

Kurt Vonnegut, 1922-2007: His Books Combined Science Fiction and Humor With Social Criticism

15 December 2007

VOICE ONE:

I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE TWO:



And I'm Shirley Griffith with PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Kurt Vonnegut, a writer and thinker who shook up the country with his unusual writing style and subjects. He helped energize huge numbers of young people to protest the Vietnam War and to always question the powers that be.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Kurt Vonnegut

It took Kurt Vonnegut about twenty-five years to write his most famous book, "Slaughterhouse-Five." It was published in nineteen sixty-nine. The book remains required reading in high school and college English classes across the country. It includes this description of the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, by Allied forces during World War Two, as witnessed by a soldier named Billy Pilgrim:

READER:

"There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn.

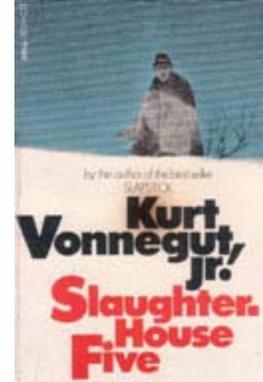
It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead.

So it goes."

VOICE TWO:

Kurt Vonnegut, a prisoner of war like Pilgrim, witnessed the bombing of Dresden. The waste of human life and other treasures greatly angered him. His novels contain some of that anger. But Vonnegut always balanced his work with humor and the use of wildly unlikely events presented as normal.

For example, in "Slaughterhouse-Five," Billy Pilgrim visits the make-believe planet Tralfamadore. He and a beautiful movie star named Montana Wildhack fall in love there in a clear ball of a house. They are studied by the Tralfamadoreans and find happiness.



Kurt Vonnegut compared the science fiction in "Slaughterhouse-Five" to the clowns in the plays of sixteenth century English writer William Shakespeare. Vonnegut believed such literary devices give the reader a rest before the story gets serious again.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Kurt Vonnegut's own life was also filled with tragedy and laughter. He was born in nineteen twenty-two in Indianapolis, Indiana. His father was a building designer. His mother was from an extremely wealthy family. She suffered from mental illness and unhappiness as a failed writer. Vonnegut said his mother would have periods of madness where she would emotionally abuse his father. Vonnegut said his father was the gentlest man on the planet. Edith Vonnegut killed herself on Mother's Day, in nineteen forty-four. The act affected her son his whole life.

In nineteen fifty-eight, Kurt Vonnegut's sister and her husband died within two days of each other. Vonnegut and his wife at the time adopted the couple's three children.

VOICE TWO:

Kurt Vonnegut was interested in writing from at least his teenage years. He worked on his high school's newspaper. Later he studied at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York and became an editor of that school's newspaper. Vonnegut studied biochemistry. He followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Bernard, who was a scientist. However, Kurt Vonnegut was not a very good student. He left Cornell in nineteen forty-three and joined the army during World War Two. German forces captured him during the Battle of the Bulge in Western Europe.

Vonnegut's experiences as a soldier and the bombing of Dresden were among the major influences in his life. He was a pacifist, someone who opposes war and violence for settling conflict. He once said: "You can teach people savagery. They may need savagery, but it's bad for the neighbors. I prefer to teach gentleness."

He was not always gentle on himself, however. He battled depression for most of his life. In nineteen eighty-four, he tried to kill himself by taking too much sleep medicine. He said later that children of a parent who committed suicide will naturally think of death as a sensible solution to any problem.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

After World War Two, Vonnegut married a childhood friend, Jane Cox. They moved to Chicago, Illinois in nineteen forty-five. They had three children. Vonnegut studied anthropology at the University of Chicago. He also worked as a reporter.

Kurt Vonnegut also began writing short stories. They were published in literary magazines. In nineteen fifty-two he wrote his first novel. "Player Piano" was influenced by Vonnegut's work at the power company, General Electric. Vonnegut said it was there that he got the idea of everything being controlled by computers. He told Playboy Magazine in nineteen seventy-three that it made perfect sense to have little clicking boxes, as he called them, make all the decisions for humans. But he said it was not good for human workers to be replaced by machines.

Vonnegut said that he wrote science fiction because General Electric was science fiction to him. "Player Piano" describes a place called Ileum where the humans have surrendered to a computer.

Writers of science fiction are often considered less serious than writers of other kinds of fiction. As a result, Vonnegut's work was published in paperback and ignored by critics for several years.

VOICE TWO:

But people started listening more closely to Kurt Vonnegut's literary voice in the nineteen sixties. There was great public anger and protest over American military action in Vietnam. Distrust for the United States government was growing. Young people and minorities especially were speaking up against America's leaders and cultural restrictions.

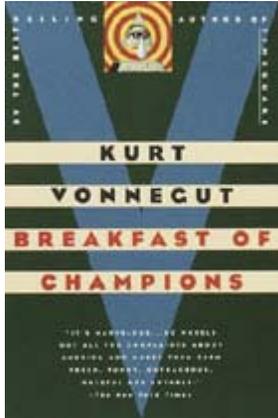
Vonnegut's statements about America, its people and its leaders mixed perfectly with that atmosphere. His novels became favorites of many people involved in the anti-establishment, politically progressive movement of that time.

"Cat's Cradle," published in nineteen sixty-three, is one example. It tells the story of a fictional scientist who helped invent the atomic bomb and something even more dangerous – a substance called ice-nine. "Cat's Cradle" is an extremely funny condemnation of many things. These include the arms race at the time -- efforts by countries to increase their nuclear weapons. It also makes jokes about organized religion and the United States government.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen sixty-four, "Cat's Cradle" won a Hugo Award for science fiction. Also that year, Kurt Vonnegut began teaching at the Writers Workshop at the

University of Iowa. He was a professor for many years and taught English at several universities and colleges. He wrote at least fifteen more books, including non-fiction.



One of those books was "Breakfast of Champions," published in nineteen seventy-three. Vonnegut tells the story of a wealthy and crazy car salesman named Dwayne Hoover. Hoover reads science fiction books written by a man named Kilgore Trout. Hoover becomes more and more sure that the books are not fiction but reality.

Here Kurt Vonnegut reads from an early version of "Breakfast of Champions." The reading took place in New York City in nineteen seventy.

KURT VONNEGUT:

"My name is Dwayne Hoover and I am an experiment by the creator of the universe. I am the only creature in the entire universe who has free will. I am the only creature who has to figure out what to do next and why. Everybody else is a robot.

I am pooped. I wish I were a robot too. It is perfectly exhausting having to reason all the time in a universe I never made."

VOICE TWO:

Kurt Vonnegut and his wife Jane separated in nineteen seventy. Vonnegut married photographer Jill Krementz nine years later. They adopted a daughter.

Vonnegut continued to be politically outspoken. He used the American political crime called the Watergate scandal in his novel "Jailbird." He was also an early environmental activist. He spoke often and loudly about the long-term dangers of fossil fuel use, pollution and waste of natural resources. Vonnegut also condemned the Bush administration and the war in Iraq that began in two thousand three.

VOICE ONE:

Kurt Vonnegut published his last book in two thousand five. "A Man Without A Country" is a collection of his opinions of many subjects, including issues in modern American society.

He died in two thousand seven after suffering brain injuries from a fall in his home. He was eighty-four. Kurt Vonnegut's children placed notes of thanks to his fans on the Vonnegut Web site. His daughter Nanny wrote: "I am so sorry for your loss as well as mine."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Our program was written and produced by Caty Weaver. Jim Tedder read the "Slaughterhouse Five" passage. I'm Steve Ember with Shirley Griffith. You can learn about other famous Americans at voaspecialenglish.com. And join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.