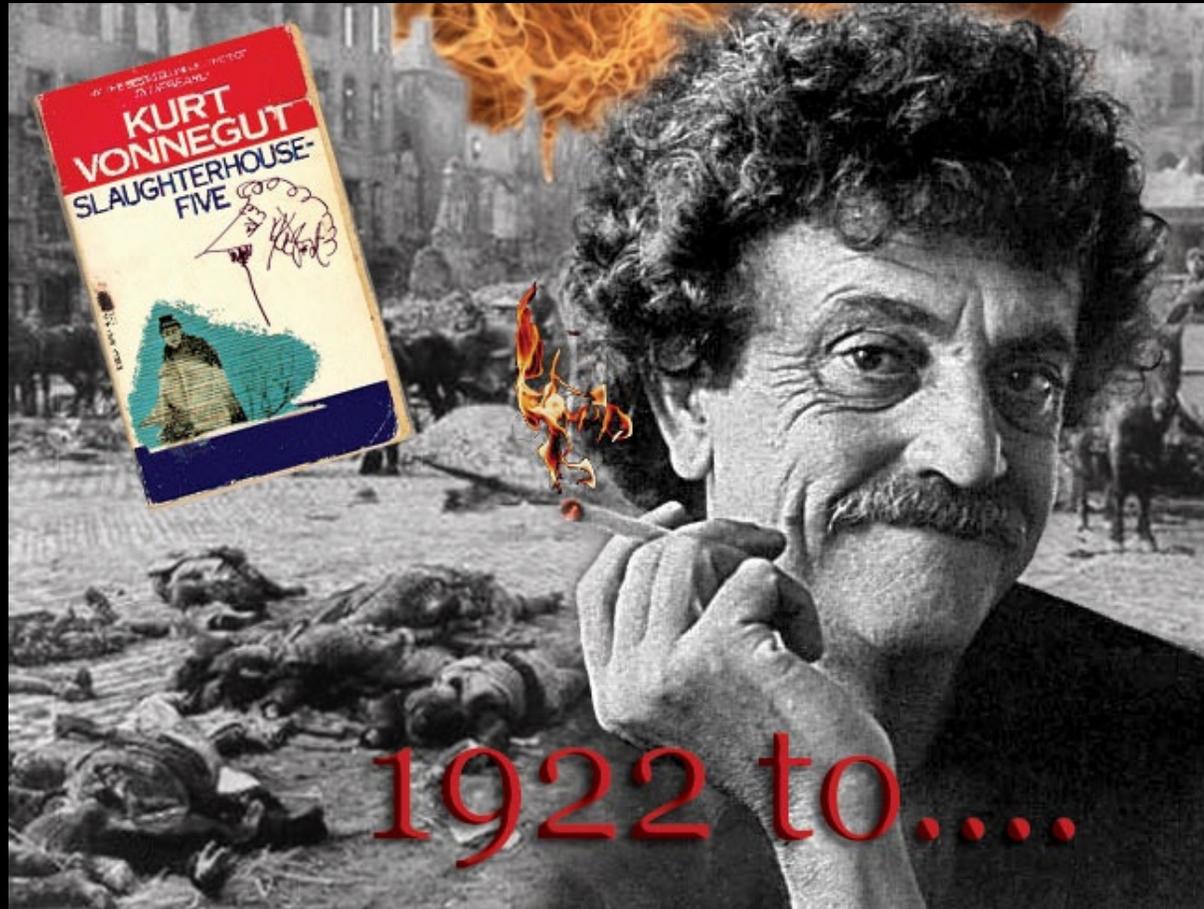


THE DRINK TANK ISSUE 125



AND SO IT GOES: A TRIBUTE TO KURT VONNEGUT

This issue is a look at Vonnegut's effect not only on me, but on others as well. There are quotes throughout from the notebooks and collected sayings of John Garcia. The first piece is one that I've wanted to write for a while. It tells the story of Kurt Vonnegut's effect on my teenage years.

I remember; Chris came over to the house and he had a copy of Cat's Cradle with him. Until then, I didn't know he was a teenager- John Garcia, November 2005

COMING OF AGE IN THE TIME OF VONNEGUT

BY

CHRISTOPHER J. GARCIA

I was 14 when I first came to the writing of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.. It was October 17th, 1989. There was an earthquake coming but I didn't know anything about that. I would be at home, fresh out of the bath and waiting for the Giants-As World Series game to begin. I was alone, Mom was at work and my uncle Wayne, who'd lived with us for years, was away at the game. The house started shaking and I went to a doorway until it was over, just like they used to tell you in school.

On my bed before the quake was my 1/2 read copy of Player Piano. When it was over, it was on the floor.

I remember this because I picked it up and started reading. There was no power, so I was reading by the remaining sunlight and listening to the battery-powered radio. Mom didn't get home until after 9, completely whigged out by what had happened. I read most of the end of the book on the floor by the battery powered nightlight that



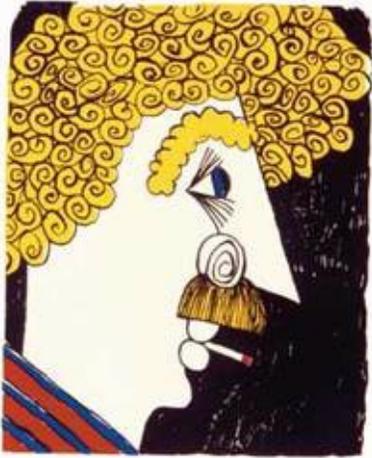
only came on when the room was dark. That was the first book by Kurt Vonnegut I'd ever read. I finished it the next morning when I should have been going to school. They'd cancelled the day since there was no power. Our electricity came back around 2 in the afternoon. No one in the city of Santa

Clara had been killed, and only 6 injuries of any kind were reported.

That was the first Kurt Vonnegut book I'd read. I'd been given a choice between Vonnegut and Sylvia Plath. Plath seemed depressing. So did Vonnegut, in all honesty, but the label science fiction made me take notice. I loved science fiction. I associated it with fandom, which I knew about by that point from my father.

That would appear to be the way things go.

That first book in many ways was a call to my rebellion. It was a story of an engineer, a powerful man in his town of Illuim, New York. I've never trusted engineers. This might not be the start of that feeling, but it certainly was the solidification point. Engineers live in certainty, in significant digits and absolute certainty. Educated guesses are for the soft sciences, the doctors, the biologists. Precision is all that matters to an engineer. I never wanted to be any of those things. I wanted to be a wrestler or a director or an actor or something that left precision even further behind. I wanted no part of the thing. I was always terrible at math, and even worse at being real-



istic.

Player Piano is a book that many see as flawed. That's OK, we're all flawed, aren't we? The thing that strikes me about Player Piano

is that the world it described and so humbly thought to force on us, never came to be. The idea that a computer like EPICAC would have to be large enough to fill Carlsbad Caverns to do any serious work was moronic by the time I was reading it. I'd played on computers small enough to fit on my lap. The idea of a state where man is mostly replaced by machine had never happened, and even then it was obvious that it would never happen. It was also obvious that the forces that rose up against the Way of the World would never materialize either.

But what did matter mattered to me the most.

What mattered was insecurity. Dr. Proteus, that Little Master on his way to Greatness, wasn't certain what had happened was right, wasn't certain that he should be benefitting from it in the face of all those who were held back. That was what I took from it.

The day after the day after the

Earthquake was the day I picked up my second Vonnegut book from the number we had in Mrs. Rasul's 3rd period Honors English class. We had more than a month before we had to give our author reports, and I thought that it would take forever to read all the Vonnegut books I could. The second book I read was Slapstick.

Talk about a book that lets you know what all the success in the world really means.

I was 14, a couple of days away from 15, actually, and I was reading a book with a main character that any teenager could understand and completely relate to. Wilbur Daffidil-11 Swain was a giant Neanderthaloid half-genius who ended up becoming the President of the United States. What teenager couldn't understand what it was like to look like a freak, to poorly compare to all those around you, to see that every success was coupled inexplicably with a bitter taste of absolute failure. The man was President, but he never really loved anyone. How Teenage Wasteland is that?

The character is lonely living with his granddaughter and her lover, but he's also famous: famous for being the King of Candlesticks, the man who is crazy about Candlesticks. The problem is, he doesn't love them, but everyone thinks that he does. How Teenager is that? You're never famous for what you want to be known for, you're only

noticed for those things that don't really matter at all. I certainly knew that when I was a kid. Kurt Vonnegut, this old dude who smoked too much, knew



exactly how I felt. It was very strange, but very true.

I powered through Slapstick over the weekend. We had gone up to the Sacramento River Delta on a houseboat and I read and read and read. I found myself sitting on top of the boat while we were going up towards the first night's docking and reading, breaking the wind with my back with the book not more than a foot out of my eyes. I didn't join in on the swimming, but I did walk onto the island we grounded ourselves for the first night and read more. That night, when the water was highest, I got myself onto the island and had one of those experiences that I love. The wind on that day was up around 35 MPH and there was a ring of clouds above. Nothing right above the island, nothing for probably 10 miles in any direction...

But there was Lightning!

All around, in the various directions, there were streaks of



lightning. It was amazing. I sat there under the shelter of reeds, watching small whirlwinds of fine sand and reading between searching the outskirts for new strikes. I finished the book with an accompanying series of flashes off to the southeast, striking the 800 foot antenna towers that rose over the islands northerwest of Stockton.

At that point, having read two books from the master, I knew that I couldn't stop. I knew what he was

talking about despite being in my early teens. I actually wanted to read more. I'd go so far as to say I needed to read more. At the time, I had no idea what it meant, all this speed-reading which was far beyond my normal rate. I was powering through things with a deeper understanding of what I was reading than I'd ever had on any of my reading. I was even forgetting that this was all for a class project. I finished on Friday night and was waiting for Monday. I was waiting to see who else there was for me to meet in the books. I thought about what wasn't covered in the two books I'd read. I needed more.

We returned and I went to Mrs. Rasul's before classes started and ended up picking up three books. I put them in my backpack, loosening the stitches at teh straps a little more. During the Silent Sustained Reading period, I started reading the third Vonnegut book I ever approached: Cat's Cradle.

Cat's Cradle is a difficult book. Not difficult to read, far from it, but it's a book that makes thoughts seem so much easier than they really are. I started it on Monday durring SSR. I read it during World History instead of listening to Mr. Sutton lecture. I got caught up in the story that even I, a dumb young teenager, knew was saying more about what humans do than a simple science fiction story.

Ice-9 made sense to me. I knew

it was impossible, knew that the instantaneous transfer of state from liquid to solid was impossible and that the terrible event of the end just didn't jibe with reality, but it was so engrossing. I had no other thoughts than about the book for the next three days. I had powered through the others, pushed and proded and probed and made my way to the other side. Cat's Cradle I walked through. I chewed it over and over, I worked the edges and even went back before I had finished and recovered parts earlier that I thought might make the part I was currently reading make more sense. It took me days to read it, and I was sitting with it every chance I had. I didn't watch any television that week until LA Law on Thursday. I vividly remember all the reading, all the time it took. I spent a lot of time with it, reading late into the night, going back over stuff at school.

Cat's Cradle was what earned Vonnegut his PhD, but it was more than just a simple study in anthropology or sociology. It as a study in the dark corners of all positive human values. The characters look at the lies we tell ourselves and others and the ways in which we make those lies work for us and against others. I found no positive character in the entire book, no one I could trust to give me honesty. I've come to desire that from the books that I read. I don't want a reliable nar-

rator; I want a real person lying to me in the right way. It were Vonnegut what put me in that mind. The entire concept of Bokononism showed me that I could no longer consider anything the truth. It was like being told Santa Claus was real while watching him take off his beard and unstuff his shirt. That's the power Vonnegut had.

As a teenager, I was already questioning every truth while being told that I was wrong to do so, that all everyone around me ever gave me was the Truth. Vonnegut said that was all rubbish, that there was no Truth, only lies of varying degrees of helpfulness. That was what I walked away with.

The report was still more than a month away, and since it was an oral report with no written component, I was set. I've always been able to talk and talk well, so I simply read more and more and more. The next book I had picked up was called Bluebeard. It was different, much newer, much more reasonable...or so I thought.

Bluebeard is actually one of Vonnegut's less respected books. It tells the story of Rabo Karabekian, an Armenian whose parents survived the genocide and came to America, settling in California and giving birth to young Rabo. He goes to war, he loses an eye and then he becomes an Abstract Expressionist.

I love art. I've always loved art. When I was younger, I wanted to be an

artist. When I got older, I wanted to be an art critic. When I was older still, I worked as an art critic. After that, I never wanted to work in the art world again. Abstract Expressionism, as performed by the masters such as Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothko had always been my favorite movement. Bluebeard has something to do with that.

I read Bluebeard over a weekend, and sadly I don't have the same total recall I do of reading the others. I remember laying in bed reading and reading. I learned a lot about art there and there was something very important that I discovered: the narrator was another liar.

Rabo was straight-forward with the reader, but he was a bold-faced liar, a teller of half-truths. This was wonderful and I absolutely loved it. He was an unfortunate scoundrel and I loved it. Rabo was the first time I really noticed that Vonnegut was an unhappy man who was, in many ways, emotionally disfigured. His characters are never bright, healthy young men (except for Paul Proteus), but they are monsters, emotionally and physically. Rabo lost an eye and was craggy by the time he wrote his memoirs. The relationships he talks about between his main characters and their kids are the kind



of things that make teenagers happy. They're almost all estranged, and when they get the chance to make things right, it's always a messy affair. That's exactly what they're like. As a teenager, I had just figured that families of blood relatives were far weaker than those from of the people we choose. Cat's Cradle dealt with that. So did Jailbird. I truly found that moving and important to my future. My thoughts towards fandom and it's place in my life

come out of those books.

I always wish I had some art talent. I've learned that I just don't have the hands for it (or the eye...or ear...and so on) and the character of Rabo Karabekian made it all seem so easy. Pieces of tape on canvases covered with house paint. That's something I can understand and I'd love it if I could do something that creative and ballsy. Rabo was my hero, even with his faults.

I stopped reading for a day when the Clash of the Champions show was on. Nothing, not even enlightenment from on high would have made me miss that wrestling show. I think I was forming the opinion of what my future life was going to be while I was watching that show. I seem to remember it being very important. I can vividly remember watching that show and having something of an epiphany. I don't know how big of one, but it certainly happened.

I read the third book of the ones I grabbed that weekend. It was *Breakfast of Champions* and it was the story of a guy with a tumor and a failed science fiction author who turns out to be the most important person in the history of mankind. On the other hand, it was also the easiest, the simplest story and the one without any huge effect on my life. Reading it, its story of a flip-out of a guy reminded me of my Dad's lesser moments when things



hit him harder than he knew how to deal with. He was never violent, but his depressions could be terrifying. Luckily, that's one of the few things I never picked up from him. When I was reading about the life of Vonnegut later in my schooling, I realised that he and my father had a lot in common. When they were up, they were up. When they were down, watch out. Kurt put his efforts into stories. Dad put his efforts into helping people. Both of them were bitten in the ass once or twice for the ways they dealt with things.

The weekend passed so smoothly without much thought. That was one of the things about the book: nothing too difficult. Vonnegut gave it a C on his ratings that appeared in *Palm Sun-*

day. I know that he was working on it when *Again, Dangerous Visions* came out and that he said it was an awful book then. I wonder what changed...

Following up a slight disappointment like *Breakfast of Champions* would be easy, but I'd have to buy it myself since I'd read all of the books that were available in Mrs. Rasul's class (Larry Tsai and Hanna Yee were both taking forever with *Slaughterhouse-5* and *The Sirens of Titan*) so I decided to check out a place that would quickly become one of my favourites: Trade-A-Book.

Trade-A-Book is a used bookstore on El Camino in Santa Clara. It's been there as long as I can remember, but before 1989, I'd never been inside. I walked in and the line of shelves was there and Vonnegut was on the first one facing me.

Every Vonnegut book there was priced 1 dollar, so I grabbed four. They were very nice and I asked if they had *Slaughterhouse-5*. They didn't. As long as I've been going there, I've never seen a copy of *Slaughterhouse-5* there. Odd.

The next book was the most important one I read in those important days. It was *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. It made me hate lawyers. I mean really hate them. I guess it was at that point that I really understood that as a person, I'm basically a non-rich, non-drunk version of Elliott Rosewater.

Elliott Rosewater, aside from



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being rich and drunk, understood the power of a new idea, and even moreso, he understood the value of a weird idea. He loved a science fiction author above all others and believed that he would show the way to the future. I was ready to take up the flag of Vonnegut at that point and make him my lord and personal savior. He was slightly insane, but he had a clarity

of vision that only maniacs possess. I could go on and on about how Mr. Rosewater and myself were kindred spirits.

And that brings me to the man, Mr. Kilgore Trout. As Vonnegut's secret identity, Trout is a wonderful piece of fiction. As a disguised version of Theodore Sturgeon, Trout is a wonderful homage to the man. As a character in a story, Trout is a wonderful example of the ways a talented writer can shatter the rules while a lesser man would foul it up in total. Trout was one of the things I came to understand. While differently terrible in every one of the books he appeared in, Trout was the best possible vessel for Vonnegut's dark thoughts about himself.

Sometimes he was a traitorous former Army man whose greatest crime was craving a woman sexually. At other times he is a noble mind who can not deal with day to day life. Often, he's a neglectful father just going with what is going on around him.

All of those are things that KV would have considered his own problems throughout his life.

After that, I was up to the new ones. I started with Galapagos, a strange story featuring the ghost of the son of Kilgore Trout as the main narrator. It was a wonderfully fun piece of writing and one that I suspect will be with me for a long time. The story takes place a million years in the future, after man as we know him has fallen away into a new, sea-bred evolutionary variation. Mainland Earth was full of disease that made the eggs of woman infertile and would lead to the death of the regular human race, but the people on the islands were free and clear. This was another example of Vonnegut using disease, just like he had used the Albanian Flu and The Green Death, as a sign for his own anger at the shit he saw swirling around him. I think that it's no coincidence that he set the Green Death on Manhattan, where he'd been living for a number of years by the time he wrote Slapstick.

I finished Galapagos and started in on Deadeye Dick. I'm not sure what I thought about it. I don't remember reading it at all. I know I finished it before I went in on Mother Night, but I don't remember it having any effect on me. I'm rather convinced that I read it on a train trip or maybe while flying and the rest of the experience led me to cover up remembering it. These things happen.

I closed my reading that fateful

autumn with Mother Night. I wasn't sure what to expect. Reading the description of the book on the back cover, I was pretty sure I'd hate it. I took to it slowly, much like I've done lately with writing from Howard Hendrix and Robert J. Sawyer. After a few pages, I discovered that it was very much unlike regular Vonnegut. There was a very different set of angers, a difficult type of cynicism. The 'document' is presented as a real piece of autobiography and there are supposedly suppressed chapters. That's a nice touch, but the feel of the book is something different.

It made me want to be a propagandist.

I've never had a rebellious bone in my body, I've always loved the status quo, but for this one blazing moment, I wanted to do something that would make all the little pieces of evil in everyday life and blast it to our enemies. I'm not sure who they were at the moment, but I wanted to make sure that they were demoralized.

And that was all the Vonnegut I read as a teenager. I was changed, in both good ways and bad. When I met M a few years later, she brought up Cat's Cradle and the two of us chatted about it for at least an hour. She said the whole thing made her incredibly happy to be stoned because when she wasn't, as she put it, in the world, the stuff that KV talked about didn't exist. SaBean had a similar take, saying tht



she didn't think that the artificial families called Karasses mattered at all. She thought they were all just fake and she used to get away from that. I wrote to M and SaBean recently, reminding them of this. SaBean responded

"He was right afterall: karasses are all that matter." she said.

There is a universality to the works of Vonnegut that appeals to teenagers. It's even leaked into the films we see. In Can't Hardly Wait, a

young wanna-be writer is traveling to Boston to study under Kurt Vonnegut for the summer, leaving behind the girl who he's wanted for years. Unlike how Kurt would have handled that departure, he ends up making out with her at the train station as his goodbye.

Kurt probably didn't know he was doing it, but he defined what it meant to be a teenager and certainly changed the way that I interacted with this cold, cruel world.

I remember reading Slaughterhouse 5 and thinking that it was completely unbelievable and then getting hit by the car and realizing that I had come unstuck in time too.

-John Garcia

Some quick thoughts on the passing of Kurt Vonnegut by John Purcell

It saddens me to learn of the death of Kurt Vonnegut. His was a totally unique voice, filled with a satirical wit that bit with a truthfulness few writers could match. My favorite Vonnegut books were *Player Piano* and *Slaughterhouse 5*, but I believe my favorite Vonnegut moment was when he had a cameo appearance in Rodney Dangerfield's hit movie, *Back to School*. In true Vonnegut satirical fashion, the story line had Thornton Mellon hiring Vonnegut to write his major essay

on Vonnegut, and when the grade comes back, the teacher, played by a sexy Sally Kellerman, says, "I don't know who you hired to write this paper, but he doesn't know a *THING* about Vonnegut!" What a wonderful statement!

God bless, you Mr. Vonnegut, and give Kilgore Trout a kiss when you see him.

John Purcell

Chris makes me write and gives me books to read and videos to watch. I just read a book called Bluebeard. There's a woman that does the same thing to the poor guy in it.

Chris is a heartless bastard!
John Garcia

Excerpt from an Old eMail from Judith Morel

It's hard for to draw the line. I just don't know when a writer is being a hack or a genius. I read Breakfast of Champions like you recommended and it was crap. I completely felt that he was just another talentless hack pumping out a book full of bright shinies for the masses to eat up while their planes taxied.

I read Cat's Cradle, a different kind of key-jangling, but the result was so thoughtful that I felt like I was reading a different author.

I don't know what's what, but I'll read more.

There is a band called BloodHag. They do short, death metal/sludge rock versions of biographies of famous SF and Fantasy authors. I've written of them before and am a great big fan of theirs. Here are the lyrics to one of their best songs:

Kurt Vonnegut- Lyrics by Professor Jake Stratton, music by BloodHag

Two hands a piece of string
Put your feet against mine and sing
Stack atoms like cannonballs
End human arrogance once and for all
No escape from the industrial Hell
Replaced by a tape of yourself
Welcome To The Monkey House,
Slapstick, Deadeye Dick, Galapagos
Simple, perfect text
Unblemished by excess
Disrespected by the press
But successful nonetheless
When the bombs dropped
All time for Kurt stopped
Saw the future and past



In a trans-dimensional hop
It's a slaughterhouse and you're the Steer
Smile in the face of your darkest fears
As the world burns down around your ears
And Kurt couldn't take it no more
His escape from the horrors of war
Bound for Tralfamadore!
Bound for Tralfamadore!



Kurt Vonnegut
by
Jeff Redmond

The literary world has recently lost a truly great man with Kurt Vonnegut, and a famed writer often compared with Mark Twain. One of Vonnegut's favorite expressions was: "So it goes" which he frequently included in many of his best selling novels. So much of his own life was so fully reflected in his works.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born on Armistice Day on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was the son of a successful architect, Kurt Sr., and his wife, Edith Sophia. Edith was the daughter of millionaire and Indianapolis brewer Albert Lieber. The junior Kurt's great-grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, was the founder of the Vonnegut's Hardware Store chain.

Vonnegut was raised along with his sister, Alice, and brother Bernard whom he spoke of frequently in his works. Fourth-generation Germans, the children were never exposed to their heritage because of the anti-German attitudes that had spread throughout the United States after World War I.

During the Great Depression, the Vonneguts lost most of their wealth and the household was never the

same. This attainment and loss of the "American Dream" would become the driving theme of many of Vonnegut's writings.

Kurt Jr. went to Shortridge High School, where he was editor of the Echo, the daily student newspaper. It was at Shortridge in Indianapolis where Vonnegut gained his first writing experience. During his last two years there the Shortridge Daily Echo was the first high school daily newspaper in the country. At this young age Vonnegut learned to write for a wide audience that would give him immediate feedback, rather than just writing for an audience of one in any teacher.

After graduating from Shortridge in 1940, Vonnegut headed for Cornell University. His father wanted him to study something that was solid and dependable, like science, so Vonnegut began his college career as a chemistry and biology major, following in the footsteps of his older brother, Bernard, who was to eventually be the discoverer of cloud seeding to produce rain. While Vonnegut struggled in his chemistry and biology studies, he excelled as a columnist and managing editor for the Cornell Daily Sun.

By this point Vonnegut's parents had given up on life, being unable to adjust to or accept the fact that they were no longer wealthy, world travelers. On May 14, 1944, his

mother committed suicide. His father was to remain a fairly isolated man the rest of his days, in full retreat from life, content to be in his own little world until his death on October 1, 1957.

In 1943 Vonnegut was going to be expelled from Cornell because of his below average academic performance. He quit college, enlisted in the army, and was sent to France as a part of the U.S. 106th Infantry Division. This unit was new and so was stationed along a supposedly quiet part of the lines, in the Ardennes region of Belgium. Its ranks were filled with school drop-outs, parolees, and whatever else the draft boards could find by 1944.

On December 14, 1944, Vonnegut became a German prisoner of war after being captured in the Battle of the Bulge. He was sent to Dresden, an open city that produced no war machinery. Thus it was off-limits to allied bombing. He and his fellow POWs were to work in a vitamin-syrup factory. On February 13, 1945, however, Allied air forces bombed Dresden, killing 135,000 unprotected civilians. Vonnegut and the other POWs survived the bombing as they waited it out deep in the cellar of a slaughterhouse, where they were



quartered.

Vonnegut was freed by Soviet troops and repatriated on May 22, 1945. Dresden was virtually destroyed by the intense Allied bombing campaign, ordered by the British air commander Harris (as a retaliation for the Nazi Luftwaffe's destruction of Coventry in England). Vonnegut would later write about the experience in what many consider his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse Five*.

Vonnegut was honorably discharged and returned to the United States in 1945. On September first of that year he married Jane Marie Cox, a friend since kindergarten, for he thought, "Who but a wife would sleep with me?"

He spent the next two years in Chicago, attending the University of Chicago as a graduate student of Anthropology, and working for the Chicago City News Bureau as a police reporter. When his master's thesis was rejected, he moved to Schenectady, New York, in 1947, to work in public relations for General Electric. It was here that his fiction career began.

On February 11, 1950, *Collier's* published Vonnegut's first short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect." By the next year he was making enough money writing to quit his job at GE, and move his family to West Barnstable, Massachusetts, on Cape



Cod, in 1951.

Vonnegut published several novels throughout the 1950s and 1960s, beginning with *Player Piano* in 1952. *Player Piano* depicts a fictional city called Ilium in which the people have given control of their lives to a computer humorously named EPICAC, after a substance that causes vomiting. *Player Piano* was dismissed by critics as mere science fiction.

The Sirens of Titan (1959) takes place on several different planets, including a thoroughly militarized Mars, where the inhabitants are electronically controlled. The fantastic settings of these works serve primarily as a metaphor for modern society, which Vonnegut views as absurd to the point of being surreal, and as a backdrop for Vonnegut's central focus. The hapless human beings who inhabit these bizarre worlds and struggle with both their environments and themselves.

By the time *The Sirens of Titan* was in print he'd also had dozens of short stories published. Vonnegut had also worked as an English teacher at a school for emotionally disturbed students, and run a Saab automobile dealership. He'd seen his father die, and witnessed the death of his 41-year old sister, Alice, due to cancer. This had occurred less than forty-eight hours after her husband had died in a train accident. Vonnegut adopted three of Alice's four children to add to his own three offspring.

In *Mother Night* (1961) there is a serious study of the dark and sinister side of Nazism, and the effects by the war on the psychology of the survivors. An American journalist infiltrates the German propaganda radio program, while secretly being a spy for the Allies. He discovers that all of his broadcasts mistakenly prolonged the war by encouraging the German people to continue fighting.

The American journalist even encounters Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official in charge of transporting all Jews to extermination camps, in an Israeli prison after the war. *Mother Night* ends with the journalist unable to live any longer with his trauma and guilt, and hanging himself with (of all things) his typewriter ribbon.

His 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle* recounts the discovery of a form of ice, called ice-nine, which is solid at a

much lower temperature than normal ice, and is capable of solidifying all water on Earth. Ice-nine serves as a symbol of the enormous destructive potential of technology, particularly when developed or used without regard for the welfare of humanity

Vonnegut's reputation was greatly enhanced in 1969 with the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*. It was an antiwar novel which appeared during the peak of protest against American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Vonnegut described *Slaughterhouse Five* as a novel he was compelled to write, since it is based on one of the most extraordinary and significant events of his life. One of the few to survive the destruction of Dresden, Vonnegut was ordered by his captors to aid in the grisly task of digging bodies from the rubble and destroying them in huge bonfires.

Because the city of Dresden had been filled with German refugees fleeing the Soviets, and was of little military value, its destruction went nearly unnoticed in the press. *Slaughterhouse Five* is Vonnegut's attempt to both document and criticize this event.

Like Vonnegut, the main character of *Slaughterhouse Five*, named Billy Pilgrim, is deeply affected by the horrible experience. His feelings develop into spiritual uncertainty that



results in a nervous breakdown. In addition, he suffers from a peculiar condition, of being "unstuck in time," meaning that he randomly experiences events from his past, present, and future. The novel is therefore a complex, non-chronological narrative in which images of suffering and loss prevail.

After the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut entered a period of depression during which he vowed, at one point, never to write another novel. He concentrated, instead, on lecturing, teaching, and finishing a play, *Happy Birthday*,

Wanda June, that he had begun several years earlier.

The play, which ran Off-Broadway from October 1970 to March 1971, received mixed reviews. Perhaps because it was somewhat too "unusual" for its time.

In it a Hemingway-like macho writer returns to visit his wife, along with one of the men who flew an atomic bombing mission against Japan. She believes her writer husband to be dead, and is engaged to marry a symphony musician (who lives in the same building with his mother). The entire tale is narrated by a little girl named Wanda June, who got killed in a car accident. She lives up in heaven with many dead soldiers, including a former Nazi SS officer, himself killed by the macho writer during WW II. There's even her birthday cake, no longer needed, and hence the title of the play.

There were several factors which could be interpreted as the cause of Vonnegut's period of depression, including, as he admitted, the approach of his fiftieth birthday and the fact that his children had begun to leave home. Many critics believe that, having at last come to terms with Dresden, he lost the major inspiration for much of his work. Others feel that *Slaughterhouse Five* may have been the single great novel that Vonnegut was capable of writing. Whatever the

cause, *Breakfast of Champions* marked the end of his depression and a return to the novel.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, as in most of Vonnegut's work, there are very clear autobiographical elements. In this novel however, the author seems to be even more wrapped up in his characters than usual. He appears as Philboyd Sludge, the writer of the book, which stars Dwayne Hoover, a Pontiac dealer who goes berserk after reading a novel by Kilgore Trout, who also represents Vonnegut. Toward the end of the book, Vonnegut arranges a meeting between himself and Trout, whom Robert Merrill calls his "most famous creation," in which he casts the character loose forever. By this time the previously unsuccessful Trout has become rich and famous, and is finally able to stand on his own.

Breakfast of Champions and *Slapstick*, or *Lonesome No More* (1976) both examine the widespread feelings of despair and loneliness that result from the loss of traditional culture in the United States; *Jailbird* (1979) recounts the story of a fictitious participant in the Watergate scandal of the Richard Nixon (1913-1994) administration, a scandal which ultimately led to the resignation of the president; *Galapagos* (1985) predicts the consequences of environmental pollution; and *Hocus-Pocus*; or, *What's the Hurry, Son?* (1990) deals with the



implications and aftermath of the war in Vietnam.

In the 1990s, he also published *Fates Worse Than Death* (1991) and *Timequake* (1997). Before its release Vonnegut noted that *Timequake* would be his last novel. Although many of these works are highly regarded, critics frequently argue that in his later works Vonnegut tends to reiterate themes presented more compellingly in earlier works. Nevertheless, Vonnegut remains one of the most beloved of American writers.

As the author of at least 19 novels, many of them best-sellers, as

well as dozens of short stories, essays and plays, Vonnegut relished the role of a social critic. Indianapolis, his hometown, declared 2007 as "The Year of Vonnegut" - an announcement he said left him "thunderstruck."

He lectured regularly, exhorting audiences to think for themselves and delighting in barbed commentary against the institutions he felt were dehumanizing people.

"I will say anything to be funny, often in the most horrible situations," Vonnegut once told a gathering of psychiatrists.

A self-described religious skeptic and freethinking humanist, Vonnegut used protagonists such as Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater as transparent vehicles for his points of view. He also filled his novels with satirical commentary and even drawings that were only loosely connected to the plot. In "Slaughterhouse Five," he drew a headstone with the epitaph: "Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt."

But much in his life was traumatic, and left him in pain. Despite his commercial success, Vonnegut battled depression throughout his life. In 1984 he attempted suicide with pills and alcohol, joking later about how he botched the job.

"I think he was a man who combined a wicked sense of humor and sort of steady moral compass, who

was always sort of looking at the big picture of the things that were most important," said Joel Bleifuss, editor of *In These Times*, a liberal magazine based in Chicago that featured Vonnegut articles.

"The firebombing of Dresden explains absolutely nothing about why I write what I write and am what I am," Vonnegut wrote in *Fates Worse Than Death*, his 1991 autobiography of sorts. But he spent 23 years struggling to write about the ordeal, which he survived by huddling with other POWs inside an underground meat locker labeled Slaughterhouse Five (*Schlachthaus Funf* in German).

The novel, in which Pvt. Pilgrim is transported from Dresden by time-traveling aliens from the planet Tralfamadore, was published at the height of the Vietnam War, and solidified his reputation as an iconoclast.

"He was sort of like nobody else," said Gore Vidal, who noted that he, Vonnegut and Norman Mailer were among the last writers around who served in World War II.

"He was imaginative; our generation of writers didn't go in for imagination very much. Literary realism was the general style. Those of us who came out of the war in the 1940s made it sort of the official American prose, and it was often a bit on the dull side. Kurt was never dull."



More recent works include *Galapagos* (1985), *Bluebeard* (1987), and the autobiographical *Fates Worse than Death* (1991). Although his work has been criticized as simplistic, it has equally often been praised for its comic creativity.

Kurt Vonnegut will remain one of the most influential writers of his generation. Known for his dark humor, pessimism and sharp edge, he was the author of fourteen novels and other

works of fiction and nonfiction. His stories of human folly and cruelty have been assigned reading for at least two decades in college literature classes around the world.

On July 9, 1999, he was honored by the Indiana Historical Society as an Indiana Living Legend. He was 75 when *Timequake* was published in 1997, and he stated it would be his last novel. In May 2000, he was named to a teaching position at Smith College in Northampton, MA.

Vonnegut had married Jane Cox, a childhood sweetheart, in 1945. But they separated in 1970 and were divorced in 1979. In November 1979, Vonnegut married photographer Jill Kremenetz. In 1991, Vonnegut and Kremenetz filed for divorce, but the petition was later withdrawn. He had seven children, three from his first marriage and three of his nephews and nieces. He and Kremenetz also adopted a daughter.

Many of his novels were best-sellers. Some also were banned and burned for suspected obscenity. Vonnegut took on censorship as an active member of the PEN writers' aid group and the American Civil Liberties Union. The American Humanist Association, which promotes individual freedom, rational thought and scientific skepticism, made him its honorary president.

His characters tended to be

miserable anti-heros with little control over their fate. Vonnegut explained that the villains in his books were never individuals, but culture, society and history, which he protested were making a mess of the planet.

“We probably could have saved ourselves, but we were too damned lazy to try very hard... and too damn cheap,” he once suggested carving into a wall on the Grand Canyon, as a message for flying-saucer creatures.

He retired from novel writing in his later years, but continued to publish short articles. He had a best-seller in 2005 with *A Man Without a Country*, a collection of his nonfiction work, including jabs at the Bush administration (“upper-crust C-students who know no history or geography”) and the uncertain future of the planet. He called the book’s success “a nice glass of champagne at the end of a life.”

In recent years, Vonnegut worked as a senior editor and columnist at *In These Times*. Bleifuss said he had been trying to get Vonnegut to write something more for the magazine, but was unsuccessful.

“He would just say he’s too old and that he had nothing more to say. He realized, I think, he was at the end of his life,” Bleifuss remembered.

Vonnegut himself once said that “Of all the ways to die, I would prefer to go out in an airplane crash on the

peak of Mount Kilimanjaro.” He often joked about the difficulties of old age.

“When Hemingway killed himself he put a period at the end of his life; old age is more like a semicolon,” Vonnegut told the Associated Press in 2005.

“My father, like Hemingway, was a gun nut and was very unhappy late in life. But he was proud of not committing suicide. And I’ll do the same, so as not to set a bad example for my children.”

Vonnegut also taught advanced writing classes at Smith College, and in November of 2000, he was named the State Author of New York.

Vonnegut was critically injured in a fire at his New York City brownstone Jan. 30, 2000. He often marveled that he had lived so long despite his lifelong smoking habit, also suffered brain injuries after a fall at his Manhattan apartment home in March 2007.

The satirical novelist who captured the absurdity of war, and questioned the advances of science

in darkly humorous works, died on Wednesday April 11th, 2007. He was 84. Oh, Kurt Vonnegut. We will miss you, old warrior. Rest in peace. And so it goes.

Vonnegut’s Novels:

Player Piano 1952

The Sirens of Titan 1959

Mother Night 1961

Cat’s Cradle 1963

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 1965

Slaughterhouse-Five 1969

Breakfast of Champions 1973

Slapstick 1976

Jailbird 1979

Deadeye Dick 1982

Galapagos: A Novel 1985

Bluebeard 1987

Hocus Pocus 1990

Timequake 1999

Short Fiction and Essays:

Canary in a Cathouse 1961

Welcome to the Monkey House 1968

Wampeters, Foma and Granfaloon 1974

Palm Sunday 1981

Fates Worse than Death: An

Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s 1991

God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian 2000

Bagombo Snuffbox 2002



I'm more sure now than ever that, like Kurt Vonnegut has said, everything is bullshit. That said, there's nothing better than having your final belief proven wrong- John Garcia

Farewell from the Monkey House
by
George Van Wagner (originally on
his LiveJournal, GVDub)

I still, almost 40 years after the fact, remember the first Vonnegut I ever read. It was the Welcome to the Monkey House collection. I remember being a bright kid in a rural public school with no track for bright kids, reading Harrison Bergeron, and deeply identifying with the idea of being forced to be something you're not for the convenience of others. I remember the gentle whimsy of Who Am I This Time? and the moral quandary faced by the protagonist of All the King's Men. Those stories have stayed with me, as have Slaughterhouse-Five, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Happy Birthday, Wanda June, Breakfast of Champions, and many others. Even Phil Farmer's Venus on the Half-Shell pastiche, written as Kilgore Trout, has a place of pride in my library. Though I admit to not having read a lot of his work from the '90s, I treasure almost everything of Vonnegut's I read as work that had a goddamn voice and made you think, even if you couldn't go all the way with him to his destination. Even when he got a little gimmicky, it was for a reason (or at least, seemed to me to be), and he sure let those personal

demons he was wrestling know they'd been in one hell of a fight. The world, as many people have been saying, will be a little less illuminated with him gone, but he sure left us some light bulbs.

and so it goes.



From Truthdoctrine on LJ

Kurt Vonnegut worked briefly at SI until being told to write a story about a race horse that had jumped the rail and terrorized the infield at a local track. Vonnegut stared at his desk for what seemed like hours before finally departing the building without a word. Inside his deserted typewriter was this:

“The horse jumped over the fucking fence.”

And from an eMail from Mike Swan

You really only need to read two Vonnegut books: Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five. I've read them all, every published word that was listed in the search I did at the Serra Library when I was in ninth grade. I kept up, bought his books, read his essays, caught the snippets he would run in the various newspapers. He was a writer who really only wrote two things of any lasting value.

Sure, he had books with lines that carry in your head forever, the one about the man's penis that's hundreds of miles long in another dimension from Breakfast of Champions being the first I think of, but only those two really matter.

That makes Vonnegut far more important than almost any other writer I can think of. John Updike's never written anything that really matters. Nor did Asimov, Vidal, Hammett, Spillane, Cartland, Maupin, Adams or Johnson. Heinlein only wrote one. Same with Sinclair, Maughn, Fitzgerald and Carrol. Mr. Vonnegut managed a good average.

So celebrate his genius as well as his lesser works! He rose above much of it!

Happy Accidents

by Steven H Silver

My first exposure to Kurt Vonnegut's writing came in junior high school, when we read a story about a man who was head and shoulders above everyone else, but not allowed to excel. I imagine that this story, "Harrison Bergeron," struck a chord with many teenagers (not just science fiction fans) who felt that they were capable of so much more than they were allowed to exhibit. For years after, I could remember the story, and even the title, but not the author (for several years, I thought it was Harlan Ellison). Eventually, I figured out it was Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and found it in a copy of *Welcome to the Monkey House*. The entire search would have been so much easier in the days of the internet.

When I went away to college, I studied in Bloomington, Indiana. Completely coincidentally, Kurt Vonnegut country. This was the area used, in part, as a basis for Rosewater County in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the work that introduced the world to the science fiction of Kilgore Trout. While in graduate school, I worked in a bookstore, where the assistant manager was a woman who did not read. At all.

Anyway, one day a kid came into the store looking for a book. It



was probably *Slaughterhouse-Five*, although it could just as easily have been *The Sirens of Titan* or *Piano Player*, the point being it was a seminal Kurt Vonnegut novel. She turned to the computer to look it up, not to see if we had it in stock, but to find out who the author was. I still have a hard time believing someone so illiterate could work in a bookstore.

While in college, I met (and later married) Elaine. She had another friend, a few years older than us, who had previously journeyed to Bloomington to attend college. Elaine's friend married a guy from Indianapolis (are you still following this. Don't worry, it really isn't worth the effort). The guy from Indianapolis has a sister who married into the Vonnegut family (I believe she married Kurt Vonnegut's nephew). So my closest approach to Vonnegut is my wife's friend's sister-in-law married Vonnegut's nephew (see, I told you it wasn't worth it).

2007 was declared the Year of

Vonnegut by the city of Indianapolis, which scheduled several events based on Vonnegut, his books, and essays. Riffing on the idea of One Book-One City, throughout the year, various libraries will be holding reading discussions of all of Vonnegut's novels. Vonnegut was scheduled to give an address at the Indianapolis Library's McFadden Lecture on April 28.

I wish I had more anecdotes about Vonnegut and his writing, but I don't, aside from some nastygrams I got from people who disagree with my reviews of his books *Timequake* and *The Sirens of Titan*. I suppose I shouldn't say this, but Hell, the point is moot now. When discussions began about who the Chicago in 2008 Worldcon bid would invite as a guest of honor, Vonnegut's name was one of the first to come up. I pointed out that the chance of Vonnegut accepting the invitation (let alone seeing it as an honor) were miniscule.

Vonnegut, of course, was one of science fiction's favorite whipping boys. As soon as he left the reservation, he proudly, and vehemently, declared he was not a science fiction writer. In more recent years, his role in denying science fiction in his work and his background in the field. More recently, of course, his role in this area has been superseded by Margaret Atwood and Michael Crichton. However, I tend to

agree with Vonnegut, that while he did write some science fiction, he isn't, for the most part, a science fiction author.

Yes, Vonnegut used a lot of tropes common to science fiction in his writing...time travel, space travel, aliens, etc. However, there is a rationalism to science fiction that was absent in Vonnegut's novels. Vonnegut would toss around words like *chrono-synclastic infundibulum* or having Billy Pilgrim become "unstuck in time," but he offered no logical rationale for these events or concepts. Instead they were very obviously hand waves to allow Vonnegut to focus on his more philosophical points. Rather than call Vonnegut a science fiction author, I would be willing to acknowledge him as a fantasy writer, for his use of science tends to have little relationship to the science of our own world, even if it internally consistent (but neither logical, nor rational) within the text of any given book or story.

Vonnegut's strength as a writer had nothing to do with whether he wrote science fiction or not, but rather with the ideas he espoused in his writing. Throughout his works, he champions the individual in the face of corrupt organizations, whether he was talking about organized religion, government, or corporations. His means of attack, throughout all of his

work, is satire mixed with a good dose of common sense, in order to serve up a perfectly gilded pill

There's no philosophy as powerful as science fiction. That's what Kurt Vonnegut taught me- Chris Garcia, 1989



The Vonnegut Art this issue

Cover- CC Ryder

Page 2- Jeb Knox

Page 3 and 10- Kurt Vonnegut's own

Page 4- Glyn Northern

Page 5- Mike Norman

Page 6- Steven Scott Hellman

Page 7- by Lysistrata

Page 8- by Hitlers Brain

Page 9-SketchBomb

Page 11, 12, 13 and 14- Espana Sheriff (The BArea's own!)

Page 15- Alan White (look for his stuff on Fansite1.com!)

Page 16- God Bless You by U4Ick

Page 17 and 18- RescueTortoise

Page 19- Joas'ka Iwanicka

Vonnegut and Me, or Thoughts on a Crusade

By Matthew Appleton

There are plenty of authors whose work I feel I haven't read sufficiently. Given the focus of this issue of *The Drink Tank*, clearly Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is one of them. To date, I've only read *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Sirens of Titan* and a couple short stories, most notably "Harrison Bergeron." Without looking over my book collection, I know that I own at least three more of his novels, but I've just never gotten around to them.

After hearing of his passing, I pulled out my copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and reread the first chapter. As I read it, I couldn't help but wonder if Bush, Cheney, Rove, et al. had ever bothered to read the book. Maybe if they had then they wouldn't have been so hell bent on starting an unnecessary war; maybe they wouldn't have imagined this war would end like a war movie starring John Wayne or Frank Sinatra. Then again, maybe not—as Vonnegut himself says in the book, "there would always be wars, they were as easy to stop as glaciers." Yeah, but maybe with a few more people like Vonnegut in the world actually running the country, there wouldn't be as many of them. And so it goes.

In fact, as I thought more about

that first chapter, I realized that how I viewed our leaders changed since President Clinton took office back in 1993. Back then, with the naïveté of a 21-year-old, I thought that it didn't matter if our President had served in the military. I see now the folly in that belief. I'm not saying that you need military experience—if you don't then you better damn well surround yourself with people who have served and heed their counsel. It's not foolproof—after all, we have McCain running around supporting the war in Iraq—but war veterans know the true costs of a war and don't see it as a venture to be taken lightly.

But, I digress. Although I found the first chapter of the novel enlightening all by itself, not everyone feels that there's something of value to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It made the American Library Association's list of 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000.¹

Getting beyond his work, the thing that will stand out most about Vonnegut in my mind is his appearance in the Rodney Dangerfield movie *Back to School*. I don't know what he was paid to appear in the movie, but from what I think I know of him I can imagine that Vonnegut must have found some pleasure in taking a poke at academia when the English professor played by Sally Kellerman confidently asserts that a paper that he ghostwrote about his



own work didn't "know the first thing about Kurt Vonnegut!"

Then again, I don't actually know the first thing about Vonnegut either, but I feel somewhat richer for having read a couple his novels thus far.

Poo-tee-weet.

(Footnotes)

¹ <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm>

In no particular order here's what all of Kurt Vonnegut's works boil down to: what the fuck is going on?

-Chris Garcia in a spoken word piece from 1997.

Alright, that's enough. I wanna thank Matt, Jeff, the good folks in BloodHag (especially Jake Stratton), John Purcell, Espana, Alan, and of course, my Pops for all the great words and pictures. I really think this is one of those issues that make me smile.

I'm rereading all the Vonnegut books including the ones that I missed on the first go 'round. I'm hoping that I'll catch the rest of the deep meaning that I missed the first couple of times. Go figure.

The next couple of issues are going back to the regular issue grind. There's the next issue, 126, which is going to be LoCs, a piece from Matt Appleton, and a piece about a building that's near and dear to my heart. After that, it's 127 with normal stuff, probably including a piece from Dave Langford and something about BayCon and Westercon. 128 will be normal...normal for me that is.

The next big issue will be This Were WorldCons. A few folks have already stepped up (John Purcell, Claire Brialey, Mark Plummer, Andy Hooper) and if you got a WorldCon to write about, let me know!