

The Library of America interviews Sidney Offit about Kurt Vonnegut

In connection with the publication in June 2011 of [*Kurt Vonnegut: Novels & Stories 1963–1973*](#), edited by Sidney Offit, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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You once told the story that at a PEN event Vonnegut announced to Norman Mailer that you were his best friend. Without skipping a beat, Mailer clasped a hand to your shoulder and said, “Don’t forget that, Sidney. It may be the greatest distinction of your literary life.” When did you realize you had become Kurt Vonnegut’s best friend?

Mailer had a touch of the prophet. Even though I’ve written twelve books, he was more than likely right. But it was Kurt who defined our friendship. He identified me as his best friend early on and in print—in a 1979 essay “The People One Knows” in *Palm Sunday*. Kurt told me several times it’s great to be friends with people who don’t want anything from you. Fans were frequently after Kurt for one thing or another—speaking engagements, benefit performances, reading manuscripts for recommendation to publishers. We were just pals. Of course we shared intimacies but most of our time together we played—tennis at Midtown Manhattan or on summer mornings in the Hamptons, Ping-Pong at parlors around town. We also visited steakhouses and French restaurants and skipped off to movies.

We were doing the town together before I really read his work. When I saw my sons were reading Vonnegut I decided I should too. There was a time in the early 1970s, after *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s debut, when there were two writers whom young people seemed to read as scripture: Kurt was one, Herman Hesse was the other.

The defining event in Vonnegut’s life was the bombing of Dresden in 1945 when he was a German prisoner of war. His being on a work detail in an

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underground meat locker during the bombing saved his life, and the name of the locker became the title of his most famous book, Slaughterhouse-Five. Did you ever talk about this?

Sure, but I can't tell you more than what he wrote. One of the great joys of knowing Kurt was that he spoke as he wrote. What do you think are the lines that define this Library of America collection? I'd say two passages. One comes from the "Special Message" he wrote to "readers of the Franklin Library's limited edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*," which is reprinted as an appendix in the Library of America edition. He ends with these words:

The Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned, was so meaningless, finally, that only one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it. I am that person. I wrote this book, which earned a lot of money for me and made my reputation, such as it is.

One way or another, I got two or three dollars for every person killed. Some business I'm in.

The wrap-up is that he breaks it down into money as a joke, but you know he's making fun of the human condition as well as himself. He makes you laugh and, for a moment, you wonder why.

The other passage comes from the end of *Cat's Cradle* where the narrator has a final exchange with the religious leader Bokonon:

"Bokonon?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask what you're thinking?"

"I am thinking, young man, about the final sentence for *The Book of Bokonon*. The time for the final sentence has come."

"Any luck?"

He shrugged and handed me a piece of paper.

This is what I read:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who.

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The kicker is the “You Know Who” at the end. We do know and are kind of pleased that Kurt doesn’t “name names.”

Those quotes show the dark and light sides of Vonnegut’s recurrent theme of the meaninglessness of human existence—but isn’t there another aspect of Vonnegut that they miss? I’m thinking of the words Rosewater comes up with for the baptism he’s to perform in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater:

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.’”

That is a feeling that Kurt had. The paradox is that there are cruel things happening in all his books. But when he says “you’ve got to be kind” he means it. He was kind. He understood that people have to do what they have to do. He didn’t even condemn the pilots who bombed Dresden.

There are two people whom I’ve met in my life who I think are true pacifists: Kurt and Heinrich Böll. Both were prisoners of war and both were German. That seems significant, doesn’t it? Kurt couldn’t abide conflict. When he was confronted by anger or an emotional pitch, he left the room. He would almost panic. There’s a scene in my memoir, *Friends, Writers, and Other Countrymen*, when the members of PEN attacked Mailer when he was president for inviting Secretary of State George Schultz as a featured speaker. Everyone was yelling. Kurt stamped out of the room. He couldn’t handle the emotion. He wrote many letters about it—he could write eloquent letters of anger—but he couldn’t express his feelings in the moment. My guess is that you could trace that back to the feeling of helplessness he had at Dresden.

There are many characterizations of Kurt Vonnegut. Jay McInerney has called him “a satirist with a heart, a moralist with a whoopee cushion, a cynic who wants to believe.” Doris Lessing has said his strength “derives from his refusal to succumb to this new and general feeling of helplessness.” Christopher Lehmann-Haupt finds his exclusive trademark to be “charming terror and terrifying charm.” Do any of these get him right?

I believe they are all insightful and appropriate. These critics are responding to Kurt’s talent for perceiving our helplessness, describing it, and expressing it with irony. There’s a quality to his style that is suggestive of

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quips, gag writing. He once said to me there was one thing he always tried to have in a book: there should be a smile on every page.

In the New York Times obituary for Vonnegut on April 12, 2007, Dinitia Smith wrote: “Like Mark Twain, Mr. Vonnegut used humor to tackle the basic questions of human existence: Why are we in this world? Is there a presiding figure to make sense of all this, a god who in the end, despite making people suffer, wishes them well?” Is that an apt capstone for Vonnegut?

One of the most startling moments occurred one Sunday when we weren't playing tennis. It was Palm Sunday and Kurt had been invited by Saint Clement's Episcopal Church over in the theater district to give the sermon. Kurt invited Morley Safer and me to come hear him. And we went. I had to go. I couldn't imagine what he would say. Do you know what he said? We don't give Jesus enough credit for having a sense of humor. When Jesus said the poor will always be with us, Kurt said, he was joking. At first you think, Kurt, come on, you're really reaching. But it flows from him. He had a point. You see, it always annoyed Kurt that people used the line “the poor you always have with you” as an excuse to do nothing for the poor. He was convinced it was a mistranslation. Here was Judas complaining that the oil the women were using to wash Jesus's feet should be sold and the money given to the poor. And Jesus is just saying, “Judas, don't worry about it. There will be plenty of poor people left long after I'm gone.” Jesus. What a joker!

About Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) Jerome Klinkowitz wrote: “The novel so perfectly caught America's transformative mood that its story and structure became bestselling metaphors for the new age.” The success of this novel transformed Vonnegut's life. Why do you think it resonated so with the public at that time?

Walter James Miller, a teacher, poet, and friend, as well as an admirer of Kurt's novels, once told me there were two transcendent novels of the twentieth century: *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and Kurt's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Both authors use humor to dramatize how ludicrous war is. What makes their work transcendent? Walter suggested that Kurt's defining feature was his accessible style. You didn't have to be a graduate student to appreciate his humor, wit, and irony.

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Did you ever talk about which writers influenced him?

Mark Twain was his literary idol. They even looked alike. When Kurt spoke at the one hundredth anniversary of the building of Twain's home in Hartford in 1979, he was offered the chance to use Twain's own cue to play on his pool table, but he declined. He was afraid Twain's ghost would send the cue ball right into the corner pocket without touching anything, just to show him what Twain thought of his work. Kurt wasn't a writer who walked around talking about other writers. Most writers are in their own world.

What contemporary writers did Vonnegut enjoy reading? Were there any he considered overrated?

The writer that he was really nuts about was Richard Yates, the fellow who wrote *Revolutionary Road*. And he liked Howard Zinn's histories. He liked books with political overtones.

Kurt always seemed to respond to books instinctively. If he didn't like something, he wouldn't apologize. He just quietly put the book down. He wasn't critical of people. He did write lots of blurbs, though. If he was moved by a writer's needs, he would come up with a few lines. But to get access to him wasn't that easy. He never looked for attention, but was generous sharing enthusiasm for writers of books he admired.

Vonnegut was famously generous with advice to writers, yet he once said, "You can't teach people to write well. Writing well is something God lets you do or declines to let you do." Yet Kurt taught fiction at the University of Iowa's graduate writing program, and you quote him as telling you that the most important aspect of the craft of fiction was "Development. Every scene, every dialogue should advance the narrative and then if possible there should be a surprise ending." As two creative writing teachers, you must have had discussions about this.

He once did a chart for me. He said the *only* thing you can teach is development. A story has to have a development and change. And that is right on the mark. I've taught much more than he had in terms of years and schools—at NYU, Hunter, the New School. And I have to tell you: the gift for narrative, for storytelling, is rarer than the gift for poetic prose or elegant language—it isn't even close. The students I have had over the years who could write stories were eventually published. There are successful writers of narrative who also have an aesthetic sense—writers like Stephen King or John Grisham. Writing teach-

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ers always say what you most need to do is to read great literature. I don't entirely agree with that. The students who are literary and self-critical frequently drop out of writing. Perhaps that's why so many novelists have extraordinary egos. That's why Jerzy Kosinski said, "If I'm not a writer, I'm nothing."

Kurt understood the short story and the structure. He broke in as a very popular writer of short stories and just about made a living at that, which was a hard thing to do. He wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Esquire*. Even his early stories always had that individual style and those eccentric characters. His invention of characters was extraordinary. It came from a private vision. You never read a character in a Vonnegut novel and say, I know a man like him. They're Vonnegut characters!

Vonnegut once said in an interview that Knox Burger, the editor who bought his first story, had told him that what was great about science fiction was that the story was the basic idea and you didn't need to worry so much about scenes and dialogue.

That reminds me of when I was working at *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. A story came in that was set on Mars but the first three or four pages were about the construction of the space ship. It was good but slow going. When I showed it to the editor there, Anthony Boucher, he said, "cut it." Then came the line I never forgot. "In a science fiction story the first line is the line the reader is always willing to accept. The first line for this story is, 'When the space ship landed on Mars.'"

With Kurt's stories there was always something else going on—a spiritual quality. Religion itself has a quality, a spiritual jump. Jesus died and went to heaven. God spoke to Moses. These are leaps. You could call them science fiction leaps. Think of the leaps Billy Pilgrim takes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Do you agree with the critics who say that Vonnegut invented a new style of writing?

Absolutely. Hemingway had an innovative style—the way he used the conjunction "and" brought grace to the story. But I never met anyone who talked or acted like his characters. The difference is that you could imitate Hemingway's style and still create something original. You just understate. But you can't imitate Vonnegut without it seeming derivative or a parody. The best definition of Kurt's style was John Leonard's tribute at Kurt's eightieth birthday party: "Vonnegut, like Abe Lincoln and Mark Twain, is always being funny

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when he's not being depressed. His is a weird jujitsu that throws us for a loop."

In his review of Breakfast of Champions in The New York Review of Books, Michael Wood characterized Vonnegut's novels as accomplishing two things: on the one hand they portray visions of middle-class despair like those we see in Slaughterhouse-Five—"a man on his bed in his cozy house, the blinds drawn, a vibrator shaking his mattress, gently jiggling him as he weeps: despair in the comfort of your own home." And then on the other hand, Vonnegut is the "jaunty creator of rosy mythologies, like the calypso gospel of Bokonism in Cat's Cradle. And the two aspects face one another—too far apart for interaction—and the reader takes his pick. And because the despair is understated—and the mythologies are scored for full orchestra, most readers pick the mythologies." Do you think this captures Vonnegut's approach to novel writing?

That is beautifully expressed. It's an elegant phrasing and criticism and an enthusiasm expressed at the same time. I think what Kurt did was just intuitive, though. An intuitive balance. The most bewildering comment Kurt ever made to me was after I sent him a copy of the reprint of my first novel. He called and left a message after he read it. "Oh, Sid," he said, "I'd do anything to write a novel like that. The characters are so wonderful." At first I thought he was kidding but that wasn't his way. Why would he say that? There's nothing about that novel that could evoke a sentence like that from anyone else in the world. Then I thought: it told me something about him. His characters are so totally invented. When you write a realistic novel you construct values and an environment for your characters. In some sense he felt that was something he couldn't do.

I once had an exchange with Mailer about this aspect of Kurt. I said to him, "Something about you and Kurt fascinates me. The two of you, I can never predict what you're going to say. It seems that you're trying to be different but you're not. It's just the way you are." And Mailer said, "You're right, but never tell Kurt to analyze it because I don't want to analyze it either." They both had an intuitively unique way of looking at things. Kurt's way of looking at people, of creating characters, was his own. Take Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He comes off like a character in a fable. If you or I were writing that story about Dresden, we'd be trying to dredge the emotion from the scene. Not Kurt.

What were Vonnegut's writing habits?

He wrote most of the day and sometimes into the night. He was also a

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streak writer. He would get it going and keep at it. I know he was a perfectionist because his waste basket was constantly overflowing. One thing: he would not submit to editing. He could not handle it. When he finished a book, it was done. He worked on it page by page. An editor once sent me a lengthy critique of one of his books and asked if I would help convince Kurt to accept the changes. I looked at them but knew better than to try. Once he wrote it his way, there was nothing you could do. And knowing him, if he saw that kind of detailed critique he might throw the whole book away and say it was garbage.

How did you first meet Kurt Vonnegut?

I'm not certain of the moment of our first hello, but I have a hunch it was Roger Straus, the publisher, who introduced us at a party sponsored by the American Center of PEN. Soon after we met Kurt joined Jimmie Flexner, Harry Geylin, Sid Simon, and a couple of other aging gents who provided a "pool" for our Sunday doubles tennis matches. Kurt was an enthusiastic regular. It wasn't long before several of the seniors dropped out, and Kurt enlisted Morley Safer to join us. What's ironic is that Roger, an intensely competitive tennis buff, played next to us for perhaps twenty years—he should get double points as a "match maker."

Vonnegut uses tennis as part of Rosewater's therapy in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. In your memoir you note that the historian James Flexner, one of your tennis six, viewed each player's style as indicative of the player's ego and character. Of Vonnegut he said, "his service is modest and he seems less interested in winning than just having fun and not embarrassing himself." What did you learn about Kurt by playing tennis with him all those years?

Jimmie got it right. Kurt was all about fun. He'd get off some great lines. We were playing tennis once with our sons. We won the first two games. But then they were coming back strong. Suddenly, Kurt said to me: "Hey, let's fall on the ball and run out the clock."

Can you share some of your adventures with Kurt?

In the seventies a German filmmaker who had learned from Kurt about our Ping-Pong matches was determined to [shoot us in action at the Broadway parlor](#) where we boarded our paddles. A day or so before the filming Kurt and I decided to warm up. We arrived some time mid-afternoon and were greeted by

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the manager who had a way of looking at us as if we were visiting a speakeasy. “Ah, yeah, Kurt and Sid,” he said. “Table one.” At the time Kurt’s name was world famous but even some of his ardent fans didn’t recognize him. On the other hand, I was appearing on a local TV news show on Channel 5 three or four times a week, debating politics. Viewers may not always recall my politics but my face seemed to be familiar to perhaps as many as a half million New Yorkers. Well, Kurt had invented this game of 100. “The hardest part of us ole guys playing Ping-Pong,” Kurt said, “was picking up the ball.” We were banging away—perhaps 86–82—when our ball flew over to where some kids were playing. This young guy brings the ball over and looks at me. “Say,” he says, “aren’t you the professor on television?” Kurt got a kick out of that. “Yes,” I replied. “What are you doing here?” he wanted to know. “I’m playing Ping-Pong with Kurt Vonnegut.” You could see the boy’s eyes light up. He ran over to tell his friends. “Guys, guys, that’s Kurt Vonnegut.” Then he came back with our ball. “Mr. Vonnegut,” he asked, “would you autograph this ball for us?” Of course, Kurt wouldn’t let me live down that I was the one who got recognized. “So you’re my famous friend.”

Vonnegut was famous as a storyteller. Do you have any favorite Vonnegut stories?

Kurt could never tell you anything that didn’t have a charming ending. There would always be some kind of ironic little fillip at the end. We talked at least once a week. One day he’s telling me about taking the mail to the post office. He tells me he tries to take one letter at a time so he can go more often. That’s his break for the day. Now, there is also this very attractive woman at the post office window. One day he has three or four letters. In the morning he drops off the first and is chatting and the woman asks, “So, will you be coming again later?” And he thinks, that’s it, she’s on to me. “Why do you ask that?” he says. “Well, because you always do.” So I ask him, “So did you go back?” “You bet,” he cackles, “made a separate trip for each one.”

When Vonnegut writes in Breakfast of Champions, “Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun story-telling.” That was in 1973 and he went on to write six more novels, but he always seemed to be questioning what impact his work was having—and whether he should be writing fiction or nonfiction.

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Kurt seemed to me like the great boxing champion Sugar Ray Robinson who frequently announced his retirement and then came back to win another title. In his last years, already past eighty, Kurt wrote the essays and commentaries collected in *A Man Without a Country*. It expressed with signature Vonnegut humor the passions, values, and ideas introduced in his classic stories. It was a best-seller. Yes, right up to his very last sentences, Kurt Vonnegut was able to inspire admiration and evoke strong feelings from his readers.