

A Brief Biography of Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. Kurt Sr. was one of the most prominent architects in the city, and his wife, Edith, was from a wealthy family. Kurt Jr. was the youngest of their three children. The fortunes of the family changed dramatically during the Depression which caused Kurt Sr. virtually to give up on life and Edith to become addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs.

At Shortridge High, Vonnegut wrote for the student paper and he continued his interest in journalism at Cornell, becoming managing editor of the student paper. Vonnegut would be influenced all his writing life by the simple rules of journalism: Get the facts right, compose straightforward declarative sentences, know the audience. Vonnegut studied chemistry at Cornell but later confessed he was a “lousy student.”

When World War II broke out, Vonnegut was 16; at 20, he entered the army and was shipped off to Europe, where he almost immediately was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge and sent as a POW to Dresden. On February 13, 1945, British and American bombers destroyed the city by dropping high explosives followed by incendiary bombs. The resulting firestorm turned the non-militarized city into an inferno that killed up to 60,000 civilians. Vonnegut and his fellow POWs survived by accident only because they were housed some 60 feet underground in a former meat locker and slaughterhouse.

Vonnegut’s job for weeks after the bombing was to gather up and burn the remains of the dead. His experience at Dresden marked him for life and eventually resulted in his literary masterpiece, **Slaughterhouse-Five**. Yet another sorrow of the war years was his mother’s suicide by drug overdose in 1944.

After the war, Vonnegut married and had 3 children. Vonnegut took an advertising job at General Electric to support his family and began writing short fiction on the side. In 1952, his first novel **Player Piano** was



published. A few years later, Vonnegut’s beloved sister Alice Adams died of cancer in 1957, just two days after her husband had been killed in a freak commuter train crash. Kurt and Jane took in three of Alice’s children, doubling the size of their family overnight.

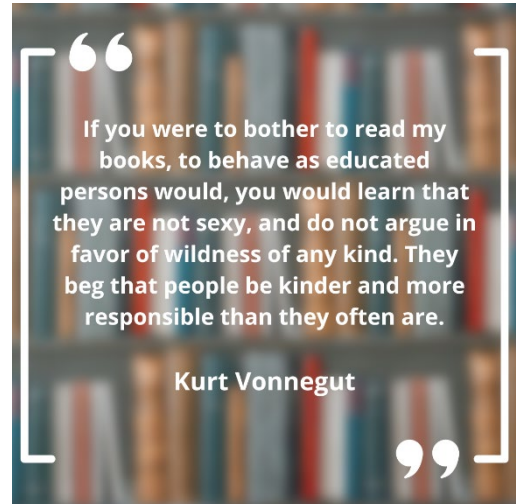
By the 1970s, Vonnegut was struggling as his children left home. His marriage dissolved and he moved to NYC, living by himself and suffering from writer’s block. Around this time, his son, Mark, suffered a bipolar disorder breakdown, but recovered. In the 1980s, Vonnegut entered a second major phase of his career. He remarried and published new novels that were well received. As the new century began, Vonnegut continued to try to be, as he said, “a responsible elder in our society,” decrying the militarization of our country after the terrorist attacks of 2001. In his final works, Vonnegut powerfully expressed his sense that corporate greed, overpopulation, and war would win out in the end over simple humanity. As he ruefully apologized to those who would come after him, “We could have saved the world, but we were just too damned lazy.”

Kurt Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007, after a fall. He was mourned the world over as one of the great American writers of the second half of the 20th century.

Bans and Challenges

Slaughterhouse-Five was published in 1969. Since its publication it has been banned, challenged, removed, and restored many times. Here are some specific instances:

- Banned because of references to religion in Rochester, MI but then an appellate court upheld its usage in the school in *Todd v Rochester Community Schools*, 41 Mich. App. 320, 200 N. W 2d 90 (1972).
- Challenged in many communities, but burned in Drake, ND (1973). Vonnegut penned a famous letter to the principal.
- Barred from purchase (for instructional purposes) at the Washington Park High School in **Racine, WI** (1984).
- Challenged at the Owensboro, KY High School library (1985) for foul language, the claim of bestiality, and the sentence: "The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the fly of God Almighty."
- Restricted to students who have parental permission at the four **Racine, WI** Unified District high school libraries (1986) because of "language used in the book, depictions of torture, ethnic slurs, and negative portrayals of women."
- Challenged at the LaRue County, KY High School library (1987) because "the book contains foul language and promotes deviant sexual behavior."
- Removed as required reading for sophomores at the Coventry, RI High School (2000) after a parent complained that it contains vulgar language, violent imagery, and sexual content.
- Retained in Arlington Heights, IL (2006) High School reading list when a board member who challenged the book based on excerpts she'd found on the internet.
- A resident filed a complaint that the book taught principles contrary to the Bible and the book was removed from Republic, MO High School (2012), but later returned and stored in a secure section of the library accessible only to parents. Teachers cannot require the book nor read it aloud in school.
- Retained in the AP English curriculum at Cienega High School in Vail, AZ (2022) when a parent complained about the language and sexual references. The district offers alternate titles when parents are concerned about the content of an assigned book.
- 2023 Menomonee Falls High School in **Menomonee Falls, WI** removed 33 books from the school library including *Slaughterhouse-Five* because of profanity and/or sexually explicit content.



Discussion Questions

- The author starts the book with “All this happened, more or less.” Is it important that the story is “true”?
- Irony is the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect. How does Vonnegut use irony in this novel?
- Compare and contrast the treatment of Billy Pilgrim by the Germans and the Tralfamadorians.
- How does free will play into the novel? As time travelers, Billy could change the future. But he and the Tralfamadorians don't. Is it because they can't? Is it because they don't want to? Is there something else going on?
- The Tralfamadorians don't understand why humans grieve death because they don't exist in a linear time and when someone dies, the Tralfamadorians can still experience that person in the past. Does this help Billy process his experience?
- The phrase “so it goes” is repeated after each death in this novel. What does this phrase mean in context? It has been criticized for being a sort of shrug, resignation, or glib. Do you agree?
- Are we meant to believe that Billy is literally abducted by aliens? Can a case be made that Billy Pilgrim is psychotic?
- Do you agree with the following quote? How does this message fit in with the rest of the book?

America is the wealthiest nation on Earth, but its people are mainly poor, and poor Americans are urged to hate themselves... Every other nation has folk traditions of men who were poor but extremely wise and virtuous, and therefore more estimable than anyone with power and gold.

- There are many strange, funny, and strangely funny incidents in the novel. Is that appropriate considering so much of the material is actually very serious?
- The full title of the book is Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death. What does the subtitle mean?
- Billy Pilgrim, despite very interesting things happening to him, is not a very interesting character. He is portrayed as almost a simpleton but lovable. Why did Vonnegut make his protagonist so non-descript?
- The author appears in many places in this novel: In the author excerpt at the beginning and the end of the book, in Billy Pilgrim's war experiences which were based off Vonnegut's, and playfully as Kilgore Trout, the worst author in the world, whose books are utter failures. Why did Vonnegut insert himself so frequently into this novel?
- Salman Rushdie argued that “The truth is that Slaughterhouse-Five is a great realist novel.” Do you agree?
- In an interview Vonnegut said, “Only one person benefited [from the massacre at Dresden] — not two or five or ten. Just one ... Me.” referring to his success from writing **Slaughterhouse-Five**. Do you agree?
- Was the bombing of Dresden a war crime?