

Letters

by Kurt Vonnegut

I have been banging out reams of paper in a lunatic get-rich-quick scheme.

It hasn't panned out. (31)

I am a brilliant rationalizer over a couple of drinks. (37)

What Slotkin said was this: no man who achieved greatness in the arts operated by himself; he was top man in a group of like-minded individuals. This works out fine for the cubists, and Slotkin had plenty of good evidence for its applying to Goethe, Thoreau, Hemingway, and just about anybody you care to name. If it isn't true, it's true enough to be interesting - and maybe helpful. The school gives a man, Slotkin said, the fantastic amount of guts it takes to add to culture. It gives him morale, esprit de corps, the resources of many brains, and - maybe most important - one-sidedness with assurance . . . I'm convinced that no one can amount to a damn in the arts if he becomes sweetly reasonable, seeing all sides of a picture, forgiving all sins. (39)

For want of anything more tempting, I'll stick with money. (39)

I sure do like plays. If Penelope goes over, I will have taken the giant step that will free me to write plays for the rest of my life. If not, I won't have taken the giant step. If not, so what? I am a nihilist. (41)

The country is being managed to death, being public related to death. (42)

It doesn't appear that I can go on much longer making a living as a short story writer...I've got a wife and two kids, and have to do something that will bring in money steadily. (43)

I think big business is a terrible thing for the spirit of the country, as our spirit is the best thing about us. (44)

It's OK to be in bad taste as long as it's interesting. (47)

Sitting here in the studio, right now, writing a good friend, and writing at my ease, I'm reminded of an uncle (Alex V.), who, after sauerbraten and several schooners of dark beer and quarter cigars, said, "If this isn't good, what is?" He says it often. It's a fine line. (49)

It's going to be a good book, Harry. We're just all going to have to be patient. (52)

(Re. all current plays focusing on New York) Unsettling business for an artist, where everything that happens in New York has universality, and everything that happens outside is ethnography. (58)

Have you read Aristotle's *Poetics*? I just did, and found in there everything any editor or writer ever told me about putting a story together. I couldn't think of a single amendment based on discoveries since 322 B.C. it's clear, and it isn't very long - and you might well recommend it to promising youngsters. Like me. (58)

Women are damn moody things. (61)

I look at the Sunday book review sections, and I say to myself, Jesus, why should anyone ever write another book. There are so many books, and I bet a lot of them are good, too. One book for every good reader. (69)

Vonnegut was as surprised as anyone and had never wanted to a "spokesman" of the young. He was very leery of the of the hippie phenomenon and wrote a searing account of one of their heroes, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, guru to the Beatles and assorted movie stars (paraphrased from article "Yes, We Have No Nirvanas"). (76)

So what's the joke? Turns out it's a free country after all. As long as you're ineffectual, which bodes well for me if not for you. (79)

(Re. relative Walter Vonnegut) His cousins and siblings looked upon him as a frightful failure, because he died of booze in his earlier fifties. But he'd had a lot of wonderful parts and brilliant friends, far, far from Indianapolis. Essentially, what he'd done was use himself up, which is what people are supposed to do. Not that I recommend booze. (92)

Hey listen - I just finished a book about twenty minutes ago, and do I ever feel loony and great. Happy as a bird. Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet. (94)

You've got to take the goods with the bads. (108)

This place is full of the dumbest, sweetest mice. I haven't the heart to harm them - and neither will Edith, and neither will you. They don't do anything bad. They keep me company and make me laugh. (114)

I wish my students could write . . . simply and clearly, and keep a story

moving as well. They are damned if they will tell a story simply and directly, and I have discovered the reason for this. It is not the fault of their previous teachers. It is their own fault; they have no stories to tell. I am going to take them on walks, and make them look at people. I have just ordered them to buy a book, which is to be the core text for my workshop. No workshop has ever had a text before. The book? That Steichen collection of photographs *The Family of Man*. (115)

Ian (Macmillan) is one of the three best writers I ever met. (117)

Keep your hat on. We may end up miles from here. (119)

(for a student writing assignment) ...I want you to adore the Universe, to be easily delighted, but to be prompt as well with impatience with those artists who offend your own deep notions of what the Universe is or should be. (119)

(To author William Price Fox) ...you're going to be a blooming culture hero and millionaire. I'll be frank with you, though: you'll be short as long as you live. Some people are tall, and other people are medium or short, and that's the way God wants it. So don't come crying to me. Some people are both tall and talented, and there you have God again. Take life as it comes. That's what I do. (124)

Mark will probably get out of Swarthmore and get into architecture at Penn. That will make me happy. He will be the third architect named Vonnegut. I wish he were the fourth. (126)

All goes well here. One of my sons is going to be a Unitarian minister. I'm pleased. (134)

Saul Bellow has argued that the writer should not think of himself as a shaman. I'm arguing that that's what a writer should be. Isn't that exciting? (135)

(Re. Mark's conscientious objector appeal) He will not hate. He will not kill. There's hope in that. There's no hope in war. (141)

I've got to quite smoking. When I do that, I quite writing. So there we are. I know. I've been through it before. (151)

From now on, I intend to limit my discourse with dimwitted Savonarolas to this advice: "Have somebody ready the First Amendment to the United

States Constitution out loud to you, you God damned fool." (154)

I went to a high school (Shortridge) which had a daily paper, so everybody was crazy about writing. Many good writers have come from Shortridge - because of the paper. The student writers get an immediate response from an audience rather than from one tired teacher. This makes writing seem exciting and relevant. (157)

The teacher should think of assisting the student to *become* a writer, rather than think of teaching the student how to write.

It was so pleasant having supper with you and Anne two nights in a row.

You wear very well. (159)

It takes me so long to find out what my books are about, so I can write them. (168)

As you know perfectly well, people need people. And Jill is who I have now. (171)

I myself am living alone in two rooms and a garden in New York, attempting to draw useful electricity from the millions of milling strangers around me. (174)

You're learning now that you do not inhabit a solid, reliable social structure - that the older people around you are worried, moody, goofy human beings who themselves were little kids only a few days ago. So home can fall apart and schools can fall apart, usually for childish reasons -- and what have you got? A space wanderer named Nan. And that's OK. I'm a space wanderer named Kurt, and Jane's a space wanderer named Jane, and so on. When things go well for days on end, it is an hilarious accident. (176)

I think it's important to live in a nice country rather than a powerful one.

Power makes everybody crazy. (177)

And the really big whacks of money, of course, come from paperback sales. If you make a small fortune, it will come from paperbacks. (183)

That part of me which asks such plonking questions is that part of me which do so well in Problems in Contemporary Civilization in Junior High School in Indianapolis a good many years ago. (185)

Most letters from a parent contain a parent's own lost dreams disguised

as good advice. (187)

(On his family's cycle of depression) I have found, though, that I handle it best in solitude. (190)

(On his mother's suicide) I have finally dealt with that suicide, by the way, in the book I just finished. My mother appears briefly at the end, but keeps her distance -- because she is embarrassed by the suicide. And so she should be. (191)

I still believe that a dog is going to kill me, and it scares me -- and it pisses me off. (192)

I am persuaded that it is now impossible to govern well almost anywhere, and that national tragedies come and go of their own will, like thunderstorms. This makes endurance the most useful human skill. (206)

Need of money has also been known to move me from here to there. I have been head of a family since I was four years younger than Mark, and I have had to scramble some. If I start to fail even now, it will be bad news for a lot of people. So my continued interest in success, which may seem unattractive, has to do with my gang, not just me. I would rather be a philosopher king with no property but a wooden bowl. Or maybe I wouldn't like that so much, after all. This is fun, too, and often satisfying. I get to talk to really good artists a lot of the time, and they nourish me. (215)

Wish me luck with my next book, which, like all the others, is refusing to be written. I hope it's a good one, so you'll be proud of me. (216)

One thing that makes all my books tough to write is that I try to tell stories without the almost essential elements of blame and villainy. (216)

The secret of good writing is caring. (221)

(Returning from Russia) I'm fresh back from the Worker's Paradise. The elevators still don't work, and it's still perfect hell to be a Jew over there. Hi ho. (221)

As I peter out creatively, I become more and more of a cultural bureaucrat. I don't consider this a tragedy, unless becoming older and doing what older people do is a tragedy. I suppose that Daphne has

told you what is in store for both us Scorpions. Huge changes are in store, and they will be terribly interesting and wrenching, and all we can do is ride along. Well -- hang on. We may wind up miles from here. (222)

When I was healed, I was shipped as an infantry replacement to the 106th Division at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, although I never had any infantry training. (223)

We'll both learn how people are wounded, and how they're healed. You have already done me a terrific favor with that letter of yours. You can do me another one immediately by realizing that my life is a total crock, just like everybody else's. (224)

This is not an invitation to go crazy. I will go crazier than anybody in the family, if anybody else in it goes crazy. That is a promise. All I am saying, Darling, is this: Trust your mind. Trust it *sometimes* and draw or paint the passionate, irresponsible, and super-wise things it sees. (228)

Ed Doctorow told me Renata Adler's definition of a writer at supper yesterday. She says a writer is somebody who hates to write. That sure includes me. And, as Max Wilkinson once said, "I never knew a blacksmith who was in love with his anvil." Hi ho. (229)

I have never written with teenagers in mind, nor are teenagers the chief readers of my books. (230)

This much I have always known, anyway: Music is the only art that's really worth a damn. (231)

I am so glad to be friends with poets at last. Poetry is so clearly intended to be read by intimates, it seems to me, that strangers can't really be included in the deepest fun. (232)

(On Harriet Beecher Stowe's comment about crossing the Ohio on ice floes) There was no poetry in her, but only bravery and decency. (239)

Hell is running an elevator throughout eternity in a building with only six floors. (246)

It is too bad that Indianapolis has been rich enough to renew itself. Most of my father's and grandfather's work has now been obliterated. All that will be left, by and by, will be the Atheneum. Have you noticed

Lexington, Kentucky? It was too poor to renew itself for a long, long time. Now it is refurbishing all its wonderful old buildings -- a cheap and sensible way to become beautiful again. (246)

I quit smoking for a month, but now I am back at it again. It is as though I have made a very bad bargain with the Devil. I cannot write unless I hurt myself some. This is stupid. (264)

The luckiest thing I ever did was to teach at Iowa for those two years. I picked up a very classy extended family that way. It made you (Gail Godwin) and John and John and John and some others quality relatives of mine for life. I used to be in this trade all alone. Suddenly, I was a member of a really great gang. I never tire of asking you and the rest, "How goes it"? If you are ever in trouble, I will take you in. (267)

(John) MacDonald was one of the group Kurt called "the Professionals," who started out as he did in the Golden Age of Magazines and who were also nurtured by his own early editor Knox Burger and agent Max Wilkinson. (272)

Jane (Vonnegut's first wife) could believe with all her heart anything made being alive seem full of white magic. That was her strength. She was raised a Quaker, but stopped going to meetings of Friends after her four happy years at Swarthmore. (273)

Hitler made a harmless admission a capital crime. Holocaust studies may again make Jews as seemingly distinctive as Hitler cruelly imagined them to be. It should be remembered, too, that once his quack anthropologists got to work seeking distinctions, they were able to generalize loathsomely about Slavs and Blacks and Gypsies and Homosexuals and on and on. Any responsible study of the Holocaust, it seems to me, must begin with the question: "What is a Jew?" It should be said that there is no scientific answer, can be no scientific answer. Any other reply has its roots in superstition. (276)

You are not mistaken to admire R. Crumb. He makes me proud to be an American. (277)

(Re. his gallery show) I really tried to make wonderful pictures. This is no town for amateurs. (278)

(To Jose Donoso) I thank you for your illegible address, and would than you for a clearer one. (281)

I had dinner with Nelson Algren in Sag Harbor (Long Island) last summer, and brought John Irving and his wife along. Nelson's jokes were more obscure than usual. It took us a couple of days to figure out that he thought John was *Clifford* Irving, the Howard Hughes Hoaxer, the con man, the beuiling crook. (282)

I seem to be the victim of a truly profound addiction. I undergo radical personality changes when I stop. They are quite permanent and unattractive. (286)

No -- I will not be there for Vonnegut Week (in Indy). Any American with common sense knows that if he was a jerk in high school he will be a jerk in his own home town forever. It would be O.K. if I were dead... (287)

Every author in the world must have been deeply satisfied when Marquez got the Nobel (prize), and every author in the world would agree with you that Borges should have got it first. (291)

As for your attachments to students we had at Iowa: those came very close to being blood relationships. Everyone remembers you two with love of a sort which need not be renewed and renewed like the paint on your house. (291)

I did receive the shirts, which are beautifully made. Really. That much is still right about this country anyway -- Eagle Shirts. We also still make the finest harps in the world. (292)

There is no chance that I could ever respond warmly to upper class sensibilities (in prose or poetry), no matter how brilliantly expressed. This is politics. Example: T.S. Eliot. F*ck him. Everybody knows he's from St. Louis -- everybody but him. (298)

It is my agnosticism which gets me into trouble with the censors, I am sure. They honestly believe that we have under law an established religion and that it is Christianity. They also believe that the Constitution has no more to do with law than a Hallmark Greeting Card. (300)

(My father) would have rather been a potter than anything. He could have given up speaking almost entirely. That was a complaint he often made: that people talked too much. (302)

For the first time since around 1951, I don't owe anybody a book. I am not at all sure that I want to write another one. My brains aren't nearly as quick and lucky as they used to be. Also -- justice doesn't seem to be the popular subject it once was, when I was young. (306)

(Former wife Jane's) suffering makes me so damned sorrowful. (306)

I would rather be a playwright than anything, mainly because playwrights are allowed to smoke backstage. (308)

You find time to be vivid in real life. Somehow I don't, and most novelists don't. Such is the territory. A novel is an enormous ball of cotton batting which sops up thousands of hours, giving almost nothing but a little lint in return. (310)

Dear Max, who was already contemplating his own death when I met him a third of a century ago, talked even back then about "all the good people on the other side." He meant those who had died, of course. And the population of Heaven, which now includes those two great friends, John and Max, continues to grow by leaps and bounds. I don't scoff at the idea of Heaven nearly as much as I used to. My first wife Jane, whom you met, I think, and with whom I remained on friendly terms, herself crossed over about eight days before John. (313)

I came home from my tour last fall so tired and annoyed that I canceled all future engagements, including one at Cedar Falls next spring. You know how much I like Cedar Falls, so this is serious. (315)

Many problems with story-telling are purely mechanical, which most people don't realize. (326)

I once met Tennessee Williams in a steambath of a health club near here, and I broke his spirit by telling him how much I admired *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*. He wasn't writing that well any more. (328)

This is an intolerably sloppy office I run, with me as the only employee. (329)

It really makes a difference, I find, if people hear me speak. (338)

I spoke at the University of Pennsylvania a few months ago, and was started to be introduced by a member of the English department. That had never happened before. He spoke so well of me! I had grown used to being treated by faculty as though I were a crazy invited by the kids, like Timothy Leary or G. Gordon Liddy. Faculty stayed away. (342)

I am ashamed of few things I have done in this life. But I can never forgive myself for giving darling, intelligent, good-hearted Lily such an awful mother. (344)

As for marrying anyone else I will be 69 in November, and my father, who abused his heart and lungs with tobacco just as I have done, made it to 72, gasping and coughing for the last two years. So I would never ask any woman to commit herself to seeing me through that fast-approaching mode of departure. I feel fine, but it seems highly improbable that I really am fine. (344)

The wonderful thing is that you are going to be without pain for the first time in years. Buddy Hackett had heartburn from his mother's cooking every day of his life until he joined the Army. After his first day in the Army he went on sick call. He told the doctor his fire had gone out. (345)

(Letter to IUPUI Chancellor Bepko) I lecture at all sorts of colleges and universities, and find torpor in the schools social climbers send their kids to, and all sorts of merriment and hope in urban schools like yours, whose diplomas are not famous for being tickets to establishments of the ruling class. (347)

I am off to the city tomorrow, Thursday, and then to the outskirts of Chicago, to Harper College, where I will tell my audience about the pregnant woman who asked me in a letter if it was wrong to bring an innocent baby into a world as awful as this one. I told her what made being alive almost worthwhile for me was all the saints I met almost anywhere, people who are behaving decently in an indecent society. (351)

Somebody should have told me that getting drunk, while fashionable, was

dangerous and stupid. (354)

I have always been proud to be a Hoosier, a son of the state which gave us
Cole Porter and Eugene Debs. (359)

My generation was extraordinarily lucky to have fought in that greatest of
rarities, an unambiguously just war. I include Korea. (360)

People capable of loving some paintings or etchings or whatever can
rarely do this without knowing something about the artist . . . So I dare
to suggest that no picture can attract serious attention without a
human being attached to it in the viewer's mind . . . Pictures are
famous for their human-ness and not their picture-ness. (361)

I intend to call for a Constitutional Convention, in order to add four
amendments to the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing that every newborn
will be sincerely welcomed, that every young person up reaching
puberty will be declared an adult, that every citizen will be given
worthwhile work to do, and that every citizen will be made to feel that
he or she will be sincerely missed when he or she is dead. (362)

If you want to write fiction, then you must be patient, for you need
experiences, and those take time to accumulate. Unfortunately,
television offers the illusion of experiences writers used to come by the
hard way, in courtrooms, on ships, in hospitals, whatever. Please don't
rely on those, unless you want to be popular. I say go for truths, very
personal ones, not likely to be learned from TV sets . . . When I teach
writing, my lessons are mainly about sociability. Please, please, please
make sure the reader is having an interesting time, and the hell with
you. (368)

Politics? I will vote Democratic because that is the most humane of the
two parties, but not by much. The Clintons are shallow, opportunistic
Yuppies, but they are the only game in town. Doesn't Dole make you
ashamed to be a World War Two vet? What a crabby old poop! (369)

For your information, and you surely know this already: 3050 North
Meridian Street was a brilliantly conceived machined for genteel living,
designed by my grandfather Bernard Vonnegut, an Indianapolis native
educated in Europe and MIT, the first licensed architect in the State of

Indiana. The Atheneum, a National Landmark, by designed by him.
(373)

Allen (Ginsburg) was inducted nominally as a poet, but had in fact become world famous for the radiant love and innocence of his person, from head to toe. (375)

(letter to Galway Kinnell) At the age of 75, I had come to doubt that any words written in the present could make me like being alive a lot. I was mistaken. Your great poem *Why Regret?* restored by soul. Jesus! What a language! What a poet! What a world! (377)

I continue to agonize over my loss of faith in both natural selection and the big bang theory. Both seem to me to be absurd -- testimony only as to how we are presently doomed to reason, with great big things necessarily having to come from teeny seeds as time creeps by. No other story of how things have come to be as they are is for our brains acceptable. (385)

There's only one rule that I know of . . . God damn it, you've got to be kind. (395) It was implicit in all his work, what Henry James called "the figure in the carpet" -- the thread that was woven through the story, including the story of his life. (395)

(Letter to daughter Edie) Father, like you, was a good citizen, a founder, among other virtuous activities, of the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, one of the best in the world, and designer of a landmark clock at the corner of Washington and Meridian Streets, in the precise center of town, which intersection was and may still be called "The Crossroads of America." I was in Indianapolis last June, and I walked under that clock, and I looked up at it, and I said out loud, "Hi, Dad." (396)

(Turning down a final speaking request) I cannot be of any use to you and your students nowadays, alas, since, at 84, I resemble nothing so much as an iguana, hate travel, and have nothing to say . . . But God bless you for being a teacher. (412)

(Final words to be delivered an audience) And how should we behave during this Apocalypse? We should be unusually kind to one another,

certainly. But we should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot.
And get a dog, if you don't already have one . . . I'm out of here. (413)

Complete letters :

Dear Mr. Spiegel—

I thank you for your letter of July 19, received only today.

I do not hate all Russians, and would not have said what I did if I had supposed that anyone there would take it with such wooden literalness. Neither do I love to hate anyone, which is quite evident in my life and work.

Since you are so literal minded, believing, as you seem to, that people at all times should say exactly what they mean or say nothing, I have no hope of explaining to your satisfaction why I said what I said. I was using a form of humor called irony, saying one thing while clearly meaning another. Such humor is not to your taste, and seems dangerous to you. I, on the other hand, would not be able to make my living as a humorist if I could not use irony. It is not a form of lying, and it is not a form of intentional deception, either. It is a matter of saying one thing while clearly saying another.

Believe me, if I thought there were any harm in it, I would find some other way to make a living. I expect to hear from you that there is indeed great harm in it, with world tensions so high, and that I had better find some other way to make a living. You may be right. World War Three might well begin with someone's making a joke, and with a humorless person taking the joke as an intolerable threat and declaring war.

If I really hated the Russians, I would have made you feel it that night. I speak ambiguously only to people who have had little experience with humor.

I have worked hard for peace all my adult life. I am going to the Soviet Union for the second time this fall. My books have all been published there, and I have several Russian friends. I will go over there with the same attitude I tried to express in my statement about hating

Russians. My exact meaning was this: I love the Russian people, but I think their leaders have often treated my fellow artists most swinishly, and it makes me mad. O.K.?

Cheers. (218)

November 16, 1988

New York City

To William G. Kennedy, Fanelon Falls

Secondary School, Fanelon Falls, Ontario

Dear Mr. Kennedy—

My publisher, Dell, has just sent me a copy of your letter of October 19 regarding the attempted censorship of my book *Welcome to the Monkey House*. You and R.A. Baxendale have my sympathy, and I am honored by your inclusion of some of my short stories in your curriculum. Your laws differ from ours in many respects, so I can offer no legal wisdom. I can only say that efforts by groups of parents to get certain works of literature withheld from an entire school community are common in this country, and have in every case been thwarted by decisions of higher courts.

Some primitive facts which may be of some slight use to you when talking about me to primitive people: I have seven children, four of them adopted. The six who are full grown are monogamous, sober members of their communities—a cabinetmaker, a television writer, a pediatrician, an airline captain, a successful painter, and a successful printmaker. They would have heard the word fuck by the time they were six, whether they had had me for a father or not. As for shit and piss: they spoke of almost nothing else when they were only three, which was surely their idea as much as mine. One man wrote me that he could learn more about sex from talking to a ten-year-old than he could from reading my collected works, which is true. Nowhere have I celebrated the use of any sort of drug, nor sexual promiscuity, nor bad

citizenship.

I express dismay at violence and humorlessness in everything I write, and in my ordinary life as well. I celebrate compassion and tenderness, and parents of every persuasion should be happy to have me do that, and especially those who are enthusiastic about the Beatitudes. Speaking, as the censors do, of giving "a five year old a hand-grenade": do the censors allow lethal weapons in their homes, or tell war stories within the hearing of children, or allow children to watch TV cartoons where the mouse blows up the cat, or drops a great weight on it from on high, or digs a pit for it lined with spikes! Do they shoot animals, and then show the bullet-riddled corpses as though they were something to be proud of? I never did. As I have already said, six of my children are full grown now, and are admittedly sexy with their legal mates, and are also toilet trained, thanks to all the talk early on about shit and piss. But they surely are not violent.

Cheers,

Kurt Vonnegut

(322)

Characters:

Knox Burger, fiction editor of Collier's

Harry Brague, Kurt's editor at Scribner's

Jose Donoso, Chilean novelist

Don Farber, theatrical attorney, then agent, negotiator, advisor

Connections

Daughter Nanny married to painter Scott Prior

Misc. Notes :

Grew up on block from away from Booth Tarkington

The sixties were a turning point for the whole country and for Kurt

Vonnegut as a writer. His work would have special resonance for the

dynamic new youth culture and its values, especially in questioning the status quo and challenging the accepted wisdom. (72)

...Donald Kaul, a very good columnist for the Des Moines Register... (125)

Maybe the time is ripe at last, now that we have our own Peloponnesian Wars. We can do the Aristophanes thing. (159)

Daughter married to Geraldo Rivera for five years.

When trying to arrange for Mrs. Rait the translator to come from Russia, he offered to be part of the seminar, for free, and offered \$3,000 to cover all her expenses (in 1976).

Liked Gogol best of all Russians he read in the Modern Library editions.

Favorite phrases :

Hey presto!

Hi ho.

Vocab :

I suppose the stuff shrivels if it is taken away from from the salubrious air of the Boardwalk.

