Fates Worse Than Death Study Guide

Fates Worse Than Death by Kurt Vonnegut

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Plot Summary

In *Fates Worse Than Death*, humorist Kurt Vonnegut examines the blindness of the American people to the hypocrisy of the Reagan Administration, bringing the Earth close to the point of extinction. A collage of articles, speeches and biographical interconnections move the analysis forward with examinations of history, literature, psychology and art.

Vonnegut's father is a tragic figure, denied his dreams by the Great Depression. His son Mark is a recovered schizophrenic who has written about it, and his mother's suicide is blamed on chemicals. Professional artists share children's natural intoxication with life until forced to earn money. Casualties among the writers Vonnegut cares about are heavy, and American literary history is foreshortened to where "generations" of writers are separated by less than twenty years. Hemingway, who writes in Vonnegut's childhood, is too bloodthirsty to be in vogue and like Harriet Beecher Stowe has faded in memory.

The words of the Requiem Mass are so horrific that Vonnegut writes an improvement, and the First Amendment could stand revision, to get around preachers who want it overruled, an evil Commission on Pornography and NRA advocacy of arming civilians. On the other hand, racism's decline is based on the Bill of Rights, and liberty's lusty birth cries need to be heard everywhere. Vonnegut with friend Bernard V. O'Hare endures internment as a POW and the firebombing of Dresden, which makes no militarily sense. MIT graduates should adopt an oath like doctors to protect them against evil employers. Neo-Cons are deluded in a comical way but have a tragic effect on dark-skinned poor people. Foreigners are buying up the U.S., as colonialists have other areas. Among the most tragic addictions is that of people hooked on preparations for war. Addicts of every sort should be cleaned up before they can hold high office.

Were hydrogen bombs not after mankind, death still would be, and there are fates worse than death, like slavery, which many have endured. Hydrogen bombs may yet serve as "eggs for new galaxies," or mankind may achieve unity through television, which has created a generation that need not fight to be disillusioned about war. Vonnegut tells Unitarian Universalists the "religious revival" has but two commandments: Stop thinking, and Obey! - something only soldiers do. Christians' bloodthirstiness comes from failing to love their neighbors as ordered; "Respect one another," could work but is unlikely to catch on because "Christianity Fails Again" is a widespread theme in folk literature. The finale will be when peace-loving Neo-Cons blow up the world. Advising his hearers, tongue-in-cheek, how to achieve political strength, Vonnegut warns against avoiding "Thou shalt not kill." Visiting civil war-torn Mozambique, Vonnegut finds its suffering so pervasive it leaves him emotionally empty.

Vonnegut's favorite translators are the late Russian, Rita Rait, despite the fact the Soviets have long pirated his works and now underpay him, and the Italian Roberta Rambelli. After addressing a group of translators, Vonnegut tries to commit suicide. Surviving, he thinks about a Ray Bradbury story in which Hemingway gets a more

glamorous way out of life. Vonnegut agrees that American humorists grow to intolerably unfunny pessimists past a certain age, and he cancels campus appearance when he realizes that he can no longer "catch-and-release" audiences. In the 1960s, he briefly tries TM, but he finds that it resembles reading books, which leave one a wiser human being. Some suicidal people blaming it on brain wiring and chemistry, and some, like Vonnegut, blame the Universe. Humorists feel free to speak of life as a dirty joke, and most ancient writings moralize. Young writers ought to moralize in a reader-friendly way. Writing books is like any other job. Most of what people like about German culture comes from when the Germanys were many; that which they hate comes from when it is one. One American in four is of German descent, and sadly, the German-American Freethinker movement has not survived, for it could offer an extended family to millions of Americans whose big questions about life now go unanswered.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

In *Fates Worse Than Death*, humorist Kurt Vonnegut examines the blindness of the American people to the hypocrisy of the Reagan Administration, bringing the Earth close to the point of extinction. A collage of articles, speeches and biographical interconnections move the analysis forward with examinations of history, literature, psychology and art.

This sequel to *Palm Sunday* (1980) consists of Vonnegut essays and speeches linked by breezy autobiographical commentary and comments on a life that resembles a Dr. Seuss creature. At Cornell in 1940, Hugh Troy' tales of practical jokes inspire Vonnegut to play them, including appearing at an ROTC inspection wearing every sort of medal he can find (swimming, scouting, Sunday school attendance, etc.). The general notes his name, and Vonnegut never rises above Private First Class (PFC) in three years as a soldier. When the war ends and Vonnegut is authorized to wear combat ribbons, he finds them to have no more meaningful than these borrowed trinkets. Vonnegut's status as a perpetual PFC is woven throughout this book.

The Vonneguts of Indianapolis expect youngsters to go east to college and return. Uncle Alex chooses Harvard because big brother Kurt is at MIT. When Kurt Sr. eventually dies, Vonnegut drops "Jr." from his name, resulting in bibliographic confusion when he lists publications, like an article for *Architectural Digest* he here quotes. When they are twenty-seven and sixty-five respectively, the son asks his father if he has enjoyed being an architect. Surprisingly, Father drops the fazade and replies that architecture is more accounting than art. The Great Depression and World War II end construction, so at what should have been the height of his career, Father has almost no work. The family never misses a meal because Father works for the Atkins Saw Company. When prosperity returns, Father partners with younger architects, and while universally respected and loved as a founder of the Children's Museum and designer of the Bell Telephone headquarters, he is passed over when the company adds additional floors. Father retires alone, takes up pottery and dies in 1957 at age seventy-two.

Vonnegut pictures Father as a Sleeping Beauty waiting for a prince to awaken his career, but a wicked witch turns him instead into Rip Van Winkle. Father is also a unicorn, a rarity among Hoosiers by his mix-and-match Salvation Army wardrobe, warnings about the rising threat of Hitler and Mussolini, "irrespecting" of politics or international boundaries and hailing of objects, natural and manmade, as "masterpieces." Vonnegut ends his piece picturing Father content with an epitaph, "It was enough to have been a unicorn," a fairy tale motif he carries forward. Father has made good times "revisitable" by mummifying a letter he sent on October 28, 1949, bragging about the sale of his first story to *Collier's* and vowing, once he has banked a year's pay at General Electric, to quit and never take another nightmare job as long as

he lives. On the verso, Father handwrites a verse from *The Merchant of Venice* on perjuring the soul.

Chapter 1 has established Vonnegut's father as a tragic figure denied his dreams by the Great Depression, with sister Alice somehow especially involved in the tragedy. Vonnegut assumes readers are acquainted with his family history from *Palm Sunday,* but this book can be read alone. The Great (economic) Depression (1929 until the ramp-up for World War II) is tightly linked to psychological depression throughout the book.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

A unicorn, it is said, will lay its head in a maiden's lap if she sits in a forest clearing. In the Vonnegut household, Sister Alice (now departed and missed) is the maiden to Father's unicorn. Father is desperate for uncritical female friendship because his wife, late at night, spills on him hatred as corrosive as hydrofluoric acid. Her untreated, unacknowledged insanity comes from alcohol and prescribed barbiturates. Vonnegut accepts that it is hereditary but is happy to have no American ancestors afflicted. He talks about this in an address to the American Psychiatric Association in Philadelphia in 1988, quoted here. Dr. Nancy Andreassen has found that professional writers tend to be depressive or come from depressive families more often than in the general public. Vonnegut holds that one cannot write serious fiction un-depressed, replacing the theory that only alcoholics can win Nobel prizes, made obsolete when males became allowed to write without being drunken brutes or considered shameful homosexuals. This theme is picked up later, applied to Ernest Hemingway.

Vonnegut shares a German surname with previous APA speaker, Elie Wiesel, and many pioneer psychologists. Germans have given the world great music, science, painting and theater, but also a nightmare from which there is no awakening. The Holocaust explains almost everything about Wiesel, while Dresden explains nothing about Vonnegut, because he is a voyeur while Wiesel is an inside sufferer. Vonnegut and fellow POWs are held for exchange, while Wiesel and kin are marked for death. A master's degree in anthropology has taught Vonnegut the "villains" are culture, society and history, not drugs. *SS Psychiatrist,* a Vonnegut book left unfinished twenty years ago, depicts a doctor using talk therapy at Auschwitz to treat staff members' depression. On Ritalin while writing that novel, Vonnegut throws it away when he realizes the drug is "dehydrated concentrate of pure paranoia." Mental health workers sometimes help healthy people be happier in cultures and societies gone insane, but in the U.S., the goal is only to train intelligent, well-educated people (Dukakis and Bush) to speak stupidly and gain popularity.

Vonnegut suspects the APA invites him to speak because of *The Eden Express,* his son, Dr. Mark Vonnegut's book about his full-blown crack-up. Vonnegut asks how many present have taken Thorazine and advises all to try it, because it cannot hurt. Mark is diagnosed schizophrenic but recovers enough to write a book, graduate from Harvard Medical School, marry, father two sons and practice pediatrics in Boston. Psychiatrists have decided anyone who writes about recovering from schizophrenia is a misdiagnosed depressive, which Mark finds funny. Mark is no longer enthusiastic about megavitamins, but he still puts more hope in biochemistry than in talk therapy. Since boyhood, Vonnegut has thought madness has a chemical basis. When Mother goes crazy and kills herself, Dr. Walter Bruetsch blames Phenobarbital and booze rather than a terrible childhood. The family keeps her insanity and suicide a secret, perhaps hoping to keep from repelling prospective in-laws. The Indianapolis chapter of Alcoholics

Anonymous is founded only in 1955, by alcoholic Uncle Alex. Vonnegut greatly admires anything-Anonymous, for anthropology shows a need for the kind of extended family denied by the Great American Experiment. Vonnegut concludes by declaring that he is sure APA members regret prescribing medication for mildly depressed patients rather than putting them on the big, warm life-support system of an extended family. APA members have not expected Vonnegut to *share* (i.e., spill the beans) about his family, which continues throughout the book.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Self-servingly, Vonnegut postulates that all women bottle hydrofluoric acid inside, and Mother releases hers unwittingly at midnight before killing herself on Mother's Day, 1944. Father's relationship with Alice has no Freudian undertones but is based on shared enthusiasm for the visual arts. Father celebrates everything Alice creates as a Pieta or Sistine Chapel ceiling, which later makes her a lazy artist. In another *Architectural Digest* article, Vonnegut describes Alice as a gifted painter/sculptor who does little but claim she can roller skate through a museum and appreciate every passing painting.

Before the Great Depression, Father shows promise as a painter in the early stages of pictures, but when Mother praises it, he overworks the finishing touches and ruins it. The most notorious interrupter of a masterpiece in progress is "the person on business from Porlock," who breaks Samuel Taylor Coleridge's concentration in *Kubla Khan.* Interruptions can be beneficial, and Vonnegut believes two-thirds of a masterpiece is more than enough; beyond that, it is like empty talk at the end of a party. Shakespeare should have ended *Hamlet* with Act 3, Scene 4, Polonius' death. The formula for a three-act play is: end Act 1 with a question mark, Act 2 with an exclamation point and Act 3 with a period. Father and Alice's painting careers end with periods - zip. Porlock deprives readers of little after "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree," and Vonnegut ends his *Architectural Digest* piece at the two-thirds mark. Vonnegut is the third person in his family to have a one-person show, the second to put in time in a "laughing academy" and the first to divorce and remarry.

Vonnegut writes about a painter in *Bluebeard* after producing the following piece for *Esquire* about Jackson Pollock. The Cody, Wyoming-born artist is America's foremost adventurer in the Abstract Expressionist movement that makes New York City the unchallenged center of innovative painting worldwide. Before Pollock, the U.S. has only one true art form, jazz, which relies on appealing accidents more formal artists exclude from their performances. Trained as a realist, able-bodied but alcoholic Pollock paints, teaches and studies during the war while fellow artists' careers are interrupted. Unique among art movements, Pollock's followers do not "dribble" like him but accept from him that one need not render likenesses, morals, politics or old stories. James Brooks tells Vonnegut the key is to lay on the first stroke of paint and let the canvas like a Ouija board do half the work, allowing the unconscious to reveal itself by ignoring life - the perfect reaction to World War II. Unlike many short-lived 20th-century art movements, Abstract Expressionism has more enthusiasts than ever. Vonnegut notes his enthusiasm in the *Esquire* piece is exaggerated; he is troubled by the absence of a horizon in Pollock's paintings, which all nature innately seeks. Shippers of packages containing objects more fragile than the human nervous system indicate "This side up."

When the Franklin Library asks Vonnegut for a special preface to its expensive edition of *Bluebeard,* illustrated by daughter Edith Squibb, Vonnegut "blathers" more about painting and intoxication, which everyone needs. Children regularly get smashed on the "Great Big Everything" by relating to the Universe as a one-on-one playmate. Professional artists play this way in various media until they must support others and then allow in a non-painting but vocal third player, a dictator, critic, curator, collector, creditor or in-law. Painters can be intoxicated on their creations for years and are happiest when they can tell the rest of the world to hang. By contrast, writing is tedious and constipating, so intruders are refreshing. Pollock comes as a third player to postwar American art, goofing around, taking no one's advice, childlike, enchanting and trusting intuition to control his hands. When supporters push too hard, he drives into a tree. Vonnegut suggests a simple epitaph: "Three's a crowd."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

As a boy, Vonnegut makes his first map of the world during summers at Lake Maxincuckee in southern Indiana. Because it is a closed circuit, Vonnegut can always get home by walking one direction, which makes him as bold as Marco Polo. Home is an unheated frame cottage on a bluff, adjacent to four cottages teeming with relatives. Father's generation grew up there as (almost) successors of the Pottawatomie Indians. They give themselves a tribal name, the "Epta mayan-boys," deriving from a nonsensical German phrase. They have now vanished, but the lake he swims with his siblings is imprinted in Vonnegut's mind. Were he ever to write about the lake, it would be Chekhovian, about squabbles over a beloved inheritance and the children's going out into the world. A stranger buys the house but lets Vonnegut and his bride honeymoon there.

At the end of the war, Vonnegut marries Jane Cox, whose English relatives question her getting mixed up with Germans. Jane is a writer, too, and *Angels Without Wings*, about raising their kids on Cape Cod, appeared posthumously last autumn, forty-two years after their honeymoon, during which she asks Vonnegut to read *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel, fittingly, about the state of people's portable souls, which accords no importance to real estate. Imprinted on Cape Cod, Vonnegut's grown children need not learn about portable real estate. They own jointly their childhood home. Vonnegut notes this piece also appears in *Architectural Digest,* for which he likes to write as a tribute to Father and Grandfather. Chapter 4, introducing Vonnegut's first wife and later generations, uses mere hints of two great Russian writers to frame his lost childhood.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut's late grandfather, Bernard, whom Vonnegut never meets, scorns his birthplace, Indianapolis, and is bemused his grandchildren drift away. Vonnegut wishes Father had insisted he study architecture and bonds with fellow storyteller, Donald Barthelme, as sons of architects. Casualties among the writers Vonnegut cares about are heavy: Bernard Malamud, James Jones, Nelson, Algren, Truman Capote and Irwin Shaw. Barthelme is only fifty-eight (compare the average age for American fatalities in World War II - twenty-six - and Vietnam - twenty. What a shame!) Vonnegut quotes his introduction to Algren's *Never Come Morning,* about how Algren, seventy-two, has written so intelligent a review of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* that Rushdie wants to meet him. Algren is bitter over how little he has received for his masterpiece, *The Man with the Golden Arm,* and is impudent, learning the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters is making up for its earlier oversight by granting him membership.

Intending to plead with him to attend the ceremony at a party Algren is throwing himself that afternoon, Vonnegut phones to ask if Rushdie may join them, but Algren is dead of a heart attack. He is buried hundreds of miles from Chicago, whose people he describes as permanently dehumanized by poverty. A penchant for truth limits Algren's popularity, but he finds altruists, particularly in Chicago, as common as unicorns (note the variant on the recurrent theme). Algren's pessimism is congruent with Christ's enchantment over those who have little hope under Caesar.

American literary history has been so foreshortened that "generations" of writers are separated by less than twenty years. Shaw, Algren, Saroyan, Cheever, Caldwell, Schulberg and Tarrell, when Vonnegut begins writing, seem as "ancestral" as Twain or Hawthorne, and yet he becomes friends with them all. Surely, the foreshortening comes from the spectacular violence that modern times wreak on culture. To young people, Vietnam seems 1,000 years ago, as World War I seems to a young Vonnegut.

That war, Vonnegut tells Hemingway scholars in Boise, Idaho, defines his fellow Midwesterner, twenty-three years his senior, with whom he shares setting out to be a reporter, being the son of a gun nut and suicide and being indebted to Twain. Hemingway has snubbed Norman Mailer and chided Shaw's daring like Tolstoy to write a historical novel from both sides of the battle line. He praises Algren and Vance Bourjaily, a hunting enthusiast who like him, one war later, drives a civilian ambulance attached to a combat unit. James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity* and a veteran rifleman, denies Hemingway is a soldier for he never submits to military training, accepts or gives orders, and even hunts U-boats in the Caribbean on personal whim.

The U.S. enters World War I too late to have war stories, but the Spanish Civil War gives Hemingway material. World War II is so massive that no Hemingway is needed,

but Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* produces a novel today more influential than *A Farewell to Arms* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* Hemingway's bloodthirsty subject matter is out of vogue, but his stories can be enjoyed as ethnographical studies of societies for which one is not responsible. Hemingway's simple language and breaking of all writing rules are amazing and delightful. All writers grow dated, for big sharks go after big marlin. Conservation and feminism have taken big bites out of Hemingway, but he remains famous, if little taught in colleges. Teachers control who is remembered, and the writer, once as much an institution as General Motors or *The New York Times,* has faded - like Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Recently Rushdie has an entire nation declare war on him over a novel, as earlier Solzhenitsyn embarrasses the Soviet Union as badly as a military defeat. They and Stowe are important because they dare oppose easily identifiable factions in society. Hemingway, a rosy, non-analytical antifascist, gains power by celebrating male bonding at a time when seeming homosexual is dreaded. Anthropologist Margaret Mead says males are happiest starting out on a hunt with no women or children along, and Vonnegut believes the women's permission is an ingredient in that happiness. Hemingway is not gay, but Vonnegut asserts that males feeling love for one another in proximity to danger is often his characters' greatest reward.

During an earlier lecture visit to Boise, Vonnegut meets a wry woman who finds it ridiculous that her husband and his friends need out-of-doors drinking and killing to show love for one another. As a former rifleman, Vonnegut vouches for the terrific feeling. Few writers in midlife have as clear an idea as Hemingway of what he has done and hopes still to do. He hopes to write three more novels and twenty-five stories (having published four novels and forty-nine stories). He delivers only four novels, including the Nobel Prize-winning *The Old Man and the Sea,* replete with shark and marlin. Seven years of literary silence follow before Hemingway writes his most memorable story - a self-inflicted death by gunshot. Vonnegut likens this to the suicide of inventor George Eastman, who shoots himself when his work is done. Thus ends the Boise speech.

Hemingway is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, founded in 1898 and consisting of upper and lower houses. Capote has made the upper, while Caldwell, Algren and Vonnegut are in the lower. Jones and Shaw die on the outside. It seems random whom the "loonies" that nominate and vote let in, and artists, writers and musicians, looking down on one another's crafts, often trade votes to get in favorites. By being ignored, hundreds of creative Americans feel like something the cat drags in - a pessimistic characterization Vonnegut applies to many others throughout the book. Tennessee William, America's premier playwright, is a member. Vonnegut once passes a note to actors rehearsing *The Night of the Iguana* to say that iguanas are ugly but nutritious. That is what Vonnegut gets from William's play.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Requiem masses are customarily sung beautifully but unintelligibly in Latin, from a text promulgated by Pope Pius V in 1570. It begins and ends unobjectionably, asking rest eternal for the dead where God's light shines on them perpetually (an odd image for the literal-minded). In 1985, Vonnegut and wife Jill Krementz attend the world premier of a new setting by Andrew Lloyd Webber (of *Jesus Christ Superstar, Evita* and *Cats* fame) in St. Thomas Church before a black-tie Protestant and Jewish audience. Vonnegut's eye is drawn to the English translation, and he wonders at the performers' blithe ignorance of God's intending a Paradise indistinguishable from the Spanish Inquisition. "Get a lawyer," says the sadistic, masochistic mass.

Vonnegut writes a better mass, is turned down trying to get it translated into Latin at Fordham, gets John F. Collins to do it and on jury duty meets a Julliard-trained composer, Edgar Grana, who spends a year setting Collin's Latin to music. They shop this unsuccessfully to several New York churches before Barbara Wagner, director of the best Unitarian Universalist choir, wants to do it. They premiere on March 13, 1988, in Buffalo, New York, with the synthesizer music so overwhelming the words that Vonnegut is cranky. When Krementz later runs into Lloyd Webber and tells him about her husband's version, the composer treats it as a fad, missing the important point: In the beginning was the word. (The original texts and revision are in the Appendix.)

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

The Seuss-like First Amendment also cries out for revision. An ACLU lawyer believes Madison omits qualifiers like "under ideal conditions" because he doubts people will take it seriously. Thus, the Bill of Rights is strictly "on" or "off." Vonnegut sees it as a dream rather than a statute. He defends absolute freedom of speech but laments that people can say vile things in public while he is charged with encouraging violence against women and kiddy porn.

Once, at a debate over efforts to ban objectionable books from schools, Vonnegut asks a fundamentalist if he knows anyone ruined by a book, which gives the Reverend an opening to tell about an Oregon man who reads a pornographic book and then rapes and mutilates a teenager. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not pornographic, and children have not been having intercourse with their mothers based on one line of dialogue, but the Reverend finds it, along with *Deliverance* and *Catcher in the Rye*, falling short of Christian behavior and attitudes. The Reverend opposes the demigod-given right to consider any idea one wants, protected from the government elevating one religion over others and enforcing its views by law. No hypocrite, he wants the First Amendment to yield to his brand of Christianity, and Vonnegut allows he is a good family man, trying to imitate the life of Christ and to hold together society's extended family (Vonnegut's anthropological training showing itself again).

The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography is a different matter. Several members are involved in financial or sexual atrocities, and all are mean-spirited throwbacks to the Council of Trent. They advocate arming civilians with assault rifles, liken Nicaraguan Contras to Jefferson and Madison, label Palestinians "terrorists" whenever possible and treat wombs as government property. They claim that the ACLU is subversive, that anything sounding like the Sermon on the Mount is communist, that AIDS sufferers ask for it and that billion-dollar airplanes are worth the price. The commission is blatant show business, seeking pious headlines. Vonnegut jokes about wanting to appear, declare the scales have fallen from his eyes, beg the government to suppress harmful words and images, forgive him and destroy the books for which he is now ashamed. In the name of democracy, it must save him from himself, for he cannot make amends because of a pernicious text that begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Vonnegut notes he writes this chapter bereft after attending the funeral of his war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, a chain-smoking district attorney turned chain-smoking defender.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

The free-speech provisions of the First Amendment allow Americans to say and publish things that make Vonnegut want to throw up, such as Charleton Heston's commercials for the National Rifle Association, advocating that civilians keep military weapons that, like loathsome germs, kill people every day. Article II of the Bill of Rights makes "a well-regulated Militia" the rationale for the people keeping and bearing arms, and were the NRA (and well-paid legislators) to recite the context, it would be clear that those not recruited, led, motivated or restrained by anything but their own perceptions cannot be considered a well-regulated militia. Behind NRA arguments lies a sick fantasy about bad, dark-skinned, poor people attacking good white people's neat homes. As a PFC, Vonnegut is good with guns, but he would not have an AK-47 or Uzi in his home. Modern weapons are so easy to operate that the NRA's argument for sportsmanship is ridiculous. George Bush, a lifetime NRA member, chooses to ignore the departure of the gallant *Voyager 2* from the solar system and instead call for a constitutional amendment outlawing flag burning, which is as nutty as the Caligula having his horse declared a Consul. This imperial action recurs later as a symbol of other U.S. political stupidities.

Vonnegut tells 1990 graduates of the University of Rhode Island, quoting Kin Hubbard, that colleges should spread the important stuff over four years instead of saving it all up for the very end. His Soviet readers are shocked when *Slaughterhouse-Five* and other supposedly dangerous titles are burned, but this is progress, for Americans used to burn black people. Racism's decline is amazing, but it could return. The change in attitude comes about when oppressed and denigrated minorities have the guts and dignity to demand it, based on the Bill of Rights.

Censorship seems to be on the rise but has always been around, undiagnosed, like Alzheimer's disease. Today, people realize that censorship sickens pluralistic democracy, and many try to do something about it. The U.S. allows slavery for a hundred years before recognizing it as a social disease and fighting it. Few find it odd that Jefferson owned slaves, and it is said that he could not free them because they were mortgaged and he was broke. How sad it is that one cannot nowadays pawn a cleaning lady when short of cash. Boston and Philadelphia claim to be the cradle of liberty, but liberty is only now being born. The gestation period of 'possums is twelve days, Indian elephants twenty-two months and American liberty 200 years plus. Only in Vonnegut's lifetime are women and racial minorities nearing economic, legal and social equality. It is time to hear liberty's lusty birth cries everywhere.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Jill Krementz is an Episcopalian who rarely goes to church, while Vonnegut is an atheist who winds up in churches a lot. When they marry in 1979, he suggests the charming Episcopalian "Little Church Around the Corner," which turns him down as a divorcee and suggests Christ Church United Methodist, where there are no snags. They agree that he has enough children, but they adopt an infant, Lily, who becomes his principal companion. Vonnegut quotes from the preface to a Festschrift he presents on her birthday. Jill is born on Manhattan Island but raised in Morristown, New Jersey, by Virginia and Walter Krementz. She attends private schools and vacations with the rich, but everything she owns at fifty comes from work as a photographer and creator of children's books. They meet in 1970 during production of a Vonnegut play, while Jill is living in a fourth-floor walk-up over a delicatessen, working as the first female staff photographer for the *Herald Tribune,* after a year in Vietnam and publishing *Sweet Pea: A Black Girl Growing Up in the Rural South*.

The Women's Liberation Movement coincides with Jill's blossoming into womanhood, and she dares to ignore her sensational good looks, to act unladylike and to demand equal pay and respect. After high school, Jill makes Manhattan - and the world - her university. She takes only one college course, anthropology from Margaret Mead, who succeeds Margaret Bourke-White of *Life* as her heroine. Only nearing fifty is Jill's talent as a first-rate social scientist appreciated, when she writes a book about what young people think about growing up. Jill's lack of formal training keeps her from imposing her ideas on the youngsters. The Festschrift ends with a sonnet about Jill as a photographer by John Updike. Jill's life, birthday celebration and profound impact on Vonnegut in his suicide episode are taken up later.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Updike lectures in Indianapolis soon afterwards and asks Vonnegut what he should know about his hometown. Vonnegut no longer feels at home in this nice-enough city. The Class of 1940 holds its Fiftieth Reunion, but Vonnegut luckily gets Lyme disease and is able not to attend. He only gets sick when it is useful, like in 1942, when pneumonia keeps him from being a chemist, and the 1980s, when he nearly kills himself and he is confined to a locked ward for thirty days.

Vonnegut tells Updike that Indianapolis is the only human settlement whose location is determined by pen and straightedge; it is dead-center in the State of Indiana and laid out in a strict grid by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, architect of Washington, DC. Updike should consider it an infinitely expandable chessboard with a center circle. Vonnegut lists some famous citizens, including former vice president Dan Quayle (whose election proves Bush cares nothing about America) and Rev. Jim Jones of Kool-Aid fame. Vonnegut feels lucky to have been born there because it gives him a rich, humane primary and secondary education. It has free libraries attended by angels of fun with information, cheap movie houses, jazz joints and a fine symphony orchestra. Vonnegut takes clarinet lessons, which allow him to tell Benny Goodman that he used to play "licorice-stick" himself. Indianapolis back then also has prep schools for really *dumb* kids.

Vonnegut's memories of Indianapolis are skewed by O'Hare's death. They first meet at nearby Camp Atterbury as members of Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 423rd Regiment, 106th Infantry Division. Both have some college. O'Hare has completed Infantry Basic Training, and Vonnegut is a virtuoso on the 240-mm howitzer. Thousands of college kids like them are called up, intellectually qualified for Officer Candidate School, but no officers are needed (except sons of people with political connections). They are sent for a few months to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) and then yanked out for D-Day as riflemen.

O'Hare and Vonnegut are "hitched" by the Buddy System and made battalion intelligence scouts, to sneak ahead of the lines and steal peeks at the enemy. Vonnegut believes he is assigned because at 6' 2", he is virtually invisible and unfamiliar with Infantry weapons. At Camp Atterbury, he can sleep in his own bedroom. Mother dies one weekend, and Alice gives birth six weekends later, just before D-Day. Their division, totally unprovisioned, defends a front against the Germans' last offensive. O'Hare and Vonnegut share the POW experience and remain friends until June 9, 1990, when O'Hare dies, a date that for Vonnegut will live forever in infamy.

A month after O'Hare dies, Vonnegut speaks about the firebombing of Dresden at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. He begins with an unusual disclaimer, that despite his German surname, he is no more enthusiastic about Nazism

than Eisenhower. As a PFC battalion scout, Vonnegut is captured in December 1944 during the Battle of the Bulge and is taken under guard to Dresden, which is firebombed on February 13, 1945, while the Germans are in full retreat. When liberated in May 1945, Vonnegut hears stories from concentration camp survivors and later visits Auschwitz and Birkenau. He and Wiesel are friends. He offers this disclaimer because George Will claims he trivializes the Holocaust in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Millions, including Panamanians, Cambodians and Vietnamese, can tell what it is like to be bombed from the air. Dresden is mainly a British enterprise, with the Americans making it kindling for the incendiaries beforehand. The whole city is targeted and becomes one flame. Tornadoes dance in the suburbs like dervishes. The British want revenge for the London blitz, Coventry and Dunkirk, while the Americans have no scores to settle (until the death camps are uncovered) with anyone but Japan.

Like Dresden, Hiroshima has no military significance. Vonnegut is certain that many more Americans and Japanese would have perished had the U.S. invaded rather than burning Hiroshima to crisps. The Germans have kept Dresden free of war industries, arsenals and troops, to let it serve as a safe haven for wounded and refugees. There are no air-raid shelters and few antiaircraft guns. It rivals Paris, Vienna and Prague for art treasures. Not one Allied soldier advances an inch because of the firebombing, nor is one prisoner released a microsecond earlier because of bombing Dresden.

Only Vonnegut benefits by collecting $5 per corpse, counting his current speaker's fee. The military planners do not know 100 POWs are down there, working in a malt syrup factory; they want as many people as possible to die - as at Hiroshima, but with more primitive technology - because they are all potential heartless warriors. No one will ever know how many are killed; both the low 35,000 and high 200,000 figures are politically motivated. Vonnegut figures 135,000 - more than Hiroshima. After the raid, for health reasons, corpses have to be collected and burned, without being counted or identified. There are no healthy males aged sixteen to fifty, for sure; they are fighting or deserting elsewhere.

Contemporary German writer, Heinrich Btzll, tells Vonnegut the German's most dangerous character flaw is obedience. Vonnegut feels no pride or satisfaction carrying corpses from cellars to great funeral pyres and thinks survivors may have thought it just that he is performing such gruesome work at gunpoint, since his people make it necessary. Perhaps, however, their minds are as blank as his. The militarily senseless firebombing of Dresden is a work of art, a tower of smoke and fire, created by enraged former pacifists. Vonnegut is home in Indianapolis when the beautiful twin towers rise over Japan.

How crazy everyone has become, making air attacks on civilian populations a symbol of national pride like the Liberty Bell. Decades later, no one admits it is "chicken-hearted" to attack Muammar Qaddafi's headquarters from the air, killing his adopted daughter. Nobel Peace Prize-winning Henry Kissinger recommends carpet-bombing Hanoi at Christmastime. Physicist/musician/philosopher Albert Schweitzer tries to teach reverence for all life but kills billions of germs to keep human patients from dying. To speak about the germs' agony would get Vonnegut carted off to an asylum, but many

find discussing Libyans equally unworthy. Many find his speeches and books hopelessly ambiguous, so he answers a series of military questions as a cold-blooded commander-in-chief, allowing only Hamburg and Hiroshima to be bombed; Dresden, Nagasaki, Hanoi, Cambodia, Libya and Panama City should not have been. The last two are pure "show biz." Vonnegut notes there is no press coverage of his speech. O'Hare shows up unexpectedly and testifies from the audience to the truth of Vonnegut's statements. Vonnegut has seven-year-old daughter Lily stand up to approximate the "sort of germ" the U.S. kills in Libya. The press stays away, Vonnegut believes, because no one wants to consider how air power can be misused. Making Americans view the results of bombings by clean-cut young men from ground-level reveals no difference from the world's worst police departments arresting and torturing the innocent with no intention to change the nobodies' probable politics. A woman suggests after the speech that no one should ever be bombed, which Vonnegut replies is obvious.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Another ex-Dresden POW at the lecture is Tom Jones, who pairs off with Joe Crone, the model for Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Jones has written recently, recalling Crone as clumsily packing at Camp Atterbury, and so ill in Dresden that he talks him into going to sick call. Jones recalls the squalor in the barracks, which the Germans do nothing to relieve. Crone is buried somewhere in Dresden in a white paper suit. He starves himself to death before the firestorm. In the novel, he returns home to become a well-to-do optometrist. Jones has become a packrat for war memorabilia, including photographs after liberation, a time Vonnegut describes in *Bluebeard.* Vonnegut has put in the appendix some of these and a document, "Bomber's Baedeker," showing Dresden no more of a military target than Kalamazoo, Michigan. Vonnegut quotes O'Hare at their parting. He has learned never to believe his government again, because of the much-vaunted Sperry and Norden bombsights, which supposedly allow surgical accuracy.

Postwar flying machines on exhibition at the museum offer no such sops to civilian sensibilities; they are clearly intended to kill everything within an enormous radius. A museum employee confides the museum's biggest supporters - weapons manufacturers - are unhappy having strategic bombing discussed there. They would rather talk about high-speed transportation and space exploration. Maybe that is why Bush snubs *Voyager 2's* departure from the solar system forever ("my works is done" - recall Edison's final note). The dove can report only death beyond, news that may throw a lot of well-heeled space executives out of work. Furthermore, children and neighbors of "planet wreckers" may question destroying the only known inhabitable planet. Still, Vonnegut believes people find life too hard and disappointing to act on repairing the sinking Ark with half its animals already dead. This is a highly effective reference to Genesis 6.

When asked by Volkswagen's American ad agency to compose with several other futurologists a letter to Earthlings, Vonnegut opens with advice from Polonius, "To thine own self be true," St. John the Divine (Rev. 14.7) and Alcoholics Anonymous' prayer for serenity, courage and wisdom. The 20th century is the first to get reliable information about the human situation, and the news is so bad that it is hard to wax wise about it. Vonnegut finds most paralyzing the news that Nature is no conservationist or friend to mankind. To people in 2088 - and their grandchildren even more - nature is ruthless in matching the quantity of life in a given place and time to the quantity of nourishment available.

Vonnegut wonders about how overpopulation has been dealt with and wonders if his contemporaries have been aiming hydrogen warheads at each other to take their minds off the deeper problem of how cruelly Nature treats them. He hopes humans have stopped letting ignorant optimists rule them; this holdover from 7 million years of human

development proves catastrophic when sophisticated institutions have real work to do. Today's rulers are doing nothing to Nature's stern but reasonable surrender terms: reduce and stabilize the population, stop poisoning the environment, stop preparing for war and deal with real problems, learn to inhabit a small planet without killing it, stop thinking science can fix anything for $1 trillion and stop thinking the grandchildren will go to a nice new planet on a spaceship. Vonnegut ends his letter to the future by apologizing for his pessimism. He has spent too much time with scientists and not enough with politicians' speechwriters.

In a piece from *Lear's* magazine, Vonnegut says "Royal Astronomer" from James Thurber's *The White Deer* should be the title for anyone who writes a popular book about the end of the world. It is hard to accept the genre's premise that things are not as good as they used to be, because he recalls weekly lynchings of blacks, apartheid in Indianapolis and colleges excluding Jews and blacks. During the Great Depression, "old poops" claim the country is falling apart because youngsters are no longer required to read classical philosophers but derive wisdom from radio quiz shows and jungle music. Today, television and rock and roll lead to dementia. The ancients expect females, minorities and the poor to serve white males, who alone think and lead, andsadly, such wisdom also goes back to the Bible.

Vonnegut attends a luncheon honoring a vice president of the filmmakers' union of the USSR, who responds to questions about the Gulag and Jewish emigration by saying their experiment with freedom and justice is only beginning. Demand for suppressed books and movies is encouraging, but many professional writers are concerned only with their standard of living. Alcoholism causes trouble whether the sufferer is politically free or not. The Soviet experiment could easily fail, but if it does not, the people will likely be disappointed with the results.

The great mass of human beings everywhere yearns for rewards more substantial than talk of liberty being its own reward. Vonnegut tells the guest of honor in light of the U.S.'s 200-year experiment, the USSR is not doing badly. It has not had legal slaves or practiced genocide on Indians. The U.S. needs *glasnost* (openness) in looking at giving women and minorities equal rights and respect with white males - something the ancient philosophers would find abominable. Vonnegut misses from his youth only freedom from knowing humans will render the planet uninhabitable. In 100 years, flying-saucer creatures or angels may find carved on a Grand Canyon wall, "We probably could have saved ourselves, / But were too damned lazy to try very hard." Vonnegut would add, "And too damn cheap."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

In 1985, Vonnegut is asked to speak at MIT, which his grandfather, father, uncle and brother all attended. The young people he addresses can do what Merlin can only pretend to do at Camelot: turn loose or reign in enormous forces. Had his brother, when he earned his doctorate in 1938, worked in Germany, Italy, Japan or the Soviet Union, he would have had to take part in making Hitler's dream of killing Jews and others in industrial quantities come true. Chemists supply Cyklon-B, and engineers provide the infrastructure to make the operation easy and efficient. Vonnegut has visited Auschwitz and Birkenau and seen A-plus technological designs, as good as the car bombs exploding today. Feminism notwithstanding, men and women differ in their attraction to immoral technology. With their children beside them, they outnumber men at demonstrations against lethal schemes and devices. The most effective doubter of the benefits of unbridled technological advancement is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and if Vonnegut were president of MIT, he would hang pictures of the *Frankenstein* monster everywhere as a warning to students and faculty. MIT can set an example by adapting the Hippocratic Oath to their undertakings. MIT graduates surely want to help rather than harm humankind and may welcome formal restraints on future wicked bosses. Applause after the speech is polite, but no one accepts the challenge. Today's students are unresponsive because they know he will never get it through his head that life is unserious. Before the speech, Vonnegut talks to some students about Reagan's Star Wars. None believe it can succeed, but all want to work on it.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

At the University of Chicago, Dr. Robert Redfield used to defend one part of the discredited theory of cultural evolution, insisting that every society passes through the "Folk Society" stage. The Folk Society is isolated geographically, is linked organically with a single area, transcends life and death and has crisscrossing bonds of kinship. Members agree on what life is about and behave uniformly. Folk societies are hell for the curious, inventive or ridiculous. When Vonnegut moves to Cape Cod as a non-Anglo-Saxon out of intellectual step with his new neighbors, he is out of place even among volunteer firemen (which he had been earlier), and he feels no less isolated in picture-perfect Sagaponack, Long Island, where he now writes. This chapter is "filets" cut from a very bad piece in *Architectural Digest,* talking about how Manhattan belongs to anyone who is there but is unownable and thus cannot support a Folk Society.

As a writer, Vonnegut is an anthropologist, writing about the acculturated primitive people in "Skyscraper National Park." Sufferers of "Folk Society Deficiency" (FSD) stops thinking as they seek to become members of a crazy artificial extended family sharing a core of mythic ideas. Manson and Jim Jones spring to mind, but so do the "Neo-Conservatives," who unwittingly live as 19th-century British aristocrats, bearing the White Man's Burden. Their delusion is comical, but the effect on dark-skinned poor people foreign and domestic is tragic. Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* depicts whites as highly evolved and others as monkeys without tails. This is little different from the way the U.S. fires indiscriminately on Lebanon and Libya, kills 1,000 tailless monkeys while arresting the Panamanian Head of State and does the same in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the South Bronx and Mozambique.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut has dealt recently with the Neo-Cons' views in *Hocus Pocus,* whose special preface he quotes here. Many Vonnegut books, including this one, do not have individual human beings as main characters. *Hocus Pocus* features imperialism, the capture of other societies' lands, people and treasure by arms. Columbus is followed by heavily armed Europeans who steal the hemisphere from its millions of human inhabitants, and the conquerors' heirs, who must administer the stolen lands and disaffected people. Foreigners, mostly cash-heavy Japanese, are now buying up the U.S., about which they care no more than those who earlier conquer Rhodesia, the Congo and Mozambique. Vonnegut breaks off the preface to say what he wishes he had written: the U.S. will be left a Dr. Seuss-type Third-World nation composed of clashing tribes. Colonialism will bust up all cultures and create a Third-World planet. Salman Rushdie has not responded to Vonnegut's response to this theory, but he wrote a review of *Hocus Pocus* for which Vonnegut is considering putting a contract out on him.

Returning to the printed preface, Vonnegut goes after American Eastern Seaboard prep schools, clones of the British ones exhibiting the "muscular Christianity" of the time of Queen Victoria. *Masterpiece Theatre* has made the British class system seem charming and witty, when it is as subversive as *Das Kapital* or *Mein Kampf*. It was and is (as practiced by Neo-Cons) armed robbery. In *The Nation,* Vonnegut wrote an essay about Americans "going bananas," claiming the U.S.'s most nurturing contribution to planetary culture is not jazz but Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Its scheme requires an explicit confession by the 10% of humans who become addicted to substances that give them brief spasms of pleasure but make their lives ghastly in the long term. The addiction can be non-chemical, as with compulsive gamblers. AA or GA members are encouraged to testify how addictions have alienated families and friends, cost them jobs and deprived them of self-respect.

Many talk of "hitting bottom" before admitting they have been ruining their lives. Among the most tragic addictions is that of people hooked on preparations for war. Vonnegut feels sorrier for someone who proposes a $29 billion weapon system than for someone washing down a fistful of black beauties with Southern Comfort. Western Civilization hit bottom in World War I, but "We the people," ignorant of the disease, have not kept power away from those who are sick. If they are separated from the levers of power, Western Civilization's long, hard trip back to sobriety may begin. World War II ought to have taught that the compulsive war-preparers cannot be appeased.

Most addictions start innocently in childhood, and some of those filled with glee at Fourth of July fireworks now babble about knocking down Evil Empire missiles with laser beams. They invent weapons against which no defense is possible, urge the citizenry to hate a given part of humanity and knock over little governments, but they

want a big war no more than an alcoholic stockbroker wants to pass out with his head in a Port Authority Bus Terminal toilet. Addicts of every sort should be cleaned up before they can hold high office.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut preaches a napve sermon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. For all their creativity, scientists cannot make dead people any deader. If hydrogen bombs were not after mankind, death - the absence of life - would be. There are fates worse than death, like Jim Jones' visions that drive his followers to drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide. I

f the U.S. government ever faces a fate worse than death, there will be plenty of Kool-Aid, in the form of nuclear weapons. Suppose the U.S. gets rid of nuclear weapons and an enemy brings in the cruel Roman form of torture, crucifixion. If Americans were crucified, would they not wish they still had hydrogen bombs? The one person known to have been crucified in ancient times chooses to endure agony rather than to end life everywhere, asking forgiveness for those who do not know what they do. Admittedly, this is a special case, and ordinary humans cannot know from him how much pain and humiliation to endure before calling an end to everything. Though no potential enemy nation has enough carpenters and no Pentagon planner has mentioned it, the U.S. could be enslaved by not appropriating enough money for weaponry, and slavery would surely be a Kool-Aid requiring fate worse than death. It will kill off all higher forms of life on Earth, including the blue-footed boobies of the Galbpagos Islands, which Vonnegut has seen with Bishop Paul Moore, Jr.

Vonnegut has never seen a slave, but millions of Americans suffer it when his four great-grandfathers first come to the U.S. The song, "Rule, Britannia," calling for a strong navy, proclaims Britons shall never be slaves, but Americans and Russians, last enslaved at the same time, are able to endure it by trusting God, believing better days are coming and committing suicide less often than their masters. Thus, slavery may *not* be a fate worse than death. Suppose enemies come ashore, drive people out of their homes into swamps and deserts and try to destroy religion? Millions of Americans - Indians - have endured this. Other possible fates worse than death include life without petroleum and (formerly) loss of virginity outside holy wedlock. Perhaps there are tribulations *white* people should not have to tolerate. Russian slaves are white, though, and Britons *have* been enslaved - by Romans. A third of Americans are robbed, ruined and scorned after the Civil War, but they want to go on living. Only soldiers do not do everything possible to remain alive.

Go to the Galbpagos Islands to realize that Nature will restart life if humans desolate the planet. Only mankind, unlikely to disarm, is running out of time. "Ka-blooey!" may be why mankind is here, to create hydrogen bombs as "eggs for new galaxies." People might pray for rescue from their own inventiveness, as the dinosaurs prayed to be rescued from their own massiveness. On the other hand, mankind may achieve unity through television, which has created a generation that needs not fight to be disillusioned about war. Vietnam veterans are somehow spooky, "unwholesomely

mature," because they have never held illusions that war is anything but meaningless butchery of ordinary people like themselves.

No Hemingway is needed to shock soldiers' parents by announcing that war is repulsive, stupid and dehumanizing. Modern communications makes everyone sick of war before unlucky young Americans go to Vietnam, Soviets to Afghanistan and "Argies" and "Brits" to the Falkland Islands (theirs sounds like a soccer match). When Vonnegut is young, few non-specialists know much about foreigners, but today sights and sounds are experienced electronically from around the planet, and millions travel to exotic places. People know for certain that "enemies" are human beings like themselves, needing food, loving children, obeying leaders and thinking like neighbors. People have a reason to mourn the death or wounding of any human being on any side in any war.

Rotten communications and racist ignorance once made it possible to celebrate Hiroshima, but today killing enemies has lost its zing. Every sane American or Soviet is horrified at the thought his country might destroy the other. It is often said that people must change, or world wars will continue. The good news is that people have changed, being ignorant and bloodthirsty no more. Vonnegut dreams about 1,000 years from now, when there will still be rich and poor, likeable and insufferable, but all will be descendants of people who endure insults, humiliations and disappointments without committing suicide or murder.

Vonnegut explains how he happens to preach in the biggest Gothic church in the world, as one in a series of opponents of nuclear weapons in 1983. He regrets his blithering optimism, talking to select war-haters in a society fascinated and entertained by war. Three-quarters of the speech is truthful, up to the television "pacifier." TV (and movies) hold and stimulate profitable, big audiences by showing them murder, as callously as Hitler's propaganda preparing Germans for death camps and war. Vonnegut should have preached about being in Hell thanks to technology telling people what to do instead of vice versa.

Weapons kill a world away while people "glurp" petroleum, surely an addiction like cocaine. He should have noted how his birthday, November 11, after 1945 turns from a commemoration of the end of a horrible war (Armistice Day) to a celebration of boys and girls who will fight future wars (Veterans Day). People his age have memorized Captain J. W. Philip's admonition to crewmen in the Spanish-American War, "Don't cheer, boys, those poor devils are dying." Compare how, when Panamanians are being "zapped," the administration crows "whoopee."

Reagan's only warfare is in sanitized movies, while Bush, while a war hero, as an aviator, never has to see his victims. Veterans of ground actions often suffer nightmares, but thankfully, Vonnegut has killed no one. He imagines how embarrassed an aviator would be to admit that. Bush is the first president in Vonnegut's lifetime to be elected after a nakedly racist campaign as despicable as Nazi propaganda. Sinclair Lewis' 1935 *It Can't Happen Here* comforts the U.S. about fascism, and Vonnegut believes it - unless there is another Great Depression. Vonnegut is friends with Bishop Moore before the Galbpagos trip with him, wife Brenda and Jill, whom Moore has known

since her childhood. On the equator, Vonnegut asks Moore to point out the Southern Cross, a constellation the bishop has seen on Guadalcanal, where he finds religion. Moore is a good man, siding with the powerless, abused, scorned and cheated. Moore is one of the saints Vonnegut tells a woman he has met that make it possible for him to recommend bringing children into this awful world.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut meets his first wife, Jane, in kindergarten. Born a Quaker, Jane dies a high Episcopalian as the wife of Adam Yarmolinsky. Both her father and brother are Marines, being military Quakers like Richard M. Nixon. Jane attends Swathmore and embraces the austere Quakerism it practices, but she stops attending meetings after they marry, perhaps because Eastern congregations are as unwelcoming of strangers as Redfield's Folk Societies and Israeli kibbutzim. Jane's teenage prediction of many children comes true as she bears three and they later adopt Vonnegut's orphaned nephews. Jane dislikes the family she comes from (her mother is periodically insane) but adores her children. The marriage breakup produces much hydrofluoric acid. The grown children flying the coop brings on terrible loneliness, and Jane goes in for Transcendental Meditation (TM) with total abandon. Holy Communion replaces its high when Jane becomes an Episcopalian.

O'Hare, born a Catholic, comes home from war a skeptic, while Moore goes to war skeptical and comes out a convinced Trinitarian. A vision on Guadalcanal brings the privileged Moore to minister to the poor. Vonnegut claims not to be changed by the war except that he is entitled to converse as a peer with other combat veterans of any army or any war. Neighborhood dogs, more than the war, which is a great adventure not to be missed, shape his personality. Second wife Jill is also Episcopalian and like Jane finds religionless Vonnegut a spiritual cripple. Vonnegut does not attend daughter Lily's baptism.

In 1986, Unitarian Universalists, who claim him as one of their own, invite Vonnegut to lecture in Rochester. He begins with his Kin Hubbard quip and then quotes Nietzsche to the effect that only a person of great faith can afford to be a skeptic. This is a difficult era, as quacks, racketeers and charismatic lunatics seek to control people, and bad preachers offer faith for money and/or votes. From the president down, the so-called "religious revival" has two commandments: 1) stop thinking, and 2) obey! Only soldiers in basic training do that. Wearing dog tags that identify him as P(rotestant), Vonnegut fights the Germans, but he wishes he had been shown as S(aracen), since he was fighting cross-emblazoned Christians on an insane Crusade.

Christians are bloodthirsty because preachers exhort them, impossibly, to *love* their neighbors. Vonnegut imagines Jesus saying, reasonably, "Respect one another," as a sign he cares about people on Earth, not just in an Afterlife. Love's emotional spectrum runs: love - like - give a damn about - hate. Christians try and fail to love continually until they have no alternative but to hate and then kill in imaginary self-defense. Anyone in reasonable mental health can respect others, and when one cannot, one can make others feel like something the cat drug in - which is better than Armageddon or World War III. Vonnegut has little hope this reform will attract support because "Christianity Fails Again" provides satisfying entertainment for many. In America, this takes the form

of a cowboy new to town inevitably facing down an unlovable man whom he has to shoot.

Early Britons enjoy knights covered like Gtzring with crosses, riding out to help folk but ending up chopping other unlovable knights to pieces. The present administration says, "Nobody wants peace more than we do," and then "Ka-boom!" Christianity Fails Again, as in Libya. Jerry Falwell, who knows the Bible verses that make murder acceptable, should explain whether Christians should feel sorry for Qaddafi's baby daughter, but Vonnegut believes TV-watching Americans cannot love dark-skinned Muslims who, in effect, commit suicide.

In terms of numbers, power, influence and spiritual differences with the general population, Unitarian Universalists are akin to the earliest Christians in the catacombs of Rome, except that they are no longer in danger of being crucified upside down or fed to carnivores. Like the early Christians, they yearn for peace, plenty and justice that may never come, and they live in an era when killing is entertainment. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that by graduation, the average American has watched 18,000 TV Failures of Christianity (murders) and is grateful to the corporations and government that put the shows on.

Modern society, like Roman society, is filled with superstition and baloney, but in those days no one knew anything about the planet, the cosmos, the origins of life or science. Early Christians have no choice but to be full of baloney, but today information abounds. Unitarian Universalists know baloney when they hear it, and contempt for it will some day be as widespread as Christianity is today. Hopefully, they will not, like early Christians, stop taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously in order to join forces with the vain, rich and violent. Unitarian Universalists need a logo for T-shirts and flags - and maybe later for tanks, planes and missiles. Vonnegut recommends a barred circle over a baloney. No large enthusiastic (perhaps rabid) following will take to that symbol, so they must repudiate it and make up highly emotional baloney about what God wants, whom he likes and hates and what he has for breakfast. The more violent they make God, the better they will do, competing with *Miami Vice*, Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone. Like televangelists, they must steer clear of the Ten Commandments, which ruin the whole show by stating, "Thou shalt not kill." Vonnegut notes that his Freethinking provokes some religious venues he addresses, like at Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky, in 1990. Dean Paul H. Jones writes a mutual friend, concerned by Vonnegut's portrayal of the human condition in *Hocus Pocus*. Jones wonders about his mentioning Jesus and invoking religious images. Vonnegut's response is in the Appendix.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

A 1990 piece for *Parade* begins with Vonnegut strapped into a jet bound for Maputo, asking John Yale who the good and bad guys are in Mozambique. Vonnegut is on a trip sponsored by CARE in hopes ordinary Americans will contribute once they learn about the manmade agony. He knows only that Mozambique is as beautiful and habitable as California, underpopulated and a Garden of Eden turned into a manmade hell. Yale works for World Vision, an American evangelical Christian charity bringing supplies to 1 million helpless refugees driven from their homes, schools and hospitals by fellow Mozambicans, the National Resistance of Mozambique (RENAMO), an anti-Marxist gang of thugs U.S. Neo-Cons love. Yale takes no sides but clearly disapproves of RENAMO's raping, murdering and pillaging uncontrollably since 1976. They transfer to a twin-engined Cessna flown by bush pilot Jim Friesen, flying high to avoid being shot at. With the roads cut, all supplies come in by air. On October 9 through 13, they tour refugee centers that look like liberated Nazi death camps and Biafra, which Vonnegut has seen in person. He has not previously seen people purposefully mutilated.

CARE's local boss is David P. Neff, forty-three, from New Athens, Illinois, a veteran of the Peace Corps in Cameroon who has worked in Liberia, the Gaza Strip, the Philippines, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Mozambique. His enemy is not RENAMO but inefficiency. If RENAMO captures the capital, they will not know what to do with it. The Cessna lands beside the hulk of a DC-3, "Little Annie," recently crashed while delivering supplies. Two gaunt Mozambicans approach, one in a shirt showing the flags of U.S. yacht clubs and the other Superman's insignia. The *Parade* article ends here, but Vonnegut continues, recalling another piece for the op-ed page of the *New York Times* about how Mozambique throws off its Portuguese masters at the same time the Vietnamese are throwing the Americans out. Mozambicans want to learn to read, write and do some math, but RENAMO seeks consistently to prevent that, much as the departing Portuguese sabotage the sewer lines that no longer belong to them. In *Palm Sunday,* Vonnegut reprints an essay written about Biafran suffering that makes him cry so hard he barks like a dog. He does not cry during World War II, and only softly when Jane dies. Mozambique's pervasive suffering leaves Vonnegut emotionally empty, a condition old friend, Herb Harrington, says happened to him in China during World War II.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut's favorite dirty joke is told in cockney by his late Russian translator, Rita Rait. An eccentric British millionaire dies and leaves an enormous prize for the wittiest original limerick. When the BBC refuses to broadcast the bawdy winner, Churchill gets it recited, using the empty sound "dah" for any offending syllable. It contains four lines of "dah" followed by "Dah dah dah dah fucking cunt." Rait chirps that as a non-native speaker she can say whatever she pleases, no matter how dirty. Vonnegut, who advocates paying translators the same royalties as authors, addresses a gathering of translators at Columbia University in 1983. His first work to be translated is *Player Piano,* into German in 1964. The translator, Wulf H. Bergner, is so familiar with American English that he asks no questions, and people say it is a fine rendering. Vonnegut has more fun with the Italian Roberta Rambelli, who asks about rumble seats and Ferris wheels. The French are the first to pick up *The Sirens of Titan.* Monique Theis poses no questions, and Vonnegut hears that her misunderstandings are ludicrous. Rambelli asks fifty-three questions, and they fall in platonic love.

The Soviets, who have nothing to do with the International Copyright Convention, pirate both titles, and the translators have nothing to do with him - like those in Germany, France, Denmark and Holland. The French translator of Vonnegut's last two books, Robert Pypin, is a novelist, fluent and a friend. He asks even more questions than Rambelli. The Soviets have joined the Convention but pay him next to nothing for later works and nothing for the earlier pirated ones. Still, he is fonder of Rait than anyone outside his family. They first meet in Paris, and he has visited her twice in Moscow and Leningrad.

Because Vonnegut has characters speak naturally, there are some obscenities in his books, which Soviet censors would not allow to be rendered idiomatically. As she did with Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Rait substitutes archaic peasant vocabulary for barnyard matters that are considered folkloric and inoffensive. *Jailbird* cannot be rendered in European languages whose judicial systems never adopted the Quaker penitentiary system. Vonnegut requires only that translators be more gifted writers than he and speak at least two languages, including his. His chatty Japanese translator, Shigeo Tobita, wants to know if "Four Roses" is expensive wine. Four months after this speech, Vonnegut is carted off to the St. Vincent's Hospital emergency ward after trying to kill himself. The Appendix includes an essay he writes long afterwards about possible connections between creativity and mental illness.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis

In "The Kilimanjaro Device," the great fiction writer Ray Bradbury has a magic Jeep driving near Ketchum, Idaho, come upon Ernest Hemingway and offer him a better alternative to blowing his head off. He dies glamorously in an airplane crash into 19,340-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro. In Bradbury country, Vonnegut's suicide might be successful, meaning that he is dead and observing things that might otherwise have been. He might have written the following essay for the *New York Times* in 1990. It observes that American humorists/satirists grow intolerably unfunny pessimists past a certain age. This is confirmed in William Keough's *Punchlines*. Twain stops laughing, denounces life on this planet and dies - even before World War I or nuclear weapons. Jokes work by hooking and releasing the listener, causing the release of fight-or-flight chemicals through laughter. On a campus tour in 1989, Vonnegut talks about challenges so real, immediate and appalling that no amount of laughter brings relief, so he cancels remaining engagements. He thinks about still writing amusing books but does not want to. He recalls Father's growing sick of architecture but sticking with it. Vonnegut wants to write a modern *Don Quixote* to razz people with his dream of the ideal citizen, but it does not come off funny. He lacks a way to let readers off the hook in the way Twain lets resourceful Huck Finn simply "light out for the territory." To what territory can one now light out?

Not only would Vonnegut not have written this piece had he died, but he would have missed seeing three more grandchildren, as Mother missed a dozen by committing suicide. She had felt as bad as anyone nowadays in Mozambique, where there is plenty of murder but no suicide. Alive, smoking and wearing Father's mournful mustache, Vonnegut quotes an essay written for a 1990 Christmas catalog. He recalls the 1960s, when he allows that deep meditation, Indian-style, might allow Europeans and Africans to achieve happiness and wisdom. Like the Beatles, briefly, he delivers himself to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and finds TM to be like a nice little nap or scuba diving in lukewarm bullion. He realizes that ignoring distractions and repeating a mantra resembles reading books, something he begins doing at age eight. Awakening a Western-style trance, however, Vonnegut is often a wiser human being. He tells this story because many consider books obsolete technology, when in fact a literate person sitting in a straight chair holding a book can experience a spiritual condition of priceless depth and meaning. Only crass and earthly matters should be surrendered to printouts and cathode tubes.

Vonnegut observes that Krementz, whom he calls "Xanthippe" after Socrates' wife, has kept him from sleeping to death and is, in George Bernard Shaw's words, "a life force woman." Abbie Hoffman is high on Vonnegut's list of saints, souls who try to slow state crimes against the meek. Hoffman does so with truth, anger and ridicule, spending his final years protecting Nature and leaving his family without a cent. His flight from prosecution puts an end to the myth of the right of peaceable assembly and petition for

redress of grievances. Vonnegut doubts Hoffman's clowning - or any protests - shorten the Vietnam War. Long before they meet, Xanthippe spends a year photographing the war and produces a beautiful, humane book, *The Face of South Vietnam*, with text by CBS correspondent Dean Brelis. This pal sends her a letter on her fiftieth birthday, recalling her as a beautiful woman not stuck on herself, who hides behind her camera, sees things few do, is often brought to tears but never gives up seeking the truth. With her heart and mind behind every picture, she asks, "Why this?"

Brelis recalls her cursing the human waste, shaking he fist in rage and working with the nuns to find hope. On a recent trip to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), Brelis sees her name on a list of "round-eyes" not to be harmed. He hopes that her goal of a better world is closer today and reminds her of the Vietnamese saying, "the fun begins at fifty." Xanthippe is another of Vonnegut's saints, along with Dr. Robert Maslansky, who treats addicts at Bellevue Hospital, and Tris and Margaret Coffin, who publish *The Washington Spectator*. They object to the characterization, but Vonnegut is swifter than Rome in making such judgments and requires no magic with the help of God. As an anthropologist, he disregards race, class and money. Morris Dees, a southern lawyer who endangers himself by taking the Ku Klux Klan to court is a saint, and Vonnegut agrees he is nuts to do what he does. The aid workers he meets in Mozambique are saints, preparing people to survive if their agencies are ever pulled out. This happens at a time when the forces of Beelzebub in the U.S. are waging racist and classist political campaigns, wreaking economic and environmental havoc and jailing more citizens than the USSR or South Africa - some beacon of liberty to the world!

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary and Analysis

Vonnegut is a "Roundhead" to Xanthippe's "Cavalier" (an oblique reference to the English civil war suggested by Arthur Schesinger, Jr., as an apt division of the world into types), and both are too barbaric to respond to the history of their art, which Saul Steinberg says is the alternative to responding to life itself. Having finished reading William Styron's *Darkness Visible,* Vonnegut says suicidal people can be divided into Styron's type, blaming it on brain wiring and chemistry, and his own, blaming the Universe. Humorists feel free to speak of life as a dirty joke, even though life is all there is or ever can be. At the point of killing himself, Hamlet does not ponder the grief and confusion he will cause survivors. Had the future King of Denmark wanted to be remembered post mortem he would have said so, like Mark Twain, who is convinced his moralizing will outlive him. Most ancient writings moralize, including the Bible, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, Voltaire's *Candide*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class,* Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology,* Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Young writers should moralize in a reader-friendly way, like *Don Quixote,* not the sermons of Cotton Mather.

Asking Saul Steinberg why Louis-Ferdinand Cyline would include loathsome attacks on Jews in general and Anne Frank in particular in his masterpieces, Vonnegut hears, "He wanted *you* to remember him." Vonnegut does not care if he is remembered after he dies. He is a child of the Great Depression, a time when one does not ask about the nature of an available job. Writing books is like any other job. When his cash cow, slick magazines, is put out of business by TV, he writes industrial advertising, sells cars, invents a board game and teaches private school, never thinking he owes it to himself or the world to return to writing. Most people of Vonnegut's age and social class are retired, and he feels he is no longer the promising writer he used to be. He hopes people will forgive him his absentmindedness as they did his aging father, who towards the end confuses him with their long-dead wire-haired terrier, Bozo. Father dies searching vainly for an important document he tells no one about.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary and Analysis

Many feel that humor is a scheme of self-defense that only maligned and oppressed minorities should be allowed to use. They must take offense at privileged Vonnegut. In New York City, everyone silently sizes up everyone else on minute distinctions of race. Doubtless they size him up as a German. When asked about German reunification, he replies that most of what people like about German culture comes from a time there were many Germanys; that which they hate comes from one. Germans are frightening because they like to fight other white people; the U.S. in Grenada, Panama and Nicaragua, are fighting "Neeger wars." During World War I, Anglos hate all things German and force the shut down of German-American institutions, so when World War II arrives, they are the least tribal and most acculturated segment of the white population. One American in four is of German descent, but politicians do not pander for their votes. Sadly, the German-American Freethinker movement has not survived, for it could offer an extended family to millions of Americans whose big questions about life are unanswered. Before World War I, they had many cheerful congregations and picnics. Despite no motivation of Heaven or Hell, the Freethinkers behave well, virtue being its own reward.

Vonnegut is astonished to have finished writing another book. His first book, *Player Piano,* published thirty-eight years ago, poses a question even harder to answer today: "What are people for?" Maintenance, he says. *Hocus Pocus,* his latest previous title, says everyone wants to build but no one wants to do maintenance. Saying *Auf Wiedersehen*, Vonnegut thinks of O'Hare and his great-grandfather Clemens' concluding his essay on Freethinking with a fragment from Goethe.

Appendix

Appendix Summary and Analysis

Early in the book, Vonnegut explains that he has moved to the Appendix materials that would break the flow of his text, but which he wants to share with the reader. The first is the afterward to son Mark's *The Eden Express.* Mark notes that things have changed for the better in twenty years since the first edition, as the biochemical component to mental illness has come to be accepted. Schizophrenia's definition has been tightened, and he is now classed as a manic-depressive. Fewer people with acute breakdowns are written off as hopeless. Still, a dozen separate diseases are lumped together as schizophrenia/manic depression, creating a hellish lack of certainty for patients and their families. Experience has shown Mark that large doses of vitamins do not help his recovery, but he has not changed the text. He simply retracts here a few passages. Mark still thinks about the 1960s, which are not spaced-out, flaky, self-absorbed times as depicted in movies. Vulnerable young people achieve a lot of good, and there are probably more deeply scarred ex-hippies than Vietnam veterans.

Vonnegut comments: Many well-educated, healthy hippies like Mark who did not risk life and honor in Vietnam are indeed scarred by shame at belonging to a social class so pandered to by the administration that its young do not have to go - and do not want to go. Vonnegut remembers the face and personality behind only one name on the Vietnam Memorial - a screw-up whose parents sent him to the Army to straighten out. He knows only one parent of a dead soldier, who shared his World War II-era mentality about patriotism and sharing sacrifices and risks. Vonnegut cannot imagine asking his parents to get him a behind-the-lines assignment. Like O'Hare's kids, Mark inherits this attitude, and like many in his generation he chooses to become a man without a country because of the government's cruel and hideously wasteful policies. Although no longer subject to military service, he goes to Canada, which he describes in *The Eden Express.* Mark may write a sequel about his post-breakdown successes. Mark's only crime against his government (shared by Hoffman and others) is the sublimely Jeffersonian form of treason: disrespect.

The subtitle of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is *The Children's Crusade,* but the age of the average corpse in World War II is twenty-six. In Vietnam, it is twenty, like the antiwar demonstrators killed at Kent State in 1970. The demonstrators, including many returned veterans, are facilely dismissed as unserious by their enemies for their manners and music. Vonnegut memorializes this prejudice in an unwritten short story, "The Dancing Fool," and is including it in the plot of a novel about a flying saucer creature named Zog, who has a cure for cancer but is dismissed because his planet's form of communication is farts and tap dancing. If Hoffman had been Vonnegut's son, he would have told him he was doing the right thing but warned him he was putting his life on the line for his countrymen.

The second item in the Appendix is Karel ?apek's essay, "On Literature." The Czech author recalls in fascinating detail boyhood wanderings through his country town and laments that no young people today would be interested in describing his prosaic writing profession in this way. Vonnegut comments: Researchers like big brother Bernard also view the world with childlike astonishment and fascination. Bernard reserves wonderment for whatever created the Universe. When Vonnegut does Western-style meditations on ?apek's essay, he borrows his innocent mind and is relieved. He hopes young people will learn to read easily, despite TV and other diversions. Vonnegut has just finished reading Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* and agrees with the thesis that if literature is considered only academically. He maintains, though, that non-theatrical artists create works to become mantras, used in solitary meditation, free of kibitzers. Such reading will go on, despite the mutual apathy between academic critics and artists.

The third item is O'Hare's remarks about their friendship on Vonnegut's sixtieth birthday: All war buddies lie to one another about keeping in touch, but Vonnegut and O'Hare manage not to avoid one another. Before the war they share in common only age and excessive smoking; what they have now derives in part, sadly, from the war and, happily, from a long friendship. They meet during specialized training in a program sheltering preppies, and when it terminates, they are sent to the Infantry. Neither can read a map or has a sense of direction, so they become reconnaissance scouts - and are captured. They are sent to a slaughterhouse in Dresden, where they are bombed by people they think are friends. After the war, they return to Dresden, as uncomfortable as the first time. They rarely speak about Dresden or the war, probably because they laugh too much together - as they did returning to Dresden. They can still smell the smoke and other things, and they spend little time there or in Russia, their next stop.

Reviewers have characterized Vonnegut as a "black humorist," but they do not realize the far greater horror of what he writes about. They miss the message, a plea that governments would follow the Sermon on the Mount rather than those who call for Armageddon. If that is black humor, it is too bad there is not an epidemic of it. O'Hare is glad neither of them died and would return to Dresden with him. Vonnegut comments on the photograph from May 1945 reproduced on the following pages, describing the hungry but elated former POWs and telling what they have gone on to do. He calls for a monument to the generation that saved the world from the Nazi war machine. Vonnegut wants to correct one of O'Hare's details, but he will not argue with the dead.

The fourth item is "The Bomber's Baedeker" entry on Dresden in 1944. The title is a cynical reference to German tourist guides. Vonnegut comments that every British and American bomber carries this kind of directory to pick targets on their own should they not be able to carry out their assigned mission. He reproduces it here to show that Dresden has nothing worth bombing. Burning it down is a religious, Wagnerian, theatrical exercise and should be judged as such.

The fifth item is an English translation of Pope Pius V's 1570 Latin funeral mass discussed in Chapter 6; the sixth is Vonnegut's 1985 revised mass in English for comparison. The seventh is John F. Collin's Latin translation of the same. The eighth

item is Vonnegut's unpublished essay written after reading galleys of an anthology by persons in institutions for the mentally ill; clerical workers used to be able to decorate their work areas with funny or impudent signs. One reads, "You don't have to be crazy to work here, / But it helps." Then as now many believe that one must be crazy to do fresh work in the arts. Similar links used to be made between tuberculosis and genius and male authors and heavy drinking. Some creative persons are beneficiaries of disease, including contributors to this volume (none of them famous). Many years in the writing business convince Vonnegut that 1) more good writing is being done than can be published or read, and 2) creative people have thoughts unlike the general population because they have been culled (or feel they have been) from the general population.

There are many reasons for culling: TB, syphilis, felony convictions, membership in a despised race or faction, bad appearance and rotten personality are a few. Being culled is not enough to make one creative; one must be gifted, as are these contributors. The percentage of gifted persons is the same in most gatherings. Vonnegut believes those culled for mental illness have given the world more works of art worth saving than those culled for other reasons. This makes sense, because the word *egregious* ("outside the herd") is coined for them. As Kris Kristofferson writes, "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose." Culled gifted persons have no reason to echo others' thoughts. Hopelessness is the mother of Originality, and Originality's three daughters are Hope, Gratitude of Others and Unshakable Self-Respect.

The final item in the Appendix is Vonnegut's reply to Dean Paul H. Jones of Transylvania University. Vonnegut talks about being a fourth-generation German-American Freethinker, who believe God is unknowable and unservable and therefore give their energies to their communities rather than worrying about an improbable afterlife. Since most Americans know a little about the Bible, Vonnegut finds it a good place to start discussions, and he admires its two geniuses, Moses and Christ. Jesus stimulates him because he notices that life is hard for most people and shows grace in defeat. Whether God or not, on the cross, Jesus teaches grace in defeat in unbelievable agony. Formal Christianity can be preached, and Vonnegut has done it many places. He cannot abide sermons, though, that say believing in Jesus' divinity is a way to *win*.

Characters

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Kurt Vonnegut, Sr.

Jill Krementz ("Xanthippe")

Alice Vonnegut Adams

Nelson Algren

Dr. Walter Bruetsch

George H. W. Bush

John F. Collins

Theodor Geisel ("Dr. Seuss")

Edgar Grana

Ernest Hemingway

Charleton Heston

Kin Hubbard

James Madison

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

Bishop Paul Moore, Jr.

Bernard V. O'Hare

Jackson Pollock

Muammar Qaddafi

Rita Rait

Roberta Rambelli

Ronald Reagan

Dr. Robert Redfield

Salman Rushdie

Edith Vonnegut Squibb

Hugh Troy

Mark Twain

Alex Vonnegut

Bernard Vonnegut

Dr. Bernard Vonnegut

Clemens Vonnegut

Dr. Mark Vonnegut

Edith LieberVonnegut

Barbara Wagner

Andrew Lloyd Webber

Elie Wiesel

John Yale

Jane Marie Cox Vonnegut Yarmolinsky

Objects/Places

The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography

The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography is depicted as a pietistic traveling show against dirty books and pictures, manned by some individuals involved in financial or sexual atrocities. Universally, the commission members are portrayed as mean-spirited advocates of the amorality of the Reagan Administration. The commission is blatant show business, seeking pious headlines. Vonnegut jokes that he is turned down to testify that the scales have fallen from his eyes and that he accepts that the government must be able to suppress harmful words and images and begs forgiveness and the destruction of his books, for which he is now ashamed. In the name of democracy, he must be saved from himself, for he is hindered in making amends by the pernicious text of the First Amendment to the Constitution.

CARE

A product of World War II, the international relief agency CARE later ministers to Third World people in dire need, including the people of Mozambique, to which it invites Vonnegut and several other journalists to write about horrific conditions there, in hopes Americans will contribute. There are fears the collapse of the Soviet Union will draw CARE back to Europe.

Dresden, Germany

The German city firebombed by British warplanes late in World War II, Dresden's fate fits the Aristotelian ideal for tragedy. The Germans hold Vonnegut and fellow POWs for possible exchange, housing them in squalor in barracks and forcing them at gunpoint to find charred corpses in the rubble and carry them to mass funeral pyres. Vonnegut imagines the survivors are as numb as he on that occasion, rather than thinking that the gruesome work is fitting punishment for his compatriots' raining havoc on their city, which has no military significance. Vonnegut does not think about the politics of the dead he carries, whether they are innocent or possible Nazis. He compares the vindictive British action to the U.S. nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima, he judges, saves American and Japanese lives, but neither Dresden nor Nagasaki can be justified.

Folk Society Deficiency (FSD)

Building on the anthropological premise of Dr. Robert Redfield at the University of Chicago and his own observations in "Skyscraper National Park" (Manhattan), Vonnegut sees FSD as a malady causing sufferers to stop thinking for themselves as they seek to become members of a crazy artificial extended family sharing a core of

mythic ideas. Charles Manson and Jim Jones spring to mind, but so do the "Neo-Conservatives," who rule Washington, DC, behaving like British aristocrats a hundred years ago, bearing the White Man's Burden. Their delusion is comical, but the effect on dark-skinned poor people foreign and domestic is tragic. Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel *Heart of Darkness* depicts whites as highly evolved and others as monkeys without tails, little different from the way the U.S. fires indiscriminately on Lebanon and Libya, kills 1,000 tailless monkeys while arresting the Panamanian Head of State and does the same in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the South Bronx and Mozambique.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression is the period of economic crisis beginning with the stock market crash in 1929 and extending until the late 1930s, when the buildup to World War II revives industry. These are the years of Vonnegut's late childhood and adolescence. A halt in construction puts Kurt Vonnegut Sr. out of business as an architect, ending a promising career. Unlike millions, the Vonneguts do not go hungry, because Father finds and accepts another job. Fellow author Nelson Algren never gets beyond the Great Depression, writing about people permanently dehumanized by poverty, and his penchant for truth shoves him toward unpopularity. Vonnegut notes the "old poops" of the day see American civilization declining because youngsters are no longer forced to read ancient philosophers but get "knowledge" from radio quiz shows and jungle music. Among the things the ancient philosophers advocate is slavery, which cannot be a legitimate part of the U.S. experiment with liberty. As a child of the Great Depression, Vonnegut learns that when one loses a job, one finds another. He does not feel bad about setting aside his writing for years when it will not pay the bills.

The Holocaust

The result of the Germans' policy to destroy all European Jews during World War II, the Holocaust is downplayed by some Americans. Vonnegut is accused by some of being among them, but he has seen the Auschwitz and Birkenau death camps with his own eyes and is friends with an outspoken survivor, Elie Wiesel.

National Resistance of Mozambique (RENAMO)

The RENAMO is an organization of anti-Marxist thugs who since 1976 have been raping, murdering and pillaging uncontrollably in the former Portuguese colony. RENAMO is early-on supported and armed by the U.S. because of its political position vis-a-vis the Marxist government. While RENAMO remains popular with U.S. Neo-Conservatives, the government has joined the rest of the world community in trying to lessen the suffering of some 1 million helpless refugees driven from their homes, schools and hospitals by these hated thugs.

The National Rifle Association (NRA)

The NRA is a right-wing lobbying group, fronted by actor Charleton Heston, that claims to protect Americans' constitutional right to bear arms. The NRA overlooks the context of this right in Article II of the Bill of Rights - to be ready to defend the country as part of a "well-regulated Militia" - and the fact that modern weapons like the AK-47 and Uzi are hardly sportsmen's guns. Vonnegut is offended by the falsity of the NRA's arguments.

Requiem Mass

The traditional service for departed Catholics promulgated by Pope Pius V in 1570 by decree of the Council of Trent, the mass has been set to music by many composers. In 1985, Andrew Lloyd Webber composes a new one, which debuts to a black-tie audience in Manhattan's St. Thomas Church. Shocked by the divine brutality of the Latin words neither the famed performers nor the audience understands, Vonnegut revises it to remove not only sleeping with the lights on (rest eternal where the light of God's countenance perpetually shines), but stripping out all suggestion of God as a personal being, eternal punishment and particularity. Vonnegut gets it translated into Latin (for the poetry) by scholar John F. Collins, set to "postmodern, multiple-crossover, semiclassical bebop lemon marmalade" by Julliard-trained Edgar Grana and performed by Barbara Wagner's renowned Unitarian Universalist choir in Buffalo, New York.

Lake Maxincuckee

A three by two-and-a-half-mile lake in southern Indiana, Maxincuckee is where Vonnegut as a boy makes his first map of the world. Because the lake is a closed circuit, Vonnegut can walk home by walking one direction, which makes him bold as Marco Polo. Home there is an unheated frame cottage on a bluff, adjacent to four cottages teeming with relatives. Father's generation has grown up at Maxincuckee as (almost) the successors of the Potawatomi Indians. They give themselves a tribal name, the "Epta mayan-boys," deriving from a nonsensical German phrase. Swimming the lake at age eleven with his siblings accompanying him in a rowboat is imprinted forever in his mind. A stranger buys the house but puts off taking possession so Vonnegut and bride Jane (nye Cox) can honeymoon there at the end of the war. During the honeymoon, Jane asks Vonnegut to read *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel, fittingly, about the state of people's portable souls, which accords no importance to immovable real estate.

Themes

Addiction

As the son, nephew, sibling and father of addicts, Vonnegut devotes much space in *Fates Worse Than Death* to the phenomenon of addiction, which he characterizes as turning to something for brief spasms of pleasure, even though long-term it makes one's life ghastly. He is happy to report that he has no addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and petroleum or war preparations - for he makes it clear that addiction need not depend on external chemicals. A master's degree in anthropology has taught Vonnegut the "villains" are culture, society and history, not drugs. While writing the unfinished *SS Psychiatrist* about a doctor using talk therapy at Auschwitz to treat staff members' depression, he is on Ritalin, which he realizes is "dehydrated concentrate of pure paranoia." His son, Dr. Mark Vonnegut, suffers a full-blown crack-up, which he describes in *The Eden Express*. Since boyhood, Vonnegut thinks madness has a chemical basis. Mother becomes addicted to Phenobarbital and alcohol before killing herself, and alcoholic Uncle Alex founds the Indianapolis chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. In a letter to future Earthlings, Vonnegut recommends the Alcoholics Anonymous' prayer for serenity, courage and wisdom.

New freedom in the USSR shows that alcoholism causes trouble whether the sufferer is politically free or not. AA rather than jazz, Vonnegut holds, is America's most nurturing contribution to planetary culture. Its scheme requires explicit confessions by addicts and encourages them to testify to how it has alienated families and friends, cost jobs and deprived them of self-respect. Many talk of "hitting bottom" before admitting they have been ruining their lives. Among the most tragic addictions is that of people hooked on preparations for war. Vonnegut feels sorrier for someone who proposes a $29 billion weapon system than for someone washing down a fistful of black beauties with Southern Comfort. They invent weapons against which no defense is possible, urge the citizenry to hate a given part of humanity and knock over little governments, but they want a big war no more than an alcoholic stockbroker wants to pass out with his head in a Port Authority Bus Terminal toilet. Addicts of every sort should be cleaned up before they can hold high office, Vonnegut maintains.

Free Speech

As a professional writer, Vonnegut, of course, defends absolute freedom of speech, but he laments that people can say vile things in public while he is regularly and inaccurately charged by right-wingers with encouraging violence against women and kiddy porn. Vonnegut believes that the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of speech, is so clothed in Dr. Seuss-like language that it must be revised. An ACLU lawyer tells him that author James Madison probably omits qualifiers like "under ideal conditions" from the Bill of Rights because he doubts people will take what he is writing so seriously. The document is, thus, strictly "on" or "off," and Vonnegut views it more as

a dream rather than a statute. He knows there is no logical connection between reading books and child rape and mutilation, but he has to accept that the fundamentalist preacher who thinks otherwise has the right to proclaim his views.

Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut holds, is not pornographic because of one line of dialogue, and for decades, he denies that children have engaged in intercourse with their mothers based on it. The Reverend does not believe the Founding Fathers - "demigod" in Jefferson's words - have the right to keep God-fearing Christians from establishing their religion and enforcing its views by law. Thus the Reverend is no hypocrite. The free-speech provision also allows the NRA to say and publish things that make Vonnegut want to throw up, as when actor Charleton Heston claims that Article II of the Bill of Rights allows civilians to own military weapons that, like loathsome germs, kill people every day and straight-facedly suggests that it is for hunting. In the ignored context, Article II makes "a well-regulated Militia" the rationale for keeping and bearing arms, and were the NRA (and well-paid legislators) to recite the context, it would be clear those not recruited, led, motivated or restrained by anything but their own perceptions cannot be considered a well-regulated militia. This is part and parcel of an administration grown as nutty as Roman Emperor Caligula having his horse declared a Consul.

Suicide

Fates Worse Than Death deals many times and in many ways with suicide, never passing moral judgment on it. Chief among the real ones is that of Vonnegut's mother, driven into midnight rages by alcohol and prescription drugs. She chooses Mother's Day finally to do away with herself, depriving herself of the joy of seeing the first of a dozen grandchildren. When Vonnegut feels his ability to catch-and-release people with humor has departed and tries to kill himself, he thinks later about how he would have missed seeing half of his six grandchildren. He notes that second wife, Jill Krementz, keeps him from sleeping to death after his attempted suicide. He nicknames Jill "Xanthippe" after the nagging but wise wife of Socrates, one of history's most notable suicides.

Vonnegut deals at length with Ernest Hemingway's gruesome suicide by shotgun, observing it is his final story. Ray Bradbury in a short story offers Hemingway a more dramatic way of killing himself, by flying into the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro. Vonnegut notes in passing that inventor George Eastman shoots himself when his work is done. Reflecting on the song "Rule, Britannia," proclaiming that Britons will never be slaves, Vonnegut notes that Americans and Russians have both been enslaved and been able to endure it by trusting God, believing better days are coming and committing suicide less often than their masters. Vonnegut dreams about 1,000 years from now, when there will still be rich and poor, likeable and insufferable, but all will be descendants of people who endure insults, humiliations and disappointments without committing suicide or murder. The mass suicide of the Rev. Jim Jones's followers by cyanide-laced Kool-Aid provides the occasion for asking the title question: Are there fates worse than death? In a piece of political metaphor, Vonnegut rules as suicide the death of

Muammar Qaddafi's adopted baby daughter, because TV-watching Americans cannot love dark-skinned Muslims and feel compelled to bomb them.

Style

Perspective

Fates Worse Than Death (1991) is a sequel to Kurt Vonnegut's *Palm Sunday* (1980), unasked for, he modestly explains - too modestly it would seem, judging from critics' comments printed on the back cover and flyleaf. The titles that have flowed from his acerbic pen, listed facing the title page (a few of which Vonnegut discusses in the text), show that a popular, successful satirist has decided to "sound off" again. As in earlier writings, Vonnegut has favorite subjects on which to meditate and at which to fulminate, the great, formative events of his life. He has grown up a fourth-generation German-American Freethinker during the Great Depression. His mother commits suicide on Mother's Day 1944, after a long decline into nighttime madness. He is taken captive by the Germans in World War II and is forced to carry to great funeral pyres the civilians killed in the firebombing of Dresden.

Since the bombing of Hiroshima, he has watched the world teeter on the brink of annihilation through nuclear weapons, and his son Mark suffers a mental breakdown in the era of protests against the Vietnam War, a conflict whose human face Vonnegut's second wife, Jill Krementz, photographs with great poignancy. Through these autobiographical threads, familiar to veteran Vonnegut readers and clearly enough delineated for novices, the author weaves essays and speeches produced and delivered during the preceding decade. In *Fates Worse Than Death,* Vonnegut targets the unprincipled machinations of the Reagan Administration and continues into the first Bush Administration to the point the Gulf War in underway. The book is published before CNN shows the awesome technological power of the coalition forces. The book's documents, enclosed in quotation marks, deal with psychiatry, quack and authentic religion, constitutional law, history and literature. Towards the end of the book, Vonnegut suggests that he is past his prime and ready to retire, but in 2005, he produces *A Man without a Country,* covering the same primal events of his life and taking on the sins of the second Bush Administration and its invasion of Iraq.

Tone

Fates Worse Than Death, like all of Kurt Vonnegut's writings, is intensely subjective. He has pet subjects that rouse his passion, and he vents at them: the successes and failures of psychiatry; alcoholism and other forms of addiction; quack and authentic religion; the Reagan Administration's callous efforts to undermine the Bill of Rights by appealing to bigoted, pietistic Neo-Conservatives; the likely fate of humankind to destroy itself in a nuclear holocaust; and humanity's warm-up practice of torturing and killing innocent people in places like Mozambique. As a professional writer, frequently panned but admired by fans, Vonnegut, of course, deals with literature and literary criticism.

Discussing the lithographs he has taken to creating of late and a publicity photograph he snaps for his wife, Vonnegut bemusedly acknowledges his fame, which also allows him to have his say on matters that bother him. He uses *Fates Worse Than Death* to goad readers out of apathy and awaken them to the dangers of nuclear holocaust and the takeover of America by the Neo-Cons. He skillfully uses the humor he claims to have lost through advancing age. For those who agree with his frank assessment of the state of the United States and Planet Earth, Vonnegut is a delightful, entertaining, thought-provoking read. For any of the hordes of Reagan-venerating Neo-Conservatives willing to consider reading it, *Fates Worse Than Death* should be thought-provoking - even eye-opening. They should find its clever language play entertaining, but they probably will not find the book delightful overall. They will doubtless insist Vonnegut lacks all objectivity, but for anyone looking back with objectivity at the events of the 1980s discussed in *Fates Worse Than Death,* it seems clear that Vonnegut is a powerful analyst. He is, moreover, candid about his inconsistency on the morality of war. This should earn him points among critics and gain him a fairer reading.

Structure

Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage consists of a rather breezy, pro-forma Preface, twenty-one numbered but untitled chapters and an Appendix consisting of nine documents and photographs, "segregated" from the text in order not to slow the narrative. As the subtitle suggests, the bulk of the text consists of previously published or delivered articles, book prefaces, speeches and sermons, extended pieces enclosed in quotation marks. These are turned into a collage by snippets of autobiographical memories and/or set-ups to how Vonnegut came to write or deliver the piece. There is no clear movement of time or of themes in *Fates Worse Than Death.* Vonnegut jumps about his life, including a Great Depression boyhood in Indianapolis, his service in World War II most notable for his capture and detention in Dresden at the time the Allies firebomb it, his long writing career, his two marriages, his parents, his siblings and his offspring. He fills it with famous people, living and dead, some developed at length and others merely indicated with a few deft brushstrokes.

Vonnegut appears cognizant that such a bouncy narrative could throw readers not used to his story and means of storytelling, because he builds into the connective portions plenty of redundancy about people and events. Because the individual pieces of the collage are self-contained, they too include introductory materials helpful to readers of the present work. Vonnegut has assembled *Fates Worse Than Death* to show the predicament in which the human race finds itself in 1991, with its political leaders having backed themselves into a corner where a nuclear war to the death is eminently possible. The bouncing about from time to time and place to place throughout Vonnegut's (then) sixty-year life reinforces the ever-changing changelessness of the human predicament, and each time he butts into a seemingly irrelevant fact, a new collage piece that makes its relevancy perfectly clear, it is powerfully satisfying. Humor, warm and sardonic, ties the book together amazingly well, given its lack of formal structure.

Quotes

"So my father's life might be seen as a particularly lugubrious fairy tale. He was Sleeping Beauty, and in 1929 not one but several princes, including Bell Telephone, had begun to hack through the briers to wake him up. But then they all got sick for sixteen years. And while they were in the hospital a wicked witch turned Sleeping Beauty into Rip Van Winkle instead." Chapter 1, pg. 24

"And may I say parenthetically that my own means of making a living is essentially clerical, and hence tedious and constipating. Intruders, no matter how ill-natured or stupid or dishonest, are as refreshing as the sudden breakthrough of sunbeams on a cloudy day.

"The making of pictures is to writing what laughing gas is to Asian influenza." Chapter 3, pg. 47

"In both, I remember, I exclaimed over the foreshortening of American literary history, in which seeming generations of writers may be separated by less than twenty years. When I set out to be a professional writer of fiction, Irwin Shaw and Nelson Algren and William Saroyan and John Cheever and Erskine Caldwell and Budd Schulberg and James T. Farrell seemed as ancestral as Mark Twain or Nathaniel Hawthorne. But I would come to be friends with all of them. And why not? With the exception of Caldwell, most were about the age of my big brother, Bernard. (I never met John Steinbeck, but I know his widow, Elaine, and she is about my late sister's age.)" Chapter 5, pg. 60

"'Quid sum miser tunc dicturus? Quem patronum rogaturus, cum xiv Justus sit securus?' From the performers' expressions and body language you would have concluded that the weak wouldn't have to be afraid in Heaven, that they would find kindness and forgiveness on all sides. You would have been badly mistaken. The performers were singing, 'What shall I, a wretch, say at that time? What advocate shall I entreat to plead for me when scarcely the righteous shall be safe from damnation.' "Ain't that nice? ('Get a lawyer,' says the mass.) "Nearly the entire mass was that sadistic and masochistic." Chapter 6, pg. 71

"As *Voyager* 2 departed the Solar System forever ('My work is done'), sending us dimmer and dimmer pictures of what we were and where we were, did our President invite us to love it and thank it and wish it well? No. He spoke passionately instead of the necessity of an Amendment to the Constitution (Article XXVII?) outlawing irreverent treatment of a piece of cloth, the American flag. Such an Amendment would be on a nutty par with the Roman Emperor Caligula's having his horse declared a Consul. "(I worry a lot about what they teach at Yale.)" Chapter 7, pg. 82

"I will say again what I have often said in print and in speeches, that not one Allied soldier was able to advance as much as an inch because of the firebombing of Dresden. Not one prisoner of the Nazis got out of prison a microsecond earlier. Only

one person on earth clearly benefited, and I am that person. I got about five dollars for each corpse, counting my fee tonight." Chapter 10, pg. 100

"I did not mention our genocide of Indians back in my great-grandfather's time. That would have been too much. I talk about that and think about that as little as possible. Thank God it isn't taught in school much. "Our own country has a *glasnost* experiment going on, too, of course. It consists of making women and racial minorities the equals of white males, in terms of both the civility and respect to be accorded them and their rights under the law. This would seem an abomination to the ancient wise men whose works our young people are dangerously, supposedly, neglecting in favor of rock and roll." Chapter 11, pgs. 115-116

"What a flop! The applause was polite enough. (There were many Oriental faces out there. Who knows what *they* may have been thinking?) but nobody came up front afterward and said he or she was going to take a shot at writing an oath all technical people would be glad to take. There was nothing in the student paper the next week. It was all over. (If such a speech had been given at Cornell when I was a student there, I would have written an oath that very night whilst talking to myself. Then again, I had had lots of free time, since I was flunking practically everything.)" Chapter 12, pgs. 120-121

"Every cockamamie artificial extended family of FSD sufferers resembles Redfield's Folk Society to this extent: it has a myth at its core. The Manson family pretended to believe (the same thing as believing) that its murders would be blamed on blacks. Los Angeles would then be purified somehow by a race war. the myth at the core of the political family which calls itself 'Neo-Conservatives' isn't that explicit, but I know what it is, even if most of them can't put it into words. This is it: They are British aristocrats, graduates of Oxford or Cambridge, living in the world as it was one hundred years ago." Chapter 13, pg. 127

"Our own government may have supported RENAMO secretly in the past, because Mozambique was avowedly Marxist, and South Africa used to do so openly and unashamedly. But no more. The *bandidos* are so few, and so hated, for good reason, that they can never expect to take over the country. Everybody else - including the United States and the Soviet Union and the International Red Cross and CARE and John Yale of World Vision - is doing everything possible to ease the agony of the non-Marxist, noncapitalist, nearly naked, and utterly pitiful refugees. For that matter, by the time I got there, the few Mozambicans sophisticated enough to have some idea of how Marxism was supposed to work were as sick of Socialist idealism in practice as anybody in Moscow or Warsaw or East Berlin." Chapter 17, pg. 170

"Rita (who was a Russian native but had a Scottish ancestor, hence her un-Russian last name) told us that story, and then she chirped with all possible cuteness, 'English is not my language, so I can say whatever I please in it, no matter how dirty. What freedom! What fun!'" Chapter 18, pg. 178

"He spent the last years of his short and frantically unfunny life attempting to protect Nature in the Delaware River Valley. He left his family without a cent. He had a criminal

record, including flight from prosecution for a drug deal. But his most memorable crime was his violation of a law which has never been written down in so many words: 'Monster fuck-ups engineered by your own government are not to be treated with disrespect until the damage done is absolutely unforgivable, incomprehensible, and beyond repair.' "So much for 'the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for redress of grievances.' (Or as a corrupt or stupid Head of State might put it, 'If TV news is for me, who can be against me?')." Chapter 19, pg. 189

Topics for Discussion

What is the greatest effect of the Great Depression on Kurt Vonnegut, and how does this manifest itself?

How does Kurt Vonnegut respond to negative criticism of his writings? How can these criticisms be categorized?

4 > 5 D How does Kurt Vonnegut's "commander-in-chief's" assessment of bombing targets affect your attitude towards his general moral stances?

Why does ex-wife Jane's death affect Kurt Vonnegut more dramatically than other tragedies he has witnessed?

How do the original Requiem Mass and Kurt Vonnegut's revision compare, and what does the latter say about his views on Christianity?

Has Kurt Vonnegut grown too old and pessimistic to be an effective humorist?

Should, as Kurt Vonnegut suggests, scientists and technicians develop an oath like the Hippocratic Oath that governs the practice of medicine? What positive and negative effects can you identify?

What other forms of addiction might be added to those discussed by Kurt Vonnegut?