

Kurt Vonnegut

**"We are what we pretend to be,
so we must be careful
what we pretend to be."**

- from *Mother Night*

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Nobody writes about doomsday better than satirist Kurt Vonnegut, who finds humor in a world that threatens to self-destruct daily. For half a century, in an oeuvre that spans nearly thirty works of fiction, drama, and essays, he's piled up evidence against the survival of "wise man" *Homo Sapien Sapien*. If mad science doesn't destroy us first, technology will. In light of Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and Vietnam, Vonnegut argues that "we're doomed to repeat the past" not only if we forget history, as George Santayana once warned, but "no matter what. That's what it is to be alive" (*Bluebeard*). But being alive is no mean feat. In his novel *Galápagos*, the ones who survive are the ones who survive—nothing more, nothing less. And so it goes.

Vonnegut's life experiences tested his faith in human nature and shaped his bleak literary vision. He was born on Armistice Day in 1922, the third child of an architect father and a brilliant but emotionally disturbed mother. He studied biochemistry at Cornell University, but left in 1943 to enlist in the army. While home on leave in May 1944, his mother committed suicide. Seven months later, he was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and sent to Dresden to work in a vi-

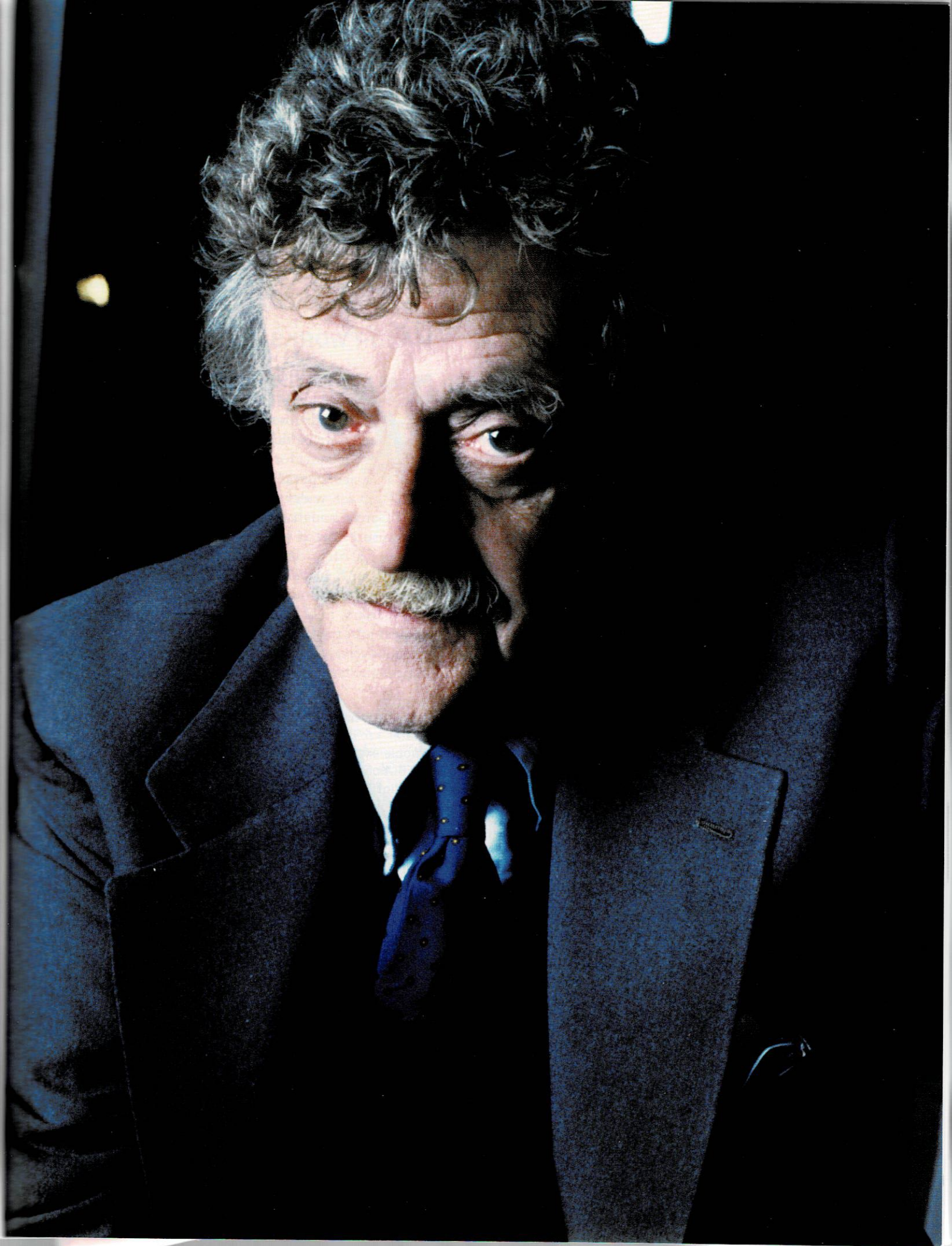
tamin factory, where he took shelter in an underground meat locker during the Allied bombing. When he returned home, he received the Purple Heart, married his childhood sweetheart, Jane Cox, and enrolled in a graduate program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. When his M.A. thesis was rejected, he left without a degree, obtaining it only after he submitted *Cat's Cradle* in 1971.

Vonnegut started writing fiction shortly after he took a job as a publicist at General Electric in Schenectady, New York, in 1947. He sold his short stories, which reflected on technology's impact on society, to popular magazines including *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Encouraged by his success, he moved to West Barnstable, Massachusetts, to write novels. In 1965, af-

ter *Cat's Cradle* earned critical acclaim, he was invited to teach at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, later taking positions at Harvard, City University of New York, and Smith College as well. In 1967, a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him time in Dresden to research what would become his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He separated from Jane in 1971 and married photographer Jill Krementz eight years later.

WHERE TO START

The best-selling manifesto against war, **SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE**, is Vonnegut's masterpiece. **CAT'S CRADLE**, a favorite on high school and college reading lists, marks his transition from an SF to popular writer. **BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS**, which had a first printing of 100,000 but was more popular with readers than critics, is perhaps the quintessential Vonnegut novel.



His so-called "final" novel, *Timequake*, was published in 1997, when Vonnegut was 74.

FROM CULT ICON TO POPULAR WRITER

Vonnegut first gained popularity in the early '60s with a small but loyal cult of pacifists and radicals, who shared his concerns with war, consumption, and ecology. Despite his counterculture hero status, elite publishers shunned his novels as 'low-brow'. His first three books were published as pulp paperbacks and shoved, to Vonnegut's dismay, in the science fiction (SF) "lodge." (Vonnegut aficionados can spend considerable effort arguing whether or not he is an "SF" writer ... *Bookmarks* will abstain.) In a 1973 *New York Times* review of *Mother Night*, Doris Lessing mourned that Vonnegut had sold this remarkable novel in paperback in order to feed his large family, which by then included his own three children and three nephews adopted after his sister's death.

In 1967, Vonnegut's luck changed. After writing a flippant book review of the Random House dictionary for the *New York Times*, Delacorte Press gave Vonnegut a three-book contract and agreed to republish his previous five books in hardback. Widespread acclaim came in 1969 with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's semi-autobiographical account of his World War II experience. Filled with allusions to Vietnam, the Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinations, and race riots, the novel captured the nation's cultural transformation. Though banned in places from Michigan to North

Dakota, it made Vonnegut a millionaire.

Since *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut continues to ask the big questions: Why do we exist? Will technology destroy us? Will the next generation learn from the last? Few other writers have answered these questions as imaginatively as Vonnegut, whose contrasts with extraterrestrials highlight our imperfections. If we're not doomed, we're close to it, so seal off your homes. Then again, better not: it might keep little green creatures shaped like plumbers' friends from whisking you off to a more enlightened planet.

MAJOR WORKS

Sirens of Titan (1959)

◆ Hugo Award nominee

Vonnegut discovered his voice and style in his second novel, which introduced the planet Tralfamadore. Although considered a "space opera," the novel found a readership far wider than the SF crowd. Jerry Garcia bought the movie rights to "make sure that it [didn't] fall into the hands of a hack," but Vonnegut bought them back (*BAM Magazine*, 12/18/87).

THE STORY: Playboy millionaire Malachi Constant, whisked off to Mars, is hailed as the long-promised Space Wanderer by the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent upon his return to earth. Unable to fulfill his disciples' hopes, "the eternal pilgrim" is hurled back into space,



VONNEGUT: AN OVERVIEW

Player Piano (1952)

Published as *Utopia 14* in 1954, this anti-utopian novel earned Vonnegut his SF reputation. With a company modeled after General Electric, the novel parodies a futuristic corporate world governed by machines and the futility of those who rebel against it.

* *The Sirens of Titan* (1959)

* *Mother Night* (1961)

Canary in a Cathouse (1961)

A collection of previously published short stories. All, except for "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp," are found in *Welcome to the Monkey House*.

* *Cat's Cradle* (1963)

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; or, Pearls Before Swine (1965)

With a little help from writer Kilgore

Trout, Eliot Rosewater, president of the well-endowed Rosewater Foundation, attempts a noble experiment with human nature. But one nasty soul is out to prove Eliot wrong... and destroy his empire.

Welcome to the Monkey House (1968)

This collection features shorter fictional works originally published in magazines as diverse as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

* *Slaughterhouse-Five; or, The Children's Crusade* (1969)

Happy Birthday, Wanda June (1970)

Vonnegut's first published play features a host of tragicomical characters: a dumb ex-bomber, a young girl killed by an ice-cream truck, a violinist-doctor, and a trigger-happy hunter—not exactly heroes, but close.

Between Time and Timbuktu; or, Prometheus-5 (1972)

This relatively uninspired script of an NET Playhouse television program is based on *Cat's Cradle* and *Sirens of Titan*, with material from *Player Piano* and a few short stories.

* *Breakfast of Champions; or, Goodbye Blue Monday!* (1973)

Wampeters, Foma, and Granfaloon (1974)

A collection of Vonnegut's essays, speeches, and reviews, including one interview (considered a highlight) with *Playboy* magazine.

Slapstick; or, Lonesome No More! (1976)

Lethal disease has scourged the U.S., but one fine mind remains. Sheltered in the remains of the Empire State Building, he's penning his autobiography, one that rekindles hope for new human possibility.

where he ends his days pondering the meaning of love and the universe.

"The Sirens of Titan, in spite of disclaimers from Vonnegut and his more serious-minded fans, is a science fiction novel, and a remarkably good one." Michael Wood, *New York Review of Books*, 5/31/73.

"His best book. . . he dares not only to ask the ultimate question about the meaning of life, but to answer it."

Esquire.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Depressingly fatalistic: "everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been."

Mother Night (1961)

Mother Night departs from the SF niche Vonnegut unwittingly carved for himself with his two previous novels. Narrated in the first person, lacking a technologically driven plot, and informed by Vonnegut's experience as a propagandist for G.E., the novel raises questions of identity. Vonnegut, who is of German heritage, writes that if he'd been born in Germany, he might have, despite quiet misgivings, "been a Nazi, bopping Jews."

THE STORY: Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is a Nazi propagandist, war criminal, and American spy. After the war, he fades into obscurity until Israeli agents abduct him and throw him in a Jerusalem jail, where he awaits tri-



al for his war crimes. What troubles him most is not his guilty conscience, but the inconclusive search for his identity: was he really the Nazi or the spy?

"[Vonnegut] makes me remember. . . that when Nazism was not stopped, but flowered. . . into the expected and forecast war, how soon our judgments became warped by the horribleness of what was going on. . . Vonnegut is one of the writers who map our landscapes for us, who give names to the places we know best." Doris Lessing, *NY Times*, 2/4/73.

". . . a small masterpiece. . . [Mother Night] is not an attempt to defeat an enemy by ridicule, but an attempt to contemplate horror by means of laughter, because laughter, of all our inappropriate responses to total, terminal horror, seems the least inappropriate, the least inhuman." Michael Wood, *NY Review of Books*, 5/31/73.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The verdict will haunt you forever. The moral: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

Cat's Cradle (1963)

✦ Harold Bloom's Western Canon

When author Graham Greene called *Cat's Cradle* "one of the three best novels of the year," he hastened Vonnegut's transition from an SF cult icon to a popular author. The publication of the novel in hardback also meant that critics took his work seriously. Most did, noting the strong parallels between Vonnegut's own family and the fictional Hoenikkers

Jailbird (1979)

This novel follows Walter F. Starbuck from Harvard to the Nixon administration, where he becomes a Watergate co-conspirator and lands in jail. A cold, comical look at power politics and greed.

Sun, Moon, Star (1980)

Vonnegut's first and only children's book recounts the Christmas story from the perspective of baby Jesus.

Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage (1981)

These autobiographical essays discuss Vonnegut's favorite comedians, country music, and a dead friend, among other notable events and quirks in the author's life.

Deadeye Dick (1982)

Rudy Waltz, after accidentally shooting a pregnant woman just for fun, searches for absolution in a world where people, circumstance, and morality are not what he thinks.

Nothing Is Lost Save Honor: Two Essays (1984)

Contains "The Worse Addiction of Them All" and "Fates Worse than Death"

* Galápagos: A Novel (1985)

Bluebeard (1987)

This fictional biography reintroduces *Breakfast of Champions* character Rabo Karabekian, an abstract-expressionist painter and friend of Rothko and Pollock, whose secret resides in his potato barn.

Hocus Pocus (1990)

This retrospective first-person novel set in 2001 features Eugene Debs Hartke, the last American to leave Saigon, as he sits in prison writing his autobiography.

Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s (1991)

This collection offers commentary on everything from talk show hosts

to World War II, suicidal depression, global starvation, and censorship.

Timequake (1997)

Vonnegut's last novel, the book "that didn't want to be written." It explores a "sudden glitch in the space-time continuum," which makes everybody repeat their exact behavior a second time around, for better or for worse.

Bagombo Snuff Box (1999)

This volume contains 23 of Vonnegut's short stories from the '50s and '60s, when they appeared in popular magazines.

God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian (1999)

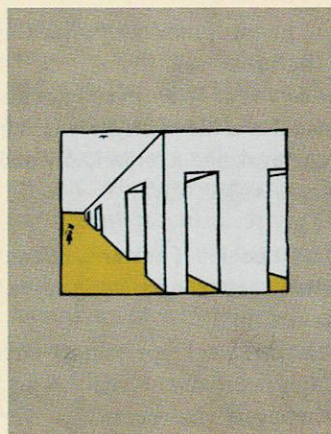
As a "reporter on the afterlife," Vonnegut has a near-death experience. On the way to heaven, he conducts some irreverent interviews with the likes of William Shakespeare, Adolph Hitler, Isaac Newton, and Clarence Darrow. ■



"Cheops"

VONNEGUT GETS GRAPHIC

Vonnegut began including simple line drawings in his novels in 1969 - first a locket in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and then sketches in *Breakfast of Champions*. "I've drawn all my life, on the edges of manuscripts and things like that. But I started thinking, 'This is the amateur approach.' ... So I decided to take myself seriously as an artist." Vonnegut began creating larger drawings on parchment and exhibited them at galleries. He later met Joe Petro III, and they have collaborated ever since, silk screening the large images that Vonnegut creates. Vonnegut's work is available for viewing and purchase at his web site: www.vonnegut.com. ■



"Flag"

(including a narrator working on a book about the bombing of Hiroshima titled, *The Day the World Ended*).

THE STORY: Ice-nine is the most destructive weapon on earth. It freezes all water at room temperature and doesn't stop until everything turns to ice. When Dr. Felix Hoenikker, so-called "father of the atomic bomb," entrusts the secret Ice-nine to his progeny, predictable chaos ensues.

"Cat's Cradle is an irreverent and often highly entertaining fantasy concerning the playful irresponsibility of nuclear scientists. Like the best of contemporary satire, it is work of a far more engaging and meaningful order than the melodramatic tripe which most critics seem to consider 'serious.'" Terry Southern, NY Times, 6/3/63.

"Kurt Vonnegut's fiction is full of bleak, sour views of our dismal mortal lot. . . . Cat's Cradle is built around a jaunty, hip, fatalistic gospel delivered mainly in calypsoes, and based on the principle that everything that happens has to happen; that a conflict between good and evil, if properly, skeptically staged, is a fine, constructive fiction."

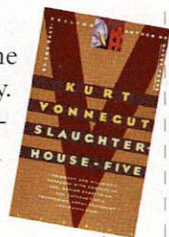
Michael Wood, NY Review of Books, 5/31/73.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Vonnegut's most ludicrous, apocalyptic commentary on our penchant for self-destruction.

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969)

- ◆ No. 1, *New York Times* Best Seller List
- ◆ No. 18, Modern Library's Top 100 novels of the 20th century

Parts of this antiwar novel blur the line between fiction and autobiography. Vonnegut claims that *Slaughterhouse-Five* exaggerated the importance of Dresden in his own life; had the novel not been a best seller, "it would seem like a very minor experience in my life" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 2). Nonetheless, his anguish at being under attack



by his own forces, which resulted in 135,000 civilian deaths, mirrors the horror Billy feels when forced to dig through the rubble of ashes and corpses. The novel's schizophrenic style lends credibility to its absurd chaos.

THE STORY: Germans capture infantry scout Billy Pilgrim and send him to a Dresden vitamin factory. When Allies bomb the city, Billy and other POWs take shelter in an underground meat locker. Billy, who becomes "unstuck in time," spends the remainder of his life shuttling back and forth between mental hospitals on Earth and the planet Tralfamadore, discovering how to avoid war.

"... usually the starting point for Vonnegut inductees, and rightfully so." David Eggers, Salon.com Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors.

"[Slaughterhouse-Five] is very tough and very funny; it is sad and delightful; and it works. But is also very Vonnegut, which mean you'll either love it, or push it back in the science-fiction corner." NY Times, 3/31/69.

"[A]fter 25 years, we can still respond to its deep felt cry for sanity in a world we never made and hearken all the more to its famous four word refrain that signifies the trivial and the devastating passage of all things, 'and so it goes.'" Alan Cheuse, National Public Radio, 3/17/94.

THE BOTTOM LINE: One of the best antiwar books ever written. The haunting finale: "Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does."

Breakfast of Champions (1973)

In his eighth novel, Vonnegut writes himself into his book, allowing his ubiquitous narrator Kilgore Trout, the little known SF writer who publishes in pornography magazines, to finally meet him. The novel, which was a wild commercial success, disappointed some reviewers. The subtitle, *Goodbye Blue Monday!* suggests the author's reemergence from a period of de-



"Mutt"

pression. It represented his largest publishing success to date, with a first printing of 100,000 copies.

THE STORY: Is it possible to be the only human in a machine-mad world? When suicidal Pontiac dealer and solid citizen Dwayne Hoover takes ag-

ing writer Kilgore Trout's words to heart, he becomes mad. What follows is a satirical drama about race relations, sexual fantasies, politics, and pollution in America circa 1973.

"[Vonnegut] performs considerable complex magic. . . . With such graceful, gentle satirical thrusts, [he] takes care of most of what is absurd and downright evil in American civilization—everything from Vietnam to sex, from war to massage parlors."

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, NY Times, 5/2/73.

"Naturally [the book] is laced with lunacies. . . . This explosive meditation ranks with Vonnegut's best."

Nora Sayre, NY Times Book Review, 5/13/73.

"... I hate this book for its preciousness, its condescension to its characters, its self-indulgence and its facile fatalism: all the lonely people, their fates sealed in epoxy. . . . Life cannot, as Vonnegut insists, be summed up with 'And so on' and 'ETC.'—or at least not without more wit and insight than Vonnegut can muster."

P.S. Prescott, Newsweek, 5/14/73.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Not the best; not the worst. The novel lacks the shimmer of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but is nonetheless clever in its madness and enjoyable to read.

Galápagos (1985)

Vonnegut claims he's never subscribed to Darwin's theory of natural selection, since he "couldn't imagine a series of family crises in which the only survivors were those whose butts blinked on and off," like lightning bugs (*Natural History Magazine*, Winter 2001). In this spirit, *Galápagos* suggests that humanity's devolution into furry seals might not be so terrible—but for the sharks. Vonnegut's own depression and suicide attempt in the mid-'80s influenced this bleakly humorous survival story.

THE STORY: Leon Trotsky Trout, the accidentally decapi-

tated son of Kilgore Trout, looks back from the future (one million years from 1986 A.D.), where he and his fellow passengers inexplicably survive the extinction of the human race. Slowly, their troublesome features disappear, until people are nothing but furry creatures with flippers and small brains.

"... his most successfully conceived and sustained work since *Slaughterhouse-Five*. . . . While his pessimistic observations on the pre-Galápagian human condition are of the sort that high-school juniors will find profound, they are presented in such unexpected contexts that many older readers may be charmed as well."

Robert Towers, NY Review of Books, 12/19/85.

"[Vonnegut] is a postmodern Mark Twain: grumpy and sentimental, antic and religious."

Lorrie Moore, NY Times, 10/6/85.

"[The author's] targets are not the foibles of social behaviour but . . . targets as broad as the pax Americana: war, genocide, economic imperialism. . . . The difficulty of aiming at such broad targets is not in scoring bulls-eyes but in avoiding preaching-to-the-converted complacency . . . and this Vonnegut achieves by irony."

Thomas M. Disch, Times Literary Supplement, 11/8/85.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Your survival has nothing to do with your physical prowess, so eat all you want. ■

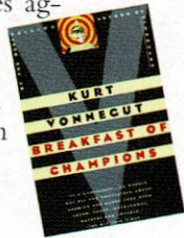
OLD SCHOOL VS. NEW SCHOOL

Jonathan Franzen's essay "Perchance to Dream" appeared in the April 1996 edition of *Harper's*. (An edited version was reprinted in Franzen's recent collection *How to Be Alone*.) In it he described his struggle to write a socially relevant novel and his coming-to-terms with being a serious novelist in a world that doesn't read. The essay served as both a question ("Why write if nobody reads?") and a pledge to write the Great American Novel. Years later, *The Corrections* appeared.

The essay received a hailstorm of mail, mostly negative. Kurt Vonnegut added his voice to the fray: **"Novelists are people who have discovered that they can dampen their neuroses by writing make-believe. We will keep on doing that no matter what, while offering loftier explanations."**

The debate did not stop there. David Foster Wallace (*Infinite Jest*, et.al.) wrote in two months later:

"This makes Vonnegut look humble and lovable, but as a response to the stuff Franzen was talking about it is total horseshit. . . . I suppose one reason it was brave of Franzen to publish his essay is that it made it easy for other writers to look humble and adorable at his expense." ■



LETTERS

WOW.

I thank you for your Sept/Oct 2003 issue, in which you are the first publication to summarize my career as a writer. About to turn eighty-one, I was resigned to going to my grave without anybody's having done that. You have give me the most previous gift any American can ever wish for, which is, and this is a word so full of magic in television newscasts, "closure."

Can I go home now?

But seriously: You are so new that I had never heard of you before, and I am beguiled by your physical beauty, and I am moved by how head-over-heels in love with books you are. And nowhere else have I found such thoughtful and literate reportage on the state of the American soul, as that soul makes itself known in the books we write.

News of the hour indeed!

Cheers!

Kurt Vonnegut
Sagaponack, NY

We started this magazine because we wanted to celebrate great books and great writers in a new way. So, on our one-year anniversary, to receive an approving nod from one of the authors we were excited to talk about ... we are just as genuinely speechless now as the day the letter arrived.

Vonnegut Gets Meta

I thoroughly enjoyed Jessica Teisch's insightful summary of Kurt Vonnegut's works in the last issue. I hope to see more of her writing in your pages. However, for completeness, I do note that although her article made mention of Mr. Vonnegut's literary alter ego, Kilgore Trout, she failed to note that a Kilgore Trout novel actually exists. In the early

1970s, Mr. Trout (aka Mr. Vonnegut) authored and published *Venus on the Half-Shell*, a satire of sci-fi space opera. It is a comedy worth reading - provided that one can find the long out-of-print book.

Keep up the good work.

D. Boyko
Milburn, NJ

Ten Hut!

I just received the new issue and see on page 24 you state that Pat Conroy's book *My Losing Season* is about his high school playing. It is mainly about his days playing for The Citadel!! You may want to correct this.

Thanks,
Judy Scott (a new subscriber and mother of a Citadel grad)
Charlotte, NC

Crossing the Yancey

I just discovered your magazine, and as a literary critic for Dayton's Women's Literary Club (over 100 years old), I will introduce *Bookmarks* in the fall.

Perhaps you have reviewed Richard Yancey's *A Burning in the Homeland* already. It's my summer favorite, published by Simon & Schuster. Yancey has another due out in the spring.

Sincerely,

Jane Leigh
Centerville, OH

A Burning in the Homeland was not widely covered, so it did not get included in our regular summaries. *The New York Times* gave this novel about a Southern plantation, rival suitors, and a murder a solid 3-star review: "By the novel's finish, however, Yancey has made us question the efficacy of ... vengeance. ... predictable and surprising ... the epitome of successful melodrama." That sounds like an enjoyable summer selection and we hold fast to

the belief that every season deserves a "beach book."

Thank You

As the author of seven books [and two more waiting to find a publisher] I think your magazine performs a valuable service to not only book readers, but the industry. Can't think of any other place where so much information is available in one package.

Francis E. Caldwell
Port Angeles, WA

Now That You Mention It

Love your magazine! Some suggestions: Why not have a page for bookish items? Like, PJs, bookmarks, reading lights, book lights, sweatshirts, etc. Bookish people **love** bookish type things to buy. Also, why not have a section for gift books, specialty little books for unique occasions.

Keep up the good work.

Jill Bellaus
Brookside, NJ

We feel guilty publishing this note because it leads so nicely into the following commercial-ish message - but this was a real letter! So Ms. Bellaus, thanks for the suggestions, we agree, and we're going to get started right now! We're bookish people and we wanted to create some bookish things! (Oh dear, this is starting to sound like pledge week on your local PBS station ... promoting products is just not our style, but we are excited about these.)

First, we finally have *Bookmarks* clothing and tote bags. Please see our ad on page 5. One side of each item features a logo for "Dr. T.J. Eckleburg's Optometry in Queens, NY" while the other has the *Bookmarks* logo. *The Great Gatsby* readers will recognize the Eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, and we hope all *Bookmarks* readers will appreciate the literary subtleties at work. Second, in time for the holidays, we're introducing our Gift Book Clubs. A perfect gift for someone you know...or yourself. We will regularly send the gift

