KURT VONNEGUT

Born: Indianapolis, Indiana
November 11, 1922

Short-story writer and novelist Vonnegut is noted for his satiric humor, social commentary, frequent use of science fiction, and increasingly postmodern techniques.

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BIOGRAPHY

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922, the son of Kurt and Edith Vonnegut. He was the youngest of three children. His ancestors had come from Germany in 1855. They were prosperous, originally as brewers and merchants, down to Kurt's grandfather and father, who were both architects, and they were prominent in the heavily German Indianapolis society. Then World War I left a residue of anti-German feeling in the United States and prohibitions on the use of the German language, dimming the family's pride and its cultural heritage. Prohibition brought an end to the brewing business, and the Great Depression of the 1930's left Vonnegut's father without work for essentially the rest of his life. Vonnegut writes frequently of the Depression and repeatedly portrays people who, like his father, are left feeling purposeless by loss of occupation.

At Shortridge High School, Vonnegut wrote for the *Shortridge Daily Echo.* The rigor of writing daily to deadlines helped shape his habits as a writer. In 1940, he went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where he majored in biochemistry and wrote for the *Cornell Sun.* By January, 1943, Vonnegut was a private in the United States Army. In May of that year, his mother committed suicide, an event of which he would write as having left him a "legacy of suicide." Soon thereafter, the Army sent him to Europe, where he was captured and held as a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany. There he experienced the event that forms the basis of his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the firebombing that virtually destroyed Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945.

After discharge from the Army, Vonnegut undertook graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He also married his former high school sweetheart, Jane Cox. While a student, he worked as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. Vonnegut left Chicago without a degree, although in 1971 his novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963) was accepted in lieu of a thesis, and he was awarded an M.A.

In 1947, Vonnegut moved to Schenectady, New York, where he worked as a public relations writer at the General Electric Research Laboratory. There he began writing fiction, and his first published short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," appeared in *Collier's* in February, 1950. Encouraged by his success as a short-story writer, he resigned from General Electric and moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, to devote himself full time to writing. He continued to publish in popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post, Ladies' Home Journal, Collier's,* and *Cosmopolitan,* but he also placed stories in science-fiction journals such as *Galaxy* and *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine.* His first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), was reissued by Bantam in 1954 with the title *Utopia 14.* Largely because of his success with short stories, which often paid well, Vonnegut did not produce his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), until seven years after *Player Piano.* Those first two novels, together with a number of the short stories, earned for Vonnegut identification as a science-fiction writer,

a label with which he was not always happy, because that genre was disdained in many quarters. During this time, Vonnegut faced personal hardships. In October, 1957, his father died, and in 1958, his sister Alice was stricken with cancer. Days before her death, her husband, John Adams, was killed when his commuter train crashed from a bridge. After this double tragedy, Vonnegut adopted three of their four orphaned children, doubling the size of his family.

The 1960's began as difficult times for Vonnegut but then saw his gradual emergence to fame. Television dried up the magazine market for short stories, and he turned to the paperback book market, first publishing a collection of short stories called *Canary in a Cat House* (1961), then the novel *Mother Night* (1961). Neither achieved great sales. The next two novels, *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), appeared in hardcover. In 1965, he went to teach at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he met other writers and critics who influenced him, particularly in encouraging him to enter his fiction more personally. This led to his adding a new and highly personal preface to the 1966 hardcover edition of *Mother Night*; in many of his subsequent works, such autobiographical introductions have become a popular feature.

In 1966 and 1967, Avon and Dell reissued all of his novels in paperback, and *Player Piano* and *Mother Night* were reprinted in hardcover. The coincidence of these events brought greater public attention to his work, and his fame began to build. A new collection of his short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House,* appeared in 1968. Meanwhile, Vonnegut had won a Guggenheim Fellowship to revisit Dresden and research the event he had struggled to write about for years, the great air raid he had experienced. This led to *Slaughterhouse-Five.* The novel, and the film that followed it, brought Vonnegut broad popularity and financial security.

Success, however, brought its own difficulties. Having faced in fiction the event that had motivated so much of his writing, Vonnegut now struggled. He even considered abandoning the novel for other forms, writing the play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1970). A compilation from his works appeared as a teleplay called *Between Time and Timbuktu* (1972). His marriage to Jane foundered, and he moved alone to New York City. At last, in 1973, he published another novel, *Breakfast of Champions,*

different in form from his previous work and illustrated with his own drawings. It drew mixed reviews but achieved excellent sales, with a first printing of a hundred thousand copies.

In 1974 came the publication of a collection of Vonnegut's essays, speeches, stories, and biography called *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons (Opinions).* Two more novels, *Slapstick* (1976) and *Jailbird* (1979), followed, in what Vonnegut has asserted was a difficult decade for him as a writer. He achieved a feeling of completion with *Slaughterhouse-Five,* he said, and found little that provided stimulation in the society of that period. By 1979, however, Vonnegut had remarried, to the photographer Jill Krementz, and adopted a baby daughter, Lily. Also in 1979, he had a return to the stage when his daughter Edith produced a musical adaptation of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in New York. He wrote the text of a children's Christmas story, *Sun Moon Star* (1980), illustrated by Ivan Chermayeff. *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (1981) was another collection, and it was followed by the novels *Deadeye Dick* (1982), *Galápagos* (1985), *Bluebeard* (1987), *Hocus Pocus* (1990), and *Timequake* (1997). Also, *Bagombo Snuff Box,* a collection of Vonnegut's early stories, was published in 1999, as was *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian,* a collection of fictional interviews, and *Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation About Writing.* Finally, a collection of essays, *A Man Without a Country,* was published in 2005.

Having become a major figure in the American literary establishment, Vonnegut has been much in demand as a speaker, frequently using the title "How to Get a Job Like Mine" to embark upon a rambling and highly entertaining evening something in the manner of Mark Twain. He has also been much in demand for articles in magazines and even for advertisements—an ironic echo of his beginnings as a public relations writer for General Electric.

ANALYSIS

Vonnegut has spoken of his experience of being in Dresden in 1945, when that city was firebombed and perhaps a hundred thousand lives were lost, as being an early motivation to write. Although it was not until his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* that he actually based a book on that experience, his first five novels point in that direction. Notably, there is