



VINTAGE

ARMAGEDDON IN RETROSPECT

KURT VONNEGUT



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About the Book

First published on the anniversary of Kurt Vonnegut's death, *Armageddon in Retrospect* is a collection of twelve new and unpublished writings on war and peace. Imbued with Vonnegut's trademark rueful humour, the pieces range from a visceral nonfiction recollection of the destruction of Dresden during World War II – a piece that is as timely today as it was then – to a painfully funny short story about three privates and their fantasies of the perfect first meal upon returning home from war, to a darker, more poignant story about the impossibility of shielding our children from the temptations of violence. Also included are Vonnegut's last speech as well as an assortment of his artwork, with an introduction by the author's son, Mark Vonnegut. *Armageddon in Retrospect* says as much about the times in which we live as it does about the genius of the writer.

About the Author

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (November 11, 1922 – April 11, 2007), was a writer, lecturer and painter. First published in 1950, he went on to write fourteen novels, four plays, and three short story collections, in addition to countless works of short fiction and nonfiction.

Mark Vonnegut is a son of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. He is a pediatrician and the author of a memoir, *The Eden Express*.

ALSO BY KURT VONNEGUT

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List of Illustrations

[See here](#). Self-portrait courtesy Kurt Vonnegut & Origami Express LLC.

[See here](#) & [here](#). Sketches courtesty Edie Vonnegut.

[See here](#). Letter from Kurt Vonnegut courtesy The Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Trust; facsimile provided by the Indiana Historical Society.

[See here](#). “Back Door” courtesy Kurt Vonnegut & Origami Express LLC.

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[See here](#). “Trust Me” courtesy Kurt Vonnegut & Origami Express LLC.

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[See here](#). “Big Goodbye” courtesy Kurt Vonnegut & Origami Express LLC.

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[See here](#). “Confetti #8” courtesy Kurt Vonnegut & Origami Express LLC.

Armageddon in Retrospect

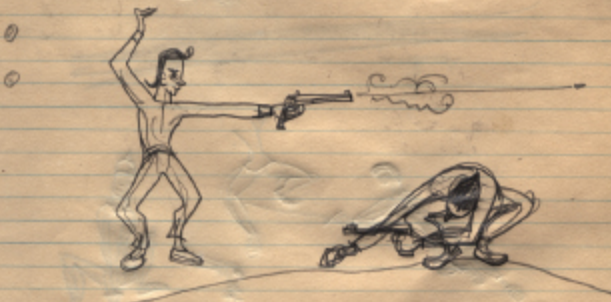
And Other New and Unpublished Writings
on War and Peace

Kurt Vonnegut

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PLANET

PLANET





Introduction

I trust my writing most and others seem to trust it most when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am.

We might as well have been throwing cream pies.

KURT, ESTIMATING THE NET EFFECT OF THE
NET ANTIWAR MOVEMENT ON THE COURSE OF
THE VIETNAM WAR

WRITING WAS A spiritual exercise for my father, the only thing he really believed in. He wanted to get things right but never thought that his writing was going to have much effect on the course of things. His models were Jonah, Lincoln, Melville, and Twain.

He rewrote and rewrote and rewrote, muttering whatever he had just written over and over, tilting his head back and forth, gesturing with his hands, changing the pitch and rhythm of the words. Then he would pause, thoughtfully rip the barely written-on sheet of typing paper from the typewriter, crumple it up, throw it away, and start over again. It seemed like an odd way for a grown-up to spend his time, but I was just a child who didn't know much.

He had an extra gear language-wise. At eighty-plus he was still doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzles quickly and in ink and never asking for help. As soon as I told him the verb came last, he could translate my Latin homework at sight, without having ever taken Latin. His novels, speeches, short stories, and even dust-jacket comments are very carefully crafted. Anyone who thinks that Kurt's jokes or essays came easily or were written off the cuff hasn't tried to write.

One of his favorite jokes was about a guy who was smuggling wheelbarrows. Every day for years and years a customs agent carefully searched through this guy's wheelbarrow.

Finally, when he was about to retire, the customs agent asked the guy, "We've become friends. I've searched your wheelbarrow every day for many years. What is it you're smuggling?"

"My friend, I am smuggling wheelbarrows."

Kurt would often laugh so hard at his own jokes that he would end up bent in half, looking up with his head in his lap. If it started a coughing fit, it could get a little scary.

When I complained about being paid fifty dollars for an article that had taken me a week to write, he said I should take into account what it would have cost me to take out a two-page ad announcing that I could write.

Anyone who wrote or tried to write was special to Kurt. And he wanted to help. More than once I heard him talking slowly and carefully to drunks who managed to get him on the phone about how to make a story or a joke, the wheelbarrow, work.

"Who was that?"

"I don't know."

When Kurt wrote, he was setting out on a quest. He knew, because it had happened before, that if he could keep the feet moving, he might stumble over something good and work it and work it and make it his own. But as many times as it happened, Kurt didn't have much self-confidence. He worried that every good idea he got might be his last and that any apparent success he had had would dry up and blow away.

He worried that he had skinny legs and wasn't a good tennis player.

He had a hard time letting himself be happy, but couldn't quite hide the glee he got from writing well.

The unhappiest times in his life were those months and sometimes a whole year when he couldn't write, when he was "blocked." He'd try just about anything to get unblocked, but he was very nervous and suspicious about psychiatry. In my early-to-mid-twenties he let it slip that he was afraid that therapy might make him normal and well adjusted, and that would be the end of his writing. I tried to reassure him that psychiatrists weren't nearly that good.

"If you can't write clearly, you probably don't think nearly as well as you think you do," he told me. If you ever think something he wrote was sloppy, you might be right, but just to be sure, read it again.

A little kid coming of age in Indiana in the Depression decides he wants to be a writer, a famous writer, and that's what ends up happening. What are the odds? He threw a lot of spaghetti up against the wall and developed a keen sense of what was going to stick.

When I was sixteen, he couldn't get a job teaching English at Cape Cod Community College. My mother claimed that she went into bookstores and ordered his books under a false name so the books would at least be in the stores and maybe someone would buy them. Five years later he published *Slaughterhouse-Five* and had a million-dollar multi-book contract. It took some getting used to. Now, for most people looking back, Kurt's being a successful, even famous, writer is an "of course" kind of thing. For me it looks like something that very easily might have not happened.

He often said he had to be a writer because he wasn't good at anything else. He was not good at being an employee. Back in the mid-1950s, he was employed by *Sports Illustrated*, briefly. He reported to work, was asked to write a short piece on a racehorse that had jumped over a

fence and tried to run away. Kurt stared at the blank piece of paper all morning and then typed, "The horse jumped over the fucking fence," and walked out, self-employed again.

I've never known a person less interested in food. The chain-smoking had something to do with it. When he complained about living so long, I told him that God was curious about how many cigarettes a human could smoke and He couldn't help wondering what was going to come out of Kurt's mouth next. The thing that made it hard to take him seriously when he said he was all done and had nothing more to say was that he started saying he was done in his mid-forties and he was still surprising people and coming up with good stuff in his mid-eighties.

The most radical, audacious thing to think is that there might be some point to working hard and thinking hard and reading hard and writing hard and trying to be of service.

He was a writer who believed in the magic of the process—both what it did for him and what it could do for readers. The reader's time and attention were sacred to him. He connected with people on a visceral level because he realized that content was not the whole story. Kurt was and is like a gateway drug or a shoehorn. Once the reader is over the threshold, other writers become accessible.

"Does anyone out of high school still read me?"

He taught how stories were told and taught readers how to read. His writings will continue to do that for a long time. He was and is subversive, but not the way people thought he was. He was the least wild-and-crazy guy I ever knew. No drugs. No fast cars.

He tried always to be on the side of the angels. He didn't think the war in Iraq was going to happen, right up until it did. It broke his heart not because he gave a damn about Iraq but because he loved America and believed that the land and people of Lincoln and Twain would find a way to be

right. He believed, like his immigrant forefathers, that America could be a beacon and a paradise.

He couldn't help thinking that all that money we were spending blowing up things and killing people so far away, making people the world over hate and fear us, would have been better spent on public education and libraries. It's hard to imagine that history won't prove him right, if it hasn't already.

Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are, that you are alone, that no one has ever felt the way you have. What occurs to people when they read Kurt is that things are much more up for grabs than they thought they were. The world is a slightly different place just because they read a damn book. Imagine that.

It's common knowledge that Kurt was depressed, but as with a lot of things that are common knowledge, there are good reasons to doubt it. He didn't want to be happy and he said a lot of depressing things, but I honestly don't think he was ever depressed.

He was like an extrovert who wanted to be an introvert, a very social guy who wanted to be a loner, a lucky person who would have preferred to be unlucky. An optimist posing as a pessimist, hoping people will take heed. It wasn't until the Iraq War and the end of his life that he became sincerely gloomy.

There was a bizarre, surreal incident when he took too many pills and ended up in a psych hospital, but it never felt like he was in any danger. Within a day he was bouncing around the dayroom playing Ping-Pong and making friends. It seemed like he was doing a not very convincing imitation of someone with mental illness.

The psychiatrist at the hospital told me, "Your dad's depressed. We're going to put him on an antidepressant."

“Okay, but he doesn’t seem to have any of the symptoms I’m used to seeing in depression. He’s not slowed down, he doesn’t look sad, he’s still quick on the uptake.”

“He did try to kill himself,” the psychiatrist said.

“Well, sort of.” Of all the medications he took, there wasn’t a toxic level of anything. He had a barely therapeutic level of Tylenol.

“Do you not think we should put him on antidepressants? We have to do something.”

“I just thought I should mention that he doesn’t seem depressed. It’s very hard to say what Kurt is. I’m not saying he’s well.”

The difference between my fans and Kurt’s is that my fans know they’re mentally ill.

Kurt could pitch better than he could catch. It was routine for him to write and say provocative, not always kind things about people in the family. We learned to get over it. It was just Kurt. But when I mentioned in an article that Kurt, wanting to be a famous pessimist, might have envied Twain and Lincoln their dead children, he went ballistic.

“I was just trying to pull readers in. No one but you is going to take it even a little seriously.”

“I know how jokes work.”

“So do I.”

Click and click, we hung up.

“If I should die, God forbid.”

Every few years he sent me a letter telling me what to do in the event of his death. Every time, except the last, the letter would be followed by a phone call, reassuring me that it wasn’t a suicide note. The day before he sent me his last “If I should die” letter, he finished the speech he was to deliver in Indiana to kick off the year of Kurt Vonnegut. Two

weeks later he fell, hit his head, and irreversibly scrambled his precious egg.

I got to study that last speech much closer than most, since I was asked to deliver it. I couldn't help wondering, "How on earth does he get away with some of this crap?" His audience made it work. I quickly realized that I was reading his words to an auditorium and a world utterly in love with my father who would have followed him anywhere.

"[I'm] as celibate as fifty percent of the heterosexual Roman Catholic clergy" is a sentence with no meaning. "A twerp [is] a guy who put a set of false teeth up his rear end and bit the buttons off the back seats of taxicabs." "A snarf is someone who sniffs girls' bicycle seats." Where oh where is my dear father going? And then he would say something that cut to the heart of the matter and was outrageous and true, and you believed it partly because he had just been talking about celibacy and twerps and snarfs.

"I wouldn't be a doctor for anything. That's got to be the worst job in the world."

One of our last conversations:

"How old are you, Mark?"

"I'm fifty-nine, Dad."

"That's old."

"Yes it is, Dad."

I loved him dearly.

These writings, mostly undated and all unpublished, hold up very nicely by themselves. They don't need any commentary by me. Even if the content of any given piece isn't interesting to you, look at the structure and rhythm and choices of words. If you can't learn about reading and writing from Kurt, maybe you should be doing something else.