

VONNEGUT'S 1950s

Human Structures

Kurt Vonnegut's debut as a writer of fiction came on February 11, 1950, when *Collier's*, one of the great family oriented weekly magazines of the era, published his story "Report on the Barnhouse Effect." But as the key date in his literary career, October 28, 1949, looms more important. For it was then, with the acceptance from *Collier's* in hand and with assurances from the editors there that two more were likely to be taken as well, that the new author wrote his father—not just with the news, but with a solemn promise to continue in this field, no matter what.

On that day in 1949, Kurt was just two weeks short of his twenty-seventh birthday, a husband and father himself, and established in a career that promised to take him smoothly into the postwar world of corporate success. As a publicist for General Electric's Research Laboratory, where "Progress Is Our Most Important Product," he was on the cutting edge of his culture, not just watching new technologies be devised but promoting their embrace by the culture at large. His own brother, Bernard, was one of the lab's star scientists. But even at twenty-seven, Kurt was still the baby of the family, and, at this important juncture of his life, he thought it important to check in back home.

Home was Indianapolis, Indiana, where he'd been raised at the core of a large extended family. But in these postwar years it was becoming dispersed. His father's architectural practice had been ruined by the Great Depression, his mother had become so disturbed by the changing nature of the times that she took her own life, his older brother and sister were out east (like him), and the once-prosperous hardware business his uncles had run was on its way to being run out of business by foreign competition. For a solid midwesterner who'd loved the sense of family, community, and civic order Indianapolis had provided for his childhood, his move to GE in 1948 had opened up a brave new

world indeed. In England, where even more startling social, political, economic, and cultural transitions were taking place, George Orwell had reversed that year's last two digits for his own novelist view of how things were changing, 1984. Working for GE in Schenectady, New York, Kurt Vonnegut found his own vision was a troublesome one as well—troublesome, that is, if he stayed within the corporate structure that promised to dominate the new era.

He desperately wanted out, and, with the acceptance from *Collier's*, it looked like he had found a way. That's why he was writing his father: not just to merit the old man's faith, but to make a promise to himself, bonded with someone who'd helped create him.

He'd just sold his first story, but he had done something more than just that. At noon yesterday, on lunch break from GE, he had put the entire payment for it in the bank. He'd do the same for the next two likely to be accepted, and he hoped to do the same for the two after that. This would give him a savings account equal to a year's salary at the publicity office, where he'd not been comfortable at all. But there was more news, and an even more serious promise.

Made in 1949, in a letter reproduced in the author's autobiographical collage published in 1991, *Fates Worse Than Death*, it involves the nature of the rest of his life. With the income from five short stories banked to live on, "I will then quit this goddamn nightmare job, and never take another one so long as I live, so help me God." With a paragraph break for emphasis, he says what every parent hopes for his or her child: "I'm happier than I've been for a good many years" (26).

Kurt has this letter on hand in 1991 because his father not only saved it, but enshrined it as workroom plaque, varnishing the page to a board decorated with a quotation from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "An oath, an oath, I have an oath in Heaven: / Shall I lay perjury on my soul?" Since his father's death in 1957, it had hung in his own workroom, a space dedicated to writing fiction and personal essays. This, not Orwell's world of 1984, would be Kurt Vonnegut's.

Some of that work involved writing his own novel, *Player Piano* (1952), to accompany George Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as classics of dystopian fiction. In 1959 he published an even more apparently futuristic novel, *The Sirens of Titan*. But both books are really about the present, about Kurt Vonnegut's 1950s, a decade he was doing all he could to prevent the development of the nightmare world Orwell and Huxley had foreseen. They are best read in the company of the short stories he'd continued doing for *Collier's* and soon for its senior competitor, the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Five a year for these venues would equal the annual salary he'd been earning in the corporate world, but now he was doing it on his own terms, drafting works that suggested how progress for its own sake wasn't a very good cultural product at all. As a husband of a sensitive, conscientious woman and as the parent of no less than six children, living in the middle-class community of West Barnstable, Massachusetts, he damn well knew it! His fiction was now in close touch with neither utopians nor dystopians, technocrats nor idealistic dreamers. Instead it spoke the language, fed the interests, and answered the concerns of people like himself.

Kurt Vonnegut stayed a member of that economic class for the next twenty years, averaging no more than five stories per year, which gave him (as he liked to recall) the salary a high-school cafeteria manager could earn. (Until 1969, when *Slaughterhouse-Five* became his first best seller, the novels rarely earned more than their small advances, taken as stopgaps when no stories were being accepted.) How close were these stories to his daily life? Although his own autobiographical collages either focus on the present or gravitate to his experiences in youth, Kurt's wife and son each wrote memoirs of that period. In 1987, Jane, recently remarried as Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky, had her heirs publish *Angels without Wings: A Courageous Family's Courageous Triumph over Tragedy* (she herself had died of cancer in December the previous year). The tragedy involved the deaths of Kurt's sister and brother-in-law within days of each other, while the triumph was achieved by Kurt and Jane's immediate adoption of their three orphaned nephews. But both terms also reverberate among the details of living on the meager earnings of an unfamous author and coping with the pressures of his creative life. Wouldn't suffering all that drive someone crazy? It did have an impact on the eldest, Mark, Kurt and Jane's first child, who later on as a young man aged just twenty-two underwent a full-fledged schizophrenic breakdown. He not only recovered, but wrote a book about it published in 1975, *The Eden Express*. With ample material about his childhood, it serves as another key account of Kurt Vonnegut's America taking shape in the 1950s.

Two other texts frame the author's 1950s: his preface to *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968) and his introduction to *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction* (1999). The first volume, published before he was famous but with the support of an initial three-book contract from Seymour Lawrence that within a year would take him there, comprises Kurt's selection of what he then considered his best short fiction. The second, published toward the end of his career, adds the culls—material that in 1974 I'd thought good enough to be included in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (Kurt demurred and had to

be argued into reprinting even his essays) and that a quarter century later Peter Reed, having written an excellent study of all Vonnegut's short fiction, persuaded him should be saved, albeit as "uncollected."

As scholars would say, the canon for Kurt Vonnegut's 1950s is complete: not just the published stories from that period and the two novels, but commentary on their lives at the time from all parts of the family, including father, mother, and son. Having this context clarified is essential, even in terms of literary art, as during these years the author was generating his material from who he was and where he lived.

"Where I Live" is the first piece in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, technically an essay but written in the new manner of personal journalism that used the techniques of fiction—character, imagery, development by dialogue, and the like—in order to present a more personally credible, imaginatively rich picture of the subject. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a cadre of self-styled "New Journalists" had appeared, including Dan Wakefield, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and others. Vonnegut's essay, first published as "You've Never Been to Barnstable?" in a slick monthly called *Venture—Traveler's World*, is indicative of the new forms and markets he'd sought after his short story outlets, *Collier's* and the *Post*, began cutting back on fiction before eventually shutting down completely. But its manner is one with his stories, and, as a portrait of his life in the 1950s, while making a middle-class living among other tradespeople and professionals in this thoroughly conventional Massachusetts community, it sets the tone for his older *Post* and *Collier's* stories that follow. How it squares with his own prefatory accounts and memoirs from his wife and son seals the case that the 1950s being presented in *Welcome to the Monkey House* and *Bagombo Snuff Box* were Kurt Vonnegut's own.

Its format is a traditional one, a device favored by Mark Twain and other nineteenth-century writers: a stranger comes to town and has to be educated to the community's ways. This is precisely what Kurt, Jane, and son Mark experienced in 1951 after pulling up stakes in Schenectady and moving to the cape. Provincetown, any writer's first choice, had proved too arty for what Vonnegut had in mind for his home life and the type of fiction he wanted to write. In "Where I Live," the incomer is an encyclopedia salesman, eager to bring the town's library (and its citizenry) up to date. Instead he finds a social group set comfortably in its ways. True, these ways are quaintly idiosyncratic and in some cases downright stupid. Consider the town's fishermen, who for years refused to believe that tuna were any good to eat, instead calling them "horse mackerel" and throwing them back into the bay, chopped up as a warning to other horse mackerel. But the community, unfashionable as it is, has prospered

in a way highly valued by the author: there's a role for everyone, from the eccentric yacht-clubbers to the Episcopalian minister who made his special contribution as a church gardener. Set as it is near the root of Cape Cod, West Barnstable is the diametric opposite of Provincetown, and a good place where Kurt could raise a family and write his fiction. Why so? Despite being a gateway to holiday-land, it made a quiet point of existing for itself, not for passersby.

As a coda to his tale, the author adds that the library finally has an up-to-date encyclopedia, but so far there have been no improvements in children's school grades or the level of adult conversation. Apparently those grades and the small talk had been good enough all along.

Right here is the structure of more than half the stories Kurt Vonnegut would write and publish in the 1950s. Individuals, couples (dating or married), families, and communities would be tempted away from their core values. For a time they'd be enthralled by illusions, be it the perfect social personality, sudden wealth, designer lifestyles, or utopian technology. That would be the action's first movement, akin to West Barnstable's exposure to the encyclopedia salesman. Then, in each story's second act (as it were), they'd be disappointed in not getting what the illusions had promised. Sometimes they'd even look weak or stupid, as with the first piece's fishermen who chopped up expensive tuna and tossed them into the water. But don't fear: their simple standards would triumph in the end, proving that their own original ways were best. "Poor Little Rich Town," "Custom-Made Bride," "The Foster Portfolio," "Who Am I This Time?"—again and again Vonnegut would exploit this formula, riffing many variations as a jazz musician might on the familiar pattern of a twelve-bar blues. The permutations were endless, truly infinite, because their structure was based on a fundamental essence of human social behavior.

Kurt knew the formula from life. He'd tried deviating from it in his career as a corporate publicist for the General Electric Research Laboratory. But what he'd seen promised no happiness. Progress for its own sake eroded core values, simple values based on the most central structures of human society. If asked, he could have quoted chapter and verse from the latest findings in anthropology, which he'd spent two years studying on his postwar G.I. Bill benefits at the University of Chicago. During the time he was there (1945–1947), the department's leading scholar, Dr. Robert Redfield, was developing his thesis of the folk society, demonstrating how groups of about two hundred people could not only survive self-sufficiently but do so in a pleasing manner, keeping every one happy because there was a job for each member, a way every person could feel that he or she was of use.

Not surprisingly, a character in Kurt Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, holds a master's degree in anthropology. But he's a Protestant minister as well, indicative of how, for his larger works of the 1950s, the author would seek his own sense of structure in both areas of human activity, the social and the religious. A religion had been the focus of Kurt's own intended master's thesis at Chicago: the Ghost Dance Society of Plains Indians in the 1890s. These Native Americans had used a form of religion to organize their revolt against the encroaching white civilization, and as a student of anthropology Kurt wanted to use them as the variable in his study of what it took to form a revolutionary community (his control group was the world of Cubist painters in early-twentieth-century Paris). And so revolution in art was a matter of Vonnegut's structural interest as well. But taking the issue this far, by comparing primitive and civilized societies, was at the time considered too radical, and so was Kurt's next idea, comparing the plot lines of folktales and modern magazine stories. Both were rejected by his professors. As an aspiring author, Vonnegut learned his lesson well. For what would become his family's bread and butter, the fifty-some stories he'd publish during the 1950s for the great family magazines of the time, he stuck to conservative structures, ones that affirmed well-being of the community for what it was. It would be in his novels *Player Piano* (written as the decade was beginning) and *The Sirens of Titan* (done at end of the 1950s) that toyed with the revolutionary aspects, respectively, social and religious, of structure.

If the social climate at General Electric in the late 1940s was anything like the futuristic world portrayed in *Player Piano*, it's easy to see why Kurt Vonnegut wanted out. There's science and technology aplenty in this novel, but what's important are the human relations, of people trying to make their way among the altered structures of this new-style world. Supposedly, as in all utopias, the changes have been for the better. Here in this new era, following a presumed third world war, all the drudgeries of human labor have been effaced. Ingenious machines do everything, providing a decent standard of living for everyone. No one except the engineers has to work, and their work involves more company politics than intellectual labor. There's the first problem: their work as such is meaningless, with no more substance to it than the abstraction of General Electric's slogan, which presented progress as its own goal. As for the goods provided to the people, they are adequate. But lives themselves are empty: with no real work to do, no one can have a sense of being useful, of being needed for anything. Vonnegut knows people believe that life must have purpose. When it seems not to, they invent it. His persistent hope is that they do it harmlessly, on the level of art and play. The danger

is when “purpose” is construed as a God-given absolute, as happens when religions take themselves too seriously. *The Sirens of Titan* demonstrates just this. But religion is also a force in *Player Piano*. That’s why the revolution’s leader is not just an anthropologist but a minister. And what he opposes is the way technology has become its own reason for being, its own justification of life—in other words, its own religion.

This is the structure Kurt Vonnegut’s novel hopes to reveal. Supporting it are two classic narrative devices, ones the author often cited as the basics for an infinite number of stories. A stranger comes to town. A man and a woman seek each other and either do or do not find happiness. In *Player Piano* the stranger is a minor functionary, a simple observer (from the outside) of the action. He’s a stranger indeed, the Shah of Bratpuhr, visiting the factory on a State Department tour. His questions sound quaint, phrased as they are in his native language with colorful words such as *khabu* (where), *siki* (what), and *akka sahn* (why). But by shading these terms with an exotic hue, Vonnegut lets them pierce the official smugness that would obscure the true nature of life in this utopia, which the Shah’s disarming comments reveal to be much more dystopian than the government and technology experts can admit.

The Shah of Bratpuhr’s words sound like nonsense syllables, because they are. But his nonsense clears away the official version of sense in this technocratic society, showing how it has given itself over to a worship of the machines. The government and company spokespersons are speechless, but not the machines. They themselves have plenty to say, such as “Furrazz-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ak! ting! Furr-azz-ow-ow,” “Vaaaaaaa-zuzip! Vaaaaaaa-zuzip!,” and “Aw-grumph! tonka-tonka. Aw-grump! tonka-tonka” (10) and so forth, a virtual musical suite. At a company party, fireworks are set off to similar sounds. On a drill field, a company of soldiers is given commands in a similar panoply of barked half-syllables. It’s all mechanical, just like the automatic washer at the home of the man and woman seeking happiness with each other, Dr. Paul Proteus and his wife, Anita. Their washing machine comments on its own work cycle: “Urdle-urdle-urdle,” “Urdle-urdle-ur dull,” and “Znick. Bazz-wap!,” ending with a conclusive “Azzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Froomph!” (96). The couple, trying to make sense of life with a happy marriage, can of course speak, and they do. But most often their conversations end with a mechanical mantra of “I love you, Paul,” and “I love you, too, Anita,” the rote repetition of which means little more than the “urdles” of their automatic washer.

Is there any meaning at all? Were he a simple dystopian, Vonnegut could easily say no. But nihilism is not the American way, certainly not the way of a beleaguered middle class struggling to find its way in the new postwar reality.

Consider the longest line in all the Shah of Bratpuhr's dialogue, the most complete statement in this novel from the religious leader of six million people, whose comments have deflated the pretenses put before him. "*Puku pala koko, puku ebo koko, nibo aki koko,*" he intones. A secret of Eastern wisdom, the key to solving all these problems in the West? No, just a set of instructions to the barber, translated as "a little off the sides, a little off the back, and leave the top alone" (174–75).

A line, when translated, that could be spoken by any *Saturday Evening Post* character of the time! In *The Sirens of Titan*, one such person appears, described as such, sporting a tell-tale dab of shaving cream behind his ear, and bearing the name of one of Kurt Vonnegut's recurrent family-magazine characters, bandmaster George M. Helmholtz (86). It's a joke, of course, but not a morbidly meaningless one. Instead the strange new world that at times seems so fearful proves to be utterly familiar, even in the person of the mysterious stranger venturing in.

Does this constitute sentimentalism, akin to what the *Post* was putting on its covers as paintings by Norman Rockwell? Only if, as when viewing a Rockwell canvas, one stops at the surface. The drawback with great public art is that the public may, if it wishes, leave the work with simply a first-glance impression. That impression will not be wrong but misses the chance for a deeper sense of completion, of resolution. Consider the famous Rockwell depiction of a bad moment during a Chicago Cubs baseball game. Framed are the dugout bench and the first row of fans sitting just above. Two lines of people are reacting to what has surely been a terrible play; there's not a happy face in the bunch. Stopping right there, a point can be made: the hapless Cubbies have failed again, and the ballplayers are as disgusted as spectators. But if one stays with the picture for a few more moments, a larger narrative evolves. Moving down the bench, one distinguishes ranges in age (from the older manager to the younger players to the adolescent batboy) and expression (from disgust to disbelief, from anger to resignation), all of which interact with the various fans and their differing expressions above. Only at the end of this process does it dawn on the viewer that he or she can feel any of these ways, too—without even having seen the play! And there's the resolution: we don't even need a view of the playing field to know that once again the loveable losers have performed in character, that for some teams there's a winsomely sad predictability to defeat, that the Cubs *and* their fans seem fated to suffer forever.

Player Piano accomplishes much the same, and in a remarkably similar manner. Far from being an exotic science-fiction tale or mind-bending experiment in cybernetics, it is fashioned much the same as the author's *Saturday*

Evening Post and *Collier's* stories. There “post-war” means after World War II rather than a prototypical World War III, but in making adjustments to new technologies, economies, politics, and demographics Vonnegut’s lesson is the same. However the “ies” and “ics” change, human beings still remain the same. As he’d discovered in his ahead-of-the-times research in anthropology, Plains Indians in 1890 had much the same motivations as Cubist painters in Paris just a decade later. People are people. It’s all one world.

Hence the suitability of this novel’s resolution. After staging a successful revolt, the workers—led by Dr. Paul Proteus, who has seen inside the system his father helped build, and Reverend James J. Lasher, whose own view is both anthropological and religious—unwind by tinkering, helplessly fascinated by the challenge of reassembling and repairing the machines they’ve just destroyed. People need something to do. Life demands purpose. The danger is inventing too dominating a one. Or one that subverts structures necessary for human happiness.

In *Player Piano* the structures are clear. Technological revolution has subverted the human need for purpose. But even the counterrevolution, led by Proteus and Lasher, succeeds only temporarily—the machines are destroyed, but human fascination will rebuild them. Not until 1985, with his novel *Galápagos*, will Vonnegut go so far as to suggest genetic devolution as a solution; preceding that extreme move is the reformulation of religion in 1959 with *The Sirens of Titan*.

Society’s structure of human purpose is complemented by Kurt Vonnegut’s understanding of the family. Paul and Anita hope that “I love you / I love you, too” will provide a refuge (as Howard and Helga’s “nation of two” hopes to suffice in the author’s third novel, *Mother Night*, in 1961). But as Vonnegut would say throughout the 1980s, when he was most comfortable in his role of public spokesmanship, a husband and wife, just the two of them, are unable to supply a world to each other. That’s why couples are motivated to have children and why children have not just siblings but grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Indeed the happily extended family is the author’s ideal, one lived by him in his Indianapolis childhood and suggested, with some whimsy, as an artifice in his novel *Slapstick* (1976). In between, during his own family life on Cape Cod in the 1950s, his sense of parenting and familial duty came into play when the Vonnegut clan’s own structure was threatened to be torn apart.

This story is told by Kurt’s first wife in *Angels without Wings*. Because it is a true story, she changes the names to protect the innocent, as it were. Kurt becomes “Carl,” son Mark is “Matt,” daughters Edie and Nanny are “Amy” and “Nelly.” Why not? By the time Jane Cox Vonnegut wrote this book, she

was Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky, remarried in the 1980s as Kurt had been in the 1970s. But *Angels without Wings* is about the time when they were all together, living as conventional a 1950s life as any American family could, given that its income provider was a fiction writer. But even that role is subsumed in the rhythms of family life, the symphony of which Kurt Vonnegut had found easier to conduct here in West Barnstable than as a research-lab publicist in Schenectady. Jane describes the Monday morning of September 15, 1958, as starting like any other, the kids off to school, she settling down to pay some bills, her husband at work in his study:

I could tell by the rhythm of the typewriter that the work was going well. It was about time. Ever since the previous February, when he had finally gotten an advance on the book he had been working on for two years before that, Carl had been struggling to finish it. March, April, and May had been fairly productive months, our spirits buoyed by the advance and by the sale of a short story earlier in the winter. But the distractions of the summer had brought work almost to a halt. Weekend after weekend, vacationing friends and relatives and friends of relatives would show up—a well-known hazard of living on the Cape—and many of them wouldn't go home on Sunday night, not seeming to understand that the house was also a place where a man had to make a living, for God's sake. The kids' noisy comings and goings added to the tumult. It was an old story. We had lived with it for years. It's what we talked about at cocktail parties on the Cape in the summer.

The time had gone pleasantly enough, actually. Which, of course, was the problem. Pleasure at that house was always getting in the way of the serious business of life. It was a sparkling mix of fun and high anxiety laced with neurosis. When you added the stress of reality—like not having enough money to pay bills—who could stand it? (5)

Sound like a Kurt Vonnegut story from *Collier's* or the *Post*? A family center, with corresponding centripetal and centrifugal forces, a man and woman seeking happiness as work draws the husband to his typewriter, only to be pulled away by kids flying out the doors and windows. Strangers come to town (those friends of relatives), but there's an extended family as well, friends *and* relatives. A fluctuation, too, such as Kurt had studied in folktales at Chicago and worked into his own stories of the 1950s, fun and anxiety mixed with neurosis. Indeed, who could stand it? Paragraph break. "Carl and I could, that was who," Jane concludes, mirroring the endings of so many of her husband's short stories.

The challenge to this carefully balanced order comes from two deaths in the family: not just the sadly anticipated loss of Kurt's sister, Alice, from cancer, but—a mere day and a half earlier—the death of her husband, quite improbably as a passenger perishing on the only commuter train in history to plunge off an opened drawbridge, but no less final for that. To make it worse, Alice—whom the family had prayed could die in peace—overheard a nurse mention the accident, giving her terrifying worries for the welfare of their children.

Like a hero and heroine in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Norman Rockwell cover and all, Kurt and Jane at once adopted Alice's kids—three boys, aged just a year or two older than their own. And, like any family in a *Post* story, they struggled. If it was hard supporting a family of five on this bread-winner's income (virtually any middle-class family's story of the times, making their way through the economic recessions of 1957 and 1959), how on earth could it be done for eight? Especially when the three new kids were traumatized by their parents' deaths and enduring a distant move into an entirely new home. Well, that's what makes it a story worthy of publication, in *Collier's* and the *Post* or in *Angels without Wings*.

It was not all angelic. Kurt and Jane were unable to adopt their fourth nephew, because he was just a baby and other relatives insisted he needed closer attention. That was a blow. And the six cousins did not always get along smoothly—not because of personal difficulties, but because the structure of a traditional nuclear family was being stretched almost out of shape. And of course there was the special nature of the father's profession, hard enough anyway but especially difficult as a free-lancer, nervously living from single sale to sale. In *The Eden Express*, son Mark Vonnegut recalls how by Christmas 1970, the family's last holiday together, things were coming apart:

There we were, my family, my blood. Cousin brother Jim, twenty-five, tormentor of my late childhood and adolescence, my replacement as eldest son, two-time college flunk-out, no particular direction, a couple thousand dollars in photographic equipment, his inheritance, shrinking fast. Cousin brother Steve, twenty-two, three months older than I, Most Popular Barnstable High School Class of '65, B.A. Dartmouth, teaching English in Barnstable High, his alma mater, hating every minute of it, planning to quit but without the faintest idea of what he was going to do next. Cousin brother Tiger [proper name, Kurt] with a year to go at U. Mass. No real plans but with a pilot's instructor license and reasonable prospects, undoubtedly in the best shape of anyone there. They were my

father's sister's sons. We had adopted them when their parents died when I was eleven. It was a real bitch at first but things worked out.

Sister Edie, twenty, two-time college drop-out, no direction, hooked up with and apparently unable to get free from Brad, a second-rate Charlie Manson. Sister Nanny, fifteen, very unhappy about school and lots of other things. My father having difficulties adjusting to superstardom, not wanting to be a writer any more, very restless, not very happy about anything. My mother going through menopausal stuff, wondering what the hell to do with her life with the kids all grown and the marriage not in the greatest of shape. And myself, twenty-two, B.A. in religion, fed up with do-gooder work in Boston, no plans and less hope for what the future held. (58)

Certainly no *Saturday Evening Post* story! But by then the magazine was defunct, like *Collier's*, both of them a faint memory of what the 1950s had been. The 1960s were a rough decade for Kurt Vonnegut, with the 1970s not much better, first a lack of markets and then a surfeit of them testing his strength as a writer. But Mark's Christmas-card snapshot shows how the times had changed. Old structures had been challenged and overturned, and new ones were not yet in place. Putting them in place was just the job his father was supposed to be doing, and in time he'd get it done. But for now things were in flux. As the young man points out so many times, no one, not even the best of them, had a clear sense of direction.

Mark's college degree was in religion, where a search for purpose was foremost. His father had looked into religion, too, examining its structure in *The Sirens of Titan*. Here, rather than seeking a purpose *in* religion, Kurt examines the purpose *of* religion, much as he'd done with issues of family and work in *Player Piano*. To do so, he takes a broad view of matters. What he produces is no more a strictly religious novel than a space novel (or work of science fiction). Rather he draws on another of the oldest narrative structures known—the business of two separate actions in progress, separate until they cross—to have religion interact with outer space. On Earth an eccentric person of old wealth, given the classically upper Hudson Valley name of Winston Niles Rumfoord, seeks to regenerate human awareness by introducing a new style of religion, a style he has discovered on a privately financed space mission during which he has not only experienced but become trapped in a new dimension of existence. Does this sound far-fetched, the stuff of shabby space opera? Well, there's plenty of space opera in *The Sirens of Titan*—Rumfoord's dog, who has been with him for this ride into the new dimension, is called Kazak, the Hound of Space. And it gets much worse than that. Vonnegut is obviously

mocking the form, a proto-postmodern way of drawing attention to his act of fabrication and discouraging any suspension of disbelief.

But there are links to a credibly real world and to serious sociopolitical issues. For his characterization of Rumfoord, Vonnegut obviously has Franklin Delano Roosevelt in mind. Roosevelt, like Rumfoord, was old money from the Hudson River Valley, but he was also president for most of the author's adolescence and young manhood—for thirteen years of Vonnegut's thirty-seven years of age to date. Roosevelt, like Rumfoord, always had his dog (Fala) at hand. The two men's speech is typified by their "glottal Groton tenor" (20), making their greetings sound like songs. Unlike science-fiction writers (who by necessity focus on issues and ideas), Vonnegut had established himself as a master of description, especially when creating characters. Even a minor functionary such as *Player Piano's* State Department host, the slickly smooth Dr. Ewing J. Halyard, is more than just "a heavy, florid, urbane gentleman of forty." Vonnegut can do a lot better than that, and he wants his readers to think more deeply about the type, and so he continues: "He wore a sandy mustache, a colored shirt, a boutonniere, and a waistcoat contrasting with his dark suit, and wore them with such poise that one was sure he'd just come from a distinguished company where everyone dressed in this manner." Very good—Vonnegut not only dresses him up, but has the dressing spark a reaction among observers. But there's more, more about Halyard and more about ourselves: "The fact was that only Doctor Halyard did. And he got away with it beautifully" (17).

Slick, smooth, and snazzily effective—and crooked as a snake! Because of his care with the language in creating people, Vonnegut is able to make Winston Niles Rumfoord more than just a cardboard cutout for science-fiction thematics. In terms of what readers know of America—Kurt Vonnegut's America, and theirs—Rumfoord is a familiar type, an aristocrat of merit and intelligence whose deep feeling for his fellow humankind motivates him to seek a better solution for happiness. For FDR, that reordering of priorities was the New Deal, a reinvention of the national economy with government taking a leading role in improving its citizens' lives. To accomplish much the same, albeit in a post-Rooseveltian world in which beneficent economics is not enough, Rumfoord offers not new government but a new religion, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent.

Here is where the paths of Earthling life and intergalactic space travel come together. As readers follow the contemporaneous action of Rumfoord's design for a better life on Earth unfolding, they also can view it from a higher perspective, which is that of their planet being observed telescopically by a stranded

flying-saucer pilot on Titan, the largest moon of Saturn. The pilot, a Tralfamadorian named Salo, has been sent on a trailblazing mission across the universe, bearing a secret message undisclosed even to himself. When his spacecraft breaks down on Titan, unable to receive communications from home, he is restricted to watching messages in the Tralfamadorian alphabet take shape on the third planet of the solar system visible above him. These messages are in regard to his mechanical problem and cover the time during which his home base is working to get him going again.

In one of his earliest examples of super-succinct paragraphing (later a hallmark of his mature style). Vonnegut ticks off the messages Salo gets. Four paragraphs, four sentences, four brief messages written on the face of Earth so that they could be telescopically visible from the largest moon of Saturn.

The communications are written in Tralfamadorian, but they translate easily enough. *Be patient, we haven't forgotten you*, reads the first; to an Earthling, however, this message is more commonly recognizable as the Great Wall of China. *We are doing the best we can*, Salo's home base tells him an epoch later, this time spelling out the words by means of the Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero. Well, Salo's an understanding sort and is pleased to read, more than a thousand Earth-years later, that *You will be on your way before you know it*. (Of course he will, having been sufficiently patient to watch the Kremlin's walls be constructed in Moscow so as to spell out this encouragement.) Finally, as doings on Earth settle down sufficiently to build (and place hopes in) the Palace of the League of Nations, Salo gets a last-minute update: *Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice* (271–72).

Short notice indeed: a third of a century! But that's in Earthling time, one of the illusions this Tralfamadorian perspective destroys. Not to mention any sense of human purpose, struggle, and suffering. Think of it, as readers are encouraged to do, as a technique that would make the shortest of Vonnegut novels large enough to fill a lifetime of contemplation: think of not just the size of that wall in China but of the bones of dead workers mixed into its bonding; think not just of the grandeur, glory, and accomplishments of Rome, but of the sufferings wrought by Nero; of the immense story of Russia, of the carnage of World War I and the hapless hopes for peace that followed. All for what? To send messages to a stranded flying-saucer pilot, waiting with the same exasperation a stranded motorist might feel when the wrecker is delayed. And flatly banal messages at that! The Great Wall of China, the Kremlin, Woodrow Wilson's dream for a better world, all reduced to empty happy-face post-it notes.

So much for intuitions of human purpose, at least from the human point of view. What did World War I accomplish, a war still present in human memory

in 1959, when this novel was published? Have your bags packed for departure on a moment's notice. Sure. Just like "the check is in the mail."

As for what the Tralfamadorians have been up to, the secret message turns out to be just this: "Greetings." Its vacuity is too much even for Salo, who during his long wait has not only learned much human history but become close friends with an Earthling or two. The futility of it literally tears him apart.

To flesh out his novel with human action, Vonnegut devises a second plot that interweaves with both Rumfoord's doings on Earth and Salo's on Titan the story of Malachi Constant's involvement with the plans of both. New money rather than old, garish rather than subtle, Constant is enough of a contrast to Rumfoord to qualify *The Sirens of Titan* as a novel of manners—as is his relationship in space with Salo, which is one of true friendship. When he dies, happily and peacefully, which is the best Kurt Vonnegut can promise any of us, it is with an understanding that "somebody up there" likes him (319). The phrase, as commonly vernacular as any of the messages to Salo, customarily means God. But from the scene itself readers know that it's Salo and from the novel's larger action that all sense of purpose is a fabrication, completely unrelated to any deity, beneficent or malevolent. Things just happen, and they might as well be the doings of flying-saucer repair as anything else.

That's what Rumfoord's Church of God the Utterly Indifferent teaches: that there is no ruling Absolute that will make sense of life, that any attempt to discover Purpose per se will yield a ridiculous space opera. Like Roosevelt, Rumfoord knows that to unite the people in adhering to this new understanding, there's nothing like a war to pull everyone together. Hence the book's staged invasion from Mars. Like World War II, it works. But the question, as always, remains what will people do afterwards.

How could the author of such a sophisticated novel, or even of a science-fiction novel (as some would have it), be producing, at this very same time, story after story for *Collier's* and the *Post*? Critics have long separated the two activities, and Vonnegut himself habitually excused the short fiction as having been done to buy time for writing his novels. But, as with *Player Piano*, the structures that generate this author's short fiction and long are compatible. Human strivings, disappointments, and resolutions are much the same in *The Sirens of Titan* and benefit from similar manneristic descriptions of characters. In chapter 3 Vonnegut borrows a major character from several of his stories, the high school bandmaster who helps solve any number of adolescent problems. To fill out the scene, he brings in the school's algebra teacher as well. Just because here the two happen to be secret agents from Mars does not obscure the fact that for this theme, as well as all others in *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut

is dressing it out in familiar terms and reminding readers that they already have the tools for making sense of things, if they just look back to their basic values. The setting is also familiar, a small cocktail lounge (known as the Hear Ye Room) in the Tudor-styled Wilburhampton Hotel, located in one of the shabbiest areas of Los Angeles:

In the Hear Ye Room were three people—a bartender and two customers. The two were a thin woman and a fat man—both seemingly old. Nobody in the Wilburhampton had seen them before, but it already seemed as though they had been sitting in the Hear Ye Room for years. Their protective coloration was perfect, for they looked half-timbered and broken-backed and thatched and little-windowed, too.

They claimed to be pensioned-off teachers from the same high school in the Middle West. The fat man introduced himself as George M. Helmholtz, a former bandmaster. The thin woman introduced herself as Roberta Wiley, a former teacher of algebra.

They had obviously discovered the consolations of alcohol and cynicism late in life. They never ordered the same drink twice, were avid to know what was in this bottle and what was in that one—to know what a golden dawn punch was, and a Helen Twelvetrees, and a *plui d'or*, and a merry widow fizz.

The bartender knew they weren't alcoholics. He was familiar with the type, and loved the type: they were simply two *Saturday Evening Post* characters at the end of the road. (86–87)

Here's the answer to the novel's outer-space and new theology problematics, right in the common manners of the American 1950s, familiar from any page of *Collier's* or the *Post*—or from a look anyone could take into their local bar, with its tritely comfortable decor, its loveably shabby characters (outfitted in the same style!), and its banal but effective drinks. In every *Post* story where George M. Helmholtz takes a hand, matters have turned out OK. So they probably will here.

Don't take it all so seriously, the author is telling his readers, whether they be readers of religious speculation or science-fiction thematics. Consider the novel's fanciest device, the trans-Galactic phenomenon known as the Chrono-Synclastic Infundibula. Where a self-serious SF author (or even a cheap hack) might show off his or her technological brilliance by offering a complex definition, Kurt Vonnegut goes to a much simpler source, *A Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do*. Its definition is no less precise for being clear and helpful, right down to the notion that *infundibulum* means “funnel.” But to

rub it in, Vonnegut lets his quoted source add, “If you don’t know what a funnel is, get Mommy to show you one” (15).

Problems of the universe are problems of the local cocktail lounge and just as likely to receive a much better solution. But the cocktail lounge *does* help us get by, as do so many comforts devised by people living sensibly within their culture—*within their own folk societies*, as a younger Kurt Vonnegut had seen demonstrated by his anthropology professors at the University of Chicago in the immediately postwar years. As Americans adjusted to the new postwar realities—new politics, new economics, new demographics, even new art and music (make that *of course* new art and music)—short stories and novels, especially in a commonly accessible form, helped get people settled: hence Vonnegut’s work in *Collier’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and in a book-club selection such as *Player Piano* and a paperback original (rack size for drugstores and bus stations) such as *The Sirens of Titan*.

Kurt’s preface to *Welcome to the Monkey House* and introduction to *Bagombo Snuff Box* confirm this orientation. For the former he was taking advantage of the first truly beneficial contract he’d ever had to gather what he considered redeemable from his work in a market now gone belly-up, the great family weeklies that had flourished between 1900 and 1950 and during this last decade had struggled to a finish, at least keeping Vonnegut and his family afloat. In the latter he writes as a famous novelist—one of the most famous in American literary history—who must account for what he did in his first decade as professional writer, a decade in which he had to “face the audience of strangers” (as he’d warn his students at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop they had to do) with fiction both accessible and worthwhile, something that made them feel better about their daily life even as they spent a half hour of it as they read his short story.

“I have been a writer since 1949,” Kurt says in the 1968 preface. “I am self-taught. I have no theories about writing that might help others. When I write I simply become what I seemingly must become” (xiii). After giving a quick sketch of his hometown (Indianapolis) and heritage (civic-conscious German-American), he describes his brother, eight years older, and his sister, dead from cancer, and mentions how two statements from them sum up his work: “cleaning shit off practically everything” and “no pain” (xiii–xiv). What he is, his family was; and what it all adds up to is his fiction. Having been accused (by the *New Yorker*) of having produced nothing more than “a series of narcissistic giggles,” he takes the joke and rolls with it, inviting the reader to picture him “as the White Rock girl, kneeling on a boulder in a nightgown, either looking for minnows or adoring her own reflection” (xv).

And that's it. Take it or leave it. Plenty had left it; in 1968 Kurt Vonnegut was not yet famous. In a year, thanks to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he would be, a sudden onslaught of attention that unnerved him and an influx of great wealth that struck him as a cruel joke, given that his family, which he'd worked so hard, even desperately, to support was now raised and departed. Thanks to heavy promotion by the book's publisher, Seymour Lawrence, Vonnegut's name was brought to the attention of critics and book-review editors, so that when *Slaughterhouse-Five* came to them next year, they'd have an awareness that the author was not a neophyte but a veteran of twenty years' sales to the slicks, an honorable enough profession to working journalists tasked with producing a newspaper's review section or writing commentary for the mass market. Indeed Seymour Lawrence had discovered Kurt Vonnegut by virtue of one of the man's own pieces of working journalism, a review of *The Random House Dictionary* published in the *New York Times Book Review* for October 30, 1966. It appears in *Welcome to the Monkey House* as "New Dictionary," and insiders can note why it may have struck Lawrence's eye: as a young man he'd worked for publisher Bennett Cerf, who is teased here. But the broader view is more helpful, which is that Seymour Lawrence had noticed the writer's Mark Twain-like appeal, an infectious use of the vernacular for bringing down abstractions and theoretics to a practical level. And also for having great fun with practically nothing! How on earth does one review a new dictionary? Of course, you can see if it has included any dirty words. But even the book's deep seriousness, its reason for existing, can be made both funny and insightful, made insightful *by means of* the fun.

Take the issue of prescriptive versus descriptive linguistics. Anyone reading the *Times Book Review* would already know, or could figure out from the terms themselves, that the former means how people should talk (according to the rules of grammar and syntax), whereas the latter is how people actually do converse. Sound interesting? Only if it's going to be on the final exam. So leave it. But here's how Kurt Vonnegut, still an unknown in 1966, put the matter: "Prescriptive, as nearly as I could tell, was like an honest cop, and descriptive was like a boozed-up war buddy from Mobile, Ala." (108). At least one reader, Seymour Lawrence, a powerful publisher with his own line at the Delacorte Press division of Dell Publishing, took it, and the rest is literary history.

From that stature achieved in literary history, Kurt Vonnegut writes his 1999 introduction to *Bagombo Snuff Box*, the uncollected short stories from the 1950s that scholar Peter Reed had talked him into saving. "I myself hadn't saved one scrap of paper from that part of my life," Kurt says at the opening. "I didn't think it would amount to a hill of beans. All I wanted to do was support a

family” (1). This is an important issue for the author, one that he drew further attention to when promoting the book on Michael Feldman’s National Public Radio show, *Whad’Ya Know?* (October 2, 1999). Feldman, of course, received Vonnegut as a major author, famous for novels that had stretched the limits of innovation. Why, he asked, had Kurt written these apparently traditional pieces?

“Because I had to support my God-damn family,” Vonnegut replied, bantering the line back and forth with Feldman throughout the interview, delighting the audience, and, in true Lenny Bruce fashion, breaking up the jazz musicians in the band.

Much of this introduction is devoted to what Vonnegut recalls as the great power of short stories—a power depleted at the end of the 1950s by the competition of television. He cites the great classics, and he describes the rise and fall of the great family weeklies that were once fat with stories and advertising. Interesting to note, he says the ads could be as stimulating as the fiction, simply because readers had to engage themselves with the magazine—so unlike just leaning back and turning on the TV. What personalizes all this history and theory is the story-within-a-story concocted for the introduction. Kurt calls it “our little domestic playlet” (5), in which Mother welcomes her teenaged son home from high school with a newly arrived copy of the *Saturday Evening Post*; he starts reading it and comes alive with its stimuli to the imagination, and—after all the usual disappointments of a day in school wash away—feels better. A few hours later Dad comes home, tired and vexed as well. Young Kurt directs him to the story he himself has just finished, giving him the warmed-up easy chair for a comfortable reading experience. Soon Dad feels better, too.

Television ended all this—for the magazines, which lost their advertising, and for readers, whose attention was now lulled rather than stirred. What this meant for Kurt Vonnegut was that short stories became harder and harder to sell, forcing him into such bridging quasi-employments as selling Saab automobiles, at the time virtually unmarketable to Americans, a story as hilarious as anything he’d write for the *Post*. Retelling it in 1999 made him feel better than he surely did in the 1950s, struggling to keep his family afloat. Knowing how by all this hard work Kurt finally succeeded, we cheer him along. It makes us feel part of the action, as the author goes on to say in conclusion, regarding the proper effect of a well-written story: “It makes the reader feel, even though he or she doesn’t know it, as though he or she is eavesdropping on a fascinating conversation between two people at the next table, say, in a restaurant” (11).

One more point should be added, and that’s the manner in which those overheard conversations in Kurt Vonnegut’s stories become so accessible. It’s

because the language being spoken is the reader's own, the common vernacular of the great American middle class. Prescriptive linguistics? "An honest cop." Descriptive linguistics? "A boozed-up war buddy from Mobile, Alabama."

Kurt Vonnegut's last short story for the *Saturday Evening Post* was written in 1963, but never appeared there, though it is included in *Welcome to the Monkey House*. "The Hyannis Port Story" signals not only the end of Kurt Vonnegut's 1950s, but his transition to the 1960s, for what else was the presidency of John F. Kennedy? That's the story's subject, a new era being described in terms from the previous one that manage to make the innovation understandable.

All the hallmarks of Vonnegut's family magazine fiction are here, including the narrator from North Crawford, New Hampshire (a mythical small town much like West Barnstable, but without the readerly distraction of being located on Cape Cod) and his simple, familiar occupation (in this case selling and installing storm windows and screens). It's 1963, and the latest wrinkle in America's popular culture is the Kennedy phenomenon, a radically new take on both politics and lifestyles. At the moment, that style is running up against a possible counterrevolution, the candidacy of his likely opponent in the next election, Senator Barry Goldwater. It's a local debate over Goldwater that, by virtue of an amusing confusion, lands the narrator a job in Hyannis Port, "practically in the front yard of President Kennedy's summer home" (133). The customer is a preposterously mannered old-money conservative named Commodore William Rumfoord (there's that aristocratic name again), "Commodore" for his honorary rank at the yacht club. Rumfoord is not only a Goldwater supporter, but despises the Kennedy clan with a vengeance steeped in a century of social history.

Even before he gets to the Commodore's home, the narrator lets readers see the provocation, because the road into Hyannis is peppered with examples of Kennedy-mania, including "the *Presidential Motor Inn*, the *First Family Waffle Shop*, the *PT-109 Cocktail Lounge*, and a miniature golf course called the *New Frontier*" (71). Well, before taking on his installation job, the narrator needs lunch and so opts into the Kennedy craze at stage two, hoping to get a waffle. But the menu tells him it's not that easy, because all the items are named after the Kennedy family and associates. "A waffle with strawberries and cream was a *Jackie*," he notes, unsurprised. "A waffle with a scoop of ice cream was a *Caroline*" (readers can appreciate the cuteness, the sweetness of it all—they are still participating in the action). But then things get seriously weird, because, as the narrator notes, "They even had a waffle named *Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.*" That's too much for Vonnegut's readers, so the ridiculousness stops there. But what

about lunch, a necessity for both plot and survival? “I had a thing called a *Teddy*” the tradesman reveals, letting it remain mercifully undescribed, accompanied by his own refamiliarization of the entire scene, “a cup of *Joe*” (137).

A cup of Joe is the sole survivor from the 1950s and several decades preceding, but it gets the narrator (and us readers) through the story’s first set of challenges. And what are those challenges? *Signs*. As literary theorists were just beginning to suggest, signs for things could be something quite apart from the things themselves that they describe. *Descriptions are their own reality*, deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze had just begun arguing, helping to establish the new cultural understanding now called postmodernism. In “The Hyannis Port Story,” Kurt Vonnegut was making that same argument, too, in his own vernacular terms. How else to explain all this Kennedy hysteria? And what about the contrary attitude of Commodore Rumfoord, whose home, right next door to President Kennedy’s, is outfitted with a huge sign of its own: a portrait of Barry Goldwater, with bicycle reflectors for eyes and floodlit with blinkers.

“A man who sells storm windows can never be really sure about what class he belongs to,” the narrator admits, having taken a paragraphed pause after encountering the Goldwater sign, “especially if he installs the windows, too” (137). But as he goes about his work, trying to keep to himself, the man can’t help but notice how the Commodore’s own world of signs, once stable, has been knocked awry by the Kennedys’ new descriptions. A yachting harbor gone from sail to motors, a social climate in which poor Irish immigrants can rise to wealth and power, the futility of having named his son Robert Taft Rumfoord when the Republican party would be turning to the former Democrat Dwight D. Eisenhower instead—all this is disappointing indeed. But what the narrator’s presence reveals is that the Commodore’s greatest disappointment is in having nothing to do. When he learns this, as the value of work is being quietly demonstrated by the narrator, he comes to terms with the world, newly described as it is.

As such, this would be a simply sentimental ending. But Kurt Vonnegut has more. The Commodore turns off his sign, realizing how mean he’s been to insult his neighbor. Does this mean his participation in the semiological world of postmodernism is over, too? Not at all. Because that evening, as the Commodore, his wife, and the narrator are relaxing on the veranda, enjoying the fruits of a job well done, a voice calls up to them. It is, as the story notes, that of “the President of the United States” (144), asking that the lights be turned back on.

Dumfounded, Rumfoord wonders why.

Were the Commodore's sign systems still operating as such, President Kennedy's first reason would have enraged him: Soviet premier Khrushchev's son-in-law is visiting and would like to see it. But the real reason is more familiar, the stuff of neighbors and neighborhoods and welcoming landmarks everywhere. Could the lights please be left on?, the President asks. "That way," he explains, "I can find my way home" (145).

Thus Kurt Vonnegut makes his transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. The *Post* soon died (as a family weekly), and postmodernism flourished (not just as a theory but as an index to an entire cultural transformation), but this new world could be understood by a simple readjustment of a few terms from the old.

"The Hyannis Port Story" was set in galleys and ready to run in a late 1963 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* when the president's assassination caused it to be cancelled. It did appear in 1968 as part of *Welcome to the Monkey House*, squarely within a newer age when assassinations had become hideously more common. But in 1971, when assembling the anthology *Innovative Fiction*, all I knew was that the piece had been collected with no previous attribution. As I'd already been dealing with major authors on bibliographical matters—Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, Ronald Sukenick, and such—I guessed I could write Kurt Vonnegut and ask him.

We'd yet to have any contact; that wouldn't come until a year later. For now, all I had was an address in *Who's Who*: Scudder's Lane, West Barnstable, Massachusetts. So I wrote, asking about the provenance of "The Hyannis Port Story" and whether my own list of uncollected works had any gaps.

Jane Vonnegut answered. Her husband "was away," she noted. In a few months Kurt's prefatory materials to his play, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (1971), would reveal why and where: to New York City, where he was starting a new life apart from his wife and family home. The reasons he gave for it were much the same as son Mark would detail in the Christmas Eve scene from *The Eden Express*, including pressures of fame and the emptiness of a house which all the children, now raised, had left. But back on Cape Cod, Jane was still doing wifely duty, generously answering my letter with a typewritten list of stories I'd missed. Plus a full account of the Kennedy story's history. Her husband was gone, but his files were still there—abandoned, as he'd say in *Bagombo Snuff Box*, as such entertainments were meant to last "about as long as individual lightning bugs" (2). But in 1971 Jane had them, and she was sharing them with me.

It's no wonder that family life for Kurt Vonnegut had come apart. The 1960s were a difficult decade for him, for professional reasons. The story market among the old family weeklies had dried up. Paperback originals could net a fair advance, but not garner serious reviews, and hence were not reputation-building. Switching to hardcover novels did not work for him, either—although there were some reviews, nothing until the decade's end sold well at all. With his children approaching college age, fill-in jobs were no longer enough, and so in 1965 he was forced to leave his family in Massachusetts and come by himself to the University of Iowa, where he taught creative writing for two years. That was a test of his marriage as well. But publisher Seymour Lawrence intervened with a three-book contract, a Guggenheim Fellowship got him out of Iowa City, and by 1968 Kurt was back in West Barnstable, writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The success of that novel shows that however difficult the 1960s were for his profession, the cultural changes of that decade were not too much for his writing to handle. Much like "The Hyannis Port Story," his novels began working with the new cultural factors that accompanied and followed the Kennedy presidency. While the America of 1960 might not seem all that different from 1950, the country in 1970 was a world apart from both. With his works of the coming decade—*Mother Night*; *Cat's Cradle*; *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; and, above all, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the essays later collected as *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*—Kurt Vonnegut articulated the terms of that transition with a structure that everyone could understand.