The American Century Theater presents

Happy Birthday, Wanda June

by Kurt Vonnegut

March 7-29, 2008

AUDIENCE GUIDE

Compiled, Written and Edited by Jack Marshall

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, and neglected American dramatic works of the Twentieth Century… what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past artists, nor can we afford to lose our mooring to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all citizens, of all ages and all points of view.

These Audience Guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

Like everything we do to keep alive and vital the great stage works of the Twentieth Century, these study guides are made possible in great part by the support of Arlington County's Cultural Affairs Division and the Virginia Commission for the Arts.

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The World of Wanda June: 1970

Kurt Vonnegut's *Happy Bithday, Wanda June* opened Off-Broadway in October of 1970. 1970, strange as it sounds, was smack dab in the middle of the Sixties. Viet Nam was still raging, as peace talks in Paris bogged down over issues like the shape of the conference table. Anti-war protests were closing down universities from coast to coast, having intensified when the United States expanded Viet Nam operations into Cambodia. At Kent State, four students were killed by the National Guard. Nothing seemed to be working right: even space exploration was turning bad, as Apollo 13 barely made it home without killing the astronauts inside.

Richard M. Nixon, of course, was the President, plotting to be re-elected in a landslide; the Watergate burglary was still in his future. The political divide in America was substantially generational; not too many adults, besides folk singers and actors, were flashing peace signs, a gesture remarkably similar to the two-finger victory sign favored by "Tricky Dick."

It seemed like everybody was arguing with everybody else. Even John, Paul, George and Ringo broke up. The most popular movies were about war and crazy warriors: George C. Scott gave one of film's most memorable performances in *Patton.* He won the Best Actor Oscar, but refused to accept the gold statuette as a protest against artistic competitions. Typical 1970. *M*A*S*H*, a Korean War comedy that seemed to connect with the growing sense that Viet Nam was pointless, was a surprise hit, while Mike Nichols' movie version of "Catch 22" disappointed the scores of Heller fans, perhaps because the events in the novel were more scary than funny when actually witnessed.

That movie monument to American rugged individualism, the Western, was in sharp decline, as Americans weren't feeling too heroic as the stories of atrocities filtered back from Southeast

Asia. Tapping into the dubious and cynical mood was another 1970s movie hit, “Midnight Cowboy.”

Boy, Jon Voight was young then.

The culture of sex, drugs and rock’n’roll was beginning to curdle too. Jimmy Hendrix and Janis Joplin, stars of Woodstock, died of drug overdoses; the next year, it would be Jim Morrison’s turn, as his fire was lit one time too many. The FDA announced that birth control pills weren’t as safe as we thought they were. Oh-oh. But AIDS was still a decade away…

The record of the year at the Grammies was the Fifth Dimension’s “Age of Aquarius,” played in elevators today. Yes, a song from a Broadway musical was #1: it was the last time that happened. Television audiences were patiently waiting for things to get interesting: “All in the Family” hadn’t shown up yet, and the hit shows were bland fare like “Room 222” and “Marcus Welby, MD,” plus the old-fashioned private-eye adventures of “Mannix.” Just try finding any of these shows in re-runs---or even on video. What ever happened to Karen Valentine?

Soviet dissident Aleksander Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for Literature, an embarrassment for the U.S.S.R. and a blow for human rights.

Meanwhile, in Kurt Vonnegut’s favorite field, technology, there were stirrings of big things to come. IBM introduced the floppy disk! But the world wide web wasn’t even a twinkle in Al Gore’s eye…

All hell would break loose in 1971, and so we can see, in retrospect, that 1970 was a year of barely suppressed tensions, ready to blow. In 1971, Courts ordered busing to relieve segregation,18-year olds got the vote, the Pentagon Papers were published, and the popular culture took a turn to the dark side.

And so it goes…

The Playwright: Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007)

Kurt Vonnegut's final work was a 2005 collection of biographical essays, "A Man Without a Country." It ends with an original poem called "Requiem," which concludes…

When the last living thing

has died on account of us,

how poetical it would be

if Earth could say,

in a voice floating up

perhaps

from the floor

of the Grand Canyon,

"It is done."

People did not like it here.

And thus in his final published words to the world did the novelist/playwright/ social critic/graphic artist distill his unique approach to life and art. Fantasy, irony, violence, death, absurdist humor and sadness, all tied together to be simultaneously coherent, disturbing, thought-provoking and wise.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born in 1922 in Indianapolis, the youngest of three children. His father was an architect; his mother, Edith, came from a wealthy brewery family. During the Depression, the Vonnegut's father was often without work, and his mother

suffered from recurring episodes of mental illness. Later she committed suicide on Mother's Day, a shattering and somehow typically ironic episode in Vonnegut's life that undoubtedly shaped his views of life, death and women. "My theory is that all women have hydrofluoric acid bottled up inside," he once wrote.

Vonnegut attended Cornell, but joined the Army before he could graduate. He was shipped to Europe with the 106th Infantry Division and fought in the snow and endless muck that was the Battle of the Bulge. His unit was almost wiped out, and Vonnegut ended up as a German prisoner of war in a camp near Dresden. He was working with other prisoners in a subterranean meat locker when British and American war planes started the now-infamous fire-bombing of this most beautiful of German cities. The work detail saved his own life, as an inferno of death raged above him.

Afterward, he was assigned to remove the charred corpses and place them into giant pyres, where they were burned a second time, into ashes. This was another experience which stayed with Vonnegut for a lifetime, intensifying and crystallizing a visceral and philosophical hatred of war.

Vonnegut returned to the United States after World War II, married his high school sweetheart, and settled in Chicago. He and his wife (the first of two) had three children, and the three became six when Vonnegut's sister, Alice, and her husband died within a day of each other, she of cancer and he in a train crash. The Vonneguts adopted their three boys.

Vonnegut worked as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau while studying for a master's degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago. His thesis was titled "The Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales." It was rejected, and he did not get his degree until many years later, when the University relented and allowed him to use his novel "Cat's Cradle" as his Masters thesis.

In 1950 he sold his first short story, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” to Collier’s magazine and moved his family to Cape Cod. He was now “a professional writer,” and produced stories for magazines like Argosy and The Saturday Evening Post. He also taught emotionally disturbed children, worked at an advertising agency and at one point started an auto dealership. Professional writers often don’t make very much money.

Vonnegut’s initial niche as a writer, one that he never really abandoned, was science fiction with an overlay of satire; for example, his second novel, “The Sirens of Titan,” prominently featured “The Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent.” In 1963, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Cat’s Cradle” was published and began to create a buzz in the literary world about its author. The book’s narrator, an adherent of the religion “Bokononism,” is writing a book about the bombing of Hiroshima and beholds the destruction of the world by a sinister substance called Ice-Nine that causes all water to freeze at room temperature.

It was “Slaughterhouse-Five,” however, released in 1969, that made Vonnegut a literary star. The book became the nation’s number one best seller on the New York Times list, established Vonnegut as a celebrity and a speaker-in-demand, and spawned a well-received Hollywood adaptation. Some schools and libraries banned the book because of its sexual content, vivid language and violence, which, of course, only added to its appeal and cult status.

“Slaughterhouse-Five” is the tale of Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut an infantry scout, who is changed by his exposure to the horrors of war. “You know — we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves,” an English colonel says in the book. “We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. My God, my God — I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade.’ ” Following his the author’s own epiphanal experience to the last detail, Billy is captured and assigned to manufacture vitamin supplements in an underground

meat locker, where the prisoners take refuge from Allied bombing.

"Slaughterhouse-Five" introduces the character of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's fictional alter ego who appeared frequently in other works through the years, and whom Vonnegut sometimes discussed in interviews as if he was a real person. The novel also launched a phrase that became Vonnegut's trademark, a cultural touchpoint, a rallying cry for opponents of the Viet Nam war, and the sign-off for TV journalist Linda Ellerbee: *And so it goes.*

The phrase ended the novel:

"Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes. Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes."

Like so many artists before and after him, success sent Vonnegut into severe depression. He vowed never to write another novel, and turned to the stage, giving Off-Broadway *Happy Birthday, Wanda June.* The strange chaos of the theater promptly drove him back to novels, though he continued to adapt many of his books for the stage and films.

He had another best-seller with "Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday" (1973), calling it a "tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast." This time his alter-ego is author Philboyd Sludge, who is writing a book about Dwayne Hoover, a wealthy auto dealer. Hoover has a breakdown after reading a novel written by Kilgore Trout, and begins to believe that everyone around him is a robot.

Another notable best-seller was "Timequake," a tale of the millennium in which a quirk in the time-space continuum compels the world to relive the 1990s. The book was, Vonnegut

confessed, a tasty hash of left-over plot summaries and autobiographical writings. Of course, Kilgore Trout was back, too. It was his last novel.

He wrote fourteen in all, as well as other plays, essays, short stories and autobiographical works. He was often accused of repeating himself, and repackaging themes and characters, charges that he cheerfully copped to. “If I’d wasted my time creating characters,” Vonnegut said in defense of his “recycling,” “I would never have gotten around to calling attention to things that really matter.” Vonnegut rejected or ignored traditional structure and punctuation. He was ingenious at inventing new words to define concepts, including "foma" (untruths that make one happy) and "granfalloons" (tribal identifications), both from "Cat's Cradle." His books were addicted to one-sentence paragraphs, exclamation points and italics. Vonnegut’s speeches were similarly eccentric, and he gave many of them. He was a favorite speaker at college commencements, where he could be counted upon to deliver funny, irreverent, quotable and often vulgar commentary on popular culture, politics, and the issues of the day. He also was a favorite of interviewers, and gave equally quotable interviews to publications ranging from college newspapers to the Paris Review and Playboy. With his disheveled manner, his shock of unkempt curly hair, his soulful eyes, Mona Lisa smirk and John Wilkes Booth moustache, Vonnegut was his own cartoon (and he was an excellent cartoonist), achieving a level of public recognition few serious novelists attain.

While his recurring themes---the absurdity of violence, environmentalism, the ironies of existence and the complexities of moral truth--- appealed, like the writings of Mark Twain (with whom Vonnegut has often been compared, and not just for his hair style. He was fond of pointing out that his grandfather was named “Clemens.”), to pessimists and cynics, Vonnegut constantly urged his readers to embrace the ethical value of kindness. This prescription was articulated eloquently by Rosewater, the main character of another of Vonnegut’s best and best-selling novels, “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater” (1975):

"Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies — 'God damn it, you've got to be kind.'"

Kurt Vonnegut died last year after suffering serious brain injuries in a fall at his Manhattan apartment. He was 84.

Vonnegut versus Hemingway

In *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, Kurt Vonnegut decided to confront a literary figure with whom he maintained a complex relationship throughout his life: Ernest Hemingway.

In some ways, they were similar. Both celebrated novelists had parents who committed suicide, Vonnegut's mother and Hemingway's father. Both were soldiers and journalists, and journalists whose training in writing sharply and concisely shaped their literary styles. Both were prone to depression: Vonnegut attempted suicide once and failed, Hemingway succeeded. One waggish critic noted this with the comment "Hemingway 1, Vonnegut 0," and sometimes Vonnegut seemed to agree. "When Hemingway killed himself he put a period at the end of his life; old age is more like a semicolon," he told the Associated Press shortly before he died. This was more wistful than it sounds, for Vonnegut had a lifetime feud with the semicolon. "Do not use semicolons," he wrote, in one of his essays about the dos and don'ts of writing. "They are transvestite hermaphrodites, standing for absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college." Later, in the same interview, Vonnegut rallied his spirits and rejected Hemingway's choice of punctuation. "My father, like Hemingway, was a gun nut and was very unhappy late in life. But he was proud of not

committing suicide. And I'll do the same, so as not to set a bad example for my children."

The two novelists developed their personal views of the world in response to shattering experiences during wartime. But Hemingway responded in the traditional straight-ahead manner of American heroes like Davy Crocket, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant and John Wayne: the goal in war is to be victorious, or at least to be courageous and unyielding in defeat. Vonnegut, in contrast, became a principle architect of the post-modern, absurdist sensibility based on the conclusion that wars couldn't be won at all. In this he had an unfair advantage over Hemingway, for Papa didn't live long enough to watch the Viet Nam War unfold. Vonnegut mused, in one of his many interviews, about whether Hemingway could have reconciled such an ambiguous conflict with his philosophy.

Vonnegut learned from Hemingway's works and studied them carefully. His commentary about his predecessor, and there was a lot of it, included much praise and admiration as well as perceptive criticism. Vonnegut clearly took some of his story-telling style from Hemingway, whom he once described as telling tales like old Indians around a camp-fire, building climaxes without the benefit of a plot. In their values and view of humanity, however, Hemingway and Vonnegut were polar opposites.

Hemingway's boyhood hero was Theodore Roosevelt, and he took T.R.'s philosophy of the vigorous life built on masculine virtues to an iconic and toxic level both in his own conduct and in his books. While Hemingway was emulating Roosevelt as a big game hunter, he was also creating his "Code hero" in novels and stories, the essentially solitary man who attains nobility through battle, courage and defeat, and who respects those he fights and kills more than the women who love him. Caring and kindness, the core virtues in Vonnegut's world, were afterthoughts to Hemingway heroes. Hemingway believed, like Teddy, that war was the forge in which a man's character was made solid and

noble. Vonnegut saw war as corruption. Hemingway embraced the embryonic environmentalism of Roosevelt, who saw nature as something that had to be preserved so that men could live in it, battle it and be part of it. He shot animals and mounted their heads on the wall. Vonnegut worried about the ecosystem.

Thus it is not surprising that when Vonnegut decided to abandon novels for playwriting after the epic success of “Slaughterhouse-Five,” he decided to build a satiric comedy around his distain for Hemingway’s philosophy. *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* is like a sitcom concept pitched by a puckish Vonnegut to a network vice-president. *Okay, picture this set-up! First, imagine a modern Odysseus returning home to Ithaca after being gone for years and presumed dead. He finds his home occupied by obnoxious suitors plotting to sleep with his wife, a confused son, and a wife whose affections have understandably cooled after so long a separation. Now imagine that the modern Odysseus is Ernest Hemingway, and while the Ithaca he left was the America of 1962, he has returned to a unfamiliar America of flower power, the sexual revolution, burgeoning civil rights for blacks, women and gays, rock music and peace marches! Pretty wild, right?*

The play almost writes itself:

…

PENELOPE

The old heroes are going to have to
get used to this, Harold--the new
heroes who refuse to fight.
They're trying to save the planet.
There's no time for battle, no
point to battle anymore.

HAROLD

I feel mocked, insulted, with no
sort of satisfaction in prospect.
We don't have to fight with steel.
I can fight with words. I'm not an

inarticulate ape, you know, who grabs a rock for want of a vocabulary. Call him up in East St. Louis, Penelope. Tell him to come here.

PENELOPE
No.

HAROLD
(emptily, turning away)
No.

Pause. He contemplates PAUL.

HAROLD
And my son, the only son of Harold Ryan--he's going to grow up to be a vanisher, too?

PENELOPE
I don't know. I hope he never hunts. I hope he never kills another human being.

HAROLD
(to PAUL, quietly)
You hope this, too?

PAUL
I don't know what I hope. But I don't think you care what I hope, anyway. You don't know me.
(indicating PENELOPE)
You don't know her, either. I don't think you know anybody. You talk to everybody just the same.

would mistake a paragraph of theirs for the prose of another writer.

Though it was a critical and commercial triumph, Mailer often downgraded his first novel, "The Naked and the Dead" (1948), by saying that it had no style for it borrowed its style from the 1930s writers who first enthralled him, especially John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell and John Steinbeck. But in books like "The Deer Park" (1955), "Advertisements for Myself" (1959), "The Armies of the Night" (1968) and "The Executioner's Song" (1979), Mailer showed himself to be a master of at least two distinct styles, one of them flat and stark in the hard-boiled Hemingway manner, the other baroque and complex, answering to every subtle vibration of his inner life. For all his public antics, Mailer's most memorable exploits took place in the arena of the sentence: arresting metaphors, paradoxical speculations, physical details that made a personality tangible. In his coverage of conventions, he could conjure up the actors in the political drama as if they were characters he invented rather than public figures he observed. This writing was fueled by a sharp intelligence, at once self-absorbed and keenly attentive, but also by his fascination with power and performance. On the page, he became another such character, as proud of his many personalities as of his protean style. Despite his gift for introspection, Mailer became more of a public person than any writer since Hemingway and Malraux. The latter's incendiary mix of activism and reflection, along with his tropism for extreme situations, made him another early model for Mailer.

Vonnegut was no world-shaker, though he eventually exerted serious influence as a guru to the young, as someone they trusted. He saw himself as an ordinary Joe with a small, peculiar gift, and he made fun of Mailer's posturing toward the end of his most popular novel, "Slaughterhouse-Five" (1969). After surviving the firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war, his plain-man hero, Billy Pilgrim, finds himself, of all places, among literary critics discussing the death of the novel -- a frequent subject in those postwar years. One of them says that since people don't read well

enough anymore, "authors had to do what Norman Mailer did, which was to perform in public what he had written." This mild joke, launched at the height of Mailer's and Vonnegut's fame, actually points to something these contemporaries, including Paley, had in common: a sense of the breakdown of the novel, blurring the lines between literary fiction and autobiography, but also poetry in Paley's case, science fiction for Vonnegut, journalism and social criticism for Mailer.

Paley responded to the rumored death of the novel by not writing one, though she tried for years after the success of her first book of stories, "The Little Disturbances of Man" (1959). In this book and two later collections, "Enormous Changes at the Last Minute" (1974) and "Later the Same Day" (1985), she came off not as a minimalist, reducing events and emotions to the bare bone, but as a miniaturist, like her friend Donald Barthelme, packing worlds of feeling into a turn of phrase, building drama into the eccentric path of the sentence rather than the conventional plot of a story. Like Mailer and Vonnegut -- indeed, like Roth and Updike -- she leans on autobiographical surrogates that keep her close to what actually happened while she improvises upon it, ruminating it into meaning. "There is a long time in me between knowing and telling," she says, in the story "Debts," to a woman who wants her to tell her grandfather's story.

As Mailer developed his style, Paley created a distinctive female voice -- quirky, humane, tough and tender -- with a cadence that rings in your head after you've stopped reading. Here is how one story, "The Long-Distance Runner," begins: "One day, before or after forty-two, I became a long-distance runner. Though I was stout and in many ways inadequate to this desire, I wanted to go far and fast, not as fast as bicycles and trains, not as far as Taipei, Hingwen, places like that . . . , but round and round the county from the sea side to the bridges, along the old neighborhood streets a couple of times, before old age and renewal ended them and me."

This is not strictly colloquial or literary, realistic or symbolic,

social or personal, but all of these things. It promises to be about people but also about cities, about wandering but also about staying close to home. Paley was the Jane Jacobs of fiction, attuned to chance urban encounters but also the pull of family life -- boisterous children, bickering husbands and ex-husbands, an elderly father. Paley was dead serious about leftist politics, to which she devoted as much energy as to writing and teaching, but in her reports on "the little disturbances of man," the ebb and flow of love and loss, she was something of a fatalist, like Vonnegut. She also believed in happy endings, the power of literature to improve on life, to offer pity and sympathy where life would withhold it. This explains the unexpected happiness that descends like grace in her best stories, such as "Goodbye and Good Luck," about the ups and downs of a woman's affair with an aging star of the Yiddish theater, and "An Interest in Life," which gives us another abandoned woman who somehow finds love.

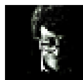
In "A Conversation With My Father," the old man asks her "to write a simple story just once more," something with an actual plot, a straight line from beginning to end. She tries to please him, though she detests such stories. Still he protests: Her stories miss the tragedy of life, the cruelty and brutality, the lack of options. She demurs. Her open form gives her characters something of an open destiny, even where life might deny it. Though her world is anything but outsized and heroic, she wants her people to be capable of change, as Mailer does. For Vonnegut, on the other hand, change is an illusion in a world that seems essentially meaningless.

Like Mailer and Paley, Vonnegut did his best work between the 1950s and the 1970s, especially in the novels "Mother Night" (1961), about a treacherous American double agent in wartime Germany, and "Cat's Cradle" (1963), about the end of the world. His novels are ingenious constructions, but his characters, caught in the web, have little freedom. The war taught Vonnegut that life and death are absurd, our fates arbitrary. Stuff happens -- "so it goes." Vonnegut's reaction to the so-called death of the novel was to write one without chronological sequence or plausible

causation, those vital ligaments of traditional fiction. In "Slaughterhouse-Five," Billy Pilgrim has "come unstuck in time." As he travels numbly between the traumatic past, the dull present and the inescapable future, they seem to be unfolding simultaneously, and he feels helpless in all of them. He is besieged by memory, conscripted into it. For this pilgrim there is no progress, only an absurd trajectory too much in his mind's eye.

William Styron wrote a moving, though tentative, book about depression, but Vonnegut somehow turned depression into literature. The science-fiction elements -- Billy's abduction to another planet -- provide glimpses of another world that highlight the follies of our own, including our sense of hope and our belief in free will, those deranged little markers of man's pride. Inspired as much by Vietnam as by the atrocities of World War II, "Slaughterhouse-Five" is a brilliant twist on the antiheroic war novel going back to "Journey to the End of the Night," "The Good Soldier Schweik" and "Catch-22," a book with its own scrambled time scheme and dark fatalism, its jokey sense of the inevitable. Like Paley, Vonnegut had the gift for making ordinary things seem unfamiliar, but without her glow of discovery or possibility. His portrayal of injured innocence buffeted by a coarse, unfeeling world spoke deeply to the adolescent *Weltschmerz* of the 1960s. It gave young people a sense of seeing through everything, as Holden Caulfield had done a decade earlier.

Just as Mailer, with his mock bravado, seemed to wrestle the world into submission, and Paley stepped back and observed its foibles wryly, Vonnegut, at heart a child of the Midwest, took full measure of the damage the world could do to simple values and the people who held them. With their accumulated wisdom, these three writers' living presence mattered, but we might miss them more if they had not left so much behind.



Why My Dog Is Not a Humanist

by Kurt Vonnegut

[To give a sense of how Kurt Vonnegut's mind worked, and how he chose to reveal it at podiums and in interviews, almost any of dozens of examples will suffice. What follows is a typical and revealing speech Vonnegut delivered on May 1, 1996, in Portland, Oregon. He received the American Humanist of the Year Award from the American Humanist Association. What follows his acceptance speech.—JM]

I was once a Boy Scout. The motto of the Boy Scouts, as you know, is "Be Prepared." So, several years ago I wrote a speech to be delivered in the event that I won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

It was only eight words long. I think I had better use it here. "Use it or lose it," as the saying goes.

This is it: "You have made me an old, old man."

I think I got this great honor because I've lasted so long. I dare to say of humanism what Lyndon Johnson said of politics. He said, "Politics ain't hard. You just hang around and go to funerals."

Forgive me if I am not solemn about my award tonight. I am here for your companionship and not any award.

Nicholas Murray Butler, the late president of Columbia University, was said by H. L. Mencken to have received more honorary degrees and medals and citations and so on than anyone else then on the planet. Mencken declared that all that remained to be done for him was to wrap him in sheet gold and burnish him until he blinded the sun itself.

This is not the first time I have been accused of being a humanist. All of 25 years ago, when I was teaching at the University of Iowa, a student all of a sudden said to me, "I hear you're a humanist."

I said, "Oh, yeah? What's a humanist?"

He said, "That what I'm asking you. Aren't you getting paid to answer questions like that?"

I pointed out that my salary was a very modest one. I then gave him the names of several full professors who were making a heck of a lot more money than I was and who were doctors of philosophy besides--which I sure as heck wasn't, and which I am not now.

But his accusation stuck in my craw. And in the process of trying to cough it up so I could look at it, it occurred to me that a humanist, perhaps, was somebody who was crazy about human beings, who, like Will Rogers, had never met one he didn't like.

That certainly did not describe me.

It did describe my dog, though. His name was Sandy, although he wasn't a Scotsman. He was a Puli--a Hungarian sheepdog with a face full of hair. I am a German, with a face full of hair.

I took Sandy to the little zoo in Iowa City. I expected him to enjoy the buffalo and the prairie dogs and the raccoons and the possums and the foxes and the wolves and so on, and especially their stinks, which in the case of the buffalo were absolutely overwhelming.

But all Sandy paid any attention to was people, his tail wagging all the time. What a person looked like or smelled like didn't matter to Sandy. It could be a baby. It could be a drunk who hated dogs. It could be a young woman as voluptuous as Marilyn Monroe. It could have been Hitler. It could have been Eleanor Roosevelt. Whoever it was, Sandy would have wagged his tail.

I disqualified him as a humanist, though, after reading in the Encyclopedia Britannica that humanists were inspired by ancient Greece and Rome at their most rational, and by the Renaissance. No dog, not even Rin Tin Tin or Lassie, has ever been that. Humanists, moreover, I learned, were strikingly secular in their interests and enthusiasms, did not try to factor God Almighty into their equations, so to speak, along with all that could be seen and heard and felt and smelled and tasted in the here and now. Sandy

obviously worshipped not just me but simply any person as though he or she were the creator and manager of the universe.

He was simply too dumb to be a humanist.

Sir Isaac Newton, incidentally, did think that was a reason able thing to do--to factor in a conventional God Almighty, along with whatever else might be going on. I don't believe Benjamin Franklin ever did. Charles Darwin pretended to do that, because of his place in polite society. But he was obviously very happy, after his visit to the Galapagos Islands, to give up that pretense. That was only 150 years ago.

As long as I've mentioned Franklin, let me digress a moment. He was a Freemason, as were Voltaire and Frederick the Great, and so were Washington and Jefferson and Madison.

Most of us here, I guess, would be honored if it was said that such great human beings were our spiritual ancestors. So why isn't this a gathering of Freemasons?

Can somebody here, after this speech, if you don't mind, tell me what went wrong with Freemasonry?

This much I think I understand: in Franklin's time--and in Voltaire's--Freemasonry was perceived as being anti Catholic. To be a Freemason was cause for excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church.

As the Roman Catholic population of this country grew by leaps and bounds, to be anti Catholic--in New York and Chicago and Boston, at least--was political suicide. It was also business suicide.

None of my real ancestors, blood ancestors, genetic ancestors in this country--every one of them of German decent--was a Freemason, so far as I know, and I am the fourth generation Vonnegut to be born here. Before World War I, though, a lot of them took part in the activities of a highly respectable but not

impossibly serious organization much like this one, which they called "the Freethinkers."

There are a few Americans who call themselves that still--some of you in this room, no doubt. But the Freethinkers no longer exist as an organized presence of which communities are aware. This is because the movement was so overwhelmingly German American, and most German Americans found it prudent to abandon all activities that might make them seem apart from the general population when we entered World War I. Many Freethinkers, incidentally, were German Jews.

My great grandfather Clemens Vonnegut, an immigrant merchant from Munster, became a Freethinker after reading Darwin. In Indianapolis, there is a public school named after him. He was head of the school board there for many years.

So the sort of humanism I represent, to which I am an heir, draws energy not from the Renaissance or from an idealized pre Christian Greece and Rome but, rather, from very recent scientific discoveries and modes of seeking truth.

I myself at one time tried to become a biochemist--as did our darling, terribly missed brother Isaac Asimov. He actually became one. I didn't have a chance. He was smarter than me. We both knew that, incidentally. He is in heaven now.

My paternal grandfather and father were both architects, restructuring the reality of Indianapolis with meticulously measured quantities of materials whose presence--unlike that of a conventional God Almighty--could not be doubted: wood and steel, sand and lime and stone, copper, brass, bricks.

My only surviving sibling, Dr. Bernard Vonnegut, eight years my senior, is a physical chemist who thinks and thinks about the distribution of electrical charges in thunderstorms.

But now my big brother, like Isaac Asimov near the end of his life, surely, and like most of us here, has to admit that the fruits of

science so far, put into the hands of governments, have turned out to be cruelties and stupidities exceeding by far those of the Spanish Inquisition and Genghis Khan and Ivan the Terrible and most of the demented Roman emperors, not excepting Heliogabalus.

Heliogabalus had a hollow iron bull in his banquet hall that had a door in its side. Its mouth was a hole, so sound could get out. He would have a human being put inside the bull and then a fire built on a hearth under its belly, so that the guests at his banquets would be entertained by the noises the bull made.

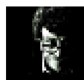
We modern humans roast people alive, tear their arms and legs off, or whatever, using airplanes or missile launchers or ships or artillery batteries--and do not hear their screams.

When I was a little boy in Indianapolis, I used to be thankful that there were no longer torture chambers with iron maidens and racks and thumbscrews and Spanish boots and so on. But there may be more of them now than ever--not in this country but elsewhere, often in countries we call our friends. Ask the Human Rights Watch. Ask Amnesty International if this isn't so. Don't ask the U.S. State Department.

And the horrors of those torture chambers--their powers of persuasion--have been upgraded, like those of warfare, by applied science, by the domestication of electricity and the de tailed understanding of the human nervous system, and so on.

Napalm, incidentally, is a gift to civilization from the chemistry department of Harvard University.

So science is yet another human made God to which I, unless in a satirical mood, an ironical mood, a lampooning mood, need not genuflect.



Vonnegut in Short: 40 Quotes That Say It All

True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.

Any reviewer who expresses rage and loathing for a novel is preposterous. He or she is like a person who has put on full armor and attacked a hot fudge sundae.

It is a very mixed blessing to be brought back from the dead.

Be careful what you pretend to be because you are what you pretend to be.

That is my principal objection to life, I think: It's too easy, when alive, to make perfectly horrible mistakes.

I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.

If you can do a half-assed job of anything, you're a one-eyed man in a kingdom of the blind.

Laughter and tears are both responses to frustration and exhaustion. I myself prefer to laugh, since there is less cleaning up to do afterward.

If people think nature is their friend, then they sure don't need an enemy.

Life happens too fast for you ever to think about it. If you could just persuade people of this, but they insist on amassing information.

All persons, living and dead, are purely coincidental.

People have to talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything really meaningful to say

Those who believe in telekinetics, raise my hand.

One of the few good things about modern times: If you die horribly on television, you will not have died in vain. You will have entertained us.

Thanks to TV and for the convenience of TV, you can only be one of two kinds of human beings, either a liberal or a conservative.

Beware of the man who works hard to learn something, learns it, and finds himself no wiser than before... He is full of murderous resentment of people who are ignorant without having come by their ignorance the hard way.

The feeling about a soldier is, when all is said and done, he wasn't really going to do very much with his life anyway. The example usually is: he wasn't going to compose Beethoven's Fifth.

Humor is an almost physiological response to fear.

There is a tragic flaw in our precious Constitution, and I don't know what can be done to fix it. This is it: Only nut cases want to be president.

I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex.

There are plenty of good reasons for fighting, but no good reason ever to hate without reservation, to imagine that God Almighty Himself hates with you, too.

Still and all, why bother? Here's my answer. Many people need desperately to receive this message: I feel and think much as you

do, care about many of the things you care about, although most people do not care about them. You are not alone.

New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.

1492. As children we were taught to memorize this year with pride and joy as the year people began living full and imaginative lives on the continent of North America. Actually, people had been living full and imaginative lives on the continent of North America for hundreds of years before that. 1492 was simply the year sea pirates began to rob, cheat, and kill them. The chief weapon of sea pirates, however, was their capacity to astonish. Nobody else could believe, until it was too late, how heartless and greedy they were.

What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

Another flaw in the human character is that everybody wants to build and nobody wants to do maintenance.

Charm was a scheme for making strangers like and trust a person immediately, no matter what the charmer had in mind.

Maturity is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything.

Well, the telling of jokes is an art of its own, and it always rises from some emotional threat. The best jokes are dangerous, and dangerous because they are in some way truthful.

The universe is a big place, perhaps the biggest.

Here's what I think the truth is: We are all addicts of fossil fuels in a state of denial, about to face cold turkey.

A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.

We could have saved the Earth but we were too damned cheap.

Who is more to be pitied, a writer bound and gagged by policemen or one living in perfect freedom who has nothing more to say?

Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops.

All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber.

Why don't you take a flying fuck* at a rolling doughnut? Why don't you take a flying fuck at the mooooooooooooon?

I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, 'If this isn't nice, I don't know what is'.

She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is doing.

Just because some of us can read and write and do a little math, that doesn't mean we deserve to conquer the Universe.

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* Vonnegut is generally credited with inventing the phrase "flying fuck." He was proud of that.