

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

Let me give you the ultra-brief cliff notes version of SH5. “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.” and “So it goes.” Those two sentences pretty much sum it up if you ask me. The first sentence starts the book with a bang and the second sounds a deathly refrain throughout. But I suppose I need to elaborate somewhat.

In this group, we have read and discussed many a modern novel where the author used non-linear time as a technique to structure (or de-structure) the work, the narrative moving back and forth in time weaving the story strand by strand. Think of Faulkner, Joyce, Rushdie and even Bellow. In *Herzog*, for example, Bellow jumps around in time to fill in the history of the main character while at the same time letting the reader get a sense of *Herzog's* disoriented fugue state. Fragmented time is used by Bellow to illustrate *Herzog's* dysfunctional state of mind.

In SH5 V destroys time, rendering it meaningless. Don't get me wrong, the reader still pieces together the history of Billy Pilgrim by fitting together disjointed bits of his life presented in seemingly random order. But to view the time-hopping of Billy Pilgrim as a literary technique misses the point. V uses disjoint time to destroy any notion of control or free will. Billy is unable to control where he is in time and within any given episode in his life he is unable to influence the outcome of really anything at all. He is mostly a passive observer of the scenes going on around him, helpless to change what was, what is or what will be. He is carried along in the stream of his own life.

And then we have the Tralfamadorians, god-like aliens who can see things in 4 dimensions. Never mind the paradox posed by this fantastic power, they see everything and everyone flowing in time from beginning to end as an unalterable “thing”. But even these powerful creatures are ultimately powerless. The universe is what is, has always been, will always be. They will some day mistakenly blow up the universe and there's not a damn thing to be done about it. It is what it is, was, will be.

The Tralfamadorians say that among all the species of all the worlds they have visited, only humans talk of free will. But of course if you see a thing in 4 dimensions, with past, present and future all laid out before you, then necessarily free will would seem like nonsense. So here we have gods with the power to see the future but no ability to change or order. No Providential ordering of things by an all-knowing, all-wise God. No, this is purest fatalism.

Life, according to SH5, is something that happens to you, not something you do. You are born, you grow up, go to school, get married, work, procreate and die. So it goes. It's all pretty stupid really. Billy hates his life and all the insipid people in it but is powerless to alter it in any way. The senselessness of Billy's life is amplified by the senselessness of war, the war that V experienced and relays to us via Billy's story of the bombing of Dresden.

130,000 innocent Germans are incinerated in the peaceful town of Dresden for no reason whatsoever. 'So it goes'. Before starting this book, I thought that this was going to be an anti war novel. But it isn't really. In the introduction, V talks of his friend's wife who hated him until he assured her he was not going to write one of those war novels where macho men perform heroic deeds. V even subtitles the book “The Children's Crusade”. But the anti-war message gets smothered by the fatalism and pessimism that permeates this short work. War, according to V, has no more or less meaning than anything else and is as unavoidable as death. To Billy's disappointment, the Tralfamadorians are unimpressed by the savagery and brutality of 20th century Earth's wars.

You may have noticed that I did not include “Poo-tee-weet?” as one of the key phrases that sum up SH5. I suppose this cheery note, tacked on somewhat artlessly to the end of the book, was intended to symbolize hope springing eternal. Sorry Mr. V, I don't buy it. This book paints a bleak, hopeless picture of life, with the only things mitigating the bleakness being the terse almost childlike prose and the brevity of the novel. You'll find no 50 cent words or long-winded descriptions here. The absolute, grinding futility of life is portrayed in a dead-pan, almost comic style. Maybe V was talking about himself when he says that Killore Trout was a bad writer with good ideas. To be honest, I liked the writing style. A more ponderous approach would have made the book unreadable.

In my view, the best way to endure this book is how V endured his own life: with copious quantities of alcohol. First round's on me, boys!

-Jimmy

3/12/2011