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Slaughterhouse-Five, Or the Children's Crusade

Kurt Vonnegut Jr., an indescribable writer whose seven previous books are like nothing else on earth, was accorded the dubious pleasure of witnessing a 20th-century apocalypse. During World War II, at the age of 23, he was captured by the Germans and imprisoned beneath the city of Dresden, "the Florence of the Elbe." He was there on Feb. 13, 1945, when the Allies firebombed Dresden in a massive air attack that killed 130,000 people and destroyed a landmark of no military significance.

Next to being born, getting married and having children, it is probably the most important thing that ever happened to him. And, as he writes in the introduction to "Slaughterhouse-Five," he's been trying to write a book about Dresden ever since. Now, at last, he's finished the "famous Dresden book."

In the same introduction, which should be read aloud to children, cadets and basic trainees, Mr. Vonnegut pronounces his book a failure "because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." He's wrong and he knows it.

Kurt Vonnegut knows all the tricks of the writing game. So he has not even tried to describe the bombing. Instead he has written around it in a highly imaginative, often funny, nearly psychedelic story. The story is sandwiched between an autobiographical introduction and epilogue.

Fact and Fiction Combined

The odd combination of fact and fiction forces a question upon the reader: how did the youth who lived through the Dresden bombing grow up to be the man who wrote this book? One reads "Slaughterhouse-Five" with that question crouched on the brink of one's awareness. I'm not sure if there's an answer, but the question certainly heightens the book's effects.

Here is the story: Billy Pilgrim, "tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola," was born in Ilium, N.Y., the only child of a barber there. After graduating from Ilium High School, he attended night sessions at the Ilium School of Optometry for one semester before being drafted for military service in World War II. He served with the infantry in Europe, and was taken prisoner by the Germans. He was in Dresden when it was firebombed.

After the war, he went back to Ilium and became a wealthy optometrist married to a huge wife named Valencia. They had two children, a daughter named Barbara who married an optometrist, and a son named Robert who became a Green Beret in Vietnam.

In 1968, Billy was the sole survivor of a plane crash on top of Sugarbush Mountain in Vermont. While he was recovering in the hospital, Valencia was killed in a carbon-monoxide accident. On Feb. 13, 1976, Billy was assassinated by a nut with a high-powered laser gun.

As you can see, there is much absurd violence in this story. But it is always scaled down to the size of Billy Pilgrim's world, which makes it more unbearable and more obligatory for the reader to understand the author's explanation for it. As I said, Mr. Vonnegut knows all the tricks.

Now there are two things I haven't yet told you about Billy Pilgrim, and I'm hesitant to do so, because when I tell you what they are you'll want to put Kurt Vonnegut back in the science-fiction category he's been trying to climb out of, and you'll be wrong.

First, Billy is "unstuck in time" and "has no control over where he is going next." "He is in a constant state of stage fright...because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next."

Story Told Fluidly

This problem of Billy's enables Mr. Vonnegut to tell his story fluidly, jumping forward and backward in time, free from the strictures of chronology. And this problem of Billy's is related to the second thing, which is that Billy says that on his daughter's wedding night he was kidnapped by a flying saucer from the planet Tralfamadore, flown there through a time warp, and exhibited with a movie star named Montana Wildhack.

The Tralfamadorians are two feet high, green, and shaped like plumber's friends, with suction caps on the ground and little green hands with eyes on their palms at the top of their shafts. They are wise, and they teach Billy Pilgrim many things. They teach him that humans cannot see time, which is really like "a stretch of the rocky Mountains," with all moments in the past, the present and the future, always existing.

"The Tralfamadorians...can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them." They teach Billy that death is just an unpleasant moment. Because Billy can go back and forth in time, he knew this lesson when he was in Dresden. In 1976, when he was assassinated, Billy Pilgrim was trying to bring this message to the world. He knew he would die, but he did not mind. "Farewell, hello, farewell, hello," he said.

I now, I know (as Kurt Vonnegut used to say when people told him that the Germans attacked first). It sounds crazy. It sounds like a fantastic last-ditch effort to make sense of a lunatic universe. But there is so much more to this book. It is very tough and very funny; it is sad and delightful; and it works. But is also very Vonnegut, which means you'll either love it, or push it back in the science-fiction corner.

