

## Slaughterhouse Five

*K. Vonnegut*

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This is one of those modern classic books you have heard of and feel more or less obliged to dip into, if only in order to find out what it is all about. Vonnegut has an ambiguous reputation. Is he really good or not? Or maybe more to the point is he a serious author or not, whatever is meant by that. From a literary point of view he is hardly established, refined readers may turn their noses down, after all he is a popular author, and this particular book made his breakthrough. Popularity with the reading masses is considered somewhat of a suspicious thing. If people at large are able to appreciate, it cannot be too subtle and deep. On the other hand a large popular appeal bespeaks a certain robustness, indicating a wider spectrum of qualities, or maybe even qualities that penetrate the dullest minds.

Vonnegut took part in the last year of the Second World War involving a capture by the Germans and being taken to Dresden where he miraculously survived the bombing of that town by being held in a subterranean slaughterhouse. The bombing was so intense that the standard shelters were not protective enough, and a giant fire storm ravaged the city, sucking pedestrians into burning buildings, or simply suffocating them due to a lack of oxygen. The experience was deeply traumatic and no doubt scarred him for life. The book is about writing a book to come to terms with the trauma. As such he eschews the straightforward memoir but turns the story into a form of magic realism in the manner of Latin American writers such as Garcia Marquez. As a protagonist he chooses a rather pitiful character who is bullied by his fellow soldiers, but, as the meek not seldom do, survives his tormentors. The magic realism consists in the idea that time is like space, existing simultaneously. A life is a collection of episodes, somehow ordered, yet accessible in any order. Such an attitude invariably carries with it a certain detachment, as in the end nothing really matters. So the book is more or less a random presentation of episodes from the life of the protagonist. This kind of presentation is of course the privilege of any author who from his or her detached standpoint can get an overview of a narrative, not being imprisoned in it. But the point is that this view is not only reserved for the author, in this case, but seemingly also shared by the protagonist himself. In a way this is how we imagine existence after death, because non-existence is beyond the reach of the imagination, in fact ironically the richer and more powerful the imagination, the harder it is to imagine the very opposite. In this somewhat sentimental view there is cessation but no obliteration. Your life is not accomplished until your death, then it becomes complete, and you will be able to add nothing to it, still be able to experience it, now at any moment, because the moments will no longer be chained in a particular order and thereby they will lose their significance, because they will not lead to anything, they will just be there. It is just there, as Popper complained about Einstein's space time, timeless everything existing simultaneously, no order of time, no free will, because if there is no free will, time travel is no longer logically impossible. What is worse? Nothing or forever being trapped in

re-experiencing your life, never being able to change it, never being able to see beyond it, never being able to improve it, to learn from it, to develop it? After all revisiting your life is a way of living it and thus should be added to it, there being no distinction between your life and your meta-life, and thus you cannot really relive it, just live it over and over again, without necessarily being aware of that. On the other hand this leads to the assumption that death may never have appeared, as life as an evolving process never existed. It was just an illusion, it was given to you, pre-ordained so to speak, and your experience will just be simultaneous episodes mutually independent as episodes, although each episode can contain traces of others. But the memory of an episode is not the same as the episode itself. In fact this is what Proust to a large case is all about. Can the memory of an episode be equal to the episode itself? Are we all dead? Did our lives never take place in the way we imagined them to have done? Every moment is just a random revisiting, the next moment will be independent of the present, and our sense of moving in time is just an illusion created by the phantom memory of past episodes. Mathematics has no time, it just exists, although our experience and understanding of it follows an ordered path that to a large extent is accidental and extraneous to the mathematics itself. True understanding is only achieved when this particular path is eliminated. It is like a piece of territory, say a city. When you first visit it, the locations follow a sequence corresponding to your itinerary. But after a prolonged residence, the precise ordering of the itineraries fades and what is left is a sense of spatial relations between different locations, and not a spurious temporal one. It is only after extended exploration you understand a territory and are free to move around it at will. Ironically by increased intimacy there is greater detachment as temporal accidental orderings are ignored.

After this philosophical digression the actual plot of the novel becomes uninteresting. The author has taken pains to create a character, whose ordinariness, one is almost tempted to write sub-ordinariness, is designed to make him an uninteresting one for whom you do not really care, or at least not want to care. After the war our protagonist marries a fat ugly girl who has a wealthy father running a suburban business of optometrists in which our hero is set up comfortably. Parallel with that he has a separate life as he is abducted by aliens and taken to a distant planet where he is exhibited as an interesting zoo-animal, and where he eventually is even joined by another earthling, a young nubile creature to boot, with whom he is expected to mate, and thus given a very satisfactory sex-life. Those adventures, believed to be bogus by his family, give to the tale an added detachment. Why does the author introduce such an absurd element? Are we to take it literally or ironically? It does make a nod to the science fiction culture of the time, and Vonnegut supposedly has in his writing a certain weakness for the science fictional. What does it mean? Is science fiction merely escapism, or is it more serious? Is it in fact, as most of its aficionados maintain, the ultimate fiction, in terms of involving the imagination? And even more seriously, is there a thin line between the wishful imagination and the creative imagination that meet there with the hope that they will eventually merge?

One of the episodes in the life of our hero is of course Dresden, what gives the book its entire *raison d'être*, without it it would be nothing really. Does the fictional account convey something that a regular memoir would not? Fiction gives a freedom, akin to the temporal freedom understanding provides. Freed from the focus on the accidental of

actual experience it can convey the undercurrent against which it should be set. A memoir focuses on episodes, but not all of experience is in the form of episodes, in fact episodic memory is just one part of memory at large, many form of memories cannot be pinpointed in time, they belong to the background. Skills for one thing such as bicycling or speaking a language, knowing rather than remembering what to do. To formulate general impressions becomes easier and more effective in fictional form, which incidentally highlights what fiction is all about. Fiction is not about making up things which are not, it is about revealing things which really are by removing things which accidentally are. It is of course much easier to ransack your memory than to write real fiction, meaning fiction which is true in a deeper sense. In order to do so you need to forget and what you write is done on your own, unguided by precise memory, and hence more difficult to falsify at every step. Each attempt can only be checked as a whole, and that necessitates countless revisions and obliteration, as you are groping in the dark. On the other hand when you try to recall events of the past you accumulate details, and each counts by adding to the picture, revisions are basically in the nature of adding, which is also, given our hoarding instincts, more pleasant than subtracting.

What sense does Vonnegut's fictional account of his war experiences make? Does war make sense at all? Perhaps not, and if it does not make sense that may be a major step in making sense of a war which does not make sense. There is in war gratuitous cruelty. And it is not always the brave and forceful who survive, the meek and inept may be as likely, just as our protagonist, to squeeze through. The drama consists in being trapped during the bombing and that turning out to being the rescue and blessing. But for those involved they were not aware of the drama. They only experienced entrapment and when it is all over the unexpected freedom, but a freedom to roam a newly created Moon landscape of ruins and debris, to which rotting human bodies make up a pungent part. There is an aftermath, and this consists in for the survivors to extricate human remains and give them a decent disposal. This, however, turns out not to be feasible, instead remains are torched, thus a large part of the victims are condemned to anonymous obliteration, they will belong to the permanently missing, presumed dead.

A book succeeds not only by virtue of its contents but by the nature if its comments, in other ways by its style. The style of Vonnegut combines sarcasm with a certain modesty and decency, ways many people would like to characterize themselves as. Moral, without being moralistic. Kind without being sentimental. And above all with a knack of seeing through things, not to take anything for granted, to be critical and skeptical, without being intellectually anarchistic. And it definitely does not hurt to be funny as well.

According to Vonnegut, more people died in Dresden than in Hiroshima and Nagasaki together. Those figures supposedly stem from David Irving's inflated figures in his book on the destruction of Dresden, and are now discounted. Estimates of the death toll varies greatly. Official figures put it around 25'000, others, maybe for propaganda reasons, cite figures up to ten times as high. Vonnegut claimed that no one profited from the meaningless destruction, except himself, who became rich and famous by his book.