

KURT VONNEGUT JR.

Nov. 11, 1922- April 11, 2007



“I won’t know myself until I find out whether life is serious or not” (Kilgore Trout, *Breakfast of Champions*)

The roots of a genius

- * Kurt was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on Armistice Day (now known as veterans day)
- * His father and grandfather were both graduates of MIT
- * Graduated Shortridge high school in May 1940
- * After college he attended Cornell University for chemistry
- * During this time he worked for the “Cornell Daily Sun”
- * While at Cornell he enlisted in the US Army.
- * Started drawing from as far back as he could remember



The Army and WWII



- * The Army moved Kurt around to Carnegie Institute of Tech. and The University of Tennessee after he enlisted to study mechanical engineering
- * During his time in the army he did a lot of mundane writing because he had a knack at it.
- * Eventually Vonnegut was shipped out to fight on the front line in the latter half of WWII
- * He was captured during the Battle of The Bulge, which is one of the most famous and brutal battles in the history of the war.

WWII (cont.)

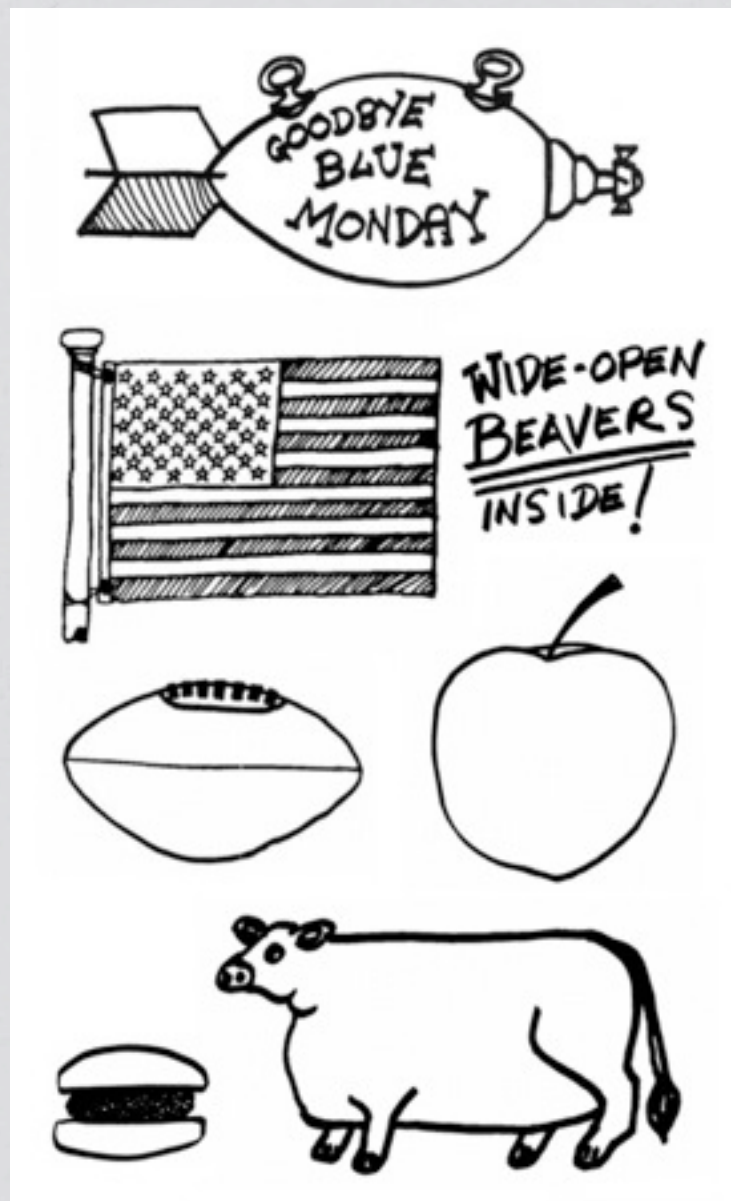
- * While he was under captivity, he was beaten by German soldiers for speaking out against them.
- * He was eventually transferred to a prison in Dresden, Germany where he witnessed the most horrific bombing ever carried out by American forces
- * It is estimated that more people were killed by conventional bombs in the Dresden fire bombings than in Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Vonnegut survived this while under captivity and witnessed the horrors of the attack. These would be the future inspirations for his novel "Slaughter House Five" (1969)
- * "There were too many corpses to bury. So instead the Germans sent in troops with flamethrowers. All these civilians' remains were burned to ashes."
- * On Mother's Day 1944, while Kurt was on leave to WWII, his mother killed herself with sleeping pills.

After The War

- * After he left the war he went to The University of Chicago where he studied anthropology and worked for the City News Bureau of Chicago. Also he got married to his childhood sweet heart.
- * Wrote a thesis comparing the leaders of 19th century native american rebel leaders and cubist painters, which was rejected for being too offensive.
- * Later he moved to New York to work as a technical writer for General electric and was a volunteer fireman.
- * Worked for Sports illustrated for one day
- * In the 1950's he was offered a position as a teacher for the University of Iowa writing workshop. He accepted. He began work on his great classic novels at this time.
- * He also published some of his lesser known works during this time. His first novel "Player Piano" (1952), and "The Sirens of Titan" (1956)
- * Most of Vonnegut's work has a Dystopian or Science fiction setting.



The 1960's and 1970's



- * During this time Vonnegut was raising 7 kids. 4 from his first marriage and 3 he adopted from his sister after she died from cancer. Also he divorced his first wife and got remarried.
- * In the 1960's he suffered a mental break down and recovery. Also he wrote his most successful novels during this time. *Cats Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughter House Five* (1969)
- * In the 1970's he continued to make work that is highly regarded to this day. "*Breakfast of Champions*" (1971)
- * At this time he began relying on creative writing as his main source of income.

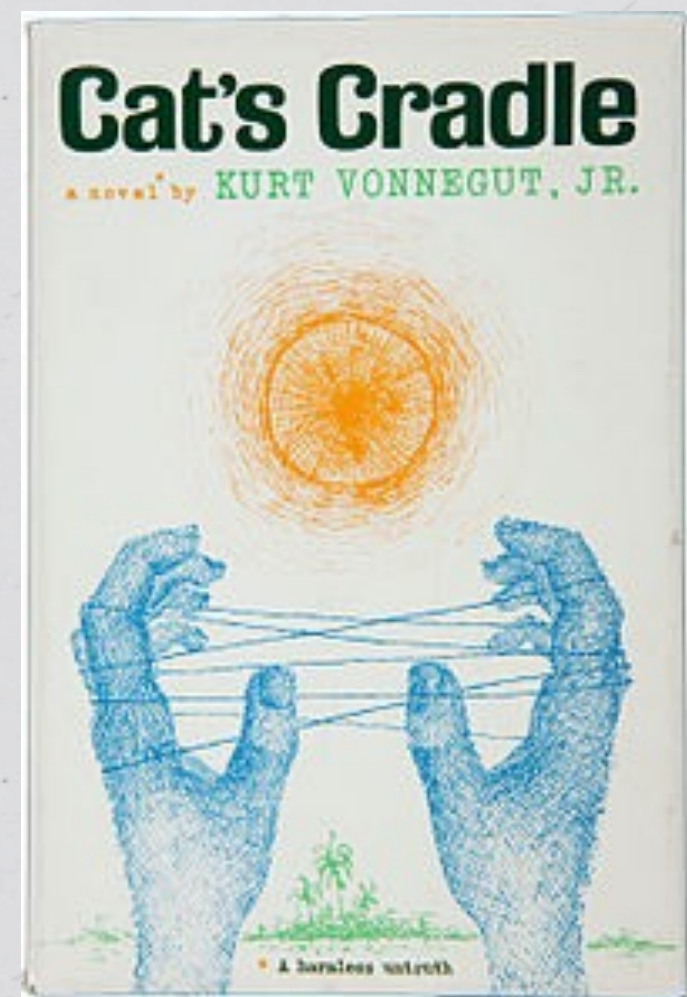
Vonnegut's Classics

- * Vonnegut had many great works released but some sold better than others.
- * Cat's Cradle, Slaughter House Five and Breakfast of Champions are best sellers but also represent milestones in his writing career.
- * In one of his novels Kurt rates a number of works he has written on a grade school scale. He gives Cats Cradle and Slaughter House Five both an A+ and gives Breakfast of Champions a C.



Cat's Cradle

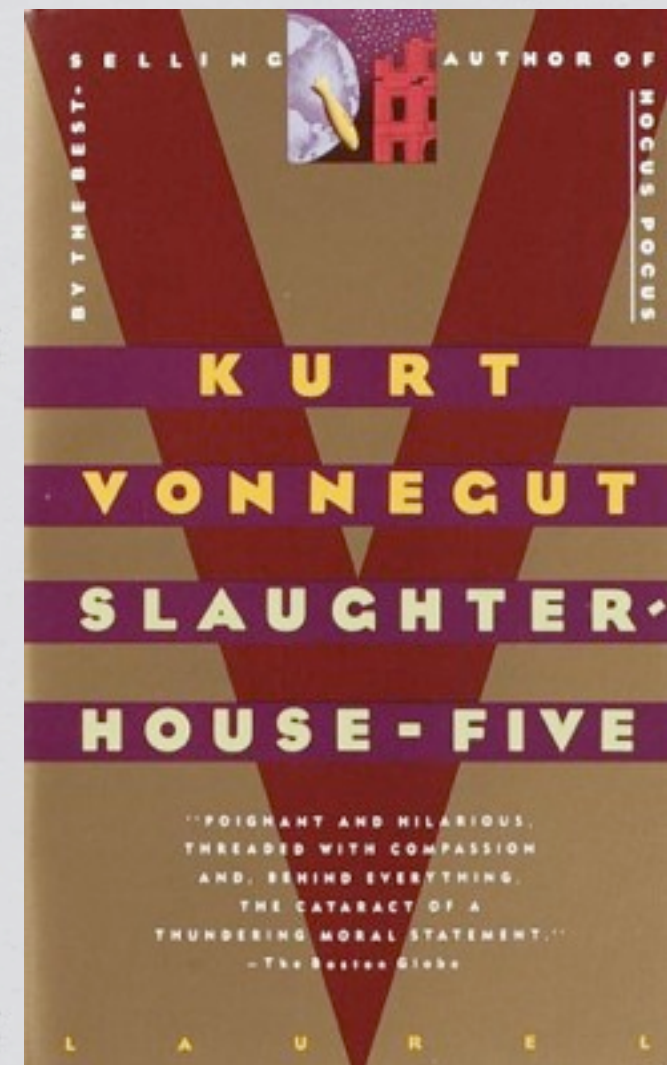
- * About an everyman character named John who is a writer working on what important Americans were doing during the Hiroshima bombings
- * Set in fictional South America and New York
- * Regarded as Vonnegut's first "hit"
- * Was honored as his thesis work by the University of Chicago



1963

Slaughter House Five

- * Regarded as Vonnegut's best work by most critics.
- * Covers his personal experience with WWII and the Dresden Bombings
- * Mixes elements of realism and experimental writing with a science fiction twist.
- * Powerful novel with a great humanist message.



1969

Breakfast of Champions

- * One of my personal favorite novels of all time.
- * Takes place in America. Very surrealist style that takes you on many different tangents.
- * Confronts politics, war, education, pornography and American life in general



1971

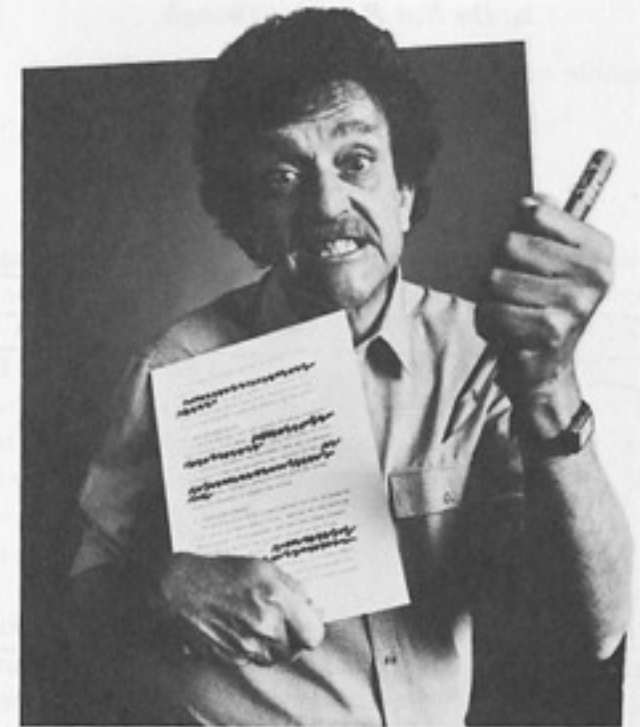
Vonnegut in the Digital Age

- * Vonnegut's later years were better to him. He had dealt with his mental health issues and began to be recognized greatly for his contributions to the literary world.
- * Continued to write and adapted to all new forms of technology even up into his final years with the advent of the internet.
- * Received a position teaching writing at Harvard University.
- * Recognized as the honorary president of the Humanist movement.
- * Was in countless interviews and even starred in a movie shortly.
- * Began writing more advice for those still learning the trade. Insisted that reading itself was an art. Wrote 7 tips for being a better writer separate from his short story guidelines



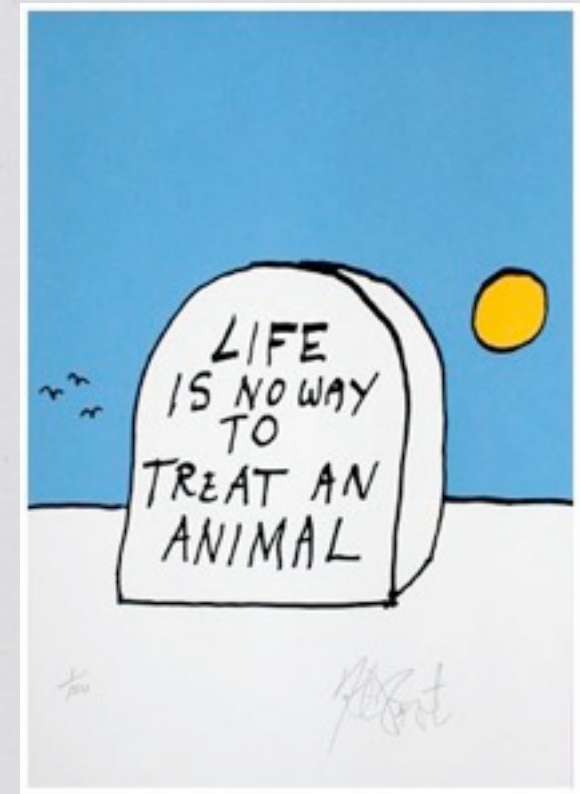
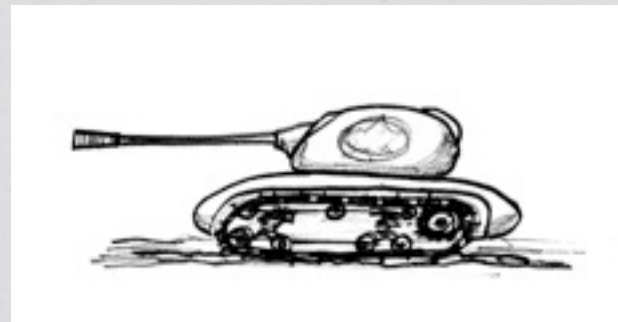
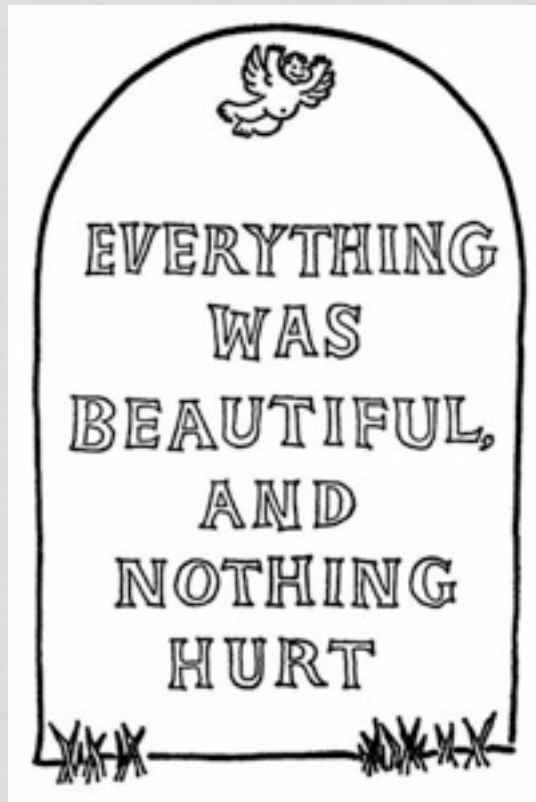
Politics

- * Vonnegut had come from a family of free thinkers and was not heavily influenced by religion. In fact he was an outspoken atheist.
- * While his political views are interpreted differently by many, it is generally agreed he was very neutral. Socialism/Capitalism.
- * Humanism/ACLU
"Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead."
- * Focused on the war and talked about how artists don't confront wars the same way anymore. Vietnam/Middle East.
- * Talked about environmentalism before it was a social norm.



"Be merciless on yourself. If a sentence does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out."

Vonnegut's Sketches



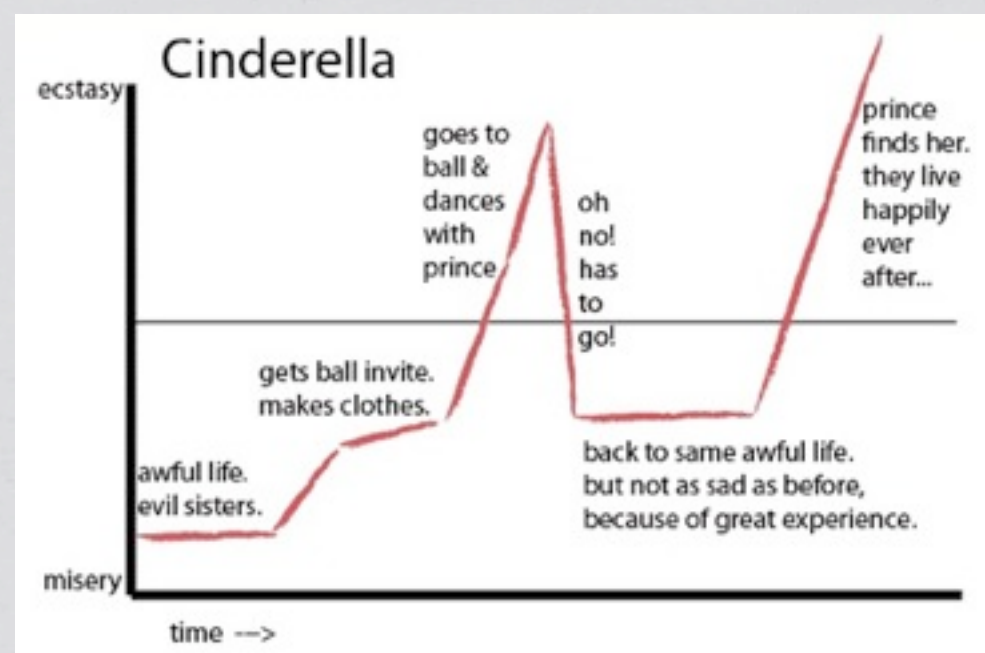
- * Vonnegut enjoyed drawing all his life and included it intermittently though out his work after “Breakfast of Champions”. His sketches have become rather famous for their simplicity and symbolism. The graphic design takes a less is more approach.

8 Rules for Writing a Short Story

- * Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
- * Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
- * Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
- * Every sentence must do one of two things - reveal character or advance the action.
- * Start as close to the end as possible.
- * Be a sadist. No matter how sweet or innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them - in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
- * Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia .
- * Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To hell with suspense. Readers should have complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.
- * Vonnegut said that Flannery O'Connor broke almost all these rules except one. He also noted more great writers tend to do that.

The Shapes of Stories

* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ>



Vonnegut believed people created so much drama because of the problems with story telling and bad plot structure and Disney-like movies.

Final Years

- * The last years of Vonnegut were some of his most controversial and lively. He wrote till his death and even had books released after he died.
- * Received a lot of heat for his political views later on in life. In a 2005 interview with an Australian journalist his words on the hot topic of radical islam were misconstrued and taken out of context cause massive controversy and speculation that he “supported terrorism”
- * Later that year he was interview on the daily show and brought up some harsh topics on the war, democracy and human rights. Jon Steward saluted him saying sarcastically “Im so sorry to see you have lost your edge after all these years”
- * Vonnegut died on April 11, 2007 after suffering brain damage from a fall.
- * Lived long enough to see his legacy flourish
- * <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-september-13-2005/kurt-vonnegut>

The Legend Lives On

- * Vonnegut is regarded as one of the best american writers of all time and is a honored as such.
- * What would Vonnegut say about where we are since he died?

“True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.” Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Web Sources

- * http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat's_Cradle
- * http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Vonnegut
- * <http://www.vonnegut.com/>