Initially a science fiction writer, Kurt Vonnegut challenged the limits of fiction, often incorporating black humor, illustrations, and metafictive techniques. Throughout his 14 novels, a play, and numerous short stories and essays, Vonnegut lamented (often bitingly) the state of the planet and its inhabitants, while remaining optimistic regarding the potential for humanity to improve its lot, in a fashion reminiscent of Mark Twain.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born in 1922, to Kurt, Sr. and Edith in Indianapolis, Indiana. His father was an architect and his mother came from a brewing fortune that was later lost in the Great Depression. Vonnegut studied chemistry at Cornell before leaving to enlist in the U.S. Army. On Mother's Day, 1944, his mother committed suicide and her death haunted him, especially as he feared at times that he too might commit suicide. The next year, Vonnegut was captured near Dresden by Nazis and imprisoned in a slaughterhouse, which ironically protected him from the Allied firebombing that destroyed the city. Vonnegut later noted, “Dresden had no tactical value; it was a city of civilians. Yet the Allies bombed it until it burned and melted. And then they lied about it. All that was startling to us” (“Playboy,” 95).

Vonnegut's disillusionment led to *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), a book that took over 20 years to write. Combining science fiction, black humor, and metafiction, the novel not only wrestles with the events of Dresden, but how one even tells such a story.

Vonnegut tackled environmental issues in several novels with his trademark scathing satire, including *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), where Vonnegut's alter ego Kilgore Trout ironically rants, “I used to be a conservationist. I used to weep and wail about people shooting bald eagles with automatic shotguns from helicopters and all that, but I gave it up” (86). Trout's defeatism displays Vonnegut's fear that humanity has surrendered, and is in need of stiff tonics in order to reverse this trend. His most notable work of environmental literature was *Galápagos* (1984), in which a small group of people become shipwrecked. The novel explores the negative aspects of evolution — particularly the “big brain” — while addressing how Darwin's ideas affect society's understanding of itself. In 1973 Vonnegut told an interviewer, “I'm not very grateful for Darwin, although I suspect he was right. His ideas make people crueler” (“Playboy” 76). A million years from 1986, when the novel is written, brains are smaller and society is better off.

Vonnegut's style avoids lyricism in favor of direct, concise sentences, fueled by an inveterate cynicism toward his times. However, he remains confident in humanity's ability to right itself. “God damn it, you've got to be kind” (129), Eliot Rosewater advises newly baptized babies in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and for Vonnegut, this call for kindness and cooperation can heal an ailing society (and planet) ravaged by greedy, power-hungry people. Vonnegut's anti-authoritarianism and humanism made him a counterculture hero, and he remains the most vocal moralist in contemporary American literature.

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