often there is a character who seems partly autobiographical, standing for some aspect of Vonnegut: Billy Pilgrim, the soldier and prisoner of war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or the science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, for example. Frequently there is also an autobiographical preface or introduction in which Vonnegut discusses his life and how it relates to the present story. Hence the reader may sense an unusually overt connection between the fiction and the author when reading Vonnegut's work.

MOTHER NIGHT

First published: 1961

Type of work: Novel

A former American double agent comes to suspect that he really was the Nazi he pretended to be.

Mother Night, Vonnegut's third novel, differs from its predecessors in having no emphasis on technol-

ogy or use of a fictional future. It is the first to be written with a first-person narrator, which deepens the characterization of the protagonist and intensifies the soul-searching, both on his part and the author's, that goes on in this novel. *Mother Night* is also the first of his novels to have an autobiographical introduction, added to the 1966 edition, in which Vonnegut ruminates about his own wartime experience and his being of German origin. He notes: "If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have *been* a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes." That thought illustrates the moral that Vonnegut sees in this novel: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

The pretense in this story concerns Howard Campbell, an American playwright living in Germany with a German wife as World War II breaks out. Campbell is persuaded to remain in Germany, cultivate the Nazis, and become an American agent. He becomes increasingly successful as a Nazi propagandist, although his broadcasts contain coded information vital to the Allies. At war's end he is spirited back to New York because his secret role cannot be revealed and he is generally thought to be a Nazi. He is hunted by vengeful patriots and by admiring neo-Nazis racists—and by the Israelis, to whom he eventually delivers himself.

Campbell's narrative is written in an Israeli prison as he searches himself for the answers to the question of whether he was really the Nazi he pretended to be or the secret spy, whether he did more to further Nazi crimes than he needed to, and what he would have done if the Germans had won. He had always believed that his propaganda was too ludicrous to believe and that he could remain detached from the horrors around him, yet the fact remained that many Nazis found him inspirational. What sustained Campbell during the war was the love of his actress wife, Helga Noth. They would retreat into a private world of love, defined by their big double bed, and become a separate "Nation of Two." That escape is denied when Helga disappears while entertaining German troops.

Clearly, this novel raises questions of the "good Germans" who opposed the Nazis but never spoke out against them or their atrocities, and it probably looks back to the Joseph McCarthy hearings of the

early 1950's, when the American government was involved in a "witch-hunt" for suspected Communists. Almost certainly it reflects some doubts on Vonnegut's part about his former role as a public relations person at General Electric. It also prompts readers to ask themselves about those situations in which they may have believed they remained inwardly loyal to certain values while doing nothing publicly to oppose their violation. The novel takes a hard look at how people survive in such times as the Nazi reign, either believing themselves secretly aloof or escaping into narrow personal worlds, or by what Vonnegut calls "schizophrenia"—simply obliterating a part of their consciousness.

In the end, Campbell commits suicide, condemning himself for "crimes against myself." He is unable to unravel the pros and cons of his public role; what he does know is that he betrayed his conscience and misused both his love for Helga and his integrity as a writer. The issue of a writer's integrity comes up in several of Vonnegut's novels, starting with *Player Piano*. His writers frequently have to decide whether to compromise in order to achieve sales, for example, or determine what responsibility they bear for actions to which they may prompt their readers.

Campbell goes from being a romantic playwright dealing in pure fantasy to a propagandist contributing to hideous atrocities. *Mother Night* also extends the moral issue to include everyone, inasmuch as they may try to author parts of their lives, create illusions for themselves, and manipulate others like characters. *Mother Night*, especially with its added introduction, reflects Vonnegut's ruminations about Dresden and about the contradictions implicit in his being a German American fighting against Germans, who then is nearly killed by the Americans. It reflects his concerns about the Allies' destruction of historic, nonmilitary Dresden and thousands of civilian lives in the name of a noble cause. It also shows him moving to a first-person voice, which enables him to explore directly the inner doubts such issues raise. The novel is especially compelling because its questions are not easy to resolve. Howard Campbell's dilemma is no easier for the reader to resolve than it is for him. He remains one of Vonnegut's most complete characterizations, the more haunting because the reader may think, on a smaller scale, that "there, but for the grace of God, go I."

CAT'S CRADLE

First published: 1963

Type of work: Novel

A careless scientific genius leaves his children crystals that turn all the world's water into ice.

Cat's Cradle is narrated by "Jonah," or John, who originally intends to write a book about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima called "The Day the World Ended." The book he ends up writing is the present one, which could have the same title, although it is about a different apocalypse. John sets out to interview "Newt," the son of the late Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the "Fathers" of the first atom bomb.

There are three Hoenikker children: Frank, the oldest; Angela, a tall musician; and the diminutive Newt. The father has left each of his children a vial of crystals of ice-nine, a compound that turns water to ice at room temperature. Angela has used hers to buy a "tom cat husband" who turns out to be a United States agent, Newt has turned over his to a tiny dancer from the Bolshoi Ballet who is a Soviet agent, and Frank uses his to gain his position as chief adviser to Papa Monzano, dictator of the island of San Lorenzo, where most of the plot is set.

Also on San Lorenzo is a fugitive preacher named Bokonon, founder of a religion called "Bokononism," which has been invented as a panacea for the population of an island so destitute that no economic system can possibly help them. Bokononism is outlawed but practiced by virtually everyone on the island. Its tenets are contained in the Books of Bokonon, which begin, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." Vonnegut, the former anthropology student, obviously enjoys inventing this religion, parodying the way religions are shaped to fit the needs of particular times, places, and populations. He also has fun inventing the language made up of the dialect of San Lorenzo and the vocabulary of Bokononism. To Bokononists, nations are "granfalloon," lies are "foma," and one's inevitable destiny is one's "Zah-mah-ki-bo."

Ultimately, Papa Monzano uses his ice-nine crystals to commit suicide, thus starting the chain reaction that turns all the world's water to ice and dooms humanity. Those islanders not already

killed join Bokonon in suicide. Jonah plans to write his story of “The Day the World Ended” before he, too, takes ice-nine.

While *Cat’s Cradle* takes a view of religions that is at once spoofing and anthropologically valid, it also comments on the nature of fiction. In so doing, it draws analogies between preachers and writers. Both use words to persuade audiences of the truth of the visions of the worlds they create. Both, this novel seems to say, may be like the maker of the cat’s cradle, who tells the child it sees the cat and sees the cradle, where there is only string. Bokonon makes a religion of a fiction, just as the writer makes up a plausible world out of words. Bokonon, however, admits his religion is “shameless,” if helpful, lies. In *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut essentially does the same, prefacing it with the epigraph “Nothing in this book is true” and beginning with a borrowing of Herman Melville’s opening of *Moby Dick* (1851), possibly the most conspicuous sentence in American literature. He then spoofs serious fictional forms with 127 “chapters,” each with its own joke title, made-up words, calypsos, and poems; a digressive, rambling plot; and a bizarre array of slapstick characters.

While *Cat’s Cradle* typifies earlier Vonnegut with its ending in mass suicide and the end of the world, it is irresistibly comic and light in tone. In the previous three novels, Vonnegut had worked with recognizable forms: the dystopian novel in *Player Piano*, the space opera with *The Sirens of Titan*, and the confessional novel in *Mother Night*. *Cat’s Cradle* is strikingly different and shows the author emerging with a style that is uniquely his own. The blend of serious social commentary and irreverent lampooning, of cynicism and compassion, of caricature figures and staccato style, would become Vonnegut’s trademark.

GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER

First published: 1965

Type of work: Novel

An alcoholic philanthropist tries to prove that his obsession with the needy does not mean he is insane.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater: Or, Pearls Before Swine is the story of a multimillionaire who, traumatized by a wartime experience, tries to compensate with philanthropy and by treating the underprivileged with kindness. He seeks to enact the slogan, “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind,” which some have seen as the essence of Vonnegut. This proves to be difficult and complicated, however, in a society that equates riches with merit and morality, and poverty with sloth and undeservingness. Eliot Rosewater’s egalitarian efforts cause universal doubt about his sanity, drive his wife to a breakdown, infuriate his father to the point of obsession, and eventually lead to his own mental collapse.

Vonnegut writes that a sum of money, the Rosewater fortune, is the central character of the novel. The distribution of wealth and its social and psychological consequences is certainly the novel’s central theme. One can see the impact on Vonnegut’s life of the Great Depression behind this novel. Through prolonged unemployment, his father became purposeless and reclusive, while his mother could not live in the style in which she had been raised, and she was anguished to the point of suicide.

A second major theme of this book is neurosis. Almost every character suffers some degree of mental affliction, often accompanied or caused by physical malaise. The craziness contributes to both the poignancy that occurs in this novel and the humor that dominates it, but through the wacky characters and events, Vonnegut examines troubling social issues that he sees pervading America: excessive wealth alongside dire poverty; attitudes that make the poor despised, even by themselves; purposelessness, bred alike by unemployment and unearned riches; and the loneliness, depression, and suicidal complexes generated by such an economic and moral structure.

The trigger for Eliot’s neurosis seems to be that in the war he killed some German soldiers who were actually noncombatant volunteer fire fighters. For Eliot, volunteer fire fighters are the perfect symbolic saviors. Without pay, they will go to the point of risking their own lives to help anyone, regardless of who or what they are. Eliot’s philanthropy seems an effort to atone for his mistake and to become a kind of social fire fighter, rescuing those suffocating in the flames of the economic system. At first he tries giving money to charities, mu-

seums, and other causes but feels no satisfying consequences of his actions and sinks into alcoholism. He then moves back to Rosewater County, Indiana, his ancestral home, where he organizes fly hunts for the unemployed and dispenses aspirin, sympathy, and glasses of wine to the distraught. He becomes a slovenly slum saint, to the despair of his conservative, hygiene-obsessed senator father, while his wife, Sylvia, breaks down under Eliot's neglect of her and his obsession with the needy.

An avaricious attorney named Norman Mushari (first seen in *The Sirens of Titan*) tries to overturn Eliot's inheritance by proving him insane, but Eliot is rescued by Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's shabby science-fiction writer who reappears in several novels and is perhaps his best-known character. Trout argues that Eliot is not insane—what he has done is to conduct a social experiment. “The problem is this,” says Trout: “How to love people who have no use?” The answer, he says, is to find a way of “treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*.” That is what volunteer fire fighters do and what Eliot has tried to do in a society in which such a response is rare.

Vonnegut once said in an interview that the Dresden firebombing was less of an influence on him than the Great Depression. True or not, he is certainly deeply concerned with the kinds of socioeconomic issues stamped in his memory in those years; this novel emphasizes those issues (as does the later *Jailbird*). It offers no easy answers, but its implications seem almost as religious as political and may owe as much to the Sermon on the Mount as to the political or economic theories of Karl Marx or John Maynard Keynes. At the end, Eliot is echoing biblical language and might be seen as a kind of modern saint or Christ figure. The novel asks what this acquisitive age would make of someone who advocated giving everything to the poor. Where limitless greed is condoned and approved, a new Christ would seem crazy unless a crafty Trout could help out.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater has some of Vonnegut's most interestingly developed characters. The interactions between Eliot, his father, and his wife are psychologically complex. The rest of the cast are caricatures, but they are just what is needed for the novel's moral commentary—and for the broad comedy that stops it from becoming too didactic.

At the point that Eliot's mind snaps, he imagines that he sees Indianapolis consumed by the Dresden firestorm. Other than the references to fires and fire fighters, there is little other allusion to the apocalypse that is to dominate Vonnegut's next novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Yet the story of a man who returns from the war haunted and changed by what he has seen parallels the author's experience and paves the way for his next protagonist, Billy Pilgrim.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

First published: 1969

Type of work: Novel

An American prisoner of war witnesses the firebombing of Dresden during World War II and time-travels to the planet Tralfamadore.

In full, the title, *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or, The Children's Crusade, a Duty-Dance with Death*, says much about Vonnegut's sixth novel. This is the novel in which Vonnegut confronts his traumatic experience of having been in Dresden when, on February 13, 1945, it was bombed by the Allies, producing a firestorm that virtually destroyed the city and killed perhaps 130,000 people. He survived the raid in the underground meat locker of a slaughterhouse, to spend the following days exhuming corpses from the ruins and cremating them. For him, Dresden becomes the symbol of the senseless horror of war, of humankind's self-destructive propensities, and of how events arbitrarily overrule the lives of individuals.

“The Children's Crusade” comes from the wife of a wartime buddy's having said, “You were just *babies* then!” Vonnegut reflects that they were indeed very young, and the soldiers in his novel are swept along as helplessly as the hapless children of the original medieval Children's Crusade, many of whom were, in fact, sold into slavery. “A Duty-Dance with Death” expresses Vonnegut's need to encounter in words his experience with death, to wrestle with its meaning, or rather, lack of meaning.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the wartime experience is undergone by his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. As his name implies, Billy is a kind of universal man-child

going through the pilgrimage of life. In this way, Vonnegut is able to embody directly his personal experience in an autobiographical character, while universalizing its meaning through the use of an Everyman figure.

Similarly, Vonnegut speaks directly as himself in the first and last chapters and interjects periodically throughout, "That was I. That was me," permitting him both to express intensely personal emotions and to make detached editorial comment. He avails himself of the chance to be in the story and outside it, so that he can tell his personal experience and perhaps come to a catharsis. Yet Vonnegut does not entirely want to make sense of Dresden or to make his book an explanation. Dresden is, for him, an event without sense, and it becomes an emblem of the senseless and arbitrary in life. Those qualities are emphasized when the Germans shoot one of the American prisoners as



a looter when he picks up a teapot from among the ruins. Such strict and arbitrary justice in the midst of the carnage is the crowning irony of the novel.

Part of Vonnegut's resistance to ordering and rationalizing the events of his story is to chop them up, fragment them, and displace them chronologically. Billy Pilgrim becomes "unstuck in time,"

which means that his mind constantly shifts between times and places, as, then, does the novel. Because the story recounts Billy's postwar life up to his death, and his adventures, real or imagined, on the planet Tralfamadore, there is considerable disjunction. The reader is jerked from a childhood memory to the war years to a middle-aged Billy (an optometrist) to the preacher Pilgrim's death, and from Ilium, New York, to Dresden to Tralfamadore.

The style of the novel emphasizes its disjunction. Each of the ten short chapters is divided into short segments, each of three or four paragraphs, which may themselves be no more than a sentence long. A fragment of one scene succeeds a fragment of another, not ordered by time, place, or theme, but hurled together almost as a collage. Looked at

all together, however, the parts add up to a moving depiction replete with ethical implications and emotional impact, if shorn of the kind of direct moral summations Vonnegut supplies in *Mother Night*.

Slaughterhouse-Five sees the return of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's fictional science-fiction writer, and also of Eliot Rosewater and Howard Campbell, so that, in part, the novel builds upon preceding ones. This is not the novel's only metafictional characteristic; it mixes fact and fiction, history and fantasy. It includes quotations from actual documents by President Harry Truman and Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby and from the fictional Trout and Campbell as if equally authentic. There are quotations of all kinds, from mildly off-color jokes to the Serenity Prayer, scattered throughout the book. There is the world of Tralfamadore, presented right alongside the historical events of World War II.

An often-noticed trait of this novel is its repetition of the phrase, "So it goes." This occurs every time anything or anyone dies. The repeated phrase has annoyed some readers, who see it as inappropriately flippant. Its repetition drums home the amount of death there is in this story and in the world, constantly calling attention to that, while at the same time reflecting a weary recognition that the author can do little to change things. Although *Slaughterhouse-Five* has earned an enduring reputation, much of its initial popularity was related to the climate of the times. In the late 1960's, protest of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was at its height. There was a large, receptive audience for an antiwar novel. The young, among whom Vonnegut was already popular, were intensely active politically. The legions of students who campaigned for antiwar presidential candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy in 1967 and 1968 were frequently called "the Children's Crusade" in the press, and that allusion in Vonnegut's subtitle was not missed by readers of the time. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, then, is remarkable in its ability to evoke pathos and laughter together, to simultaneously voice antiwar outrage and philosophical acceptance, and to combine the story of personal experience with a broader social commentary. The novel's unique form, which enables it to accomplish so much, is the culmination of Vonnegut's experiments with narrative technique in the five preceding novels.

SLAPSTICK**First published:** 1976**Type of work:** Novel

A giant neanderthaloid twin becomes president and creates artificial extended families to end Americans' loneliness.

In the prologue to *Slapstick: Or, Lonesome No More!* Vonnegut writes, "This is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography." That may seem surprising, given that the protagonist is a seven-foot, six-inch neanderthaloid with seven fingers on each hand and six nipples, but he clarifies his point by saying: "It is about what life *feels* like to me." He calls it "grotesque situational comedy," and that seems an apt description of the bizarre content of this novel. He also dedicates the novel to comedians Laurel and Hardy, who "did their best with every test." There is a lot of that spirit in the novel, too.

Wilbur Swain and his twin, Eliza, are born so abnormal that their parents send them to be raised in a distant, obscure mansion. While they learn to behave like idiots in public because that is expected of creatures who look like them, they are actually capable of great intelligence so long as they are together. Separated, they become dull. Yet separated they are for most of their lives. Wilbur goes on to become president of the United States on the campaign slogan "Lonesome No More!" (which is also the novel's subtitle). As president, Wilbur institutes a system of artificial extended families, wherein everyone is issued a new middle name by the government and thus inherits a whole set of new relatives of the same name. Wilbur, however, comes to preside over a country which, under the impact of variable gravity, the Albanian flu, and the "Green Death," is disintegrating into warring dukedoms and states. He ends his days living among the ruins of Manhattan.

The world of this novel is one of hyperbolic distortion. In that respect it is heightened slapstick, the world rendered in manic-depressive surrealism. Vonnegut has amused with invented religions before, but the Church of Jesus Christ the Kidnapped, whose believers constantly snap their heads to look over their shoulders in the hope of

seeing their abducted savior, seems peculiarly suited to this novel, in which so much of the humor is visual. Similarly, the Chinese experiments that vary gravity, so that on some days bridges collapse and elevator cables snap, while on others all men have erections and can toss a manhole cover like a discus, emulate the broad, often painful comedy of slapstick.

Vonnegut's "grotesque situational comedy" includes an impression of his personal life as well as the national. He speaks of how his sister Alice loved slapstick comedy and describes how, when she heard that her husband had been killed as she herself was dying of cancer, commented, "Slapstick." That situation, with both parents dying within days of each other in tragic circumstances and leaving four young children, is a good example of the kind of real-life grotesquerie that contributes to Vonnegut's vision in *Slapstick*. The close relationship of Eliza and Wilbur may be seen as a play on Vonnegut's closeness to Alice, whom he describes as still the imagined audience for most of his writing. Similarly, Wilbur's dependence on "tri-benzo-Deportamil" may be a slapstick rendition of the author's own use of antidepressant drugs at one point in his life.

"Lonesome No More!" is a slogan Vonnegut actually suggested that vice presidential candidate Sargent Shriver might use during the 1972 election campaign. Believing that the large, extended family of relatives living in proximity has virtually ceased to exist in America and that the small nuclear family is incapable of fulfilling the same role, Vonnegut has argued seriously that other kinds of social groupings are needed to support the individual. When he went to Biafra during the Nigerian civil war, he was most impressed with how tribal families operated, and this experience gave rise to the artificial extended families presented in *Slapstick*. The idea is treated humorously and shown with limitations, but the problem of individual isolation and loneliness within American society is one Vonnegut has always taken seriously.

His return to the theme of love in this novel is also familiar. Eliza's argument that saying "I love you" to someone leaves them no option but the obligatory "I love you, too" echoes those exchanges in the same words and the same tone in *Player Piano*. Romantic love—and here, sibling love becomes erotic—remains volatile, emotional, and

undependable. Vonnegut again reasserts the superiority of “common human decency,” of treating others with respect and consideration. There are other reiterations from earlier work. The name Bernard O’Hare—actually that of a wartime buddy—is used again, and Norman Mushari reappears. There is even the reappearance of a boring Paradise. These “in jokes” become part of the humor of the novel.

Some of the humor has aroused criticism of *Slapstick* as being cavalier with serious issues and carelessly dismissive. The repeated, interspersed uses of “Hi ho” and “And so on” particularly draw ire. They are the words of a first-person narrator, however, and one who is frequently high on “tribenzo-Deportamil” and having to describe cataclysmic events beyond his control. The phrases and the tone are as much an invocation of the slapstick films of Laurel and Hardy, to whom the book is dedicated, as are the caricatures and exaggerated actions. That tone changes in the ending, where Wilbur has died and a third-person narrator takes over. The account of his granddaughter Melody’s journey to share Wilbur’s old age is a touching and affirmative one. Her act is one of family love, and the story of how she is helped along the way by other people, not only those of her extended family, and by birds and animals, is a warmly affirmative one. Closing the novel with “*Das Ende*” is Vonnegut’s gesture to the large, close-knit, German-speaking family that once existed in Indianapolis, as described in the prologue.

GALÁPAGOS

First published: 1985

Type of work: Novel

The last survivors of the human race escape to the Galápagos Islands and evolve over a million years into furry amphibians.

Galápagos is narrated from a future one million years hence by the ghost of Leon Trout, son of Vonnegut’s frequently used character, science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout. Leon was beheaded while working as a shipbuilder, and his ghost inhabits a cruise ship bound for Guayaquil, Ecuador, to carry tourists to the Galápagos Islands.

While the ship is awaiting its maiden voyage, the world economic system breaks down under the burben of global debt, and World War III is triggered. Those events, however, which contain typical Vonnegut warnings about contemporary conditions, do not end the human race; what does is a corkscrew-like microorganism that destroys ovaries.

As order breaks down in the port of Guayaquil, ten people escape in the cruise ship. They reach Santa Rosalia, one of the Galápagos Islands. At this point there is only one male, the ship’s captain, and the women include an Indianapolis schoolteacher who eventually becomes the mother of the new human race. She transmits the captain’s sperm to six Indian girls and impregnates them. The male line survives in the baby of a Japanese woman. He is born furry as the result of a genetic mutation caused when his grandparents were caught in the atom bombing of Hiroshima.

Over the succeeding million years, as the descendants of these original survivors reproduce, they adapt to their largely marine life by developing flippers, instead of hands and feet, and smaller, streamlined heads. They also inherit the fur of the Japanese mutant ancestor. Thus they evolve as seal-like “fisherfolk.”

Charles Darwin and evolutionary theory are major themes in this book, and evolution is even reflected in the form of *Galápagos*. The novel has fifty-two chapters, as the year has weeks. The first part of the book is called “The Thing Was,” capturing the colloquial way to refer to complications in a narrative as well as alluding to the original form of the human animal. The second part’s title is “And the Thing Became,” recounting the adaptation to aquatic life. Having *Galápagos* narrated by the son of Vonnegut’s fictional alter ego, Kilgore Trout, makes it seem as if the novel itself has evolved out of Vonnegut’s own earlier fiction.

Vonnegut recognizes that evolutionary theory is often misunderstood and that it leaves unanswered questions. He points out that evolution is not simply an inevitable progression of constant improvement. Contingency often shapes the course of events, such as the occurrence of a new virus that destroys female reproductive organs or the mutation caused by the Hiroshima bomb. Moreover, evolution is not always toward the better. For example, in the Irish elk, the deer family’s defense mech-

anism of antlers was taken to such an extreme that it ultimately led to the extinction of the species.

Some of these ideas Vonnegut treats with typical humor. The convoluted development of the first part of the book, with its many characters, digressions, histories, and coincidences, creates its own kind of whimsical evolution into the main plot concerning the few who reach Santa Rosalia. The short chapters, chopped into subsections, end with suspenseful jokes. It is as if *Galápagos* itself, like evolution, is shaped not by grand design but by chance and coincidence.

One of the central ideas, comical but pointed, that the novel presents is that the huge human brain has become as burdensome an evolutionary step for humans as the Irish elk's huge antlers were. Humans' brains, with their capacity to invent, imagine, and hold opinions, have become their greatest enemies. One problem, Vonnegut posits, is that it has proved impossible for humans to imagine something that could happen without trying to make it happen, often with disastrous results. Similarly, opinions, not necessarily grounded in fact, become so firmly held that they drive humans to irrational acts. In *Galápagos*, then, Vonnegut reverses the general supposition that as people evolve to higher intelligence they improve. His fisherfolk develop flippers and lose the manual dexterity to make tools or weapons, and as their skulls shrink, their brains diminish, and they become harmonious and content.

Implicit in *Galápagos*, despite its humor, are some grim warnings. Among the most obvious are warnings about the world economic situation, with its inequalities resulting in massive starvation and in debts that threaten the monetary system. There are warnings about the possibilities of accidental war, of conflict over "opinions," and of new viruses made dangerous by environmental damage to immune systems. Behind all these ideas, though, looms the overriding danger of what humans are themselves, here presented as the danger posed by their oversized brains.

Galápagos is dominated by a positive tone, however, not only because of its humor but because it ultimately is affirmative about human decency. It is notably affirmative about women. While many of the men are impaired or incompetent, the women, particularly the central mother figure, Mary Hepburn, cope, survive, and nurture. Even the ghostly

narrator rejects his father's cynicism and his own tormented past to become reconciled. The epigraph, borrowed from Anne Frank, is appropriate: "In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart."

"HARRISON BERGERON"

First published: 1961 (collected in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, 1968)

Type of work: Short story

A married couple epitomize loss of fundamental humanity by witnessing and failing to respond to the murder of their exceptionally gifted son.

First published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, "Harrison Bergeron" is set in 2081, when equality has finally been achieved by elimination of the exceptionally gifted or by controlling them via technology. Such methods of control include mental handicap radios in ears which emit ghastly sounds to interrupt and control thought, masks which conceal exceptionally attractive faces and clothing which does the same for bodies, and weights that the physically strong carry at all times, like handicaps for horses. However, George and Hazel Bergeron's son, Harrison, is so exceptionally gifted physically, artistically, and mentally that the HG (Handicapper General) men come and take him away. Harrison escapes, though, and enters a television station where a dance program is being broadcast (which his parents are watching), throws off his physical handicaps, declares himself emperor, and encourages one exceptionally beautiful (and onerously handicapped) female dancer to throw off her handicaps and dance with him and be his empress. During the dance by these two beautiful and gifted people, and at the moment of their kiss, the dancers are shot dead by the Handicapper General. Harrison's parents, too handicapped and controlled to be able to focus clearly on or understand or respond to the death of their son, simply continue watching television, although George's ear radio noises are drastically increased to impede comprehension and reaction, and Hazel cries because of "something real sad on televi-

sion.” She just cannot remember what it was.

“Harrison Bergeron” effectively renders Vonnegut’s vision of the unethical, misguided use of scientific and technological advancements in the future, a frequent theme in his later fiction, such as in *Cat’s Cradle* in 1963. Under the guise of an admirable equality, those in power in 2081 use technology to maintain their power and the status quo by controlling, by force if necessary, the evolutionary progression of human abilities. Vonnegut would return to this theme of evolutionary interference in *Galápagos* in 1985, with more subtle examination of the ambiguous permutations. Although a creative and ironically humorous story in which the laughter is, as always in Vonnegut, a painful response to an absurd world, “Harrison Bergeron” lacks the originality and technical creativity of Vonnegut’s best fiction, particularly since Aldous Huxley had more realistically and effectively dramatized the same themes and ideas in *Brave New World* (1932) nearly thirty years earlier.

BLUEBEARD

First published: 1987

Type of work: Novel

An aging painter meditates upon his ancestry, his war experiences, his problematic relationships, and his artistic failures, and achieves catharsis by his final artistic endeavor.

Bluebeard is Kurt Vonnegut’s most extensive examination of artistic endeavor, namely painting by abstract expressionists, but in reality all artistic activity, including literature. Although precursors of this artistic meditation are elements of earlier works, including the questioning of the truth-telling capacity of literature in *Cat’s Cradle*, nowhere else has Vonnegut directly faced the fundamental issue of whether art at its highest is representational of reality or is a self-enclosed, nonrepresentational medium for presentation of the artist’s emotions. The narrator, Rabo Karabekian, an elderly artist of Armenian ancestry who began as a copyist but becomes an abstract expressionist, can copy anything but is frustrated by the criticism that his representational painting lacks “soul,” or emotional profun-

dity. Then, his work as an abstract expressionist is condemned as so subjectively nonrepresentational as to be meaningless. His abstract expressionist work is also jeopardized by modern technology, as he uses a paint, Sateen Dura-Luxe, which is supposedly a significant improvement on earlier paints but which literally disintegrates after a few months, sabotaging virtually all of Karabekian’s expressionist paintings, including a huge one on public display in New York City. Thus, again, Vonnegut satirizes the blind faith of the modern world in technology, a theme throughout his fiction.

Humiliated by his failings as both representational painter and abstract expressionist and motivated by the suicide of abstract expressionist friends and by the death of his wife, like several Vonnegut narrators, Karabekian emerges from his personal underground of tragic loss of loved ones and personal failure to make a final, successful attempt at art. Realizing that the greatest painting, and by implication literature, is representational of and commentative on life, the narrator turns to his most powerful life experience, the view of the valley where he and other World War II prisoners were taken at the end of the war and released. With thousands of people present, of virtually all nationalities, conditions of health, occupations, and mentalities, and including even remnants of Hitler’s armies with their killing machines, the sight is unforgettable, reflecting the customary Vonnegut premise that war and its aftermath are the fundamental, defining realities of human existence. Karabekian renders that scene on the panels of his largest failed abstract expressionist painting, and it is a success, the catharsis that reunifies his life and art. As with the paintings of little girls in his house, representing human beauty prior to the pain and horror of real life and which cause visitors to leave saying “no more war,” the greatest art, as Karabekian realizes and as Vonnegut believes and practices in his fiction, is art that shows the tragedy, the pain, of war and related destructive human actions, as well as art that shows the courage, humor, and kindness that are the only means to combat the horror. Vonnegut’s fiction reflects a lifetime devoted to showing the horror and encouraging resistance to it, and *Bluebeard* is a powerful addition to that tragic depiction and lifetime of comic resistance, a novel worthy to be counted among Vonnegut’s best work.

HOCUS POCUS

First published: 1990

Type of work: Novel

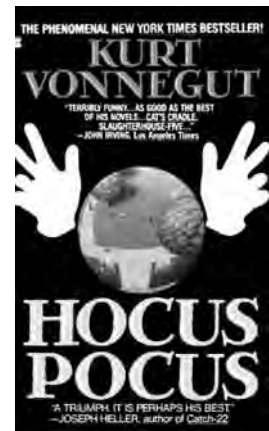
A former Vietnam military officer, college and prison teacher, and now jailbird contemplates his disastrous life and a schizophrenic, disintegrating America in the near future.

Hocus Pocus is perhaps Vonnegut's grimmest and most powerful indictment of Americans and American life, indicative of why fifteen years later he would title his collection of essays *A Man Without a Country*. This novel is set in 2001, enabling Vonnegut a decade earlier to project his vision of what America would soon become. What he sees is revealed by his first-person narrator, his typical war veteran; this time, it is a veteran of the Vietnam War—fittingly for this novel, America's most humiliating military venture. The narrator is presented as the last person to leave by helicopter from the top of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, and the experience enables him to emerge from this personal underground a changed man, convinced that all pro-war propaganda is "hocus pocus," of which he was an admitted master as a military spokesman himself and dedicated to trying to tell the truth, without self-serving deception.

What America has become in the near future is a schizophrenic, disintegrating world, symbolized both by the college for the wealthy but learning-disabled where the narrator finds postwar employment and by the prison for impoverished and uneducated minorities directly across a lake from the college. The U.S. Supreme Court has reinstated segregation, at least in prisons, and while the number of learning-disabled wealthy students has remained a constant number at three hundred, the prison population has grown constantly, to ten thousand. Also, America is basically under absentee ownership, having been sold bit by bit to foreign nations and individuals by wealthy Americans who "take the money and run," unwilling to be responsible for America's future. Race- and class-based uprisings are prevalent, including in the South Bronx, and gasoline is so scarce and expensive that it is to be found only in semisecret locations.

In his role as teacher of physics, the narrator attempts to expose the overweening pride and abysmal ignorance that have generated much of the disintegration of America, both represented by the failed perpetual motion machine created by the college's founder and prominently placed in the foyer of the college's library, proof of blind faith in technological solutions by humans who are, in the words of the narrator's dead war buddy, "1,000 times dumber and meaner than they think they are." The narrator's efforts only get him fired as a college teacher, though, with the firing orchestrated by a college trustee who is a conservative television talk-show host and whose daughter uses the technology of voice recording to take the narrator's statements out of context and thereby convict him of anti-American teaching. As the narrator notes, a history professor at the college says much worse but only about the distant past; however, the narrator, Eugene Debs Hartke (aptly named), talks about America's present inequalities, injustices, and delusional destructiveness.

After being fired, the narrator is hired by the prison, whose director is a Hiroshima survivor by the mere chance that he went into a ditch to retrieve a ball when the explosion occurred, with all around him incinerated, reflecting Vonnegut's belief that time and chance are the prime movers of the universe. Inevitably in a race- and class-divided world, a prison break occurs, and the minority prisoners (who are not rehabilitated but only watch television reruns) attack the college and kill the faculty and staff who are present (the students are away on vacation) and are themselves killed when enough American military finally arrive from the Bronx and other intracountry battle fronts to address the prison revolt. Then, since he is Caucasian and educated, and under the assumption that no members of a minority could have planned the break, the narrator is arrested, charged with being the ringleader, and imprisoned, from which location and viewpoint he putatively authors the novel.



Kurt Vonnegut

Unlike in *Galápagos* and *Bluebeard*, there is very little optimism in *Hocus Pocus*, aside from the narrator's humane insight and understanding. The novel conveys Vonnegut's conviction that humans will ultimately destroy themselves, probably sooner than they think, given their arrogance and ignorance and self-deception—their hocus pocus. Vonnegut has admitted that he struggled mightily in writing one more novel, *Timequake*, and one reason is probably because he subconsciously realized that he said it all in *Hocus Pocus* and said it incredibly well. *Hocus Pocus* is the powerful culmination of Vonnegut's fiction.

SUMMARY

Vonnegut has likened his role as writer in society to that of the canaries in the coal mines of old—to give alarm of danger. He has also spoken of himself as a shaman, responding to and speaking about what goes on in society. Yet he remains a comic novelist. His novels, as a result, are full of warning, social commentary, and, frequently, moral judgment, but in their humor and compassion escape heavy didacticism. Vonnegut has evolved a distinctive style. His often fragmented, tragicomic renderings have struck a chord in the readers of his time.

Peter J. Reed; updated by John L. Grigsby

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- In *Player Piano*, is technological advancement part of the problem, part of the solution, or both? Explain what the novel indicates about Kurt Vonnegut's likely attitude toward modern technology.
- In *Mother Night*, what does Vonnegut show about how and why human beings are prone to self-deception? Does he offer any ideas about how self-deception can be minimized, if not avoided?
- How does Billy Pilgrim's being "unstuck in time" affect how the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is structured or constructed? In which of Vonnegut's other novels is this "unstuck in time" technique utilized? Is there a valid psychological basis for this technique? If so, what is it?
- What view of religion is reflected in *Cat's Cradle*?
- How is the structural technique or characterization device of descent into a psychological underground and then emergence with a new, and better, understanding of the world involved in three of Vonnegut's novels? In each instance, what has the main character learned by the experience?
- Based upon *Bluebeard*, what makes a great painting and, by implication, a great novel? How does *Bluebeard* itself embody or fail to embody the qualities of great literature?
- Based upon *Hocus Pocus*, what are Vonnegut's beliefs about the Vietnam War, and about war in general?
- Did the main character in *Hocus Pocus* deserve to be fired as a teacher? Justify your opinion with specifics from the novel, and with explanation of what personal qualities and intellectual abilities a good teacher possesses.