

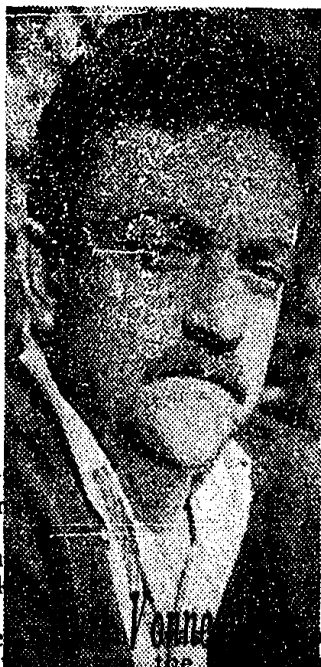
The Landscape Of Death

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, OR THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

By Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

(Seymour Lawrence/Delacorte, 186 pp. \$5.95)

Reviewed by Geoffrey Wolff



"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference."

You find this sentiment hung up on walls everywhere: needlepointed on samplers, or embossed on gilt-edged paper like a stock certificate, or printed in crude block letters.

It is, no doubt, an ancient homily but today, as you try to sort the acceptably inevitable from the unacceptably inevitable, it has uncommon force.

It appears twice in Kurt Vonnegut's novel about war and death.

In the context of the Dresden fire raid of World War II, and of Vietnam, and of sudden and slow death everywhere and always, it becomes a profane prayer.

Vonnegut intrudes himself into his fiction.

He tells us he was huddled in the cellar of a slaughterhouse when fire rained down on the ancient city of Dresden at war's end, when wind whipped the flames and consumed 135,000 people. He tells us he tried to write the story for years, blocked its plot out on wallpaper in different-colored crayons, gave it a beginning, middle, end.

He tells us how he failed to get the plotted story written.

He tells us that a movie producer told him he might as soon write an anti-glacier book as an anti-war book. Glaciers are as easy to stop as wars. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . ."

The movie producer was wrong.

A novel can control time and outcome, it can undo doings, repair what events have destroyed.

There are many, many brilliant things in this book but the most intelligent, and humane, and hopeful, consists of using a striking artifice to change what cannot be changed.

The novel's hero, Billy Pil-

grim, watches a war movie on television. Then, coming "unstuck in time," he sees backwards. The beginning seen at the end, goes like this:

"The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. That happened to see. bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a raculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes . . . When bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals . . . The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again."

Seen forwards, the fact is, against which Vonnegut's fiction rubs, were quite otherwise.

Twice as many died at Dresden, for no strategic, military reason at all and little other reason, as died at Hiroshima.

Billy Pilgrim recalls what it was like after the planes departed: "It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans [POWs] and their guards did come out the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead."

That is a fictional account of the landscape of death. Vonnegut won't permit his hero to be trapped in earth time—Billy Pilgrim journeys to other worlds, can see beyond his own death, control time—neither will he allow himself to be contained by a fictional voice only.

one ne- Here are two others you will find in his book:

"It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war . . ." Harry S. Truman describing the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima).

And from the Old Testament: "The Lord rained upbrimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground."

Billy is an ordinary fellow—an optometrist, with a plump wife and a son—pulling himself together by fighting with the Green Berets in Vietnam.

Extraordinary things happen to him: he is kidnapped by a flying saucer and swept from time to time, by the planet Traftamadore where he is on display, from time to time, in a zoo, in a cage furnished with stuff stolen from a Sears & Roebuck warehouse.

The science fiction is a plausible device to save Billy from lunacy, for it is in the ordinary course of his life that he sees death everywhere, death excused by the obscene sentiment that what cannot be changed should be accepted with serenity.

Because we tune out words like murder, death killing, Vonnegut reminds us each time of the life that is, that is no more, with the words: "So it goes." It is just a device, I guess, like running that insane movie backwards, changing everything.