

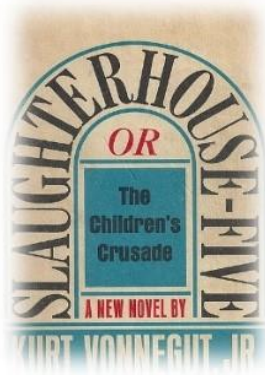
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #138

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Kurt Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse-Five,' or the 'Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death'



Caught up in the “busyness” of living, we often miss life’s astonishing quality – the sheer wonder of it – the wonder of its beauty and the wonder of its horror.

Sometimes they come mixed together.

As in February 1945, the waning days of World War II, the Allied Forces (“*the good guys*”) fire bombing Dresden (“*the Florence of the Elbe, the ‘wedding cake city’ with its ornate architecture, the home of musical geniuses*”) burning the city to the ground and incinerating 130,000 to 135,000 civilians. Or, killing

roughly the entire population – every man, woman, and child – of Erie, Pennsylvania at its 1960 peak.

That “130,000 to 135,00” always gets me – what’s 5,000 dead, more or less? Stalin, one of “*the bad guys*,” allegedly said, “A single death is a tragedy; A

million deaths is a statistic.” [1] Which is why statistics about the Holocaust dull the mind, but the famous (infamous?) photo of a German soldier shooting a fleeing Polish Jewish woman and her child in the back chills the blood, freezes the spine, and leaves one silently screaming.

That’s life’s horror; its beauty is in a child’s smile, sunset at Presque Isle, or a warm-hearted nun ladling soup at a soup kitchen for the poor. And in art – the grace of a Mary Oliver, the wit of a John Donne, the light seemingly without source in a Vermeer – or the humaneness of Kurt Vonnegut’s now classic, serio-comic novel ***Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade*** in which he seeks to make sense of the slaughter of innocents and finds he can’t.

Published in 1969, since its 50th anniversary in 2019, the novel has been having a resurgence of popularity. I first read it in 1969. In its introductory chapter, Vonnegut tells about how late at night he’d have the long-distance operator call up old friends or people named Vonnegut in strange cities to see how they were doing and whether or not they were related.

One of my college buddies and I one night, our consciousness perhaps altered, decided to try it. We had the long-distance operator track down a Kurt Vonnegut in Barnstable, Massachusetts on Cape Cod. He answered the phone. We told him his technique worked. He laughed uproariously and said, “Jesus Christ, I’m going to need to get my number changed.”

Regarding its resurgence, perhaps the chaos of our current politics has once again revealed its moral insights’ powerful relevance. Unlike John Bunyan’s Christian in ***The Pilgrim’s Progress***, who travels from his home in the “City of Destruction” to the heavenly “Celestial City,” Vonnegut discovers only humor can preserve one’s sanity as he traces his alter-ego Billy Pilgrim’s progress from survivor of the Dresden massacre through mid-20th century American prosperity seeking, like Job, to understand the presence of evil – pain and suffering – in a world allegedly looked over by a benevolent God.

Actually, at this point, I have a confession to make. Writing this ***Book Note*** – the 138th in the series – has turned out to be the most difficult of them all. I’ve been getting up and walking away from – I almost wrote “typewriter,” remember those? – this ***Note*** for a day or two. There are so many ways to approach this deceptively simple, deceptively short novel. Deceptive because in its brevity, in its slapstick humor, its sci-fi wackiness, one can easily miss its deep profundity.

How many ways could we discuss ***Slaughterhouse-Five***? We could discuss it as meta-literature, in which the story itself and its telling is the subject of the discourse as the narrator, who may or may not be trustworthy, comments on the action, the characters’ motives, and the story’s meaning or lack of meaning.

We could discuss its genre – that is, what type or category of story is it? What conventions does it hold to, or violate? *Wikipedia*, hardly the most sophisticated of sources, lists *Slaughterhouse-Five's* genres as dark comedy, satire, science fiction, war novel, metafiction, and postmodernism. To try to explain all of those would require a **Book Note** longer than the novel itself by several hundred pages.

Meta-fiction we've already noted. *Dark comedy*, which in pre-politically correct times, was called black humor, uses comedy to address topics that are either taboo or so serious and painful that they cannot easily be addressed head-on. I once taught a course in it. It seeks to transcend the unspeakable by speaking about it in a jesting manner. In short, it addresses all those situations in life where one's reaction is "I didn't know whether to cry or laugh." It chooses to laugh in the face of horror, as does Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five* contains multiple scenes causing a reader to laugh out loud, such as the one after the starving prisoners had finally been fed but fed so much that they were all stricken with acute diarrhea. Billy Pilgrim stumbles into a latrine and hears an American near him "wail(ing) that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go'. He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book." [2] The "I" was Vonnegut intruding into his own story.

Or we could talk about it as *satire*, which uses humor to either goad self-improvement – that's called Horatian satire which seeks to improve – or uses humor to ridicule and destroy – that's called Juvenalian after the Roman poet Juvenal – when improvement is thought impossible. As, for example, when Billy, recuperating in a hospital after a plane crash, shares a room with the pompous and morally obtuse Professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord of Harvard. Rumfoord, who himself never saw combat, lectures Billy on the beauty of aerial combat and the need to be ruthless. As Rumfoord expatiates on the glory of air power the consequences be damned, Billy pierces the heartless pomposity when he simply says, "I was there." "There" being Dresden, and glory was in short supply, swamped by pain and death. [3]

Or we could talk about it as *science fiction*. Billy Pilgrim is kidnapped by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore and taken back to Tralfamadore when he is kept in a zoo with an actress Montana Wildhack as an exhibit for Tralfamadoreans. Tralfamadoreans have the amazing ability to travel in time. As time travelers, they are immortal, because when they die, they can just go back to another time in their life. Billy also develops the ability to time travel, which enables him to see into the future and back into the past. It enables him to face his death with equanimity, for he knows he can travel to another time in his life. For Tralfamadoreans there is no beginning or end. There is only an *is* – an eternal now.

As a time traveler, Billy comes unstuck in time, which enables him to flash forward, flash backward, and even flash laterally through the plot.

Slaughterhouse-Five's plot does not unfold linearly, but moves in loops and whirls traveling back and forth in Billy's life, enabling the younger Billy to comment on the older Billy's experience and vice versa.

Or we could discuss it as a *war novel*. ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** is one of the half-dozen or so best war novels ever written.

In the great war novels, there are no heroes.

Why is that?

There are no heroes in ***Slaughterhouse-Five***, for as Vonnegut promised his old World War II buddy Bernard V. O'Hare's wife Mary, to whom the book is partially dedicated, should anyone ever make a movie about his book, there would be no parts for Frank Sinatra and John Wayne.

Mary hated wars.

Slaughterhouse-Five was written in 1968. During the mid-1960s, as the war in Vietnam raged, numerous movies were made about World War II and even the Vietnam War glorifying war. Sinatra and Wayne played in several. This was Vonnegut's way of saying "goodbye, to all that."

Later, there would be anti-war Vietnam movies like ***The Deer Hunter***, ***Apocalypse Now***, and ***Platoon***, but that was later.

Aside: You probably, maybe not, are wondering what's on my list of the best war novels. It's short and none of them glorify war. They are ***War and Peace***, ***The Red Badge of Courage***, ***All Quiet on the Western Front***, ***The Naked and the Dead***, ***Catch-22***, and ***Dog Soldiers***. ***War and Peace*** actually contains arguably the greatest battle scenes in western literature (and yes, I've read ***The Iliad*** and ***The Odyssey***), but the "peace" parts are better, particularly the scene when Natasha dances in the cabin in the woods after the hunt. *Spoiler alert:* It actually, like ***Catch-22*** and ***Slaughterhouse-Five***, has a touch of the serio-comic, for it ends where it begins at a social gathering with folks arguing politics. Interestingly, they are all anti-war novels written by authors with first hand experience of war. And, like the three movies noted above, they all have been spectacularly ineffective in preventing future wars.

Vonnegut got that too, for as he recounts in ***Slaughterhouse-Five's*** opening chapter discussing the travail he's had writing it, he once met movie-maker Harrison Starr. Starr is a real person. He produced Michelangelo Antonioni's ***Zabriskie Point***, a film about 1960s era hippies. Starr asked him if his book was an anti-war book. To which, Vonnegut answered, "Yes ... I guess." Starr then

asked, “You know what I say to people when I hear they’re writing an anti-war book?” “No,” Vonnegut replied. “I say why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead.” Vonnegut tells the reader, “What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too.” [4]

Or we could discuss it within the context of Vonnegut’s other work, all of which in some fashion are about the problem of evil. In my *America in 1968* series, discussing storytelling, we met Howard W. Campbell, Jr. from Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*. Campbell is American who moved to Germany at age 11, became a well-known German playwright and Nazi propagandist. As a sort of “Axis Sally,” Campbell broadcast radio messages to American troops belittling America, extolling Nazism, and encouraging them to surrender. He defended violence in pursuit of Nazi virtue. Captured by Israeli commandos and taken to Jerusalem, he writes his memoirs as he awaits trial as a war criminal. He alleges that he was only pretending to be a Nazi; that in his inner-most heart he was a man of virtue who cherished peace and loved all people. Probably dogs and children, too.

Vonnegut’s point is that we need to be careful about what we pretend to be. We are what we do, not what we think. If in our day job we’re a Nazi supporting genocide, then it matters not that in our heart we are virtuous. We’re a Nazi. Which for Vonnegut is the essence of evil. But, given current politics at home and abroad, not for all of us.

Which leads to what *Slaughterhouse-Five* is really about.

Although the frequent target of book burners and others claiming some sort of moral superiority, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is really a morality tale. Its genre is wisdom literature offering teachings about divinity and virtue. It is a modern day *Book of Job*, but one in which God is absent or indifferent.

But not to worry, for it is also a book about how to face death in a world of inexplicable pain and suffering.

It is a book about the search for hope.

In the end, it’s a morality tale.

Slaughterhouse-Five is suffused with death. Large scale slaughter, like the fire bombing of Dresden and the Holocaust; small, intimate deaths of individuals, like Billy Pilgrim’s wife Valencia, who, driving to a hospital to nurse

Billy after his plane crash, dies of carbon monoxide poisoning because in her determination to get to Billy she drove on after a car crashed into her damaging her car's exhaust system; or, the execution of Pfc. Edgar Derby for stealing a teapot against the backdrop of the massive devastation of Dresden.

Large scale; small scale; all dead. *So it goes*.

"*So it goes*" has slipped its moorings in ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** and entered the American idiom as a kind of catch-all expression for the sameness of daily life, which can sometimes be just "one damn thing after another" as the phrase brushes off the vexations of the day-to-day.

But that is not how Vonnegut meant it. For Vonnegut, it was the mental strength needed to face death in order to keep on living. He discovers that one cannot keep on living until one has faced death.

It's an old observation we've revisited many times in these 138-and-counting ***Book Notes***. Camus said it most memorably, paraphrasing Shakespeare's "To be or not to be" – but the truth that one only starts to live when one recognizes that one dies is an old, old one that every generation, every individual seems to need to re-learn.

And sometimes one needs to re-learn it on a grand scale in order to live on a small scale, an individual scale.

How does one go on after one has survived a massacre?

That's Billy Pilgrim's, that's Vonnegut's quest. Another genre to which ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** could be assigned is the great canon of *quest* literature. *Quest* stories are the archetypal human story. They are about humans' search for meaning. The earliest known human story – ***Gilgamesh*** – is a *quest* story. Curiously, they all seem to have the same answer that Vonnegut discovers.

You face it.

Face what?

Death.

In facing it, you don't expect it to make any sense. It just *is*.

Multiple commentators have tracked down the number of times "*So it goes*" is uttered in ***Slaughterhouse-Five***. Google says it's 106. [5] And every time it is used, it is used after some comment about, some incident of death. Large or small; one or many.

It's about facing death and moving on. Not forgetting; not suppressing; not avoiding. Just recognizing it as the ultimate and inescapable reality. *So it goes.*

And vowing that while it might be inescapable, it does not need to be gratuitous. Vowing that while you personally cannot escape it, you will not be its agent. Which is another way of saying you will adhere to the admonition "Thou shalt not kill" and that you will not contribute to human suffering.

That you will follow the first tenet of almost every code of ethics in the world – "Do no harm."

Vonnegut does not have much to say about organized religion, for almost all organized religions have either forgotten or on occasions willfully rejected the most basic tenet of their own moral code – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

It's the simplest sounding ethic and apparently impossible for humans to obey.

But try to obey it they – we – must.

Vonnegut himself says "I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. I also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that." [6]

Sadly, although his sons may have followed his advice, history since 1968 and our current politics suggest it is a lesson that still needs to be learned.

Nazis are once again on the march. "A rose by any name," Nazis of one type or another it appears will always be with us.

In the face of that ignorance, what gives us, what gave Vonnegut hope?

The simple things. Flowers. Birds. His novel ends "Poo-tee-weet."

It ends with birdsong, for in the end that may be all there is. It reminded me of exiting Yad Vashem. After the zig-zagging tour through that chamber of horrific memories, you exit onto to a veranda or porch overlooking a garden and sunshine and birds singing.

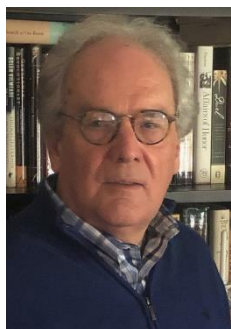
In the end, that's all there is – life and the beauty and the wonder of it amidst the horror.

So it goes.

That and the sunset at Presque Isle, a child's smile, and the touch of a loved one.

Remember – do no harm! It’s not as easy as it sounds.

“Poo-tee-weet.”



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End Notes

1. “A Single Death Is a Tragedy; A Million Deaths Is a Statistic,” in the **Quote Investigator** available at [A Single Death Is a Tragedy; A Million Deaths Is a Statistic – Quote Investigator®](#) accessed March 27, 2023.
2. Vonnegut, Kurt. **Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade**. (New York: The Modern Library, 1969 Kindle Edition), p.130.
3. Ibid., p. 190.
4. Ibid., p. 5.
5. Greene, Nick. “15 Facts About ‘Slaughterhouse-Five’” at **Mental Floss** available at [15 Facts About ‘Slaughterhouse-Five’ \(mentalfloss.com\)](#) accessed March 28, 2023.
6. Vonnegut, *cited above*, pp. 20-21.

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