

Obituary: Kurt Vonnegut, satirist and pessimist

Sandy English
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The American writer Kurt Vonnegut died on April 11 at the age of 84 from injuries to his brain suffered during a fall several weeks earlier.

Vonnegut wrote 14 novels, three collections of short stories, and a smaller number of essays. He was a popular writer, particularly among the young and disaffected.

His novels appeared in high-school curriculums and were sometimes banned in libraries, ostensibly because of their sexual content, but often, in reality, because of the way in which they mocked official society.

He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1922, the youngest of three children of a moderately wealthy German-American family. His mother's parents were in the beer-brewing business, and his father was an architect and a painter.

Vonnegut grew up in a place and time when members of the American middle-class often had an attraction for radical and progressive ideas. As a teenager, his relatives gave him books of speeches by the Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs (also born in Indiana) and the remarkable novels of American life by John Dos Passos. Neither influence ever entirely left his intellectual sensibility.

As a boy and young man, he suffered personal tragedies, often connected with the upheavals experienced by American society. The Great Depression robbed his father of a livelihood, and in this period his mother began to show signs of mental illness. Vonnegut's college education at Cornell University was interrupted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

He volunteered for the army and was sent to train at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. On leave to visit home for Mother's Day, he found that his mother had committed suicide.

The army assigned him to the 106th infantry division and he fought in the Battle of the Bulge, where most of his unit was destroyed. Afterwards, he was taken prisoner and assigned to work in a factory in the German city of Dresden, making vitamins for pregnant women.

On February 13, 1945, the British and Americans bombed Dresden, which Vonnegut later called in an interview, "a city full of museums and zoos—man at his greatest." The bombing created a firestorm in which 135,000 people died—a major atrocity of the Second World War.

Vonnegut and his fellow POWs sheltered in a meat-storage area called Slaughterhouse Five. When he returned to the surface, he found the city had been razed to the ground. He and his fellow POWs were ordered to help dispose of the dead.

It was this event, more than any other, which conditioned his view of life. He developed a hatred of violence and inhumanity.

When the war ended it appears that the young Vonnegut, along with

millions of other war survivors, looked forward to a better, more equitable society. In his last novel, *Timequake* (1997), also a semi-memoir, he describes the final days of World War II when, as a released POW who had not yet met up with Allied forces, he was told by German soldiers that now the United States would have to fight the USSR.

"We replied that we didn't think so. We expected the USSR to try to become more like the USA with freedom of speech and religion and fair trials and honestly elected officials and so on. We in turn would try to do what they claimed to be doing which was distribute goods and services and opportunities more fairly. 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'. That sort of thing."

But the German soldiers turned out to be right. American society did not become more equal, but instead, after first compromising with the Stalinist leadership in the USSR, set out to isolate it. The American ruling elite never abandoned its aim of reconquering Soviet territory for capitalism. The Stalinist bureaucracy, for its part, far from reforming itself, launched further repression at home and helped decapitate revolutionary movements around the world. These painful facts were to color Vonnegut's life and writing in ways that he probably never fully understood.

Vonnegut worked at various jobs after the war, first as a police reporter in Chicago and then as a public relations man for General Electric in Schenectady, New York. After 1951 he began to write fiction full-time, though for many years he had to supplement his income with various jobs.

From his beginnings as a writer Vonnegut was intimately concerned with social problems. Based on his experience working for GE, his first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), depicts Paul Proteus, a head scientist at fictitious corporation in a place called Ilium, New York. In this society, nearly everything is automated and most workers must either join the army or live off a kind of public make-work scheme.

Eventually, Proteus sides with workers who are losing their dignity. He helps to lead a rebellion that destroys the machinery and hopes to reestablish a more primitive form of society.

Here were all the elements of his future work. *Player Piano* satirized the hypocrisy of corporate life and the conformity of American society. Vonnegut reasserted human dignity in the face of seemingly inexplicable forces.

But because life in America was, to him, largely inexplicable, Vonnegut also drew pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of changing society. In the case of *Player Piano*, society had to take a technological step backward before people could free themselves. For the rest of his life, Vonnegut proudly referred to himself as a Luddite.

The 1950s were a particularly hard time to begin writing creatively.

Genuine art and the inner and outer dissent that it both requires and nourishes tended to be stifled or muted by the reactionary atmosphere of McCarthyism and the Cold War prosperity. Social satire was, for the most part, relegated to the genre of science fiction, where serious readers or critics might not notice it.

A number of critical views of society—including Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1950) and Fredrick Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants* (1952)—that appeared in this genre were dark. The future was regarded with trepidation. While revolt played a role in this kind of writing, it was at best only partially successful.

The plots were strikingly similar, including a struggle for freedom by a small group, often abetted by a convert from the establishment, against an all-powerful society that was conformist, totalitarian and inhuman. George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm* had exerted a powerful influence in literary social criticism, as had Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*.

But this was not primarily a literary matter. The American ruling elite had purged official artistic life of left-wing elements in the immediate postwar years. The labor movement adopted anti-communism and class collaboration as its credo. The illusions that America might be moving in a progressive direction, a further extension of the New Deal, toward some sort of US-style “popular front,” illusions which Vonnegut—along with many others—had shared, were rapidly dashed. American capitalism, based on its preeminent world position and its colossal wealth, imposed intellectual conformity on society, and attempted to convince the population that the new reality was the best of all possible worlds.

Where was the dissident artist to turn? Vonnegut cannot be entirely blamed for arriving at dystopian conclusions. In hindsight, it is easy to see that the world order that emerged after 1945 only *appeared* permanent. Very few, and especially few artists, saw the future possibilities of genuinely humane social development at the time.

Nevertheless, a certain literary tradition of bleak glimpses at the future (or perhaps the present) was established, and Vonnegut was one of its best representatives. His work is filled with a desire to criticize America, and he defended political and legal equality nobly.

But he also cynically dismissed the possibility of social equality as an equality of universal denial or leveling in the short story “Harrison Bergeron” (1961), a staple in the American high-school English class reading lists today.

Human history, to his way of thinking, was in general incomprehensible. Vonnegut added all sorts of amusing improbabilities—in the *Sirens of Titan* (1959), aliens manipulated history to send signals to each other. Escape became a common solution to social problems in his work. In the *Sirens of Titan* physical escape from the Earth is the way out of troubled conditions.

His concern for the world-historical tragedies of the century was deep and undeniable, but he was not able to approach these historically. As Doris Lessing wrote (approvingly) of *Mother Night* (1961), about an American double-agent on trial for his role as a presumed Nazi propagandist: “Whose fault was it all—the gas chambers, the camps, the degradations and the debasements of all our standards? Whose? Well, ours as much as theirs.”

Vonnegut’s ahistorical humanism floundered on his pessimism. In *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), the narrator, an adherent of a kind and gentle religion, has been working on a book about the bombing of Hiroshima. In the end, he witnesses the desiccation of the world by a man-made substance called Ice Nine.

Vonnegut’s fame grew and reached its height at the time of the

Vietnam War, when renewed mass political protest was beginning to create a healthier cultural atmosphere. In 1969 he published *Slaughterhouse-Five*, based on his experiences in Dresden.

Artistically, the work is probably his best. The narrative passes back and forth between the Dresden bombing, postwar American suburbia and a “utopian” and more humane existence on another planet.

While there was no real development in his overall worldview—ultimately the leading characters can only run away from the horrors of American life—the novel is a biting expose of American-British war crimes and the anxieties that underlay life in the postwar decades.

He continued to write in the same vein. There were sometimes passages of sparkling frankness. *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) contains a vision of American society as a stranger from another planet might see it:

“A lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made. It might have comforted them some if their anthem and their motto had mentioned fairness or brotherhood or hope or happiness, had somehow welcomed them to the society and its real estate.”

Vonnegut’s sense of kindness, however, was not merely humane, but also a kind of retreat in the face of insurmountable odds. In novel after novel his despairing view of society surfaced. *Slapstick* (1976) is told from the ruins of the Empire State Building in a Manhattan known as the Isle of Death, after America “bankrupt and falling apart” has been destroyed by a plague.

In *Galápagos* (1985), the human species has saved itself only by evolving beaks and flippers and eschewing the use of tools, which have caused so much trouble, or, as the writer Lorrie Moore called it in a review of the book, “The huge spiritual mistake that is Western civilization.”

On the whole, Vonnegut’s characters and situations do not sufficiently challenge his readers. He spoke to a social mood more than he fought for a new one. If he was satirical, he was also a little too easy. However, if he pulled back from the most radical conclusions about a social rot that he had seen spread for his whole working life as an artist, this had something to do with the intellectual conditions that made it difficult to characterize in an all-sided manner the age in which he lived. The trenchant social criticism available to a Dos Passos in the mid-1920s was in short supply by Vonnegut’s day. The circumstances in which he wrote were unfavorable for characterizing American society as devastatingly as needed to be done, and also, frankly, the task was complex.

Toward the end of his life, Vonnegut spoke courageously and honestly about the Iraq War and the Bush Administration. In his last book, *Man Without a Country* (2005), he asked, “What can be said to our young people now that psychopathic personalities, which is to say, persons without consciences, without sense of pity or shame, have taken all the money in the treasuries of our government and corporations and made it all their own?”



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