

# Slaughterhouse-Five

*A Study Guide*



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### Introductory Materials — *Why teach Slaughterhouse-Five?*

Listen:

*“I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.*

*“I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think they need machinery like that.”* — Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden on February 13, 1945, when it was firebombed by the Allies in one of the most controversial attacks of World War II. Exploring Vonnegut’s letter home to his family, as well as the firebombing of Dresden, Tokyo, and the Blitz in London can help students develop a more thoughtful, nuanced discussion of war. Whether the book is read as a science fiction or a semi-autobiographical novel, it leaves no doubt that Vonnegut’s experience as a young man in Dresden was one of the most important experiences of his life.

Billy Pilgrim’s alien encounter or mental break (allow your students to decide) creates an opportunity to talk about the mental and emotional strain that affects veterans, and to discuss mental health in your classrooms. The author of this study guide reached out to combat veterans to find some resources that they wish every teenager could see about post-traumatic stress disorder to try to chip away at some of the myths and stigma surrounding mental health.

Slaughterhouse-Five can be read with Joe Haldeman’s *The Forever War* (see study guide at [LiberalStudiesGuides.ca](http://LiberalStudiesGuides.ca)), another book written by a war veteran that explores similar themes.

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## Curriculum Connections

- Intermediate/Senior Level English
- Intermediate/Senior Level History
- Senior Level Canadian & International Law
- Senior Level Challenge & Change in Society
- Senior Level Canadian & World Issues

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## Reading the Book

We suggest exploring this text through **discussion based inquiry**. A few guidelines:

Students will read the books and prepare their own questions, or explore the reading beginning with questions introduced for the class.

- Possible points for discussion are outlined in the chapter breakdown below, but students should guide the discussion during Socratic seminars.
- Students should be marked on participation in the discussion, respect for differing opinions, and evidence that they've read the book.
- If using Socratic seminars, periodic journals on class discussions should be kept by students for evaluation.
- Teaching material for the classes leading up to Socratic seminars and in line with the points for discussion outlined below follow the chapter-by-chapter breakdown. (Bookmark links will take you between the chapter breakdown and the suggested lessons.)
- As the material in this study guide is based on student-led discussion questions, it may be necessary to experiment with different formats for the discussions. Literature Circles can work quite well, for example. Also worth considering: timed debates, Think/Pair/Share, Word Walls or role playing.
- Assign the first chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five to be read with Kurt Vonnegut's letter home after being released from a POW camp after the war.

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## Vonnegut's POW Letter and Chapter 1

### Discussion questions:

- Why do you think it took Vonnegut so long to write his “famous Dresden book”?
- Why do you think Vonnegut tells the story about working for the Chicago City News Bureau?
- Why do you think the details of the bombing of Dresden were still secret when Vonnegut inquired?
- What do you think of the tone of Vonnegut's letter to his family? Is it different than you imagined a letter like that would be? Why or why not?

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## Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 1: “When I was somewhat younger, working on my famous Dresden book... he said, ‘That’s your trade, not mine.’”

Chapter 1: “The end, where all the lines stopped, was a beetfield... He had taken these from dead people in the cellars of Dresden. So it goes.”

Chapter 1: “Then she turned to me, let me see how angry she was... She was my friend after that.”

POW letter: “Under the Geneva Convention, Officers and Non-commissioned officers... possibly the world’s most beautiful city. But not me.”

POW letter: “When General Patton took Leipzig we were evacuated... I can’t receive mail here, so don’t write.”

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## Exercises

### Slaughterhouse-Five in historical context:

Share the 1969 New York Times book review of *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade* (available at LiberalStudiesGuides.ca). In addition to allowing students to talk about the world into which this book was released, it can help them get their bearings about the way the book will proceed.

- Why do you think the book is known more frequently by the former title, rather than *The Children's Crusade*?
- What historical events were happening in 1969 when this book was released?
- How do you think these events affected the way people read the book?
- Do you think there are any events happening today that you will be able to think about differently while you read this book?

### Dresden and bombing in World War II:

Share the articles from History.com on *The Bombing of Dresden*, *The Bombing of Tokyo*, and *Blitzkrieg*, and the BBC History article on the *Bombing of London*, and The Globe and Mail article *Bombing of Dresden still a matter of debate*, all available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca

(The Atlantic feature on the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, also linked through the website, can be shared with students who have screen access. Some graphic images appear within.)

- How many people were really killed at Dresden?
- Why do you think Vonnegut gets the numbers wrong?
- What are some similarities between the different bombing campaigns?
- What are some differences between the different bombing campaigns?
- Had you heard about these battles before?
- If so, where did you hear about them?
- If not, why do you think you hadn't heard about them?

### Conscription:

Share with your students the article on conscription from The Canadian Encyclopedia (available on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca).

- What do you think about the idea of conscription?
- How would World War II have been different without conscription?
- What is different about modern wars because they don't have conscription?

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## Chapters 2 – 4

### Discussion questions:

- Do you think Billy Pilgrim is really unstuck in time and a space traveller, or do you believe that he is dealing with mental trauma suffered during the war?
- Why doesn't Billy Pilgrim want to be rescued? Why do you think he wants to be left behind?
- Why do you think Billy doesn't protest the war in Vietnam?
- Do you think Billy is really proud of his son in the Green Berets?
- Billy keeps noticing feet that are ivory and blue. What do you think this means?
- Why do you think the Tralfamadorians say there is no such thing as "why?"
- Do you think it's significant that Billy is being abducted by Tralfamadorians at the same time as he is on the train ride and arriving at the prisoner of war camp? Why or why not?

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## Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 2: "And so on. Billy first became unstuck in time... by a vacuum-cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey – and said so."

Chapter 2: "Billy Pilgrim had stopped in the forest... He dimly sensed that someone was rescuing him. Billy resented that."

Chapter 3: "Billy turned his attention to his desk... A German was kicking his feet, telling him to wake up, that it was time to move on."

Chapter 3: "Billy was not moved to protest the bombing of North Vietnam... Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future."

Chapter 3: "The Germans sorted out the prisoners according to rank... I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare."

Chapter 4: "Billy looked at the clock on the gas stove... all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed."

Chapter 4: "Where am I?" said Billy Pilgrim... Only on Earth is there any talk of free will."

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## Exercises

### Ongoing exercise: Stuck in time? In outer space?

Ask students to write at least a half-page explanation of why, or why not, they think Billy Pilgrim is really unstuck in time and a space traveller.

- If you believe that the book is science fiction, what do you think the time travel and Tralfamadorians are there to teach us and Billy?
- If you believe that Billy is not really unstuck in time, why do you think he imagines this?

### Prisoners of war in Canada:

Share with your students the resource **Reading and Remembrance — Homeland Stories: Enemies Within** (available at [LiberalStudiesGuides.ca](http://LiberalStudiesGuides.ca)). This five-page resource tells the story of World War II prisoner of war camps in Canada, 12 of which were in Ontario. Review the conditions as described in the Canadian camps. (No questions are prepared about escape attempts, but students may be amused by the story of the POWs who returned to their camp in Alberta after coming across a grizzly.)

- What do you think of the fact that refugees and prisoners of war were treated equally by the British?
- Why do you think the British had a hard time distinguishing between POWs and refugees? Do you think the problem was easier for Canadians to solve?
- Why do you think the Canadian government did not want to allow those who were obviously refugees rather than prisoners to join Canada's population?
- Compare the conditions of the Canadian POW camps to those described by Kurt Vonnegut in the book. Why do you think they were so different? What are the similarities, if any?

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## Chapters 5 – 7

### Discussion questions:

- Do you think Billy Pilgrim is really unstuck in time and a space traveller, or do you believe that he is dealing with mental trauma suffered during the war?
- What do you think it says about the war that the British who have been in a POW camp for nearly the whole war are in better shape than nearly everyone else?
- Mr. Rosewater says that the good thing about war is that “Absolutely everybody gets a little something.” Do you think his comment can be justified? Do you think his attitude about war must be different than ours is today?
- What do you think was Vonnegut’s motivation for putting the headstone into the book in chapter five?
- Do you think that if you had been the Dresdeners waiting to guard the Americans, you would have felt relieved?
- What does the state of all these soldiers say about the war? How do the Dresdeners and the Americans compare to the British POWs?

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## Passages for Socratic Discussion

Chapter 5: “The flaw in the Christ stories, said the visitor from outer space... *He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!*”

Chapter 5: “But the subject of war never came up until Billy brought it up... He knew from past experience what this meant: He was being stupid.”

Chapter 5: “When the beautiful people were past, Valencia questioned her funny-looking husband... he had traveled back to 1944, to the prison hospital again.”

Chapter 6: “Listen: Billy Pilgrim says he went to Dresden ... as though he had been exercising hard.”

Chapter 6: “Billy Pilgrim says now that this really is the way he *is* going to die, too... There isn’t anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there.”

Chapter 6: “Eight Dresdeners crossed the steel spaghetti of the railroad yard... Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera.”

Chapter 7: “When the three fools found the communal kitchen... ‘All the real soldiers are dead,’ she said. It was true. So it goes.”



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## Exercises

### Ongoing exercise: Stuck in time? In outer space?

Ask students to write at least a half-page explanation of why, or why not, their opinion of whether or not Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time and travelling to outer space has changed (or hasn't).

- If you believe the same thing you did after reading chapters 2 – 4, what new information do you feel supports your theory?
- If you have changed your mind, what new information led you to do so?

### The costs to soldiers of war:

Share with your students The Globe and Mail investigation on soldier and veteran suicide related to the war in Afghanistan (available on [LiberalStudiesGuides.ca](http://LiberalStudiesGuides.ca)).

- Do you think that it makes sense to count the mental illness of soldiers after war as a war injury?
- Do you think it makes sense to add suicides to the death toll of a war?

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## Chapters 8 – 10

### Discussion questions:

- Do you think Billy Pilgrim is really unstuck in time and a space traveller, or do you believe that he is dealing with mental trauma suffered during the war?
- Why do you think Vonnegut continually uses the phrase, “So it goes.” through the book?
- What do you think about the fact that the Innkeeper tells the Americans to sleep well so soon after the bombing of Dresden?
- What do you think of the different perspectives that Vonnegut introduces about the bombing of Dresden through Professor Rumfoord? Why do you think he includes them?
- What do you think of Billy’s quest to make Professor Rumfoord listen to him?

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## Passages for Socratic Discussion

**Chapter 8:** “And then it developed that Campbell was not going to go unanswered after all... The air-raid sirens of Dresden howled mournfully.”

**Chapter 8:** “Billy helped Trout deliver his papers, driving him... ‘He *writes* like a fourteen-year-old,’ said Kilgore Trout.”

**Chapter 8:** “Unexpectedly, Billy Pilgrim found himself upset by the song... Here was proof he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was.”

**Chapter 10:** “If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed.”

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## Exercises

### Ongoing exercise: Stuck in time? In outer space?

Ask students to write at least a half-page explanation of why, or why not, their opinion of whether or not Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time and travelling to outer space has changed (or hasn't).

- If you believe the same thing you did after reading in earlier chapters, what new information do you feel supports your theory?
- If you have changed your mind, what new information led you to do so?

### Billy's conversations with Professor Rumfoord:

In chapter 9, Billy Pilgrim has a series of conversations with Professor Rumfoord, and is on a quest to make him listen. Here are some suggested passages for Socratic discussion:

“Professor Rumfoord said frightful things about Billy within Billy's hearing... It was now that Billy spoke intelligently. ‘I was there,’ he said.”

“There in the hospital, Billy was having an adventure very common... ‘I just want you to know: I was there.’”

“‘It had to be done,’ Rumfoord told Billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden... ‘Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore.’”

- What do you think Billy Pilgrim, Professor Rumfoord, and Kurt Vonnegut each think of the bombing of Dresden?
- What do you think Vonnegut is trying to illustrate with these conversations?

### A soldier's experience

Share with your students the resource [Major Douglas Thorlakson – A Soldier's Story](#) (available on [LiberalStudiesGuides.ca](#)). This is the story of an IED attack on a Canadian veteran as he recollects it.

- What are some similarities and differences you see between the attack Major Thorlakson experienced and Billy Pilgrim's experience during the bombing of Dresden?
- How do you think soldiers deal with this kind of experience?

This exercise can be usefully paired with resources on trauma outlined below.

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## Cumulative Assignments/Essay Questions

### The challenge of trauma:

Choose and share some of the resources on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on post-traumatic stress disorder with your students.

- Do you think that Billy Pilgrim's story could be a stylized telling of a struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder? What are the literary devices that Vonnegut uses to deal with different symptoms?
- Do you think Vonnegut himself dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder? Why or why not?

### Readjustment to civilian life:

Choose and share some of the resources on LiberalStudiesGuides.ca on adjustment to civilian life for soldiers after war.

- Do you think Billy Pilgrim adjusted to civilian life?
- What do you think are some things that stood in Billy's way as he tried to come home?
- How closely do you think Billy Pilgrim's experience matched Kurt Vonnegut's?



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## *A Study Guide*

Liberal Studies Guides help teachers engage their students when discussing literature through study guides and cross-curricular resources made freely available for classroom use. We also offer free workshops on using the Socratic method with secondary students of all levels.

Our study guides break down novels into lessons with ideas for discussion, exercises, and assignments. We tie our guides together with additional resources on our website, LiberalStudiesGuides.ca, including ready-to-use worksheets, to encourage the discussion of current events, history, music, philosophy, and economics to help tie the lessons to the real world.

Although our guides are aimed at English classrooms, the supplementary resources may be useful for history, music, drama, communications studies, economics, philosophy, and social studies.

Liberal Studies Guides is a project of the Institute for Liberal Studies, a non-partisan educational charity. We believe that encouraging discussion in the classroom helps to better equip students to discuss the problems facing Canadian society.



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