

# Kurt Vonnegut

**J**ames was a buddy whose wife worked the graveyard shift while we drank beer and watched kung fu movies. A couple of months ago, one of the people we had utmost respect for — a curmudgeonly scribe of the sardonic and the absurd — died after slipping and falling. As Kurt Vonnegut himself would have said, “So it goes.”

We shared many nights waxing philosophical about the meaning and wonder in Vonnegut’s books, whether the technological fears of “Cat’s Cradle,” the foolishness of war in “Slaughter-House Five,” the simple beauty of small-brained creatures in “Galapagos” or the relative efficacy of critics categorizing Vonnegut as a science-fiction writer.

We argued at length about the books, which was the best (I fancied “Cat’s Cradle”; James liked “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater”), the worst, and the funniest (“Breakfast of Champions” for me, and “Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon” for James).

Vonnegut served as our cultural guide, illustrating the cravenness of the powerful, demonstrating the necessity of questioning authority, documenting the horror of organized slaughter, and regaling us with stories the high-school history books left out. He might have made us more cynical than 17-year-olds need to be, but his ability to hold on to hope in the middle of a world

## AN AMERICAN LITERARY LEGEND DIES, BUT HIS LEGACY

### WILL NEVER PERISH BY MARK LUCE



gone wrong seemed a tacit endorsement of our youthful idealism.

On Feb. 9, 1995, Kurt Vonnegut came to Lawrence, Kan., to give a talk called “How to Get a Job Like Mine.” James drove up from Salina, and like giggly schoolgirls, we took our seats and watched Vonnegut perform his trademark routines. Laughter ruled the evening.

Driving to the Eldredge Hotel bar afterwards, I was a bit bummed out, wondering aloud if I had outgrown Vonnegut. Maybe those ideas of his were great to the kids, but the notion of hope rang quietly on my graduate-student ears. James would have none of it, claiming that a guy who continued to write books that appealed to disenfranchised and dissociated youngsters may be a one-trick pony, but it’s a pony we need.

He also told me of his dream of sending Vonnegut a package in the mail — a

pack of Pall Mall’s (Vonnegut’s brand as an unrepentant smoker) and a note that simply said, “Thanks for the books.”

Sitting in the bar, our heads snapped when Vonnegut walked in with a couple of student-event types. I excused myself, ostensibly to use the rest room. Instead, I slunk down the stairs, plunked \$3 in quarters into the cigarette machine and yanked the handle for Pall Mall.

I politely intruded Vonnegut’s party, dropping the smokes on the table, and saying only, “I think this is your brand. Thank you for everything.” And I walked back to our table.

When we spoke after Vonnegut’s death, James and I recounted that evening. James, who tells anyone remotely literary this story, said his son Max had asked if I remembered the story. James assured Max that I did, and he didn’t hesitate to repeat that I had stolen his bit. So it goes.

So again, Mr. Vonnegut, thank you for the books and everything.

*Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where “Cat’s Cradle” is required reading for the sophomore English class he teaches.*

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