

My last word

*Kurt Vonnegut
interviewed by
J. Rentilly*

J. Rentilly, a journalist based in Los Angeles, interviewed Kurt Vonnegut for US Airways magazine, shortly before his death in April 2007. We reprint the interview with grateful acknowledgements. J. Rentilly's remarks are in italic and Kurt Vonnegut's in ordinary type.

Kurt Vonnegut was once called ‘the laughing prophet of doom’. While the description is somewhat apt, it doesn’t come close to telling the whole story about the late author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and recent bestseller *A Man Without a Country*, as well as 20 other books. A World War Two veteran and prisoner of war who survived the bombing of Dresden, Vonnegut was also a widely quoted social critic, an easily recognizable public figure (yes, that was Vonnegut in the Rodney Dangerfield campus comedy *Back to School*), and, in recent years, a prolific artist. Vonnegut’s paintings, drawings, and sculpture – many of them inspired by themes or characters in his writings – are critically acclaimed and available for limited-edition purchase at kurtvonnegut.com.

All too often, Vonnegut was shoehorned into the ‘science-fiction ghetto’ – a sore underestimation of his witty, soulful, and wizened prose. But in his hometown of Indianapolis, 2007 marks a yearlong celebration of all things Vonnegut. Many readers and critics alike believe ‘The Year of Vonnegut’, produced by the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library and the Indianapolis Cultural Development Commission, is a long time coming, and that Vonnegut – whose writings frequently intimate that time is merely illusory – is a treasure of the past, present, and future. ‘I think these folks must be crazy’, the author said about the acclaim, chasing the comment with an infectious, cigarette-charred laugh. ‘But that’s okay by me.’

Tell me the reasons you’ve been attracted to a life of creation, whether as a writer or an artist.

I’ve been drawing all my life, just as a hobby, without really having shows or anything. It’s just an agreeable thing to do, and I recommend it to everybody. I always say to people, practise an art, no matter how well or badly you do it, because then you have the experience of

becoming, and it makes your soul grow. That includes singing, dancing, writing, drawing, playing a musical instrument. One thing I hate about school committees today is that they cut arts programs out of the curriculum because they say the arts aren't a way to make a living. Well, there are lots of things worth doing that are no way to make a living. [*Laughs.*] They are agreeable ways to make a more agreeable life.

I am having some success with paintings now because I'm well known. People would have no interest in them otherwise, and that's all right. I made them simply for the pleasure of creation. I speak with real painters and real artists from time to time about when they get their rocks off, and it's the process of actually doing it. The rest of it – rave reviews or flops, or whatever – is just noise to them. It's the doing that matters, the becoming. The rest of it doesn't really matter.

In the process of your becoming, you've given the world much warmth and humour. That matters, doesn't it?

I asked my son Mark what he thought life was all about, and he said, 'We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is'. I think that says it best. You can do that as a comedian, a writer, a painter, a musician. He's a paediatrician. There are all kinds of ways we can help each other get through today. There are some things that help. Musicians really do it for me. I wish I were one, because they help a lot. They help us get through a couple hours.

When did the art become important to you, something you did regularly?

My grandfather, Bernard Vonnegut, was an Indianapolis architect and a painter. My father was an architect and a painter. My sister was a very good sculptress. So there were artists and art supplies around the house all the time. I could fart around as much as I wanted. I didn't take it seriously. I was as unserious as Jackson Pollock, throwing a canvas on the ground and messing it up in the most beautiful ways.

'A lack of seriousness', you wrote, 'has led to all sorts of wonderful insights'.

Yes. The world is too serious. To get mad at a work of art – because maybe somebody, somewhere is blowing his stack over what I've done – is like getting mad at a hot fudge sundae.

Nearly forty years after Slaughterhouse-Five, people still love reading your books. Why do you think your books have such enduring appeal?

I've said it before: I write in the voice of a child. That makes me readable in high school. [*Laughs.*] Not too many big sentences. But I hope that my ideas attract a lively dialogue, even if my sentences are simple. Simple sentences have always served me well. And I don't use semicolons. It's hard to read anyway, especially

for high school kids. Also, I avoid irony. I don't like people saying one thing and meaning the other.

Do you feel we're living through an odd time in history, both nationally and globally?

Well, my late brother Bernie, who was a great expert on weather – at one point he knew more about tornadoes than anybody else on the planet, I imagine – was always approached by people who knew his background and wanted him to be an expert about it. 'Bernie, isn't this weather unusual?' And he would say, 'The weather is always unusual'. I mean, this is a very special time in history, but every time is.

When Timequake was published ten years ago, you said you were basically retired as a writer. You've published two essay collections since then, God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian and the best-selling A Man Without a Country. I wonder if the visual arts have become a substitute for writing in your life.

Well, it's something to do in my old age. [Laughs.] As you may know, I'm suing a cigarette company because their product hasn't killed me yet.

Is it a different creative process for you, sitting down to write or picking up a paintbrush?

No. I used to teach a writer's workshop at the University of Iowa back in the '60s, and I would say at the start of every semester, 'The role model for this course is Vincent van Gogh – who sold two paintings to his brother'. [Laughs.] I just sit and wait to see what's inside me, and that's the case for writing or for drawing, and then out it comes. There are times when nothing comes. James Brooks, the fine abstract-expressionist, I asked him what painting was like for him, and he said, 'I put the first stroke on the canvas and then the canvas has to do half the work'. That's how serious painters are. They're waiting for the canvas to do half the work. [Laughs.] Come on. Wake up.

Your wife, Jill Krementz, is a superb photographer. I wonder if her work has had any influence or provided inspiration for you as an artist.

No. But it's been a pretty big part of the marriage. I fell in love with her talent. [Laughs.] I'm just so proud of her. As a consumer of her work, I like it so much, and she really knows what she's doing. She uses very little film. She just knows when to shoot. I asked her one time how she knew when to shoot. She told me about a photo session she was doing between a man and a woman [who were interested in] each other, and the moment to shoot was when the man ran out of material and no longer knew what to say. [Laughs.]

We live in a very visual world today. Do words have any power left?

I was at a symposium some years back with my friends Joseph Heller and William Styron, both dead now, and we were talking about the death of the novel and the death of poetry, and Styron pointed out that the novel has always been an élitist art form. It's an art form for very few people, because only a few can read very well. I've said that to open a novel is to arrive in a music hall and be handed a viola. You have to perform. [*Laughs.*] To stare at horizontal lines of phonetic symbols and Arabic numbers and to be able to put a show on in your head, it requires the reader to perform. If you can do it, you can go whaling in the South Pacific with Herman Melville, or you can watch Madame Bovary make a mess of her life in Paris. With pictures and movies, all you have to do is sit there and look at them and it happens to you.

Many years ago, you said that a writer's job is to use the time of a stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted. There are a lot of ways for a stranger to pass time these days.

That's right. There are all these other things to do with time. It used to be people would wonder what the hell they were going to do for the winter. [*Laughs.*] Then a big book would come out – a big, wonderful book – and everybody would be reading it to pass the time. It was a very primitive experiment, before television, where people would have to look at ink on paper, for God's sake. I myself grew up when radio was very important. I'd come home from school and turn on the radio. There were funny comedians and wonderful music, and there were plays. I used to pass time with radio. Now, you don't have to be literate to have a nice time.

You've stated that television is one of the most viable art forms in the world today.

Well, it is. It works like a dream. It's a way to hold attention, and it's awfully good at that. For a lot of people, TV is life itself. Churches used to provide people with better company than they had at home, but now, no matter what your neighbourhood life or family life is like, you turn on the television and you get relatives, family. I don't know if you've heard about this, but scientists have created baby geese that believe that an airplane is their mother. Human beings will believe in all kinds of things that aren't true, and that's okay. And TV is a part of that.

In your opinion, what's good on TV?

I have seen episodes of TV that would have been major Broadway plays in the '20s and '30s. That's where so much of our great writing is going on, [even] if very rarely. *Law & Order*, for example, deals with very subtle issues and social

problems, very effectively and truthfully. That's one of the best things going, that show.

2007 has been dubbed 'The Year of Vonnegut'. When we spoke a few years back, you said that the acceptance of your community has always been important to you. Is this paradise found?

Well, paradise lost, really. We all should have extended families. We need them, just like we need vitamins and minerals. And most of us don't have those extended families anymore. I had one in Indianapolis, when I was born, which was in 1922. I had uncles and aunts all over the place, and cousins, family businesses that I could go into, whole rows of cottages that were full of my relatives. There was always someone to talk with, to play with, to learn from. I've lost all of that. They have been dispersed.

But the community, more generally speaking, is honouring you now – with celebrations and festivals. What do you make of that?

It's a very sweet honour. Of course, what it is, it's the idea of librarians there in Indianapolis – they have a great public library system, of which I was a great beneficiary when I was a kid – and it's a celebration of books and reading, really. Librarians, real heroes of our nation, have come forward to make this celebration, and that's a wonderful thing.

Is there another book in you, by chance?

No. Look, I'm 84 years old. Writers of fiction have usually done their best work by the time they're 45. Chess masters are through when they're 35, and so are baseball players. There are plenty of other people writing. Let them do it.

So what's the old man's game, then?

My country is in ruins. So I'm a fish in a poisoned fishbowl. I'm mostly just heartsick about this. There should have been hope. This should have been a great country. But we are despised all over the world now. I was hoping to build a country and add to its literature. That's why I served in World War Two, and that's why I wrote books.

When someone reads one of your books, what would you like them to take from the experience?

Well, I'd like the guy – or the girl, of course – to put the book down and think, 'This is the greatest man who ever lived.' [*Laughs.*]