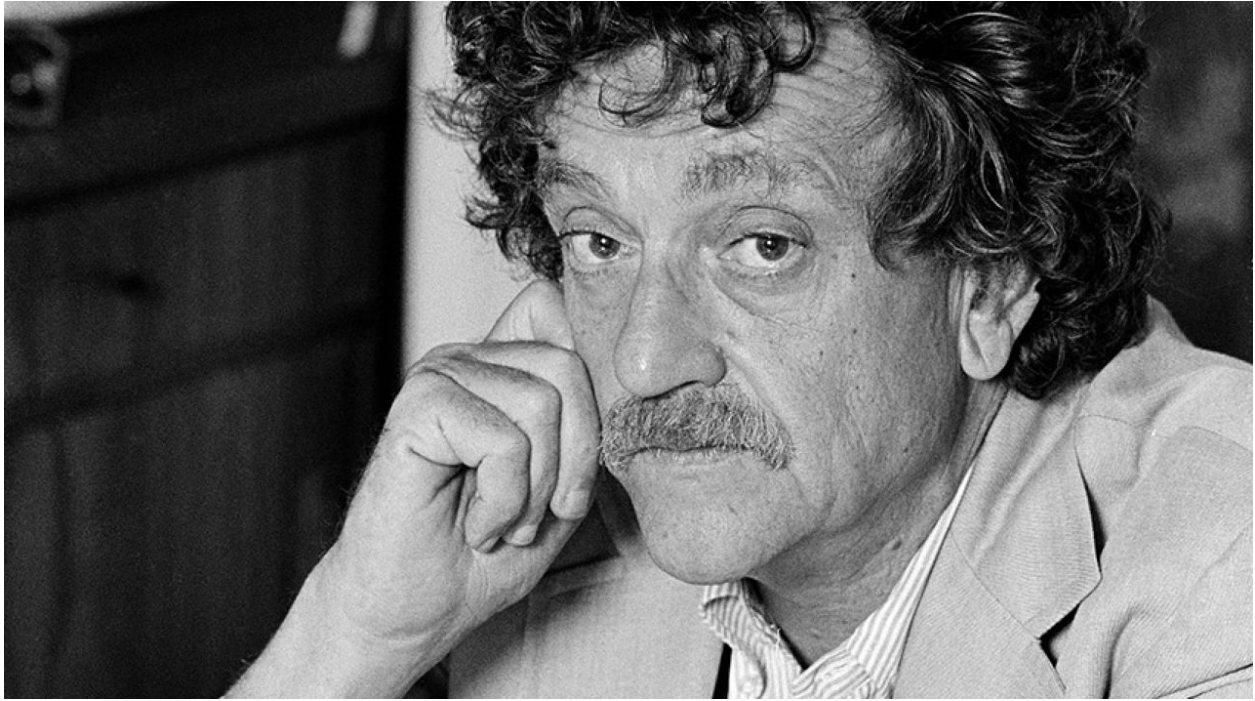


# LOOKING BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

## A LIFE IN RETROSPECT

BY ANNIE HALSETH



**O**n May 29, 1945, Kurt Vonnegut wrote a letter home to Williams Creek, Indianapolis from a Red Cross Club in Le Havre P.O.W. Repatriation Camp. "Dear people:" he begins, "I'm told that you were probably never informed that I was anything other than 'missing in action.'" The letter is written with Vonnegut's distinctive sardonic inflections and black humor as it briefly mentions the hardship the World War II veteran endured. But perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this letter is its relationship to Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The letter mentions his status as a POW, his hellish transport to Dresden and the subsequent firebombing of the city. (It should be noted that the letter was never made public during Vonnegut's life. It was published posthumously in the collection *Armageddon in Retrospect*.) In fact, it reads like the first outline of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the novel that was published 25 years later and cemented Vonnegut's status as an American literary icon.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born on November 11, 1922 and he died at the age of 84 on April 11, 2007. He was a prolific writer, publishing 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 5 plays, and 5 works of nonfiction during a career spanning over 50 years. Time has been kind to Vonnegut and his work. As we approach the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 2019, we are also finishing the

celebrating the author's life as we observe the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. Vonnegut's impact on the American literary community cannot be overstated. He continues to serve as a pillar in American literature. In December of 2015, *The New Yorker* featured an article about his wife, Jane, and her influence on his career as a writer. Even more recently, on April 29, Vonnegut's childhood home was featured in the 2017 St. Margaret's Hospital Guild's Decorator's Show. And on a continuing basis, a Twitter account in Vonnegut's name publishes relevant quotes from the author and has over 290,000 followers to its account.

In 2006, less than a year before his death, students at Xavier High School were given an assignment to write to their favorite author and ask him or her to visit their school. Five of the students wrote to Vonnegut. While he never visited the school ( his excuse was he now resembled "nothing so much as an iguana") he was the only author to [reply](#), and his letter contains an assignment for the class:

Write a six line poem, about anything, but rhymed. No fair tennis without a net.  
Make it as good as you possibly can. But don't tell anybody what you're doing.  
Don't show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever,  
or Ms. Lockwood. OK?  
Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces, and discard them into widely separated trash  
recepticals. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your  
poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you,  
and you have made your soul grow.

This is not the first time Vonnegut wrote a letter to a school. Despite its overwhelming popularity, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a tumultuous history of censorship. [In 1973](#), Vonnegut responded to Drake High School in North Dakota when school board members burned 32 copies of his book. Charles McCarthy, the Drake Public School Board President, said he didn't think the novel was appropriate for for children. "We didn't approve of its obscene language," he said.

Vonnegut's response has gone down in history as many of the lines have been quoted in defense of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and other books placed on censorship lists around the nation. Benedict Cumberbatch, Oscar nominee and star of *The Imitation Game*, even [recited the letter](#) at the Letters Live Festival in 2014. Vonnegut [wrote](#), "Certain members of your community have suggested that my work is evil. This is extraordinarily insulting to me. The news from Drake indicates to me that books and writers are very unreal to you people. I am writing this letter to let you know how real I am." Vonnegut continues to challenge McCarthy at the end of the letter to show the letter, of which

he made no copies: "Do you have the courage and ordinary decency to show this letter to the people, or will it, too, be consigned to the fires of your furnace?"

In [2011](#), all copies of *Slaughterhouse-Five* were removed from the Missouri High School Library for, as Missouri State assistant professor Wesley Scroggins puts it, containing "so much profane language, it would make a sailor blush with shame. The 'f word' is plastered on almost every other page. The content ranges from naked men and women in cages together so that others can watch them having sex to God telling people that they better not mess with his loser, bum of a son, named Jesus Christ." Due to the backlash online, just a few months later the ban was [repealed](#), though the novel was moved to a special section requiring parental permission for students to read, a move which didn't go far enough for the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library. Julia Whitehead, executive director of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, maintains that this action did not actually repeal the ban since it requires parental permission and accompaniment for students to check out the book. Nevertheless, this is only the most recent attempt to ban *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which has been banned, barred, or burned at least [17 times](#) since 1972.

**B**ut *Slaughterhouse-Five* isn't about sex or the F word or heresy, it is about war and who suffers when nations clash. The full title of Vonnegut's novel is *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade*. The novel begins with the narrator explaining the struggle of writing this story, a struggle Vonnegut echoes in his interview that appeared in *The Paris Review*, an interview that gained notoriety due to its unique composition. The interview was originally a composite of four interviews conducted with the author over the course of a decade. The composite then went "through an extensive working over by the subject himself, who looks upon his own spoken words on the page with incredible misgivings . . . indeed what follows can be considered an interview conducted with himself, by himself."

In the interview, Vonnegut corroborates the narrator's story: the encounter with Mary O'Hare, the wife of his fellow POW, Bernard V O'Hare, really did shape the perspective of the novel. Prior to their encounter, he saw the novel "starring John Wayne and Frank Sinatra," but Mary's words: "You were just children then, it's not fair to pretend that you were men like Wayne and Sinatra, and it's not fair to future generations, because you're going to make war look good" changed his perspective. And so, like the narrator, he names his book *The Children's Crusade*.

Vonnegut was, and continued to be, an outspoken opponent of war. He was vocal against the Bush administration policies and spoke of the impending war in Iraq as 'nonsense.' He described the Vietnam war as a 'ruinous mistake,' and he spent his career trying to unpack the senseless

destruction that he witnessed during his time as a soldier in World War II. In an interview in 1987, Vonnegut revealed, "My own feeling is that civilization ended in World War I, and we're still trying to recover from that. Much of the blame is the malarkey that artists have created to glorify war, which as we all know, is nonsense, and a good deal worse than that – romantic pictures of battle, and of the dead and men in uniform and all that. And I did not want to have that story told again."

So he approached the subject with humor and unique elements of science fiction that allowed him to comment on the absurdity he saw in the world. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut introduces the protagonist:

Billy Pilgrim has become unstuck in time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day.

He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

Despite the dry and slightly sardonic tone that Vonnegut uses to describe Billy's nonlinear lifestyle, he shows how Billy's abrupt transitions in time leave the character victim to whatever is occurring in that moment in time. Billy is constantly reliving horrific moments from the war, such as being violently deloused at a prison camp, before being catapulted back to infancy and remembering his mother patting his belly while he 'gurgled and cooed,' and is then playing golf as a middle aged optometrist, after which the Tralfamadorians, the extraterrestrial aliens who kidnap him to keep in a zoo, are explaining their perception of time to him.

Even though Vonnegut spoke out against war, *Slaughterhouse-Five* illustrates the inevitability of war. Billy Pilgrim, during his time on the Tralfamadorians home planet, Tralfamadore, asks the aliens to explain how they keep their planet peaceful. When they laugh at him, Billy is baffled. The Tralfamadorian explain that they have had many violent wars and that the wars on Earth do not perplex or scare them, as Billy had assumed. Rather, they saw wars just as they saw any event: inevitable. This sentiment is echoed throughout the book, but is perhaps best explained by the narrator: "there would always be wars . . . they were as easy to stop as glaciers."

"The destruction of Dresden was my first experience with really fantastic waste," Vonnegut said. "To burn down a habitable city and a beautiful one at that . . . I was simply impressed by the wastefulness, the terrible wastefulness, the meaninglessness of war." The view of war was meaningless struck a chord with America in 1969, the year *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published and the year Nixon swore to end the Vietnam war. Many Americans saw the fruitless war in Vietnam not only as wasteful, but as a meaningless endeavor that family and friends were dying for.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, with its black humor, fragmented narrative, and a protagonist with a startling lack of agency, gave angry and confused Americans a way to talk about the war.

Vonnegut does not sugarcoat the horrific nature of war, but his approach to such dark subject matter is engaging. It has the ability to start a conversation about these topics because they are hard to talk about. The immortality of this novel is in its accessibility. It is controversial not because of the F word or the sex, but because it makes its readers think about the master-narratives in society: for example, that war is glorious and boys who leave for war return as men. *Slaughterhouse-Five* undermines those narratives as its characters are young boys who are exposed to the brutality and senseless waste of war. Yet Vonnegut does not place judgment on the war. "I didn't want to argue with people who thought Dresden should have been bombed to hell," he said. "All I ever said in my book was that Dresden, willy-nilly, was bombed to hell."

The lack of judgement that Vonnegut imposes on his book is to foster conversations around these difficult topics. He does not defend or condemn, he simply points out. It is up to the reader to interpret and come to their own conclusions. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel that will continue to be relevant as long as there is war in the world. And as we now know, war is as easy to stop as a glacier.