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KURT VONNEGUT: 1922-2007

His popular novels blended social criticism, dark humor

By Elaine Woo
Times Staff Writer

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Advertisement

Kurt Vonnegut, an American cultural hero celebrated for his wry, loonily imaginative commentary on war, apocalypse, technology, materialism and other afflictions in "Slaughterhouse-Five" and other novels, has died. He was 84.

One of the last of a generation of great American novelists of World War II, Vonnegut died Wednesday night in New York City.

Vonnegut suffered brain injuries in a fall several weeks ago, said his wife, photographer Jill Krementz. He had homes in Manhattan and Sagaponack, N.Y.

"There was never a kinder and, at the same time, wittier writer to be with personally," author Tom Wolfe, a friend and admirer of Vonnegut's, told The Times. "He was just a gem in that respect. And as a writer, I guess he's the closest thing we had to a Voltaire. He could be extremely funny, but there was a vein of iron always underneath it, which made him quite remarkable.

"He was never funny just to be funny," Wolfe added.

An obscure science fiction writer for two decades before earning mainstream acclaim in 1969 with "Slaughterhouse-Five," Vonnegut was an American original, often compared to Mark Twain for a vision that combined social criticism, wildly black humor and a call to basic human decency. He was, novelist Jay MacInerny once said, "a satirist with a heart, a moralist with a whoopee cushion."

Although he was disdained by some critics who thought his work was too popular and accessible, his fiction inspired volumes of scholarly comment as well as websites maintained by young fans who have helped keep all 14 of his novels in print over a 50-year career. Five of his novels have made the leap into films.

He is "together with John Hawkes and Gunter Grass … the most stubbornly imaginative" of writers, novelist John Irving once wrote of Vonnegut. "He is not anybody else, or even a version of anybody else, and he is a writer with a cause."

His novels, which include "The Sirens of Titan," "Cat's Cradle," "Mother Night" and "Breakfast of Champions," introduced a revolving cast of odd characters, from the downtrodden visionary Billy Pilgrim to Kilgore Trout, the unsuccessful writer who was Vonnegut's alter ego.

Vonnegut was also an essayist, playwright and short-story writer, whose shorter pieces were collected in such volumes as "Welcome to the Monkey House" (1968), "Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons" (1974) and "Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s" (1991).

"Slaughterhouse-Five" was a book he tried but failed to write for 25 years. An agile mix of fantasy and Vonnegut's World War II experiences, it features time traveler Pilgrim who, like Vonnegut, survived the Allied firebombing of Dresden.

Unorthodox in structure and patently antiwar, the novel resonated with a rebellious younger generation. Vonnegut became an icon of the countercultural 1970s and his book became a milestone of postmodern American literature, unequaled in force or artistry by any of his later novels.

"He writes about the most excruciatingly painful things," Michael Crichton observed in a review of "Slaughterhouse-Five" for the New Republic. "His novels have attacked our deepest fears of automation and the bomb, our deepest political guilts, our fiercest hatreds and loves. Nobody else writes books on these subjects; they are inaccessible to normal novelistic approaches."

He made no pretense of his intentions: He was a public writer — one who directly addressed some of the most vexing issues of his day.

"My motives are political," he once told Playboy magazine. "I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society…. Mainly, I think they should be — and biologically have to be — agents of change."

On another occasion he explained that his goal in writing novels was to "catch people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents" and "poison their minds with humanity. Encourage them to make a better world."

A lonely child

A fourth-generation German American, Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis on Nov. 11, 1922.

Although he had an older brother, Bernard, and a sister, Alice, Vonnegut was often lonely as a child. His mainstay growing up was a black woman named Ida Young, the family cook. He suggested that the "intolerable sentimentality" that some critics saw in his writing was owed to Young, who spent long hours reading to him from an anthology of poems about undying love, faithful dogs and humble, happy homes.

The son and grandson of architects, he grew up in prosperity until the Depression struck and his father, Kurt Sr., went 10 years without a commission. The family finances were so abysmal that his mother, Edith, who had been born to affluence, had to sell the family china. Vonnegut would later say his parents left a legacy of pacifism and irreverence as well as "bone-deep sadness," and in much of his later fiction his characters would be afflicted by unemployment and the subsequent loss of status and purpose.

When the family money ran out, he left private school for the public Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, where his scrawny physique made him the butt of jokes. Nicknamed "Snarf" after classmates spied him sniffing his armpits absentmindedly, he described himself as "a real skinny, narrow-shouldered boy … a preposterous kind of flamingo," not unlike the oddball Billy Pilgrim in the novel that would make Vonnegut famous. He found a niche on the staff of the campus newspaper, the Echo, as a writer and editor.

When he went off to Cornell University in 1940, he followed his older brother into science as a chemistry major. Unlike his brother, however, Vonnegut was a poor student who gained attention for his practical jokes, such as showing up for final exams of large classes he was not enrolled in and shredding the exam in front of the astonished instructor.

He also became known for writing, which took up most of his time in college. He served as managing editor of the Cornell Daily Sun as well as author of a thrice-weekly humor column.

Many years later, when he was asked to identify his cultural influences, he would often name serious writers such as Twain, Jonathan Swift and James Joyce. "But the truth is that I am a barbarian, whose deepest cultural debts are to Laurel and Hardy … Buster Keaton, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Charlie Chaplin … and so on," he wrote in 1972. "They made me hilarious during the Great Depression and all the lesser depressions after that."

He was close to flunking out of Cornell in early 1943 when he joined the Army and was sent to Carnegie Institute of Technology and the University of Tennessee to study mechanical engineering. He was trained in artillery and as an advance infantry scout.

Just before Vonnegut shipped out to England, his mother committed suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills on Mother's Day, 1944. She had suffered bouts of depression after failing to make much money writing magazine fiction in the 1930s, an activity she took on to bolster the family income. According to her son's recollection, she also had become dependent on alcohol and "unlimited amounts of prescribed barbiturates." Her death was the first in a series of bizarre and brutal turns in Vonnegut's life that would color his later writing.

In late 1944, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and wound up in a prisoner work group in Dresden, a city so treasured for its baroque beauty that no one thought it would be targeted. If he remained there, Vonnegut thought, he would be safe until the war ended.

But on Feb. 13, 1945, Dresden was hit by successive waves of British and American bombers, which destroyed the city's extraordinary architecture and art treasures and killed at least 60,000 people and perhaps as many as 200,000 — more than in the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

Vonnegut and his group were spared because their prison was as good as a concrete-block underground bunker: "a cool meat-locker under a slaughterhouse," two floors below ground, which they shared with six guards and "ranks and ranks of dressed cadavers of cattle, pigs, horses and sheep."

When the bombing was over, he emerged to find that the Allies had "burnt the whole damn town down." He and the other prisoners were put to work as "corpse miners," recovering the dead who had suffocated in bomb shelters. Vonnegut dragged out the bodies and piled them on huge communal funeral pyres. The recovery effort eventually was halted and the Germans just torched the dead where they lay, turning the shelters into crematories.

"It was a fancy thing to see, a startling thing," Vonnegut would recall in a 1977 Paris Review interview.

Emotional event

Although he would sometimes downplay Dresden's importance, he acknowledged that the experience gave him "something to write about."

It also blackened his view of the world.

"The firebombing of Dresden was an emotional event without a trace of military importance…. " he said in an undated speech reprinted in "Fates Worse Than Death."

"I will say again what I have often said in print and in speeches, that not one Allied soldier was able to advance as much as an inch because of the firebombing of Dresden. Not one prisoner of the Nazis got out of prison a microsecond earlier. Only one person on earth clearly benefited, and I am that person," said Vonnegut, referring to his bestselling novel. "I got about five dollars for each corpse, not counting my fee tonight."

The horror and absurdity of the catastrophe would plague him for years as he tried, and finally rejected, the idea that one could write conventionally about something that so utterly defied logic.

Dresden capped a period swollen with trauma for Vonnegut, who struggled in later years with his own depressions and once nearly took his own life.

Vonnegut was released from the Army in 1945 and married his childhood sweetheart, Jane Cox. He enrolled at the University of Chicago, switched his major to anthropology, and got a job reporting for the Chicago City News Bureau. The rookie reporter was assigned murders, car crashes and weather stories. In 1947, he quit school after his master's thesis, "Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales," was rejected by his faculty committee. (In 1971, after he had become the illustrious author, the university finally accepted his novel "Cat's Cradle" as his thesis and awarded him his degree.) He also quit journalism for a higher-paying job in public relations at General Electric in Schenectady, N.Y., where his brother was an atmospheric physicist.

By day he wrote news releases that promoted GE's philosophy of progress as its "most important product," a notion he did not invent and that for Vonnegut quickly lost its charm. At night, he began to write short stories that showed the potential downsides of scientific progress, such as the perils of computers and extraplanetary radio. The notion that humankind was devising the means of its own unhappiness and destruction would emerge as a dominant theme in his later works.

Vonnegut's stories appeared in the leading magazines of the 1950s, including the Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Ladies Home Journal and Cosmopolitan, as well as in more specialized publications such as Fantasy and Science Fiction. By 1950, he found he could support himself and his growing family as a writer and left GE.

The environment of GE, in which he was "completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines," inspired his first novel. "Player Piano," published in 1952 and reissued in paperback a few years later under the title "Utopia 14," revolves around an engineer who rebels against the mechanization of society, which has made life easier but deprived people of a sense of purpose. The engineer seeks spiritual comfort as a follower of a minister trained in anthropology. According to Jerome Klinkowitz, a noted Vonnegut scholar, the novel shows readers "how progress as an end in itself is a defeating proposition."

The book was largely ignored by critics, so Vonnegut rededicated himself to the short-story market while working other jobs. He taught high school English on Cape Cod and sold Saabs.

Seven years passed before his next novel, "The Sirens of Titan" (1959), appeared. The plot concerns extraterrestrials who meddle in the course of human history to help a space traveler obtain a spare part for his spacecraft. Sold as science fiction even though it was a sophisticated satire of the genre, it was sold at bus stops and drugstores and quickly went out of print. Klinkowitz and John Somer, in their book "The Vonnegut Statement," noted that copies sold for $50 in the college underground until it was reissued by Dell in the 1960s.

"Mother Night," published in 1962, presented the character of Howard W. Campbell Jr., an American intelligence agent in Germany at the start of World War II who poses so successfully as a Nazi radio propagandist that he is kidnapped by Israeli operatives, tried for war crimes and commits suicide. Vonnegut summed up the lesson of this avowedly moralistic tale in this line: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

A transitional novel that has few science fiction elements, it caught the attention of major reviewers, who were impressed by its masterful tone. Critic Richard Schickel, writing in Harper's, called it "a wonderful splash of bright, primary colors, an artful, zestful cartoon that lets us see despair without forcing us to surrender to it."

With his next book Vonnegut began to earn wider literary notice. The protagonist of "Cat's Cradle," published in 1963, is a writer who travels to the Caribbean where he becomes a follower of Bokonon, a religious maverick who promises salvation through a freewheeling gospel of "fomas" or harmless untruths. The writer also witnesses the deadly power of Ice-9, a substance that kills everything it touches by freezing it.

The title of the novel refers to the string game in which the player loops the string to make supposedly recognizable images, such as a cat's cradle. Vonnegut exposes it as a hoax: "No damn cat. No damn cradle," one of the characters bitterly complains. It was Vonnegut's way of saying that many accepted wisdoms, including political or religious doctrines, in fact explain nothing at all.

Among several notable writers who praised the novel was Graham Greene, who said it was "one of the three best novels of the year by one of the most able living writers."

"Cat's Cradle" was followed by the harshly satirical "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls before Swine," published in 1965. This novel introduced the character of Eliot Rosewater, a millionaire philanthropist disgusted by his wealth and its power to warp ideals. He preaches love through a motto that sounds the theme of all of Vonnegut's writing: "Goddamn it, you've got to be kind."

The book also introduced Trout, the aging, under-appreciated science fiction writer. The Greene review notwithstanding, Vonnegut saw himself in the same literary rut as the fictional Trout and loudly complained about critics' underestimation of his talent.

"I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file drawer labeled 'science fiction' … and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station," he wrote in an essay printed in the New York Times Book Review in 1965.

He wrote "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater" at a low point in his career, when he was barely earning enough money to support his family, which had doubled in size due to tragic occurrences in 1958. That year he adopted three of his sister's children after she and her husband died within days of each other, she of cancer and he in a train accident. In 1965, Vonnegut left the family home in Cape Cod and rolled into Iowa City in a dilapidated Volkswagen to join the faculty of the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. It would turn out to be an auspicious move.

A colleague at the workshop, critic Robert Scholes, became his champion and devoted a chapter to Vonnegut's fiction in "The Fabulators," a 1967 book of criticism that began to alter the view of Vonnegut in scholarly circles.

His early novels were reissued in paperback around the same time, advancing his underground reputation. Two of his novels, "Player Piano" and "Mother Night," were reissued in hardcover and earned serious critical attention.

He also returned to journalism, writing first-person essays for the New York Times magazine, Life and Esquire on topics ranging from transcendental meditation to the Apollo 11 moon flight. One piece, a humorous dictionary review, caught the attention of Delacorte Press publisher Seymour Lawrence, who offered him a three-book contract in 1968. That year Vonnegut won a Guggenheim fellowship to travel to Dresden.

The first book to appear under the new contract was "Slaughterhouse-Five."

Vonnegut's struggle to write this novel began after his return from the war more than two decades earlier.

" … I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it…. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I'd head in again, I'd back off," he recalled in speech to students at Iowa City in 1969. "It's like Heinrich Boll's book 'Absent Without Leave' — stories about German soldiers with the war part missing. You see them leave and return, but there's this terrible hole in the middle. That is like my memory of Dresden…. "

The breakthrough came when he realized that instead of writing a story about the war, he could simply tell the truth. The Vietnam War was a catalyst that freed him to "finally talk about something bad that we did to the worst people imaginable, the Nazis. And what I saw, what I had to report, made war look so ugly," he wrote in an essay collected in his 2005 book "A Man Without a Country."

"Slaughterhouse" begins with an unusual apology from Vonnegut, who inserts himself as the narrator. "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time," he complains in the first chapter. Perhaps the tumult of the late 1960s — when Norman Mailer, among other prominent writers, was also experimenting with form by injecting himself into the story — was causing this disruption in literary convention.

Vonnegut also never depicts the firebombing itself. Instead, the story loops backward and forward in time, going from Pilgrim as a young man held by the Germans in Dresden, to Pilgrim as a senile widower imprisoned by extraterrestrials, to Pilgrim in middle age at a convention of fellow optometrists. The effect is bewildering — deliberately so, because part of the author's message is that profound puzzlement is the only appropriate response to the senselessness of Dresden's destruction.

The book is "so short and jumbled and jangled … because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre," Vonnegut writes. "Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

"And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?' "

Antiwar message

There was no mistaking the antiwar tilt of the novel, released while the U.S. was mired in Vietnam. Most of Pilgrim's fellow soldiers are poorly trained and utterly demoralized. Death and tragedy abound, punctuated by the narrator's alternately weary and flippant refrain: "So it goes."

But Vonnegut leaves little doubt as to his intent: "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 we need machinery like that."

The novel reflected the preoccupations of the era, addressing not only war but overpopulation, ecology and consumerism. It was the lead review in major book sections, such as the New York Times Book Review, where Scholes raved that Vonnegut was a "true artist" and "among the best writers of his generation."

Critic Leslie Fiedler, writing in an influential 1970 essay in Esquire, said that "Slaughterhouse-Five" was "less about Dresden than about Vonnegut's failure to come to terms with it — one of those beautifully frustrating works about their own impossibility, like Fellini's '8 1/2 .' "

Other distinguished critics saw "Slaughterhouse" in less flattering terms. Alfred Kazin was turned off by what he termed Vonnegut's "impishly sentimental humor" about the absurdities of war. Vonnegut, according to Kazin, "is at his best not in 'Slaughterhouse-Five' (really a satire on the Great American novel) but in spoofs of the American scene like 'God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.' … In 'Slaughterhouse-Five' Vonnegut seems, all too understandably, subdued by his material and plays it dumb. He is funnier when he is ruthless."

Through the 1970s, the novel endured attacks by would-be censors, who opposed its abundant obscenities and graphic scenes. It was made into a well-regarded 1972 movie by director George Roy Hill. The book also was ranked 18th on the list of the top 100 English-language novels of the 20th century by the Modern Library.

Vonnegut appeared not to take his accomplishments too seriously. In the Paris Review interview he said writing was no more complicated than a good practical joke. "If you make people laugh or cry about little black marks on sheets of white paper," he said, "what is that but a practical joke? All the great story lines are great practical jokes that people fall for over and over again." He said his novels were essentially "mosaics of jokes."

A vow to quit writing

Although "Slaughterhouse" thrust him to the vanguard of American letters, he grew depressed and vowed never to write another novel. "I felt after I finished 'Slaughterhouse-Five' that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to," he wrote in "Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons." It was a threat he would make several times over the next few decades.

He wrote a play that was produced on Broadway, "Happy Birthday, Wanda June," as well as a teleplay for public television, "Between Time and Timbuktu." He covered the Republican National Convention in 1972 for Harper's and was elected vice president of the PEN/American Center.

"Breakfast of Champions," published in 1973, marked the then-50-year-old author's return to the novel. He acknowledged that it was in some important ways a cathartic book: The pathetic Kilgore Trout, who by then had appeared in several Vonnegut novels, finally becomes a rich and famous writer.

The novel, which earned generally tepid reviews, did not mark the end of Vonnegut's depressions, however. In fact, it directly refers to the author's worries about depression and suicide in lines such as " 'You're afraid you'll kill yourself the way your mother did,' I said." In 1984 Vonnegut attempted suicide with alcohol and pills and spent a month in a mental ward. He later told the Washington Post that he wasn't crazy; he was angry. "If I do myself in sometime, and I might, it will be because of my mother's example," he said, referring to her lethal overdose decades earlier. He narrowly escaped serious injury in January 2000 after a fire at his East Side Manhattan brownstone, apparently caused by a cigarette he had left burning in his study. He was hospitalized in critical condition for smoke inhalation.

"Now I'm thinking of suing the makers of Pall Mall," the inveterate chain-smoker joked after his recovery. "On the package they promise to kill me and they still haven't done it."

Such black humor appealed to successive generations of Vonnegut fans, whose cultish ardor played a part in one of the more successful Internet hoaxes of recent years.

In 1997, an e-mail forwarded to thousands of people gave what was purported to be the text of an MIT commencement address given by Vonnegut, a popular commencement speaker. It was full of folksy witticisms, such as "Wear sunscreen" and "Be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone," that many people — including his wife — believed were quintessential Vonnegut. The text was actually written by a Chicago newspaper columnist and forwarded without her byline or permission. Vonnegut had become the victim of a "foma," the word signifying a harmless untruth that he had invented three decades earlier in "Cat's Cradle."

Vonnegut had married Krementz in 1979, after his first marriage ended in divorce. His second marriage produced a daughter, Lily. He also had three children from his first marriage, Mark, Edith and Nanette; and three he adopted after his sister's death, James, Steven and Kurt Adams.

He collected many of his shorter writings into four volumes, including "Bagombo Snuff Box" (1999), which featured his previously uncollected short fiction; "God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian" (2000), a series of riffs on dead eminences such as William Shakespeare that he originally wrote for radio; and "A Man Without a Country," a collection of short essays and speeches (2005). Among his other novels were "Slapstick, or Lonesome No More" in 1976, "Jailbird" in 1979, "Dead-Eye Dick" in 1982, "Galapagos" in 1985 and "Bluebeard" in 1987. His last novel, "Timequake" in 1997, split the critics, with some expressing annoyance at its familiar tone of weary bemusement and others calling it his funniest work in years.

After "Timequake," he said he would write no more novels, but in 2000, while serving a term as State Author for New York, he admitted to having reneged on the promise. He was working on a novel about a standup comic in New York. The title suggested another irreverent rumination on modern life and its ills. He was calling it "If God Were Alive Today."

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Times staff writer Stuart Silverstein contributed to this report.

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The wit and wisdom of Kurt Vonnegut

"When I think about my own death, I don't console myself with the idea that my descendants and my books and all that will live on. Anybody with any sense knows that the whole solar system will go up like a celluloid collar by-and-by. I honestly believe, though, that we are wrong to think that moments go away, never to be seen again. This moment and every moment lasts forever."

— "Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons," 1974.

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" … when a society is in great danger, [writers are] likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists — all artists — should be treasured as alarm systems."

— Playboy interview, 1973

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"You cannot be a good writer of serious fiction if you are not depressed."

— Undated speech to the American Psychiatric Assn.

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"I do think … that public speaking is almost the only way a poet or a novelist or a playwright can have any political effectiveness in his creative prime. If he tries to put his politics into a work of the imagination, he will foul up his work beyond all recognition."

— "Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons," 1974

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"Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well-connected."

— "Slaughterhouse-Five," 1969

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"The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems."

— "Player Piano," 1952

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"Poverty is a relatively mild disease … but uselessness will kill strong and weak souls alike."

— "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater," 1965.

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"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

— "Mother Night," 1962

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