

On Kurt Vonnegut
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I didn't realize until recently that my local library has an excellent collection of e-books and audio books easily accessible for borrowing from one's laptop at a separate website. If you haven't, you might check to see if your local library has this sort of arrangement.

About a week ago, I looked through the biography and autobiography section of the e-book collection, and a book of letters by the writer Kurt Vonnegut caught my eye (Kurt Vonnegut and Dan Wakefield, editor, *Kurt Vonnegut: Letters*, Dial Press, 2014), and I borrowed the book.

This is what Wikipedia says about Vonnegut:

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922–2007) was an American writer. In a career spanning over fifty years, Vonnegut published 14 novels, three short story collections, five plays, and five works of non-fiction, with further collections being published after his death. He is most famous for his darkly satirical, best-selling novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

Vonnegut was deployed to Europe to fight in World War II and was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge [in Belgium]. He was interned in Dresden [a city in Germany] and survived the [February 15, 1945] Allied bombing of the city [incinerating an estimated 135,000 people and leveling the city] by taking refuge in a meat locker of the slaughterhouse where he was imprisoned. After the war, Vonnegut married Jane Marie Cox, with whom he had three children. He later adopted his sister's three sons, after she died of cancer and her husband was killed in a train accident.

I knew Vonnegut was a prominent writer and that critics were mixed on him: while some lauded his literary merits, the majority basically wrote him off as an entertaining writer who told young people especially what they wanted to hear. I'd never read anything

by him.

As it turned out, I was captivated by the book of letters: fresh and insightful and self-revealing (and what a complex, interesting self Vonnegut had to reveal), and Vonnegut was a terrific prose stylist, even in letters. The letters were addictive; I couldn't put the book down. I read them backward in time: I started with the 2000s, the last decade of his life, and then went to the '90s, '80's, '70s, and '60s. There were letters from earlier than the 60s, but I felt done with the book and didn't read those. Vonnegut knew all the big-name American writers of his time—Bellow, Mailer, Updike, Styron, and so on—so along the way I got an easily digestible overview of the American literary scene in the last third of the twentieth century.

I knew that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969 (I just looked up the year), was Vonnegut's first best-seller and his most popular and influential book, and that a hit movie (released in 1972—looked that up too), which I have never seen, had been based on the book. The library's e-book collection had the book and I checked it out.

I was mightily impressed. *Slaughterhouse-Five* wasn't the shallow, smart-ass clever, appeal-to-impressionable-youth, time-bound ('60s-'70s) book I had feared it would be. To my pleasant surprise, though I might have guessed it from Vonnegut's flowing and sophisticated letters, this was big time writing and ideas. I read the book in a day, yesterday, got lost in it as I did the letters. It remarkably and seamlessly integrates autobiography and fictional realism and fantasy, including sci-fi. It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's assistant in World War II, who was a prisoner of war in Dresden and survived the fire-bombing of that city. There are flash-forwards to Billy's mid-life existence twenty-years later as an optometrist and husband and father in middle America and captive on a distant planet (the sci-fi part).

As I read along in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, enjoying the book immensely and profiting from its ideas, I thought about what I was doing when the book and the film based on it came out. I was around

thirty and an instructor at a university while I was working on my doctoral studies in education. Before that, I had spent five years as a high school social studies teacher (history, current events, economics, etc.). I sort of, I think anyway, knew about the film, and maybe I knew about the book, though likely I didn't. The book and film, now I know, were major cultural phenomena at the time, yet I wasn't personally plugged in to either one. What was I doing during that time? The truth, reading the sport page of the local newspaper and watching games on television and eating hamburgers, French fries, and Cokes at McDonald's. I've come a long way.

I'm going to look into other of Vonnegut's writings, both fiction and non-fiction. Next on my list, a collection of his non-fiction writings late in his life, *A Man Without a Country* (2007); and I'll stream the film based on *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the same title, which is available at Vudu and other places.

I'll end this with excerpts from *Slaughterhouse-Five* I felt drawn to copy down:

Billy went up the carpeted stairway into his and his wife's bedroom. The room had flowered wallpaper. There was a double bed with a clock radio on the table beside it. Also on the table were controls for the electric blanket, and a switch to turn on a gentle vibrator which was bolted to the springs of the box mattress. The trade name of the vibrator was "Magic Fingers." a

Billy took off his tri-focals and his coat and his necktie and his shoes, and he closed the venetian blinds and then the drapes, and he lay down on the coverlet. But sleep would not come. Tears came instead. They seeped. Billy turned on the Magic Fingers, and he was jiggled as he wept.

"I heard you tell Father one time about a German firing squad." She was referring to the execution of poor old Edgar Derly.

"Um."

"You had to bury him?"

"Yes."

"Did he see you with your shovels before he was shot?"

"Yes."

He said he had seen several men die in the following way. “They ceased to stand up straight, then ceased to shave or wash, then ceased to get out of bed, then ceased to talk, then died. There is much to be said for it: it is evidently a very easy and painless way to go.”

“Dad--?” he son said in the dark. Robert, the future Green Beret, was seventeen then. Bill liked him, but he didn’t know him very well. Billy couldn’t help suspecting that there wasn’t much to know about Robert.

He lay down on the bed and turned on the Magic Fingers. The mattress trembled, drove a dog from under the bed. The dog was Spot. Good old Spot was still alive in those days. Spot lay down again in the corner.

There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn. . . . 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. Everything else in the neighborhood was dead.

“It was all right,” said Billy. Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does.”