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Kurt Vonnegut, Novelist Who Caught the Imagination of His Age, Is Dead at 84

By DINITIA SMITH
Published: April 12, 2007

Corrections Appended

Kurt Vonnegut, whose dark comic talent and urgent moral vision in novels like "Slaughterhouse-Five," "Cat's Cradle" and "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater" caught the temper of his times and the imagination of a generation, died last night in Manhattan. He was 84 and had homes in Manhattan and in Sagaponack on Long Island.

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His death was reported by his wife, the author and photographer Jill Krementz, who said he had been hospitalized after suffering irreversible brain injuries as a result of a fall several weeks ago.

Mr. Vonnegut wrote plays, essays and short fiction. But it was his novels that became classics of the American counterculture, making him a literary idol, particularly to students in the 1960s and '70s. Dog-eared paperback copies of his books could be found in the back pockets of blue jeans and in dorm rooms on campuses throughout the

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United States.

Like [Mark Twain](#), Mr. Vonnegut used humor to tackle the basic questions of human existence: Why are we in this world? Is there a presiding figure to make sense of all this, a god who in the end, despite making people suffer, wishes them well?

He also shared with Twain a profound pessimism. “Mark Twain,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote in his 1991 book, “Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage,” “finally stopped laughing at his own agony and that of those around him. He denounced life on this planet as a crock. He died.”

Not all Mr. Vonnegut’s themes were metaphysical. With a blend of science fiction, philosophy and jokes, he also wrote about the banalities of consumer culture, for example, or the destruction of the environment.

His novels — 14 in all — were alternate universes, filled with topsy-turvy images and populated by races of his own creation, like the Talfamadorians and the Mercurian Harmoniums. He invented phenomena like chrono-synclastic infundibula (places in the universe where all truths fit neatly together) as well as religions, like the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and Bokononism (based on the books of a black British Episcopalian from Tobago “filled with bittersweet lies,” a narrator says).

The defining moment of Mr. Vonnegut’s life was the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, by Allied forces in 1945, an event he witnessed firsthand as a young prisoner of war. Thousands of civilians were killed in the raids, many of them burned to death or asphyxiated. “The firebombing of Dresden,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote, “was a work of art.” It was, he added, “a tower of smoke and flame to commemorate the rage and heartbreak of so many who had had their lives warped or ruined by the indescribable greed and vanity and cruelty of Germany.”

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His experience in Dresden was the basis of “Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade,” which was published in 1969 against the backdrop of war in Vietnam, racial unrest and cultural and social upheaval. The novel, wrote the critic Jerome Klinkowitz, “so perfectly caught America’s transformative mood that its story and structure became best-selling metaphors for the new age.”

To Mr. Vonnegut, the only possible redemption for the madness and apparent meaninglessness of existence was human kindness. The title character in his 1965 novel, “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine,” summed

up his philosophy:

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies — ‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.’ ”

Mr. Vonnegut eschewed traditional structure and punctuation. His books were a mixture of fiction and autobiography in a vernacular voice, prone to one-sentence paragraphs, exclamation points and italics. [Graham Greene](#) called him “one of the most able of living American writers.” Some critics said he had invented a new literary type, infusing the science-fiction form with humor and moral relevance and elevating it to serious literature.

He was also accused of repeating himself, of recycling themes and characters. Some readers found his work incoherent. His harshest critics called him no more than a comic book philosopher, a purveyor of empty aphorisms.

With his curly hair askew, deep pouches under his eyes and rumpled clothes, he often looked like an out-of-work philosophy professor, typically chain smoking, his conversation punctuated with coughs and wheezes. But he also maintained a certain celebrity, as a regular on panels and at literary parties in Manhattan and on the East End of Long Island, where he lived near his friend and fellow war veteran Joseph Heller, another darkly comic literary hero of the age.

Mr. Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922, the youngest of three children. His father, Kurt Sr., was an architect. His mother, Edith, came from a wealthy brewery family. Mr. Vonnegut’s brother, Bernard, who died in 1997, was a physicist and an expert on thunderstorms.

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During the Depression, the elder Vonnegut went for long stretches without work, and Mrs. Vonnegut suffered from episodes of mental illness. “When my mother went off her rocker late at night, the hatred and contempt she sprayed on my father, as gentle and innocent a man as ever lived, was without limit and pure, untainted by ideas or information,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote. She committed suicide, an act that haunted her son for the rest of his life.

He had, he said, a lifelong difficulty with women. He remembered an aunt once telling him, “All Vonnegut men are scared to death of women.”

“My theory is that all women have hydrofluoric acid bottled up inside,” he wrote.

Mr. Vonnegut went east to attend [Cornell University](#), but he enlisted in the Army before he could get a degree. The Army initially sent him to the Carnegie Institute of Technology (now [Carnegie Mellon University](#)) in Pittsburgh and the [University of Tennessee](#) to study mechanical engineering.

In 1944 he was shipped to Europe with the 106th Infantry Division and shortly saw combat in the Battle of the Bulge. With his unit nearly destroyed, he wandered behind enemy lines for several days until he was captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp near Dresden, the architectural jewel of Germany.

Assigned by his captors to make vitamin supplements, he was working with other prisoners in an underground meat locker when British and American warplanes started carpet bombing the city, creating a firestorm above him. The work detail saved his life.

Afterward, he and his fellow prisoners were assigned to remove the dead.

“The corpses, most of them in ordinary cellars, were so numerous and represented such a health hazard that they were cremated on huge funeral pyres, or by flamethrowers whose nozzles were thrust into the cellars, without being counted or identified,” he wrote in “Fates Worse Than Death.” When the war ended, Mr. Vonnegut returned to the United States and married his high school sweetheart, Jane Marie Cox. They settled in Chicago in 1945. The couple had three children, Mark, Edith and Nanette. In 1958, Mr. Vonnegut’s sister, Alice, and her husband died within a day of each other, she of cancer and he in a train crash. The Vonneguts took custody of their children, Tiger, Jim and Steven.

In Chicago, Mr. Vonnegut worked as a police reporter for the City News Bureau. He also studied for a master’s degree in anthropology at the [University of Chicago](#), writing a thesis on “The Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales.” It was rejected unanimously by the faculty. (The university finally awarded him a degree almost a quarter of a century

later, allowing him to use his novel “Cat’s Cradle” as his thesis.)

In 1947, he moved to Schenectady, N.Y., and took a job in public relations for the General Electric Company. Three years later he sold his first short story, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” to Collier’s magazine and decided to move his family to Cape Cod, Mass., where he wrote fiction for magazines like Argosy and The Saturday Evening Post. To bolster his income, he taught emotionally disturbed children, worked at an advertising agency and at one point started a Saab auto dealership.

His first novel was “Player Piano,” published in 1952. A satire on corporate life — the meetings, the pep talks, the cultivation of bosses — it also carries echoes of Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World.” It concerns an engineer, Paul Proteus, who is employed by the Ilium Works, a company similar to General Electric. Proteus becomes the leader of a band of revolutionaries who destroy machines that they think are taking over the world.

“Player Piano” was followed in 1959 by “The Sirens of Titan,” a science-fiction novel featuring the Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent. In 1961 he published “Mother Night,” involving an American writer awaiting trial in Israel on charges of war crimes in Nazi Germany. Like Mr. Vonnegut’s other early novels, they were published as paperback originals. And like “Slaughterhouse-Five,” in 1972, and a number of other Vonnegut novels, “Mother Night” was adapted for film, in 1996, starring [Nick Nolte](#).

In 1963, Mr. Vonnegut published “Cat’s Cradle.” Though it initially sold only about 500 copies, it is widely read today in high school English classes. The novel, which takes its title from an Eskimo game in which children try to snare the sun with string, is an autobiographical work about a family named Hoenikker. The narrator, an adherent of the religion Bokononism, is writing a book about the bombing of Hiroshima and comes to witness the destruction of the world by something called Ice-Nine, which, on contact, causes all water to freeze at room temperature.

Mr. Vonnegut shed the label of science-fiction writer with “Slaughterhouse-Five.” It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain’s assistant who discovers the horror of war. “You know — we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves,” an English colonel says in the book. “We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. My God, my God — I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade.’ ”

As Mr. Vonnegut was, Billy is captured and assigned to manufacture vitamin supplements in an underground meat locker, where the prisoners take refuge from Allied bombing.

“Slaughterhouse-Five” provided another stage for his fictional alter ego, Kilgore Trout, a recurring character introduced in “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.” The novel also featured a signature Vonnegut phrase.

“Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round,” Mr. Vonnegut wrote at the end of the book, “was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes.

“[Martin Luther King](#) was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes.”

One of many Zenlike words and phrases that run through Mr. Vonnegut’s books, “so it goes” became a catchphrase for opponents of the Vietnam war.

“Slaughterhouse-Five” reached No. 1 on best-seller lists, making Mr. Vonnegut a cult hero. Some schools and libraries have banned it because of its sexual content, rough language and scenes of violence.

After the book was published, Mr. Vonnegut went into a severe depression and vowed never to write another novel. Suicide was always a temptation, he wrote. In 1984, he tried to take his life with sleeping pills and alcohol.

“The child of a suicide will naturally think of death, the big one, as a logical solution to any problem,” he wrote. His son Mark also suffered a breakdown, in the 1970s, from which he recovered, writing about it in a book, “The Eden Express: A Memoir of Insanity.”

Forsaking novels, Mr. Vonnegut decided to become a playwright. His first effort, “Happy Birthday, Wanda June,” opened Off Broadway in 1970 to mixed reviews. Around this time he separated from his wife and moved to New York. (She remarried and died in 1986.)

In 1970, Mr. Vonnegut moved in with Ms. Kremetz, whom he married in 1979. They had a daughter, Lily. They survive him, as do all his other children.

Mr. Vonnegut returned to novels with “Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday” (1973), calling it a “tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast.” This time his alter ego is Philboyd Studge, who is writing a book about Dwayne Hoover, a wealthy auto dealer. Hoover has a breakdown after reading a novel written by Kilgore Trout, who reappears in this book, and begins to believe that everyone around him is a robot.

In 1997, Mr. Vonnegut published “Timequake,” a tale of the millennium in which a wrinkle in space-time compels the world to relive the 1990s. The book, based on an earlier failed novel of his, was, in his own words, “a stew” of plot summaries and autobiographical writings. Once again, Kilgore Trout is a character. “If I’d wasted my time creating characters,” Mr. Vonnegut said in defense of his “recycling,” “I would never have gotten around to calling attention to things that really matter.”

Though it was a best seller, it also met with mixed reviews. “Having a novelist’s free hand to write what you will does not mean you are entitled to a free ride,” R. Z. Sheppard wrote in *Time*. But the novelist Valerie Sayers, in *The New York Times Book Review*, wrote: “The real pleasure lies in Vonnegut’s transforming his continuing interest in the highly suspicious relationship between fact and fiction into the neatest trick yet played on a publishing world consumed with the furor over novel versus memoir.”

Mr. Vonnegut said in the prologue to “Timequake” that it would be his last novel. And so it was.

His last book, in 2005, was a collection of biographical essays, “A Man Without a Country.” It, too, was a best seller.

It concludes with a poem written by Mr. Vonnegut called “Requiem,” which has these closing lines:

When the last living thing
 has died on account of us,
 how poetical it would be
 if Earth could say,
 in a voice floating up
 perhaps
 from the floor
 of the Grand Canyon,
 “It is done.”
 People did not like it here.

Correction: April 13, 2007

An obituary in some copies yesterday about the writer Kurt Vonnegut misidentified the novel in which a recurring Vonnegut character, Kilgore Trout, was introduced. It is "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine," not "Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade." The surname of another character, who appears in the novel "Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday," was misspelled. It is Philboyd Studge, not Sludge.

Correction: April 14, 2007

An obituary on Friday and in some copies on Thursday about the writer Kurt Vonnegut referred incorrectly to the military role of the character Billy Pilgrim in the Vonnegut novel "Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade," set in Europe during World War II. Pilgrim was a chaplain's assistant, not an infantry scout, although he encounters scouts in his travels and joins up with them.

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