

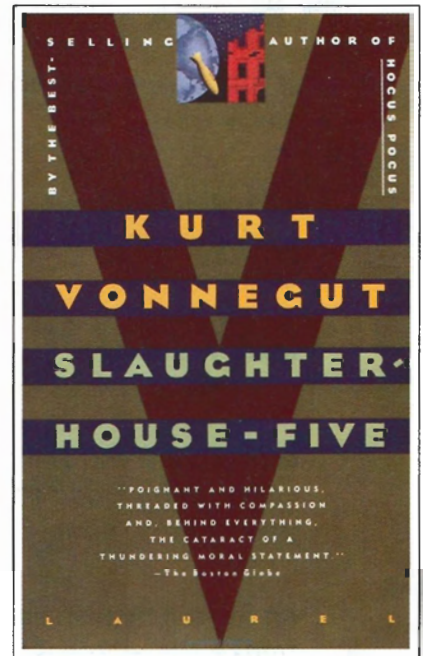
Kurt Vonnegut's

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

BY ELIZABETH LUNDAY

YOU KNOW IT AS SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, BUT IT GOES BY ANOTHER NAME, TOO. The complete title of Kurt Vonnegut's acclaimed novel is Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death, by Kurt Vonnegut, A Fourth-Generation German-American Now Living in Easy Circumstances on Cape Cod [and Smoking Too Much], Who, as an American Infantry Scout Hors de Combat, as a Prisoner of War, Witnessed the Fire-Bombing of Dresden, Germany, 'The Florence of the Elbe,' a Long Time Ago, And Survived to Tell the Tale. This is a Novel Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet Tralfamadore, Where the Flying Saucers Come From. Peace.

Weird, yes. But when you get to know the book, it actually makes a lot of sense. Even the bit about the flying saucers. Allow us to explain.

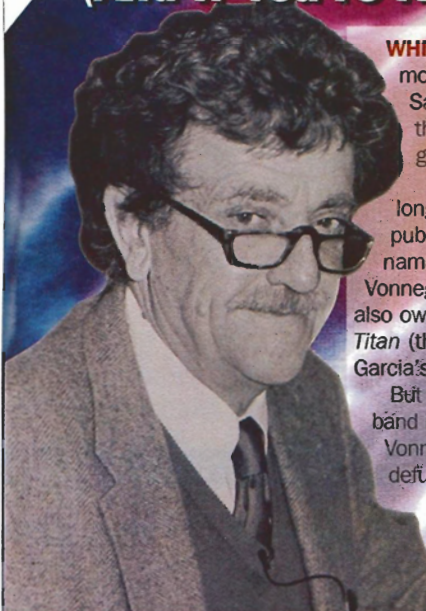


THE STORY

Slaughterhouse-Five isn't told in the standard, chronological way. On the contrary, its main character, Billy Pilgrim, is an unwitting time traveler. One moment he's living in 1945, then 1968, then 1954.

Arguably the novel's most compelling sections take place during World War II, when young Billy is serving as a U.S. soldier. The Germans

If You Like Jam Bands, You'll Love Kurt Vonnegut (And If You're Kurt Vonnegut, Jam Bands Will Love You)



WHILE FREEWHEELING JAM BANDS are more commonly associated with Hacky Sacks and hippies, never underestimate the power of Kurt Vonnegut to unify a group of free-loving music fans.

The Grateful Dead definitely had a long love affair with the author's work. Their publishing company, Ice Nine Music, was named after an imaginary substance in Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*. Garcia et al. also owned the movie rights to *The Sirens of Titan* (though Vonnegut bought them back after Garcia's death).

But the Grateful Dead wasn't the only jam band influenced by the coolness that is Kurt Vonnegut. Several songs by Phish, the now-defunct music-tour phenomenon, were Vonnegut-inspired. A key line from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time," resonates through the band's lyrics. And Vonnegut

returned the compliment. When 100 noted artists were invited to create definitive album covers for their favorite recording artists, Vonnegut drew a cover for the Phish album *Hook, Line and Sinker*. The piece, which incorporated his "Tralfamadorian Movie Star" print, was displayed in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 2003.

It gets better. In 2001, Vonnegut went to see his grandson, Max Prior, play at a Northampton, Mass., community arts concert. There, Prior introduced Vonnegut to Phish drummer Jon Fishman, and an impromptu performance ensued. Prior's band, Special K and His Crew (the members of which were all of about 16 years old at the time), laid down a groove, while Fishman "played" the suction hose of a running vacuum cleaner and Vonnegut scatted the prologue to—that's right—Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. News reports described the audience as "stunned."

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE: BANTAM DOUBLEDAY DELL PUBLISHING GROUP INC.

capture Pilgrim, who's lost behind enemy lines, and take him to Dresden, a beautiful city untouched by war. There, he and other POWs are kept in an abandoned slaughterhouse, where they escape the Allied bombing of Dresden in an underground meat locker. Although they are safe, they can still hear the firebombs pounding above. And when they emerge, everyone has been killed, and everything is destroyed.

Pilgrim returns to these memories frequently. But after coming home from the war, he marries, graduates from optometry school, and becomes a respected businessman. Despite such positive steps, tragedy seems to follow him. First, he turns up the sole survivor of a plane crash. Next, his wife dies in a car accident. Following these events, Pilgrim starts telling people he was kidnapped by aliens called Tralfamadorians, who taught him that the past, present, and future don't really exist. Instead, they believe time is a continuous whole. Pilgrim accepts the Tralfamadorian theory, and as he floats through the unalterable events of his life, he accepts that he has no power over his fate.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Dresden, Germany, was indeed fire-bombed on the night of February 13, 1945, and Kurt Vonnegut was one of the POWs who witnessed the attack. On that evening, Allied forces killed at least 25,000 people (although some estimate that as many as 130,000 people died). Vonnegut decided to write about his experience in Dresden as soon as he returned from the war, but it took him more than 20 years to finish the book. While crafting the novel, he realized conventional narrative structure imposed logic on events—and that the events he witnessed in Dresden had none. *Slaughterhouse-Five* therefore lacks conflict, climax, and conclusion. In addition, he feared glorifying war. Thus, the short, episodic style of the novel doesn't allow the reader to draw morals from the story, nor allow the characters to find peace. To underscore this point, he inserts himself into the narrative, making it

great names, great scenes, great quotes

Literary VIPs

BILLY PILGRIM: *Slaughterhouse-Five* focuses on POW Billy Pilgrim. His first name (Billy, not William) marks him as permanently childlike. His last name identifies him as a voyager, but with one poignant exception: Billy is on a pilgrimage without a purpose.

KURT VONNEGUT: Vonnegut appears as a character in his own book, both in the semi-autobiographical first and last chapters and occasionally in the body text itself. He uses these appearances to remind the reader that many of the events are true, and that he experienced them himself.

Scenes to Remember

- ✦ Vonnegut visits his war buddy Bernard O'Hare to talk about Dresden. He's surprised by the hostility of O'Hare's wife, Mary, who accuses his books of portraying war as glamorous, as in a movie with Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. Vonnegut promises her *Slaughterhouse-Five* won't have a part in it for Sinatra.
- ✦ Two days after the war ends, Pilgrim rides on the back of a green cart pulled by two horses. If he could choose to remember only the happy times and ignore the bad, this would be the moment he'd choose: lying in the sunshine with the birds singing in the trees. This is Pilgrim's happiest memory—not his wedding day or the birth of his children, but an experience of simple animal comfort.

Famous Last Words

- ✦ "I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid as I had seen it, about the book I would write. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat of dead Jews and so on. All I could say was, 'I know, I know. I know.'*
*Though horrified by Nazi atrocities, Vonnegut refused to allow for a "just war" or a "right side." He tried to curtail the inevitable criticism of the book by addressing it within the novel itself.
- ✦ "I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber."

clear that even the author can find no way to form a lesson from such horror.

WHY THE STORY MATTERS

ANTI-PLOT, NON-HERO: Vonnegut abandons traditional storytelling by drastically altering chronology. This strategy allows him to reflect Pilgrim's disjointed reality and avoid a conventional plot. Vonnegut also discards the traditional literary hero. Christ-like in his suffering, Pilgrim does not act, but is instead acted upon—a victim of destiny without any motivation beyond basic survival. Through Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut paints all participants of war as the

"listless playthings of powerful forces."

LITTLE GREEN CREATURES IN FLYING SAUCERS: The science-fiction segments of *Slaughterhouse-Five* strike most readers as bizarre, even distracting. Out of nowhere, Billy Pilgrim is kidnapped, displayed in an alien zoo, and mated with a movie star. Vonnegut never says his alien stories are imaginary, but Pilgrim does read science-fiction novels with similar plots. Real or not, the Tralfamadorians are a coping mechanism that enables him to accept empty tragedies. He clings to the Tralfamadorian saying about life and death: "So it goes." 🍌