

Firestorm:
The Life of Kurt Vonnegut
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It is with much trepidation that I present this essay tonight. After all, who in this august body does not know Kurt Vonnegut, Indiana's most famous author of the twentieth century? For In the words of Francis H Isley, Club Secretary, 1970:

Of course, we also have those who say, "I liked your paper, but..." And then beware! The Club, as a body, has been everywhere, seen everything and, or so it seems, read every book ever published: and woe to the poor member who comes unprepared and insufficient fortified to his appointed evening..."

I considered fortifying myself this evening with my favorite bourbon, but, alas, gave up the idea for want of a designated driver!

"And So It Goes."

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born on November 11, 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was the son of Kurt Vonnegut, Sr. (1884-1957), an Indianapolis architect, and Edith Lieber (1888-1944). Both parents were from celebrated Indianapolis families. Kurt, Sr., was the son of Bernard Vonnegut (1855-1908), well-known Indianapolis architect who designed the Indianapolis Athenaeum, Buildings for the William H. Block Company, Fletcher Trust, Bell Telephone Company, L. S. Ayres, the John Heron Art Institute, and Shortridge High School. Kurt's mother, Edith Lieber, was the daughter of millionaire Indianapolis brewer, Albert Lieber.

Kurt was the youngest of three children. The eldest was his brother Bernard (1914 – 1957) who eventually enjoyed a long career at General Electric in Schenectady, New York. Bernard was the inventor of seeding clouds with silver iodide crystals to make rain. The middle child was his sister Alice (1917 – 1958).

Kurt's biographer, Charles Shields described Kurt's parents as distant and not involved in his parenting. Fortunately, the family cook and housekeeper, Ida Young, became a surrogate parent and was close to Kurt.

Both Bernard and Alice attended Park School, which later merged with Tudor Hall School for Girls, in Indianapolis. The Indianapolis Literary Club now meets at Park Tudor School, albeit not at either of the original locations, but in the former Lilly Orchard on College Avenue.

Kurt attended Orchard School from 1928-1931. However, when family fortunes took a downturn with the Great Depression, he was enrolled in Indianapolis Public School Number 43, now known as the James Whitcomb Riley School, just blocks from the family home. In 1936 Kurt entered Shortridge High School, now known for its famous attendees that include Vonnegut, Senator Richard Lugar, U.S. Representative Andrew Jacobs, Jr., Booth Tarkington, Dan Wakefield, and others.

During most of Kurt's childhood, he and his family lived at their Arts and Crafts style home at 4401 North Illinois Street. It still stands on a half an acre and has three stories with six bedrooms.

In addition to being an architect, Kurt's father had some engineering skill and was responsible for turning the Indiana Bell Telephone Building in downtown Indianapolis around on its foundation so that administrative offices could be added. According to Shields, Kurt's mother Edith was so unhappy with the downturn in the family's fortune that she unmercifully berated her husband for not making more money. In response, Kurt Sr., retreated to his artist's studio on the third floor of their home. Edith was eventually prescribed a barbiturate by her physician, but it appeared that this exacerbated her unstable behavior. As for Kurt, the family unhappiness probably contributed to his lifelong use of alcohol and tobacco. Pall Mall cigarettes became his signature style as he was not often without his cigarettes.

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It was at Shortridge that Vonnegut began his writing career. He began as a co-editor of the Tuesday edition of the *Echo*, the school's newspaper.

After graduation from Shortridge Kurt attended Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Rather than following his own interests, he was persuaded by his father Kurt Sr. to major in biochemistry, a "useful discipline." While at Cornell, Kurt continued his interest in writing and wrote for the *Cornell Daily Sun*, first as a staff writer and eventually as its editor. Kurt also became a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corps. However, because of poor grades, he was placed on academic probation and was forced to withdraw in January 1943. With the loss of his student deferment, he enlisted in the Army rather than wait upon being drafted.

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After enlisting in the Army, Vonnegut took his basic training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Subsequently, he was sent to the Carnegie Institute of Technology and the University of Tennessee for training in mechanical engineering. Eventually he was sent to Camp Atterbury in Indiana for training as an Army scout. Upon returning home for Mother's Day in 1944, he discovered that his mother had suicided by overdosing on sleeping pills.

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In the latter part of 1944 Kurt was sent to Europe as a member of the 106th Infantry Division. The 106th participated in the Battle of the Bulge and were overrun by German armor. Over 500 of the 106th were killed and another 6000 were captured, including Vonnegut.

In a letter to his family written from the La Havre POW Repatriation Camp in France before his return to the United States on May 29, 1945, Vonnegut described his experience as a German POW. After their capture in December 1944 they were

marched 60 miles without food or water and then loaded up sixty each in unheated, unventilated boxcars and taken to a POW camp near Berlin. On the way their train was strafed by the Royal Air Force causing the loss of 150 men. In early January 1945 about 150 men including Vonnegut were taken to a work camp In Dresden.

Vonnegut wrote dispassionately:

“I was their leader by virtue of the little German I spoke. It was our misfortune to have sadistic and fanatical guards. We were refused medical attention and clothing. We were given long hours at extremely hard labor Our food ration was two-hundred-and-fifty grams of black bread and one pint of unseasoned potato soup each day...One boy starved to death and the SS Troops shot two for stealing food.

On about February 14th the Americans came over, followed by the R.A.F. Their combined labors killed 250,000 people in twenty-four hours and destroyed all of Dresden...

After that we were put to work carrying corpses from Air-Raid shelters; women, children, old men, dead from concussion, fire or suffocation. Civilians cursed us and threw rocks at us as we carried bodies to huge funeral pyres...”

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Vonnegut survived the firebombing of Dresden because he and a number of other American POWs were housed in an underground meat locker. He struggled over the next 24 years to describe his WWII experiences and the firebombing of Dresden. His efforts finally resulted in the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his most successful novel, in 1969. In his attempts to recall his wartime experiences he traveled back to Dresden with his war buddy, Bernard O’Hare. Neither Kurt, nor Bernard, nor any of his other POW friends could remember clearly the events of the firebombing. The book is WWII’s most famous anti-war book. It makes interesting reading and is composed of a number of “post-traumatic” flashbacks in the life of its main character, Billy Pilgrim. The bombing of Dresden is not described until the final pages of the book.

Slaughterhouse Five was widely banned after its publication because of its “anti-American,” anti-war stance and crude language. It is the 29th most banned book on the American Library Association’s list of most banned books in the twentieth century. In a First Amendment case involving *Slaughterhouse Five* and 10 other books (*Board of Education v. Pico*) the United States Supreme Court decided in a split decision to let the Second Circuit Court of Appeals decision stand. The Second Circuit had reversed and remanded for trial the original court’s ruling for summary judgment in favor of the student petitioners. The other Vonnegut book that was widely banned was *Cat’s Cradle*.

After his return to the United States, Vonnegut looked up Jane Marie Cox, a high school classmate, and married her in September 1945. In December 1945 the couple moved to Chicago, where both enrolled at the University of Chicago, she on a fellowship

and he in a master's program in anthropology. While at university Kurt worked for the Chicago City New Bureau as a reporter. Unfortunately, his master's thesis was unanimously rejected in 1946.

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Subsequently the Vonneguts moved to Schenectady, New York where Kurt worked as a public relations writer for the General Electric Company where his brother also worked.

Kurt and Jane had three children. First born was Mark in 1947. Although Mark eventually went to medical school and became a pediatrician, this was after he suffered a “schizophrenic” episode (probably misdiagnosed bipolar disorder) while living at a commune in British Columbia. His illness is memorialized in his book, *The Eden Express*. Second born was Edith or “Edie” in 1949. Later in life she became a painter. Her first marriage was to Geraldo Rivera, best known for being an American talk-show host. In 1954 Kurt and Jane's third child, Nanette, was born. Nanette is a well-known artist and writer.

While in New York, Kurt began to write short stories to supplement the family income. He also worked briefly as a picture caption writer for *Sports Illustrated*. Kurt hated this job so much that on the day he quit he was supposed to write a caption for a racehorse jumping over a racetrack fence, he wrote: “The horse jumped over the fucking fence.” After writing that famous line, he abruptly left work, never to return.

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In the mid 1950s the Vonneguts left New York and moved to a large house in West Barnstable, Massachusetts. They were to live there while they raised their three children. Unknown to them, their family was to get even larger and fill the house to capacity. The Vonnegut's marriage was traditional at the time, with the exception that Kurt worked from home. He would secrete himself in his study, write for most of the day, and leave Jane to care for the children.

1958 was a tragic year for the Vonneguts. Kurt's sister Alice had married Jim Adams. At the time the Adams were living in New Jersey and Jim was commuting by train to New York City for his job in sales and advertising. Unfortunately, the engineer of the train that Jim was riding on his morning commute had a heart attack and died. The train's fireman was unable to regain control of the diesel engine and the train plunged into Newark Bay as it was passing over the raised Newark-Bayonne Bridge. Jim died in the wreck along with 46 other fellow passengers. Barely 24 hours later Kurt's sister Alice succumbed to breast cancer which she had been suffering for about two years. Despite their dire financial circumstances, Kurt and Jane decided to care for the Adams' four boys, three of whom they raised to adulthood.

In 1987 Jane published her delightful account of raising this large family of children. In *Angels Without Wings: A Courageous Family's Triumph Over Tragedy* Jane

chronicles her story beginning with the horrible accident and Alice's death. Although she retrained her own name in the book, the publisher changed the name of each of the seven children, probably for privacy reasons. In her book Jane shows immense psychological mindedness, much warmth, and incredible facility and imaginativeness in her ability to raise children. She documents her own mini-psychotic episode and her trouble recalling all of her memories about her children. Because of her memory difficulties, she interviewed each of her children prior to publishing her book. It is remarkable how malleable memory is and that each observer of an event may remember it quite differently. An interesting side-note is that Kurt refused to allow his name to be used in the book, nor would he write a foreword. It is a perfectly delightful book and is well worth reading.

The stress and strain of raising six children on a struggling author's salary probably contributed to the unraveling of the Vonnegut's once happy marriage. The couple separated in 1971 and divorced in 1979. Tragically, Jane died of ovarian cancer in December, 1986 just before *Angels Without Wings* was published.

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In 1965 Kurt was asked to take part in the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. While teaching there he had a brief affair with Loree Rackstraw (born Lora Lee Pugh), an older graduate student in the English Department. Thus, began a four-decades long friendship which is documented in Loree's book, *Love As Always, Kurt Vonnegut As I Knew Him*. This relationship, if Jane knew about it, doubtless did not endear her to Kurt.

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With the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five* in 1969 Kurt's writing career took off like a rocket. Financial success was assured for the rest of Vonnegut's life. Ironically it did nothing for his marriage to Jane. In 1971 after separating from Jane, Kurt moved to New York City. He met Jill Krementz, 18 years his junior and a well-known professional photographer of famous authors. They eventually married in 1979 and adopted a daughter, Lilly at three days old. Their marriage was tumultuous with several separations and filings for divorce.

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Vonnegut and academia at times did not mix well. Although Kurt was wildly popular at writers' workshops, he had trouble picking a major or thesis topic and finishing a degree in higher education. After three failed attempts he did finally receive his master's degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago by submitting one of his novels, *The Cat's Cradle*. Faculty there still refer to the process and final submission of his thesis as "the Vonnegut affair." It's highly likely that Vonnegut received his degree based more on his fame than expertise in anthropology and ability to do fieldwork. He was a writer at heart.

Vonnegut struggled with depression during adulthood. While his marriage to Jane was unraveling, he couldn't sleep and had trouble writing. He was placed on Ritalin, which helped some. In the mid-1970s while in his early 50s his unhappiness caused him to consider suicide. In March 1984 he attempted suicide with a combination of alcohol, sleeping pills, and antidepressants. This attempt was probably precipitated by his marital difficulties with Jill. He was hospitalized 18 days, and when released, moved into a small home in Greenwich Village. At that time his son Mark wondered if his father had bipolar disorder.

Interestingly, while Kurt was attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1965, research psychiatrist Nancy Andreasen, M.D., Ph.D., did a study in which she interviewed some of the writers. She found that poets tended to have more psychotic schizophrenic episodes compared to the general population and fiction writers tended to have more depression or bipolar disorder. Vonnegut was part of this study.

In all Vonnegut published 14 novels, five plays, and numerous short stories. As a writer he was beloved by many, especially for his antiwar sentiment. He was witty and full of wisdom. His writings were full of incredible creativity, black humor, and biting satire. Vonnegut never wrote an autobiography, but if one reads his fiction closely, it is highly autobiographical in nature. Although he won many awards and accolades, in my opinion, one of the best honors an author can receive, is the one of censorship; authors who have their books censored or banned are included with the likes of Mark Twain, Maya Angelou, John Steinbeck, Jack London, James Joyce, and George Orwell.

At the end of Kurt's marriage to Jill they were living together in a New York City Brownstone. On March 14, 2007 Kurt took his small dog Flour on a walk. As they reached the bottom steps of the Brownstone, Kurt tripped over Flour's leash, fell headfirst, and sustained a traumatic head injury. He had bled into the frontal part of his skull and died four weeks later on April 11, 2007 at age 84.

"And So It Goes."

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Selected Quotes

A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved. (*Sirens of Titan*).

Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place.

For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break. (*A Man Without a Country*).

I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different. (*A Man Without a Country*).

I want to stand as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center. (*Player Piano*).

If I had gone to Indiana University or Purdue or Wabash or DePauw, I might now be a Congressman or Senator. (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p.20).

If you want to really hurt you parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possible can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something. (*A Man Without a Country*).

Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow (*A Man Without a Country*).

Psychoanalysts are missing important clues about patients' childhoods if they do not ask about dogs the patients knew. As I have said elsewhere, dogs still seem as respectable and interesting as people to me. Any day. (*Palm Sunday*, p. 146).

There is the word "motherfucker" one time in my *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as in, "Get out of the road, you dumb motherfucker." Ever since that word was published, way back in 1969, children have been attempting to have intercourse with their mothers. When it will stop no one knows.) (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p.76).

To all my friends and relatives in Alcoholics Anonymous," I began, "I say that they were right to become intoxicated. Life without moments of intoxication is not worth 'a pitcher of spit,' as the felicitous saying goes. They simply chose what was for them a deadly poison on which to get drunk. (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p.45).

You cannot be a good writer of serious fiction if you are not depressed. (*Fates Worse Than Death*, p.29).