

ANALYSIS

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969)



Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

(1922-2007)

“It has traditionally been true that one cannot acceptably admit to a taste for science fiction, except among scientists or teenagers. And these two groups share a strikingly low standard of literary attainment, and a correspondingly high tolerance for mangled prose. This is not to say that science fiction is any better now, as literature, than it ever was. A look at the bookstore shelves will prove this too: the vast majority of science fiction writing is abysmal. It is perhaps paradoxical that our most technologically advanced fiction should also be the most technically inadequate. Most science fiction writers cannot put together a literate sentence, only a handful can create a reasonable character; perhaps a dozen, at most, can sustain a simple plot. Science fiction represents, as a form, a subordination of all fictional elements to an idea—just as detective fiction represents a subordination of all elements to plot....

As a category, the borders of science fiction have always been poorly defined, and they are getting worse. The old distinction between science fiction and fantasy—that science fiction went from the known to the probable, and fantasy dealt with the impossible—is now wholly ignored. The new writing is heavily and unabashedly fantastical. The breakdown is also seen in the authors themselves, who now cross the border, back and forth, with impunity.... Many traditional science fiction preserves have been invaded by highly skillful authors, equipped to work on a very high level. Modern science stands as a vast and largely untouched reservoir of metaphor, but very recently a number of ‘real’ authors have begun to draw upon it in various ways. One thinks immediately of Nabokov, Updike and Donleavy, and in a sloppy-effective way, Norman Mailer....

When I was growing up, everybody knew damn well what Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was. He was a science fiction writer. It said so, in the high school textbooks where his stories were reprinted. And what do you call *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan* if not science fiction? Some years ago, he began to drift, but by then there was a new category, black humor, and Vonnegut got stuck into that one. The company was a little more reputable, but the category remained. He was doing *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Mother Night*, and *Cat’s Cradle*. It seemed pretty blackly humorous, all right. And if he didn’t have anything nasty

to say about his mother, well, he'd get around to it. He was witty and he was grim, and that was enough. However, with *Cat's Cradle* he began to get some attention.... Reviews of his latest book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, have dragged out the old complaints: Vonnegut is too cute, Vonnegut is precious, Vonnegut is silly.... Here we come to the second difficulty with Kurt Vonnegut. His style is effortless, naïve, almost childlike. There are no big words and no complicated sentences... A funny, simple writer is in trouble nowadays. And Vonnegut doesn't make it any easier for you. He is cheerfully, exuberantly schizophrenic...

Of his writing, he has said, 'I realize now that the two main themes of my novels were stated by my siblings: 'Here I am cleaning shit off of practically everything,' and 'No Pain.' This statement is as true as anything a writer has said of his work; it is also the reason why Vonnegut is so difficult to accept. He writes about the most excruciatingly painful things. His novels have attacked our deepest fears of automation and the bomb, our deepest political guilts, our fiercest hatreds and loves. Nobody else writes books on these subjects; they are inaccessible to normal novelistic approaches. But Vonnegut, armed with his schizophrenia, takes an absurd, distorted, wildly funny framework which is ultimately anaesthetic. In doing so, his science-fiction heritage is clear, but his purposes are very different: he is nearly always talking about the past, not the future. And as he proceeds, from his anaesthetic framework, to clean the shit off, we are able to cheer him on—at least for a while. But eventually we stop cheering, and stop laughing.

It is a classic sequence of reactions to any Vonnegut book. One begins smugly, enjoying the sharp wit of a compatriot as he carves up Common Foes. But the sharp wit does not stop, and sooner or later it is directed against the Wrong Targets. Finally it is directed against oneself. It is this switch in midstream, this change in affiliation, which is so disturbing. He becomes an offensive writer, because he will not choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad. *Mother Night*, the clearest antecedent to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, begins by giving it to the Nazis. That's all right. Then Vonnegut gives it to the Jews, then to the American right wing, then the left wing, then the Negroes, then the happily marrieds—and finally manages to reduce any social or political affiliation to total absurdity, while we look on with increasing horror. It is an astonishing book, very gentle and funny and quiet and totally destructive. Nobody escapes without being shown, in a polite way what an ass he is. (And interestingly, the left-wing political activists, who generally count Vonnegut among their number, all have somehow never found time to read this particular book.)

A Vonnegut book is not cute or precious. It is literally awful, for Vonnegut is one of the few writers able to lift the lid of the garbage can, and dispassionately examine the contents. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he also says, 'Nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting,' and it is within this framework that he writes about an event that should qualify for all those adjectives—the fire-bombing of Dresden, which Vonnegut experienced as a prisoner of war in Germany. There is every indication that this book represents, for Vonnegut, a final statement of his thoughts about this experience. He says so explicitly, just as he says the project is doomed to failure ('There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre'). The book also brings together characters and locales from other books—Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Eliot Rosewater, and Ilium, N.Y., giving the novel a faintly anthological flavor. The book is written in the brief segmental manner he developed in *Cat's Cradle*, organized as a collection of impressions, scattered in time and space, each told with the kind of economy one associates with poetry. It is beautifully done, fluid, smooth, and powerful.

There is also some business about a distant planet and flying saucers, but that does not make the book science fiction, any more than flippers make a cat a penguin. In the final analysis the book is hideous, ghastly, murderous—and calm. There are just people, doing what people usually do to each other. The ultimate difficulty with Vonnegut is precisely this: that he refuses to say who is wrong. The simplest way out of such a predicament is to say that everybody is wrong but the author. Any number of writers have done it with good success. But Vonnegut refuses. He ascribes no blame, sets no penalties. His commentary on the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King is the same as his comment on all other deaths: 'So it goes,' he says, and nothing more.'

One senses that underneath it all, Vonnegut is a nice man, who doesn't really like to have to say this, but...his description of one character might stand for all mankind in his view: 'She had been given the opportunity to participate in civilization, and she had muffed it.' And of himself, a comment by another

character, the author Nazi-propagandist-pornographer-American spy Howard W. Campbell, Jr. 'I speak gibberish to the civilized world, and it replies in kind.'

So it goes."

Michael Crichton
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