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Kurt Vonnegut

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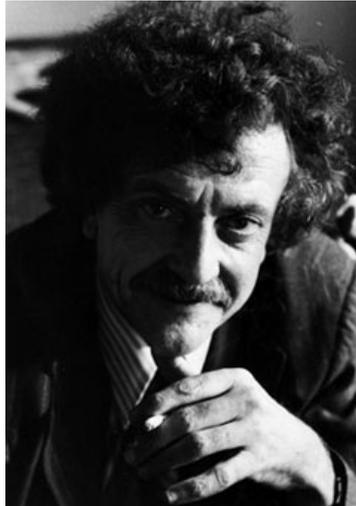
Kurt Vonnegut junior, novelist, died on April 11th, aged 84

Apr 19th 2007 | From the print edition



ON FEBRUARY 13th 1945, Kurt Vonnegut sat in an underground meat locker in Dresden, Germany, listening to the city above him being destroyed. He and the other prisoners of war, captured as they wandered behind enemy lines, had been consigned to make vitamin syrup for pregnant mothers, trying to ignore the ominous “Schlachthof-Funf” (Slaughterhouse-Five) daubed on the door.

Now they simply listened. One prisoner made a joke. “Nobody laughed,” Mr Vonnegut wrote later, “but we were all glad he said it. At least we were still alive! He proved it.” Sitting in a slaughterhouse as the sky rained fire, his life proved by a joke, Mr Vonnegut found the path that would define him for the rest of his life.



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His novels questioned the nature of existence and the purpose of life, often with blackly comic humour and fantastical political satire. With his unkempt hair and drooping moustache, he looked much like that other great American pessimist, Mark Twain. Life, he declared frequently, was “no way to treat an animal”.

Although Mr Vonnegut’s experience in Dresden shaped his world view, it took him 24 years and seven novels before he wrote the “famous Dresden book” he had promised. “Slaughterhouse-Five”, published in 1969 against the backdrop of racial unrest and the Vietnam war, propelled him from science-fiction writer (a label he abhorred) to literary icon. The novel caught the brooding, anti-establishment mood of the times and became an instant bestseller. Its signature hook, “So it goes”, which followed every death, was adopted as a mantra by opponents of the war.

The main character, Billy Pilgrim, is kidnapped by small green aliens called Tralfamadorians, who teach him the true nature of time: that all moments in the past, present and future exist always, and that death is just an unpleasant moment, neither an end nor a beginning. When Billy is shot bringing this message to the world, he does not mind. He knew he would die like this; he has seen it all before. “Farewell, hello, farewell, hello” are his last words.

Mr Vonnegut’s was one of the defining voices of post-war America. Yet it was also ambiguous. Early works such as “Player Piano” (1952) and “The Sirens of Titan” (1959) were technological reveries, even though he was a self-confessed Luddite who preferred his typewriter to a computer. He became honorary president of the American Humanist Association, yet still looked to God for answers. He admitted once that “The beliefs I have to defend are so soft and complicated, actually, and, when vivisected, turn into bowls of undifferentiated mush. I am a pacifist, I am an anarchist, I am a planetary citizen, and so on.”

He was on firmer ground, it seemed, with his fiction. He created races of alien creatures,

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such as the Mercurian Harmoniums, a species of paper-thin extra-terrestrials who lived on sound. Bokononism, his invented religion, was a creed of “bittersweet lies”. He imagined anti-ageing drinks and floating furniture, while Ice-Nine—the final form of water which freezes at room temperature—destroyed the world in seven seconds flat. So it goes.

The empty birdcage

His background gave no hint of the fantasising to come: an American father, a German mother, boyhood in Indianapolis, science at university. In later years he ruefully advised his students: “If you really want to disappoint your parents, and don’t have the nerve to be gay, go into the arts.” During the Depression his mother, who had bouts of mental illness, turned to writing short stories to generate income; when this failed, she committed suicide.

His own writing career grew slowly, once army service was done. He was a crime reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau, a PR writer for General Electric, even a Saab car salesman. He also studied for a master’s in anthropology at the University of Chicago. His thesis was rejected, but his novel “Cat’s Cradle” (1963) was accepted instead, almost 25 years late.

Mr Vonnegut populated his fiction with alter egos: the author Philboyd Studge, the Pontiac salesman Dwayne Hoover, the science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, the soldier Billy Pilgrim. In “Breakfast of Champions” (1973), the author has a conversation with himself:

“This is a very bad book you’re writing,” I said to myself.

“I know,” I said.

“You’re afraid you’ll kill yourself the way your mother did,” I said.

“I know,” I said.

Critics accused him of being rambling, repetitious, sometimes incoherent and lazily autobiographical. Mr Vonnegut was defiant, though his fear that the critics were out to “squash him like a gnat” contributed to his suicide attempt in 1984. He vowed several times he would never write another novel: “Timequake”, published in 1997, proved to be his last.

Like Billy Pilgrim, he had seen his own death many times, and did not fear it. He joked he was going to sue the manufacturers of Pall Mall cigarettes, the brand he smoked heavily for years, for failing to kill him as they promised on the packs. Since his death, a simple black-and-white drawing has appeared on his [website](#). It shows an empty birdcage, the door wide open. Farewell Mr Vonnegut, and hello.

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