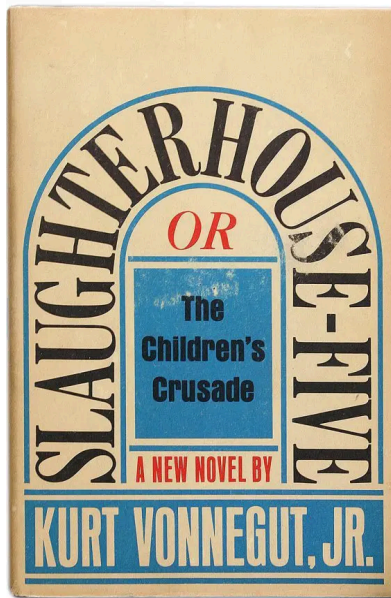


# The Moral Clarity of 'Slaughterhouse-Five' at 50



By Kevin Powers  
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When I was 24, I watched a small white car through the 4X scope attached to my M240B machine gun. The weapon rested on the wall of a rooftop on the outskirts of the city of Tal Afar, Iraq. The street down which the car drove was otherwise empty, the United States Army having previously informed the citizens of Tal Afar to evacuate their city or find themselves caught between military-strength deadlines and the people toward whom that deadliness was meant to be applied.

Though the day was hot and hazy, and I had been awake for all but a few of the preceding 48 hours, it was unmistakably clear that from a window of the small white car the occupant of the passenger seat had unfurled a white flag of truce. This was plain even without the aid of magnification provided by my scope. Through the scope, I saw a man in the passenger seat and a woman driving. They were old, and though I can't say with any certainty how old, their age registered immediately as an important characteristic. Old people rarely try to kill American soldiers. I believe this to be both historically true and true in that place and at that time. Old couples waving white flags of truce from windows of small white cars are exceedingly unthreatening, even in a place like Tal Afar in September 2004, where many of the young men were very dangerous, including and perhaps especially us.

Someone said, "What ya got, Powers?" And I said: "Nothing. Just an old couple trying to get out." There were perhaps a dozen people on that rooftop, some of whom I knew

about as well as you can know a person, others whom I had only met a couple of days earlier. I think someone got on the radio but I can't say that for sure. I do know that none of the people on that rooftop were afraid of the old man and the old woman in the small white car. Some distance away from us, perhaps on another rooftop, another group of soldiers had been watching the same white car, though I did not know that yet.

I don't remember how much time passed between my saying, "It's nothing," and someone in that other group of soldiers opening fire, but it was likely less than 10 seconds. And I don't know why they did it. But I know that .50-caliber machine-gun rounds tore into the small white car and tore into the old man and the old woman until the small white car stopped moving and the old man and the old woman were both dead. So it goes. They have been dying in my mind every day for the last 14 years. I suspect they will do so until I've exhausted my own days on this earth. This is my moment trapped in amber.

I am now 38. I live in a rented house in Pittsboro, N.C., with my wife, my two daughters and my dog. I try to be kind. I try not to hurt people. And though I have just told you all the things I know with certainty about that day in September in Tal Afar, Iraq, when I was 24, I'm still not sure what it means. I don't know if my being there in that place and at that time makes me a bad person, but on most days I think it means I do not get to claim to be a good one.

There is an eminently useful thought experiment with which I suspect you are familiar. It goes something like, "What would an alien think of \_\_\_\_?" The blank is typically filled in with something like sex, or our destructive relationship to the natural world, or money. War is sometimes used to fill that blank, too. The point of the thought experiment is to invent a kind of critical distance between a particular aspect of human behavior and ourselves, the ones behaving un-self-consciously like humans.

This thought experiment is useful precisely because it forces a perspective so separate, or alien, that with a little luck we gain some insight into why we are the way we are or why we do the things we do, like procreate, or poison our habitat, or hoard digital proxies for paper proxies for bits of rare but not all that rare metals, or watch old people get machine-gunned to death, or firebomb medium-size German cities. I've often thought that "Slaughterhouse-Five" is a variation on this kind of thought experiment; it has few if any equals in creating the kind of distance that can offer insight into the mass insanity of modern warfare.

*[ Read our original review of "Slaughterhouse-Five," from 1969 ]*

But it is so much more than a uniquely useful thought experiment on war. It is equally remarkable in the innovative way its structure is married to, and made necessary by, the

story itself. Just before his capture by the Germans during the war, our hero, Billy Pilgrim, becomes “unstuck in time.” Later in the narrative we learn that this is a consequence of Billy’s subsequent abduction by Tralfamadorians, aliens who happen to be unbound by the normal limitations of time and space. Through this ingenious device Kurt Vonnegut shows the past as an irresistible force, particularly in the case of those who have trauma at the center of their experience.

The war intrudes on Billy’s later life in a way that will be immediately familiar to those who have fought in one. His past arrives without invitation, bouncing between the war, his childhood and his unremarkable later life as an optometrist, which is itself punctuated by visits to mental and veterans hospitals. As the narrative progresses we begin to understand that for a man who has witnessed the horrors that Billy has, the Tralfamadorians’ belief that the past, present and future are merely the primitive notions of Earthlings starts to sound like a comforting explanation for the intrusive nature of traumatic experience.

This all may sound very strange to you. It is beautifully strange. But let me be more direct about what I really think this book is. “Slaughterhouse-Five” is wisdom literature. It is a book of awe and humbling clarity. Its lessons are so simple that by adulthood most of us have forgotten or taken them for granted only to be stunned upon being reacquainted with their fundamental gravity.

Through the little green eyes of Billy Pilgrim’s Tralfamadorian captors, we see ourselves as mere human beings, mortal animals utterly stripped of our pretensions. Our crimes become both monumental and quotidian. Our grief and our destiny are both inevitable. This may sound cynical or nihilistic, but I would argue that this book is among the most humane works of art ever created. It is concerned with and dedicated to the alleviation and prevention of human suffering in the face of its inevitability, and I can think of no braver moral position to take than that one. I’ve relied on it as a touchstone in my life. You can have Job. I’ll throw in my lot with Billy Pilgrim.

In the singularly brilliant introductory chapter, Vonnegut tells us in his own voice how he came to write this book. It was born from his experiences as a young Army private taken prisoner in World War II, witness to both the brutality of the German war machine and the catastrophic Allied firebombing of Dresden. Near the end of the chapter he writes the following: “I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that.”

This is merely one example of Vonnegut's unmatched moral clarity. He, more than any other writer I can think of, could cut through cant and sophistry and dissembling to expose our collective self-deceptions for what they are. His sentences are accusations that let you keep your dignity. And for those of us who recognize ourselves in those accusations, that generosity is a rare gift. Few among us will ever write something so plainly and undeniably true that its honesty feels provocative even 50 years after it first appears in print, but Vonnegut did when he wrote "Slaughterhouse-Five." I, for one, am grateful it exists.

Kevin Powers is the author of two novels, "The Yellow Birds," a National Book Award finalist, and "A Shout in the Ruins," as well as a poetry collection, "Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting."

*This essay is adapted from the introduction to a new, 50th-anniversary edition of "Slaughterhouse-Five," by Kurt Vonnegut, published this month by Modern Library.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/books/review/kevin-powers-kurt-vonnegut-slaughterhouse-five.html>