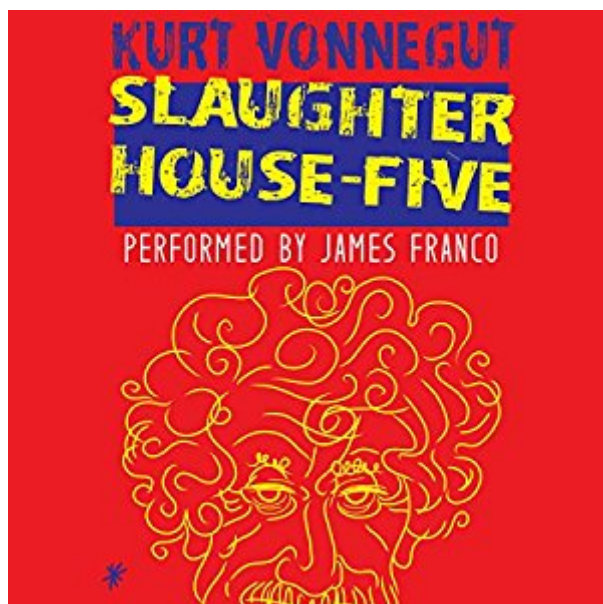


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# Slaughterhouse-Five



## Synopsis

Slaughterhouse-Five is the now famous parable of Billy Pilgrim, a World War II veteran and POW who has, in the later stage of his life, become "unstuck in time" and who experiences at will (or unwillingly) all known events of his chronology out of order and sometimes simultaneously. Traumatized by the bombing of Dresden at the time he had been imprisoned, Pilgrim drifts through all events and history, sometimes deeply implicated, sometimes a witness. He is surrounded by Vonnegut's usual large cast of continuing characters (notably here the hack science fiction writer Kilgore Trout and the alien Tralfamadorians, who oversee his life and remind him constantly that there is no causation, no order, no motive to existence). The "unstuck" nature of Pilgrim's experience may constitute an early novelistic use of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder; then again, Pilgrim's aliens may be as "real" as Dresden is real to him. Struggling to find some purpose, order, or meaning to his existence and humanity's, Pilgrim meets the beautiful and mysterious Montana Wildhack (certainly the author's best character name), has a child with her, and drifts on some supernal plane, finally, in which Kilgore Trout, the Tralfamadorians, Montana Wildhack, and the ruins of Dresden do not merge but rather disperse through all planes of existence. Slaughterhouse-Five was hugely successful, brought Vonnegut an enormous audience, was a finalist for the National Book Award and a best seller, and remains four decades later as timeless and shattering a war fiction as Catch-22, with which it stands as the two signal novels of their riotous and furious decade.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I know this novel fairly well having read it several times (once aloud to my students). It is about all time being always present if only we knew, or could realize it, or had a sense about time in the same way we have senses for light and sound. It is also about the Allied fire bombings of Dresden which killed something like 25,000 people. (And so it goes.) Kurt Vonnegut begins as though writing a memoir and advises us that "All of this happened, more or less..." Of course it did not, and yet, as with all real fiction, it is psychologically true. His protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, an unlikely hero, somewhat in the manner of unlikely heroes to come like Forest Gump and the hero of Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, transcends time and space as he bumbles along. This is a *comédie noire*--a "black comedy"--not to be confused with "film noir," a cinematic genre in which the bad guys may win or at least they are made sympathetic. In *comédie noire* the events are horrific but the style is light-hearted. What the genres have in common is a non-heroic protagonist. This is also a totally original work written in a most relaxing style that fuses the elements of science fiction with realism. It is easy to read (which is one of the reasons it can be found on the high school curriculum in our public schools). It is sharply satirical, lampooning not only our moral superiority, our egocentricity, but our limited understanding of time and space. And of course it is an anti-war novel in the tradition of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Johnny Got His Gun*. Vonnegut's view of time in this novel is like the stratification of an upcropping of rock: time past and time present are there for us to see, but also there is time future.

Listen: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* is really something else. I have to admit this is one of the few books where I saw the movie first (years ago), and about 3 years ago, I decided to read the novel. Left a deep impact on me, although I had a hard time understanding it. So a couple of months ago I saw the movie again, loved it again (although I normally detest movies done after books), and then decided to read all of Vonnegut's novels and shortstories, and chronologically this time, starting out with the promising *Player Piano*. Now I reread *Slaughterhouse Five*, and so far it is Vonnegut's best book. It is clearly an attempt to describe his impressions in World War Two and especially Dresden, but instead of writing a realistic novel about war, Vonnegut 'invents' a totally non-linear genre of science fiction that is absolutely unique in its scope. There is no suspense at all, because the novel's main character (not to call him hero) Billy Pilgrim is unstuck in time, which means he travels back and forth in time. We meet a young Pilgrim traumatized by his gun-loving father, a Pilgrim lost in World War Two, a Pilgrim married to the obese daughter of a rich John Birch Society nutcase and above all a happy Pilgrim living on Tralfamadore, a planet in a faraway solar system. All this is narrated in no particular order, and maybe the book needs to be read twice to get its

scope, but it is worth it. Vonnegut's style also reaches a level that I haven't seen of him in the past, very bitter-sarcastic-loving-sweet... all at once. Every death is followed by a shrugged "So it goes.", and paragraphs are often introduced with "Listen:".

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