

Kurt Vonnegut Junior's "Fates Worth Than Death: an Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s" was published in 1991. This is less a review than a reminder of Vonnegut's continuing relevance.

Vonnegut was a favourite when I was in high school. None of his books were on the school's curriculum, we all read Vonnegut extra-curricularly. I remember discussing his books with classmates during class.

He is a loyal opponent and a betrayed lover. Loyal opposition, perhaps more than anything else, sustains democracy. Vonnegut's admiration for the ideals of his country is immeasurable. With sadness, he observes that his passion was scorned. He was regularly ignored by the American media and those in public office.

His writes of art, war, love, death, family, nationalism, science, technology, history and the future. As an American soldier he became a prisoner of war during World War II in Dresden, Germany. He witnessed, survived and was compelled to collect the dead after horrific 1945 fire-bombing of Dresden. His mother suffered mental illness and committed suicide. His father was a dedicated parent and talented architect who was stoically and severely constrained by the Depression.

Vonnegut combines humour with serious reflection. In a critique of the Great American Experiment, he tells the funniest clean joke he knows.

"Why is cream more expensive than milk?"

"It's hard to get cows to squat on those little bottles."

Now milk and cream aren't even available in glass bottles so the humour is slightly tarnished. Nonetheless, it helps us through his serious thoughts and it deflates the undeservingly sacred. He criticizes past and present malfeasance.

Vonnegut asks how the United States of America can call itself a beacon of liberty when Thomas Jefferson not only owned slaves, but used them as collateral for a loan?

He notes the difference in average age and race of soldiers killed in Vietnam versus World War II? The former was twenty years old and disproportionately black while the latter was twenty-six years old and in proportion to the American racial mix.

When he discusses censorship, he says that it is mostly a rural problem.

"The same communities that used to burn people, mostly black people, when I was a boy, are now burning books. Isn't that an improvement?"

Vonnegut explains that only in his own lifetime has there been serious talk of giving women and racial minorities anything like economic, legal, and social equality.

He goes after the National Rifle Association and its jellyfishy, well-paid supporters when they misrepresent Article II of the Bill of Rights. They often quote, "the right of people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed" but they omit the preface, "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State." He asks, rhetorically, how a heavily armed man recruited by no official, led by no official, given no goals by any official, motivated or restrained only by his personality and perceptions can be considered a member of a well-regulated militia?

Vonnegut lauds the idealism of the First Amendment of the US Constitution which protects religion, free speech, the press, and the right of people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. He cites George Bush senior's contempt for this venerable document. Were he writing today, would he be kinder to Bush junior?

He sees much of American leadership as greedy, amoral and just plain nutty like the Roman Emperor Caligula when he declared his horse a Consul.

In my opinion, nobody has come closer to the truth, when Vonnegut quipped, "We could have saved the Earth but we were too damned cheap."