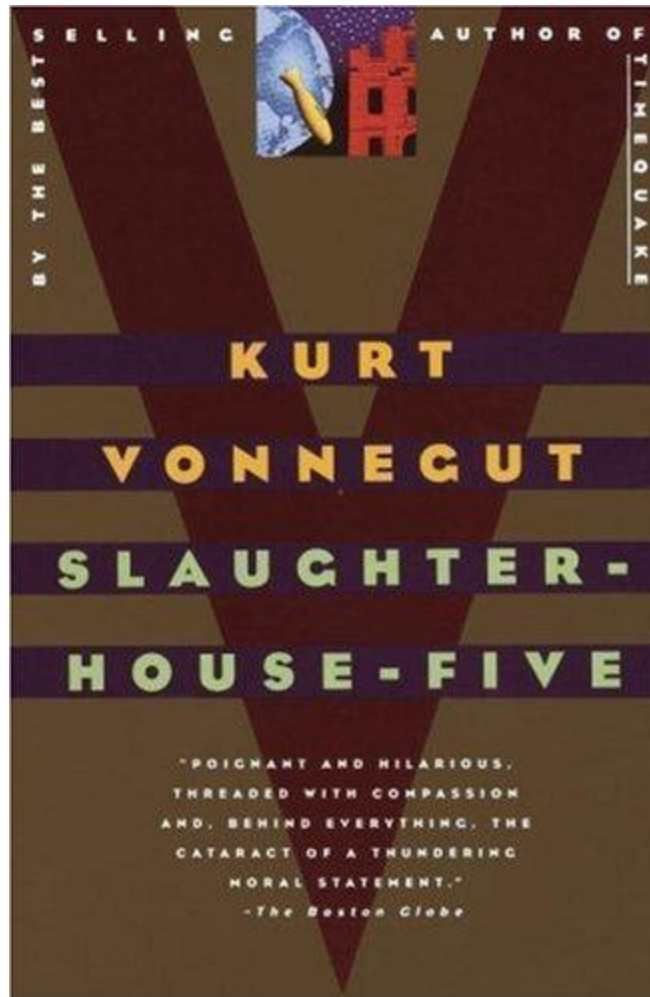


Slaughterhouse-Five Survival Guide



Kurt Vonnegut, Counterculture's Novelist, Dies

Published April 12,
2007.

Kurt Vonnegut, whose dark comic talent and urgent moral vision in novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* caught the temper of his times and the imagination of a generation, died last night in Manhattan. He was 84 and had homes in Manhattan and in Sagaponack on Long Island.

Mr. Vonnegut suffered irreversible brain injuries as a result of a fall several weeks ago, according to his wife, Jill Krementz.

Mr. Vonnegut wrote plays, essays and short fiction. But it was his novels that became classics of the American counterculture, making him a literary idol, particularly to students in the 1960s and '70s. Dog-eared paperback copies of his books could be found in the back pockets of blue jeans and in dorm rooms on campuses throughout the United States.

Like Mark Twain, Mr. Vonnegut used humor to tackle the basic questions of human existence: Why are we in this world? Is there a presiding figure to make sense of all this, a god who in the end, despite making people suffer, wishes them well?

He also shared with Twain a profound pessimism. "Mark Twain," Mr. Vonnegut wrote in his 1991 book, "Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage," "finally stopped laughing at his own agony and that of those around him. He denounced life on this planet as a crock. He died."

Not all Mr. Vonnegut's themes were metaphysical. With a blend of vernacular writing, science fiction, jokes and philosophy, he also wrote about the banalities of consumer culture, for example, or the destruction of the environment.

His novels — 14 in all — were alternate universes, filled with topsy-turvy images and populated by races of his own creation, like the Tralfamadorians and the Mercurian Harmoniums. He invented phenomena like chrono-synclastic infundibula (places in the universe where all truths fit neatly together) as well as religions, like the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and Bokononism (based on the books of a black British Episcopalian from Tobago "filled with bittersweet lies," a narrator says).

The defining moment of Mr. Vonnegut's life was the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, by Allied forces in 1945, an event he witnessed firsthand as a young prisoner of war. Thousands of civilians were killed in the raids, many of them burned to death or asphyxiated. "The firebombing of Dresden," Mr. Vonnegut wrote, "was a work of art." It was, he added, "a tower of smoke and flame to commemorate the rage and heartbreak of so many who had had their lives warped or ruined by the indescribable greed and vanity and cruelty of Germany."

His experience in Dresden was the basis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which was published in 1969 against the backdrop of war in Vietnam, racial unrest and cultural and social upheaval. The novel, wrote the critic Jerome Klinkowitz, "so perfectly caught America's transformative mood that its story and structure became best-selling metaphors for the new age."

To Mr. Vonnegut, the only possible redemption for the madness and apparent meaninglessness of existence was **human kindness**. The title character in his 1965 novel, "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater," summed up his philosophy:

"Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and

crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies — 'God damn it, you've got to be kind.' ”

Mr. Vonnegut eschewed traditional structure and punctuation. His books were a mixture of fiction and autobiography, prone to one-sentence paragraphs, exclamation points and italics. Graham Greene called him “one of the most able of living American writers.” Some critics said he had invented a new literary type, infusing the science-fiction form with humor and moral relevance and elevating it to serious literature.

He was also accused of repeating himself, of recycling themes and characters. Some readers found his work incoherent. His harshest critics called him no more than a comic book philosopher, a purveyor of empty aphorisms.

With his curly hair askew, deep pouches under his eyes and rumpled clothes, he often looked like an out-of-work philosophy professor, typically chain smoking, his conversation punctuated with coughs and wheezes. But he also maintained a certain celebrity, as a regular on panels and at literary parties in Manhattan and on the East End of Long Island, where he lived near his friend and fellow war veteran Joseph Heller, another darkly comic literary hero of the age.

Mr. Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922, the youngest of three children. His father, Kurt Sr., was an architect. His mother, Edith, came from a wealthy brewery family. Mr. Vonnegut's brother, Bernard, who died in 1997, was a physicist and an expert on thunderstorms.

During the Depression, the elder Vonnegut went for long stretches without work, and Mrs. Vonnegut suffered from episodes of mental illness. “When my mother went off her rocker late at night, the hatred and contempt she sprayed on my father, as gentle and innocent a man as ever lived, was without limit and pure, untainted by ideas or information,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote. She committed suicide, an act that haunted her son for the rest of his life.

He had, he said, a lifelong difficulty with women. He remembered an aunt once telling him, “All Vonnegut men are scared to death of women.”

“My theory is that all women have hydrofluoric acid bottled up inside,” he wrote.

Mr. Vonnegut went east to attend Cornell University, but he enlisted in the Army before he could get a degree. The Army initially sent him to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) in Pittsburgh and the University of Tennessee to study mechanical engineering.

In 1944 he was shipped to Europe with the 106th Infantry Division and shortly saw combat in the Battle of the Bulge. With his unit nearly destroyed, he wandered behind enemy lines for several days until he was captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp near Dresden, the architectural jewel of Germany.

Assigned by his captors to make vitamin supplements, he was working with other prisoners in an underground meat locker when British and American warplanes started carpet bombing the city, creating a firestorm above him. The work detail saved his life.

Afterward, he and his fellow prisoners were assigned to remove the dead.

“The corpses, most of them in ordinary cellars, were so numerous and represented such a health hazard that they were cremated on huge funeral pyres, or by flamethrowers whose nozzles were thrust into the cellars, without being counted or identified,” he wrote in “Fates Worse Than Death.” When the war ended, Mr. Vonnegut returned to the United States and married his high school sweetheart, Jane Marie Cox. They settled in Chicago in 1945. The couple had three children, Mark, Edith and Nanette. In 1958, Mr. Vonnegut's sister, Alice, and her husband died within a day of each other, she of cancer and he in a train crash. The Vonneguts took custody of their children, Tiger, Jim and Steven...

Mr. Vonnegut shed the label of science-fiction writer with “Slaughterhouse-Five.” It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an infantry scout (as Mr. Vonnegut was), who discovers the horror of war. “You know — we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves,” an English colonel says in the book. “We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. My God, my God — I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade.’ ”

As Mr. Vonnegut was, Billy is captured and assigned to manufacture vitamin supplements in an underground meat locker, where the prisoners take refuge from Allied bombing.

In “Slaughterhouse-Five,” Mr. Vonnegut introduced the recurring character of Kilgore Trout, his fictional alter ego. The novel also featured a signature Vonnegut phrase.

“Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote at the end of the book, “was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes.

“Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes.”

One of many Zenlike words and phrases that run through Mr. Vonnegut’s books, “so it goes” became a catchphrase for opponents of the Vietnam war.

“Slaughterhouse-Five” reached No.1 on best-seller lists, making Mr. Vonnegut a cult hero. Some schools and libraries have banned it because of its sexual content, rough language and scenes of violence.

After the book was published, Mr. Vonnegut went into a severe depression and vowed never to write another novel. Suicide was always a temptation, he wrote. In 1984, he tried to take his life with sleeping pills and alcohol.

“The child of a suicide will naturally think of death, the big one, as a logical solution to any problem,” he wrote...

His last book, in 2005, was a collection of biographical essays, “A Man Without a Country.” It, too, was a best seller.

It concludes with a poem written by Mr. Vonnegut called “Requiem,” which has these closing lines:

*When the last living thing
has died on account of us,
how poetical it would be
if Earth could say,
in a voice floating up
perhaps
from the floor
of the Grand Canyon,
“It is done.”
People did not like it here.*

The Bombing of Dresden

The bombing of Dresden in February 1945 has remained one of the more controversial aspects of World War Two. Dresden, a city unaffected by bombing up to that point in the war, lost many thousands of civilians in the firestorm that was created by the Allies. As the Russians advanced to Berlin from the east and the Allies from the west, why was Dresden bombed when it did appear that the war would be ended in the near future?

Historically, Dresden had been northern Germany's cultural centre – a city filled with museums and historic buildings. The Zwinger Museum and Palace and the Frauenkirche Cathedral were world famous buildings. From 1939 to the end of 1944, the city had been spared the bombing raids that the Allies had launched on Nazi Germany. By February 1945, the city was filled with refugees – people moving from east to west in an attempt to escape the advancing Red Army. The Nazi propaganda machine had filled the minds of the Germans with horror stories of what to expect if the Red Army got to Germany. Thousands now fled from this army as it relentlessly advanced to Berlin. No one knows how many people were in Dresden when the city was bombed. Officially, the city's population was 350,000, but with the number of refugees there, it would have been a lot higher than this.

Between February 13th and February 14th 1945, between 35,000 and 135,000 people were killed by Allied bombing in Dresden. Historians still argue over the number of deaths. However, there were so many refugees in the city at the time that the real figure will almost certainly never be known.

So why was Dresden chosen as a target? Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command, had always held the view that any city that had anything to do with the Nazi war effort was a target. A number of theories do exist as to why Dresden was chosen so late in the war:

- 1) The city was in Nazi Germany and for this reason was a legitimate target for attack as the Allies were at war with Nazi Germany.
- 2) The city was not simply a cultural centre – there were factories there producing weapons and equipment for the Nazi war effort. Therefore, the city was a legitimate target. It was also a rail base to send troops to the war front with the Russians.
- 3) Though the Russians were allies, Churchill and Roosevelt had already decided that Stalin would be a major problem after the end of the war. Therefore, as the Red Army advanced against an army that was effectively defeated, it had no idea as to what an equal and possibly superior military force could do. Therefore, Dresden was bombed to show the Russians the awesome power of the Allies and to act as a warning to them not to stray from the agreements they had made at the war conferences.

In all, over three waves of attacks, 3,300 tons of bombs were dropped on the city. Many of the bombs that were dropped were incendiary bombs. These created so much fire that a firestorm developed. The more the city burned, the more oxygen was sucked in – and the greater the firestorm became. It is thought that the temperature peaked at 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit. The surface of roads melted and fleeing people found that their feet were burned as they ran. Some jumped into reservoirs built in the city centre to assist firefighters. However, these were ten feet deep, smooth-sided and had no ladders - many drowned. Very few of those in the city centre survived – those that did provided a vivid picture of what it was like to be in a firestorm.

"There were no warning sirens. We were completely surprised and rushed back down to the cellars of the hospital. But these quickly became hopelessly overcrowded with people who could no longer find shelter in their own burning buildings. The crush was unbearable, we were so tight you could not fall over."

"Apart from the fire risk, it was becoming increasingly impossible to breath in the cellar because the air was being pulled out by the increasing strength of the blaze."

"We could not stand up, we were on all fours, crawling. The wind was full of sparks and carrying bits of blazing furniture, debris and burning bits of bodies."

"There were charred bodies everywhere."

"The experience of the bombing was far worse than being on the Russian front, where I was a front-line machine gunner."

Rudolph Eichner

After the raid had finished, SS guards brought in from a nearby camp burnt the bodies in the city's Old Square (the Altmarkt). There were so many bodies that this took two weeks to complete.

A vast amount of the city was destroyed and when the Red Army took it over, the city had all but ceased to exist. Much of the city centre remained rubble into the 1950's, when the Russians who remained in the city during the Cold War, put their effort into rebuilding destroyed cities in Russia itself, rather than rebuild eastern Germany.

Source: "The Bombing of Dresden." [History Learning Site](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/bombing_of_dresden.htm).
http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/bombing_of_dresden.htm

Literary Terms: Definitions and Examples:

allusion	D: E:
imagery	D: E:
irony	D: E:
juxtaposition	D: E:
3 rd person narration	D: E:
1 st person narration	D: E:
omniscient narration	D: E:

unreliable narration	D: E:
non-linear narration	D: E:
meta-fiction	D: E:
apathy	D: E:
hero	D: E:
anti-hero	D: E:
symbolism	D: E: