

**Program:** A Tale of Two Anniversaries

**Speaker:** Chris Lafave, Curator with the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library

**Introduced by:** Jeff Rasley

**Attendance:** 132

**Guests:** Jim Bebet (sp?), Susan Brandt, Bill Clemens, Mark Owens, Philip Sowders, Sue Wilson, Horst Winkler

**Scribe:** Larry Hutchison

**Editor:** Carl Warner

Our speaker today was Chris Lafave, Curator of the Vonnegut Museum\*Library. The museum is located across the street from the Madame Walker Theatre. His subject was Kurt Vonnegut and, using humor, he talked about influencing events in Kurt's life with a focus on two of his novels, "The Sirens of Titan" and "Slaughterhouse Five".

Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922, a descendant of German immigrants that had come to this country from Westphalia. The early generations of the family were commercially successful, most notably known for founding the Vonnegut Hardware Company. His father, Kurt Sr., was a skilled architect known for having designed the Das Deutsche Haus (The Athenaeum) and the Fletcher Trust Building. His mother, Edith, was a Lieber who were brewers and quite wealthy. As a youngster

Vonnegut started at the exclusive Orchard School, but the economic wellbeing of the family began to deteriorate. The brewery of the Lieber family was closed as a result of prohibition, and The Great Depression effectively ruined the architecture business of his father. Vonnegut's brother and sister had graduated from private schools but economics dictated that Kurt Jr. attend public schools which led him to Shortridge High School where he wrote for the school paper, the Shortridge Daily Echo, and graduated in 1940.

Vonnegut's early adult years were checkered and unfocused. He started at Cornell University after high school but was uninterested in his major (bio-chemistry) and turned out to be an indifferent student. He joined his father's fraternity, Delta Upsilon (Drunks Unlimited?) and wrote for The Cornell Daily Sun. On the whole, scholarly pursuits were unappealing, and he left Cornell after being placed on academic probation. At various times over the next few years, he attended four other universities but never acquired a degree.

By the time he left Cornell WWII was in full swing, and he enlisted in the Army in March 1943. Just as his family setting had been instrumental in influencing his outlook on life, the events of the war impacted him profoundly. In 1944 while on leave, his mother committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. Vonnegut eventually got sent to Europe and participated in The Battle of the Bulge where he was captured by German forces in December 1944. This led to him being shipped as a prisoner to Dresden, a city that no one expected to be bombed because of its lack of military significance. This was not the case as the city was devastatingly firebombed in early 1945 while Vonnegut and his fellow prisoners holed up in a meat locker. Eventually he was freed and repatriated to the U.S.

After the war, he seemed to continue his search to find who he was. His family background demanded that he make a success of himself in some field other than writing. For a while he was enrolled as a student of anthropology at the University of Chicago, and later he worked at GE. While at GE, he had his first piece published in 1950 in Collier's magazine. With limited successes in his background, Vonnegut resigned from GE, moved to Cape Cod, and began to write full time. Over the next forty-five years, he devoted himself to writing. His output included fourteen novels, three



collections of short stories, five plays and five works of non-fiction. Mr. Lafavre's speech today focused on two of the novels.

#### Slaughterhouse Five:

The protagonist of this novel is Billy Pilgrim. While not based on him directly, many of the experiences of Billy Pilgrim are those of Vonnegut. The humor is black and the settings of non-earth travel are off the wall. And the novel is anti-war, written at a time (1969) when the nation was reeling from the effects of the Vietnam War, which no doubt contributed to its popularity.

#### The Sirens of Titan:

This science-fiction novel is concerned with free will and being stripped of it. Remember Vonnegut wanting to write early in life and being pushed by family into careers that led to "success"? The characters in this novel, the main being Malachi Constant, have lost their free will and can only make the best of the situation.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. died in April 2007 as a result of brain injuries incurred by a fall at his home. He had by this time lived in New York City for many years. He was a prolific writer who had suffered from depression for much of his life and had attempted suicide in 1984. Some of his writings are absurd to the extreme (maybe his life was extreme), but he clearly was a giant in American literature in the late twentieth century.

Chris Lafavre