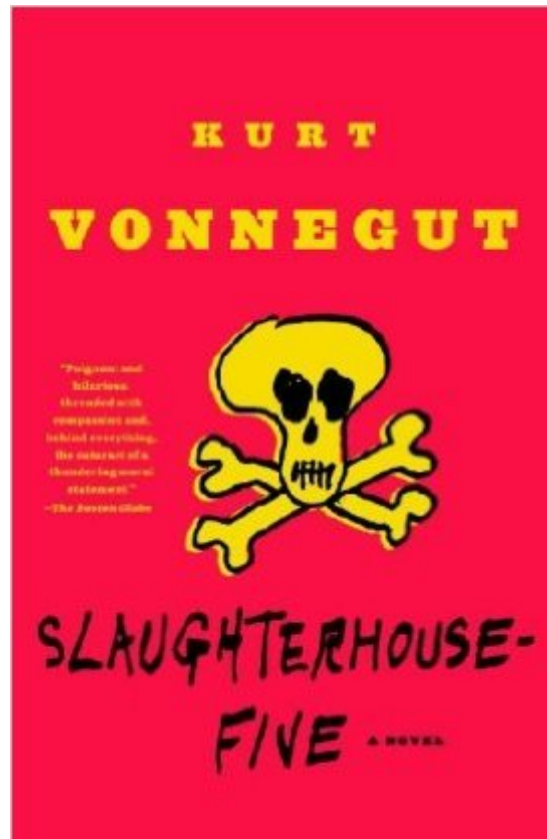


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Slaughterhouse-Five: A Novel (Modern Library 100 Best Novels)



Synopsis

Slaughterhouse-Five, an American classic, is one of the world's great antiwar books. Centering on the infamous firebombing of Dresden, Billy Pilgrim's odyssey through time reflects the mythic journey of our own fractured lives as we search for meaning in what we fear most.

Book Information

Series: Modern Library 100 Best Novels

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Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars See all reviews (2,530 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

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

but our limited understanding of time and space. And of course it is an anti-war novel in the tradition of All Quiet on the Western Front and Johnny Got His Gun. Vonnegut's view of time in this novel is like the stratification of an upcropping of rock: time past and time present are there for us to see, but also there is time future.

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

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