

## Kurt Vonnegut : a voice for life

By Christopher Bigsby,  
Created 2007-04-11 23:00

Kurt Vonnegut, who died on 11 April 2007 at the age of 84, once said that he learned "bone-deep sadness" from his parents. He was 21 when his mother committed suicide and in *Breakfast of Champions* a character remarks "You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did." He later confessed to himself being a monopolar depressive, even attempting suicide, insisting nonetheless that he was unashamed of the incident, which he would not repeat because he did not want to be "a two-time loser". His father, he recalled, had said some of the funniest things he had ever heard but that he was "the saddest man I ever knew". Perhaps Vonnegut's humour, always with a dark underlay, was his response to a sense of spiritual vertigo. Certainly, the laughter in his work often comes through clenched teeth.

In person [1], he could come across as lugubrious, mixing melancholy with wit. In performance, he was a vaudevillian with a carefully honed act. He was an habitual smoker, believing it a treatment for his depression, but acknowledged the side-effects, one of which being that he set himself alight, causing serious burns. In the end, though, it was writing that proved the real therapy and as he remarked, "I don't think you have to write that close to the truth about yourself in order to feel better. I think that writing detective stories, spy stories or whatever, is probably as therapeutic." In his case the "whatever" would be science fiction.

Also in openDemocracy on Kurt Vonnegut:

Rob Cawston, "*A Man Without a Country* [2]"  
(6 February 2006)

Mark Hanrahan, "*Slaughterhouse-Five* [3]" (26 March 2006)

### An American epic

The Vonnegut family [4] arrived from Germany before the American civil war. They were what he called "educated speculators" who bought into the American dream. They were in flight, he once explained, from "militarism, noblemen and the Catholic church", becoming atheists immediately on arrival. They did not, however, escape the military, serving in the Union army. When he asked what the quality of German troops was in the civil war, he was told, "very poor", and commented "I was glad to hear that."

The family, who lived in Indianapolis, were proud of their German roots until the first world war when they found themselves attacked by patriots. Vonnegut remembered German being spoken in the family home. At school he learned physics, chemistry and biochemistry. He was hopelessly at sea, drawing the conclusion that school should prepare people for failure, since "that is what is going to happen to them ... almost everybody loses, as most people who set out to write books, even good books, lose." Later, he would be involved in the Battle of the Bulge

whose opening days he described as the largest defeat of the United States army in history. He had an appreciation of defeat, regarding it as an inevitable part of the bargain that is life.

Certainly, 1929 seemed to offer evidence for this. His father, an architect, lost all his money while commissions dried up. He could bear it. His wife could not, blaming him for their plight. As a boy, Vonnegut studied clarinet under the first chairperson of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and would have a lifelong love of music [5], but he was beginning to write; he contributed to the school newspaper, as to the student newspaper at Cornell where he was a biochemistry major. In 1943, he enlisted in the army but before going overseas was trained in mechanical engineering. No sooner was he in the war than he was captured and imprisoned in the basement of a slaughterhouse in Dresden where he experienced the allied bombing, the event that would later prompt him to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Following the war he went briefly to the University of Chicago and then worked in advertising for General Electric. His first story was published in 1950, though it was not long before the magazine market began to dry up. His first novel, *Player Piano*, which dealt with the problems raised by automation, appeared in 1952. There followed [6] a series of science fiction novels, or novels laced with science fiction ideas (*Mother Night*, 1962; *Cat's Cradle*, 1963; *Breakfast of Champions*, 1973; *Slapstick or Lonesome no More!*, 1976) though he felt ambiguously about them because, as he explained, "science fiction writers are thought of as inferior ... a little backwater." For the most part his early books went un-reviewed, though *Cat's Cradle*, in 1963, did prompt a review in the *New York Times Book Review*.

Christopher Bigsby is professor [7] and head of the school of American studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA), England. Among his many books are *Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust: The Chain of Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 2006 [8])

### **Vonnegut's gift**

It was with *Slaughterhouse-Five* [9] (1969), however, that his career changed and he became necessary reading for a generation. This book, too, crucially had science-fiction elements but at its heart lay the bombing of Dresden, which had taken place twenty-four years earlier. It took so long for him to address it, he explained, because he had never appreciated the scale of the event. Its details had been effectively suppressed for many years while he, himself, claimed to have no precise memories of it, having to consult friends and undertake research. That it appeared in 1969, however, meant that this novel about a terrible incident which occurred in what he nonetheless regarded as a just war was seized on by a generation who saw in it an image of an unjust war, Vietnam. He suddenly found himself asked to appear at anti-Vietnam war rallies, denouncing America's betrayal of its own principles.

The fact is that underneath the joker, the writer of speculative fiction, Vonnegut was at heart a teacher and a believer in American principles, though in his 2005 book, *A Man Without a Country: A Memoir of Life in George W. Bush's America* [10], he had, it seemed, become like an ageing Mark Twain, in despair of the world. Yet his very despair was laced with wit and itself a provocation. He believed, after all, that literature could play the role of the canary in the coal mine, warning against the suffocation of values. It was the function of literature to be "a slow-acting poison". He had himself been infected by the socialist writers of the 1930s. Now he, in turn, wished to "infect young people with humanity".

Perhaps that is Vonnegut's [11] true legacy. As he said, "I am a teacher and I want people to pay attention. In order to make students pay attention to the content you have to suddenly bang on the desk with your fist, or get up and write on the blackboard. And if you are lucky, the chalk

will squeak! Then the people will wake up and pay attention. The question is, am I worth paying attention to or not, and that is for God to say.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Literature/vonnegut\\_4522.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Literature/vonnegut_4522.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.latimes.com/la-me-vonnegut12apr12,0,3568530.story?track=mostviewed-homepage>

[2] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts/vonnegut\\_3243.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts/vonnegut_3243.jsp)

[3] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts/slaughterhouse\\_3679.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts/slaughterhouse_3679.jsp)

[4] [http://www.indianahistory.org/pop\\_hist/people/kv.html](http://www.indianahistory.org/pop_hist/people/kv.html)

[5] <http://www.bloomsbury.com/Authors/microsite.asp?id=1117&section=1&aid=1547>

[6] <http://www.vonnegutweb.com/vonnegutia/chronology.html>

[7] [http://www1.uea.ac.uk/cm/home/schools/hum/ams/People/ams%2Bacademics/Professor%2BChris%2BBigsby%2B%2B%2B%2B%2B%2BBA%252C%2BMA%252C%2BPhD%252C%2Btarget=\\_blank](http://www1.uea.ac.uk/cm/home/schools/hum/ams/People/ams%2Bacademics/Professor%2BChris%2BBigsby%2B%2B%2B%2B%2B%2BBA%252C%2BMA%252C%2BPhD%252C%2Btarget=_blank)

[8] <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521869348> target=\_blank

[9] <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780440180296>

[10] <http://www.bloomsbury.com/BookCatalog/>

ProductItem.asp?S=1&sku=22043985&EmailMe=&mscssid=A3S7VDJ207QD9GM0W2CM6H47TLUM6H

[11] <http://www.vonnegut.com/>



Copyright © Christopher Bigsby, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.