



AND SO IT GOES

Life according to Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut, considered one of the best 100 American writers of the 20th century, often used science fiction to describe modern life. But his work can't really be described as pure science fiction.

Vonnegut (1922–2007) uses familiar human characters and normal settings, but then his characters may suddenly travel in time or meet **aliens**², which helps explain and move the action of his books forward.

For example, in one of Vonnegut's most famous novels, *Slaughterhouse Five*³, the main character Billy Pilgrim claims he was kidnaped by aliens and taken to the planet Tralfamadore. The setting for *Slaughterhouse Five* isn't the alien planet, but actually Billy Pilgrim's last days as a soldier in World War II. One moment he's trying to escape from the Germans on foot, walking and walking across the ice and snow of a December Europe; the next moment he's **on display**⁴ in a zoo on Tralfamadore.

It is there that Billy Pilgrim learns about the Tralfamadoreans' belief that all life – past, present, and future – can be viewed at the same time, the same way you can see several peaks of the Rocky Mountains at one time. This belief helps Vonnegut explain the tragedy of death with the simple phrase, “And so it goes.” In *Slaughterhouse Five* he repeats that phrase every time he mentions anyone, or anything, that has died. It becomes a slogan similar to “Such is life.” If you think of the person's death as **merely**⁵ one of the many peaks in the mountain range, it brings a kind of peace to the event.

Vonnegut himself was a foot soldier in World War II. He was **captured**⁶ and **imprisoned**⁷ by the Germans (and kept in the basement of an old slaughterhouse, number five), and **survived the fire-bombing**⁸ and destruction of the German city of Dresden. These events greatly influenced most of his novels and are the basis for *Slaughterhouse Five*.

A writer of many professions

Vonnegut had a very mixed career to support himself and his family while writing. He worked as a news reporter in Chicago while finishing graduate school, as a public relations writer for General Electric in New York, and was also a volunteer **firefighter**⁹ and owned a car **dealership**¹⁰ there. For a time he also taught writing at the famous Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa.

Vonnegut the critic

Vonnegut became more pessimistic about life as he grew older. He joined a writers' protest movement and refused to pay taxes during the Vietnam War, and was active in the **humanism movement**¹¹. Humanists believe everyone is responsible for ethical behavior and trying to bring justice to society, without **relying on**¹² a belief in some kind of religion.

Mary Matz (USA)



Vonnegut illustrated some of his books. His first illustrated book was *Slaughterhouse Five* and he continued with his felt-tip pen illustrations in *Breakfast of Champions*.

OTHER FAMOUS BOOKS BY KURT VONNEGUT

Player Piano

Written in 1952, this science fiction novel portrays a world **run by**¹³ machines and a super computer. Vonnegut said: “This book is not about what is, but a book about what could be.” And many of his **predictions**¹⁴ about life in the future have come true.

Cat's Cradle

Published in 1963, this book explores themes of science, technology, and religion. It is a satire on the **arms race**¹⁶ and other war issues. A man researching the history of the atomic bomb meets one of the scientists who invented it. He's also invented a kind of ice that freezes water at room temperature – and freezes everything it comes into contact with.

Breakfast of Champions

Written in 1973, this book is a portrait of a fictional town in the American Mid-West (called Midland City) that is home to a group of slightly neurotic characters. An unknown science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, comes there and meets a rich businessman, Dwayne Hoover, who owns much of the city but is slowly going **insane**¹⁷.

Slaughterhouse Five



Right from the beginning of the book we are given the facts about the main character Billy Pilgrim.

We learn that he was taken prisoner by the Germans, returned home after the war, became rich, married and had two children, survived an airplane crash and said he had been kidnapped by a flying saucer from the planet Tralfamadore.

You don't expect to find out about this right from the start of a story. But that is not what the book is about. The **focus** is not really on who, when and why. Vonnegut explains and adds information about characters by travelling in time to express his thoughts in an experimental way.

Billy first 'came unstuck in time', he moved in time, during the war behind the German lines in 1944.

Little Billy was terrified, because his father had said Billy was going to learn to swim by the method of sink-or-swim. His father was going to throw Billy into the deep end, and Billy was going to damn well swim. It was like an execution. ... His eyes were closed. When he opened his eyes, he was on the bottom of the pool... He lost consciousness... He dimly sensed that somebody was rescuing him. Billy blinked and, travelled in time to 1961. It was New Year's Eve, and Billy was disgracefully drunk at a party... and Billy found himself out in his automobile, trying to find the steering wheel. Billy windmilled his arms, hoping to find it by luck. When that didn't work, he became methodical, working in such a way that the wheel*

could not possibly escape him. He placed himself hard against the left-hand door, searched every square inch of the area before him. When he failed to find the wheel, he moved over six inches, and searched again. Amazingly, he was eventually hard against the right-hand door, without having found the wheel. He concluded somebody had stolen it. This angered him as he passed out.*

He was in the back seat of his car, which was why he couldn't find the steering wheel.

In the next moment Billy finds himself back in 1944 still feeling a bit dizzy.

He was cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent... He wished everybody would leave him alone. 'You guys go on without me,' he said again and again.

The time-travels of Billy Pilgrim reveal his inner feelings and give more information. It is as if trying to put together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. By the end of the book you think you can finally see the whole picture.

TASK

Look at the following words taken from the excerpt and try to match them with the right meaning.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 sensed | A) pressed himself |
| 2 blinked | B) not succeed in doing stg |
| 3 windmilled | C) realized |
| 4 placed himself hard | D) became unconscious |
| 5 failed (to) | E) became aware of |
| 6 concluded | F) felt awkward, ashamed |
| 7 passed out | G) moved as if in wide curve, rotated |
| 8 was embarrassed | H) opened and shut eyes quickly |

Solution on p. 3

DISCUSS

In the excerpt first Billy goes back to his childhood, in the next moment he jumps into a comic description of how he was trying to find the steering wheel. How do his time travels tie in with the moment when he's telling his fellow wanderers (soldiers) to leave him behind, when he feel dizzy, cold, and embarrassed, (Was the memory from his childhood a pleasant one?)

VOCABULARY

- 1 pure [pjʊə] – čistý, ryzí
- 2 alien ['eɪlɪən] – mimozemšťan
- 3 slaughterhouse ['slɔ:təhaʊs] – jatka
- 4 on display [dɪ'spleɪ] – vystavený
- 5 merely ['mɪəli] – jenom, pouze
- 6 to capture ['kæptʃə] – zajmout
- 7 to imprison [ɪm'prɪz(ə)n] – uvěznit
- 8 to survive fire-bombing – přežít bombardování
- 9 firefighter ['faɪəfaɪtə] – hasič
- 10 dealership ['di:ləʃɪp] – obchodní zastoupení
- 11 humanism movement ['hju:mənɪz(ə)m] – humanistické hnutí

- 12 to rely on [rɪ'laɪ] – spolehnout se
- 13 run by – ovládaný, řízený
- 14 prediction [prɪ'dɪkʃ(ə)n] – předpověď
- 15 cradle ['kreɪd(ə)l] – kolébka
- 16 arms race – závod ve zbrojení
- 17 insane [ɪn'seɪn] – šílený

SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE

- 18 flying saucer ['sɔ:sə] – létající talíř
- 19 square [skwɛ:] – čtvereční
- 20 focus ['fəʊkəs] – zaměření, pozornost, hlavní cíl
- 21 to sink [sɪŋk] – potopit se, jít ke dnu
- 22 was going to damn well – se měl zatraceně snažit
- 23 execution [ek'sɪ'kju:ʃ(ə)n] – poprava

- 24 lost consciousness ['kɒnʃənsɪs] – ztratil vědomí
- 25 dimly [dɪmlɪ] – matně
- 26 disgracefully [dɪs'greɪsfʊli, -f(ə)li] – hanebně
- 27 steering wheel ['stiəriŋ wi:l] – volant
- 28 left-hand door – levé dveře
- 29 was...hard against – narazil na
- 30 dizzy [dɪzi] – mít závrať
- 31 to reveal [rɪ'vi:l] – ukázat
- 32 inner feelings [ɪnə 'fi:lɪŋz] – vnitřní pocity
- 33 jigsaw puzzle ['dʒɪɡzɔ: 'paz(ə)l] – skládačka puzzle

GLOSSARY*

deep end – the deep part of a swimming pool (=hloubka)
inch – unit of length (1 inch = 2.54 cm), hear *inch* means small amount or part of something (=kousek, píď)

LANGUAGE POINT

Pilgrim (Billy's surname) refers to his ability to travel in time. (pilgrim=poutník)