

## Slaughterhouse 5: The Children's Crusade A Dirty-Dance With Death ABOUT THE BOOK

Moving backwards and forwards in time, *Slaughterhouse 5* is narrated by Billy Pilgrim, a Second World War veteran who was captured by the Germans in the Ardennes offensive in 1944 and who witnessed the horrific firebombing of Dresden by the Allies. When the novel opens – in 1968 – Billy is a wealthy optometrist living in Ilium, New York State, with a wife and two children. It becomes clear during the course of the novel, however, that Billy has been in an air crash which has left him severely injured, and that his wife has died in a freak accident while rushing to his bedside.

*Slaughterhouse 5* is a miraculously moving, bitter and funny story and the most original anti-war novel since *Catch 22*.

‘A marvellous excursion...the writing is pungent,  
the antics uproarious, the wit as sharp as a hypodermic needle’  
Daily Telegraph

‘One of the master alchemists of modern American fiction’  
Sunday Times

‘An extraordinary success.  
It is a book we need to read and re-read...  
Funny, compassionate and wise’  
New York Times Book Review

‘A work of keen literary artistry’  
Joseph Heller

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis, in the United States, in 1922 and studied biochemistry at Cornell University. Drafted into the US infantry in World War II, he was captured by German soldiers in 1944 and was working in Dresden in the underground meat locker of a slaughterhouse when the city was attacked and destroyed by United States and British bombers. He came out of hiding to find ‘135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men.’ The event profoundly affected his life and writing, and is the central concern of his most celebrated novel, *Slaughterhouse*.

In a course of his writing career Vonnegut’s work has ranged across many genres and has always been distinguished by its imaginative ability and by its profound concern with man’s inhuman behaviour towards his fellow man. *Slaughterhouse 5* is also his most dramatic articulation of this message.

## AUTHOR INTERVIEW

McSweeney’s, September 2002

Before speaking with you, I read over many of your books and came across one of the most heartbreaking paragraphs I've ever read in *Timequake*: "I was the baby of the family. Now I don't have anybody to show off for anymore."

Yeah. Where do you fit into in your family?

I'm the oldest. I have one younger brother.

You're certainly very different people. Chances are he's a helluva lot funnier than you are. The only way he could get attention at the dinner table is by being funny.

You have outlived your ancestors, and many of your colleagues in letters.

Yes, well, that's the reason that I don't want to be in New York any longer. I don't want to go to parties any more. There are no familiar faces anymore. You know, you go to a party and you hone in on the couple people you know. There are none of those people for me at parties any more. I've lost my sister, my brother, my editor, my publisher. It's a whole generation gone by. Old war buddies of mine, my colleagues, my family.

Joseph Heller, in 1999.

I took that one very hard.

You were one of the few people to walk out of Dresden. Now, some fifty years later, you're among the last men standing.

Every so often I run into someone on the street who announces to me that they are really a survivor. I mean, who the fuck isn't? If you're not dead, you're a survivor.

#### STARTING POINTS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

Despite being a work of fiction, *Slaughterhouse 5* clearly has many autobiographical elements to it – both Billy Pilgrim and Vonnegut himself, for instance, were captured in the Ardennes in 1944. Is it possible to distinguish fiction from reality in the novel?

The central episode around which *Slaughterhouse 5* turns is the firebombing of Dresden. But is it right to simply call the novel an anti-war book? Is Vonnegut trying to address other concerns in the novel as well?

Why do you think the author introduces science fiction elements to the book? How central are the book's discussions about truth, time and war to Billy's experiences on Tralfamadore and his use of time travel?

How would you describe the characterisation in *Slaughterhouse 5*? Does Vonnegut spend much time describing his characters, and if not, what use does he have for them?

Although written about World War II, the novel was first published at the height of the Vietnam War. Is this significant? Does Vonnegut draw any explicit or implicit parallels anywhere within the book between the two wars?

Both Kilgore Trout and Dr Rosewater appear in other Vonnegut novels. How would you judge the significance of each character to the telling of this particular story? Are they essential to the novel?

## OTHER BOOKS BY KURT VONNEGUT

Player Piano  
The Sirens of Titan  
Mother Night  
Cat's Cradle  
God Bless You, Mr Rosewater  
Welcome to the Monkey House  
Happy Birthday, Wanda June  
Breakfast of Champions  
Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon  
Slapstick  
Jailbird  
Palm Sunday  
Deadeye Dick  
Galapagos  
Bluebeard  
Hocus Pocus  
Fates Worse Than Death  
Timequake  
Bagombo Snuff Box

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Mao II ~ Don DeLillo  
V ~ Thomas Pynchon  
Astrological Diary of God ~ Bo Fowler  
Choke ~ Chuck Palahniuk  
All Families Are Pschotic ~ Douglas Coupland