

Vonnegut and Biography Roundtable

I'd like to begin by saying what a compulsively readable book Charles Shields' biography is. Once I started it, I couldn't put it down. And as far as I can tell from reviews, online comments and the like, that's the experience of most readers. I appreciate as well the fact that the book is so well-researched and so well-documented. Any time I found myself wondering where a quote came from or what motivated a particular comment, I could easily flip to the copious notes at the back and find the source that Charles was drawing from.

I'd also like to say that I found the Dresden portions of the book, in particular, to be extremely well-done. The interviews with surviving veterans, some of whom fought with Vonnegut in Germany—including Dale Watson, Robert Kelton, James Mills, and Gifford Doxsee—provide new and fascinating insights into this period in Vonnegut's life.

But that said, and despite my appreciation for these aspects of the book, I nevertheless feel obliged to argue somewhat with Charles' depiction of Vonnegut's family life. I myself never met Vonnegut, unlike many of you here, so my comments will be based on extensive reading of Vonnegut's own writings and interviews as well as other memoirs and remembrances written about him, including books such as Loree Rackstraw's *Love as Always, Kurt*, Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky's *Angels Without Wings*, and Mark Vonnegut's *The Eden Express*.

I'd first like to speak briefly about what seems to be one of Charles's main theses in the biography—that much of Vonnegut's life was shaped by an overwhelming sense of competition with and resentment of his older brother, Bernard. This was a thesis that several of us heard Charles propose at the panel remembering Vonnegut at the ALA conference in San Francisco five years ago, when the Kurt Vonnegut Society was first hatched. I was skeptical of this reading of Kurt's life at the time, and I have to say that I remain skeptical after reading the biography. I'm certainly not suggesting that Kurt's relationship with his older brother was perfect, but judging from what Vonnegut himself as well as those close to him, have written elsewhere, the relationship seems to have been much warmer than the biography suggests. We might remember, especially, the prologue to *Slapstick*, in which Vonnegut writes that his "longest experience with common decency" (3) has surely been with his older brother. And when Bernard, on the plane, shows Kurt a scientific apparatus that can detect invisible lighting flashes, rather than resenting his older brother's success, Vonnegut writes: "I thought it was beautiful that my big brother could detect secrets so simply from so far away" (20).

If I had more time, I could also talk about the moving tribute Vonnegut wrote to his older brother in the epilogue to *Timequake*, Loree Rackstraw's references to Bernard as Kurt's "beloved older brother" in her memoir, or the delight Kurt and Bernard shared over the prank letter from General Electric that Kurt had written to

his uncle Alex in 1947, and which the biography oddly describes as displaying “jealousy” when read “between the lines” (100). The point here is not that Vonnegut, as a testy 84 year old, did not express resentment about his brother. But it seems to me that the biography leaves out the real sense of love, affection, and respect that existed in the relationship, even if it might also have been a difficult one in some of the ways that Charles describes.

I think the biography similarly tends to mischaracterize Vonnegut’s Barnstable days, with Jane, their three boys and the adopted Adams children. It’s really beginning in this section that the biography turns increasingly negative. Again, I’m not complaining that Charles presents unflattering information about Vonnegut and his relationships—I think it’s entirely admirable that he’s not writing a hagiography and that he doesn’t overlook the less attractive sides of his subject. But I do think that more contextualizing in this section could have painted a fuller, more sympathetic portrait. According to the biography, “Kurt could not be bothered with the tedium of day-to-day family matters,” (166), and he selfishly abandons Jane to see to the family while he devotes himself to his writing. Yet, Jane, in her memoir, puts the roles that she and her husband played during this period into the context of the times when she writes:

This was before the days when a young family might reasonably have pursued the alternative of the wife going to work. . . . There were no

community child-care centers, no family nearby. I had no immediately marketable skills, and the word “househusband” had not been coined yet. Without really questioning them, we instinctively clung to the traditional roles—husband the breadwinner, wife the homemaker—though in each case there was unacknowledged rage at the limitations. (6)

I often tell my students that the 1950s and early 1960s marked one of the more misogynistic periods in American history and that this misogyny is evident in American literature produced during that time. Women, in books ranging from Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* to John Updike’s *Rabbit Run* are frequently presented as mindless, shallow creatures who stifle the creativity and individualism of the men they’re married to. While Anita Proteus in *Player Piano* could possibly be put into this camp, I do think, as I have argued elsewhere, that Vonnegut was grappling with women’s issues in a meaningful way even in his early stories. The 1963 story “Lovers Anonymous,” for instance, seems to me a direct response to the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. And certainly, later in life, Vonnegut dealt squarely with gender roles, especially in his novel *Bluebeard*.

The biography also blames Vonnegut for abandoning Jane during the Peter Adams Nice episode, suggesting that Vonnegut deliberately arranged for the adoption of the youngest Adams boy by relatives in Alabama, then fled to go fishing in Florida to avoid dealing with the situation. However, Jane remembers this

incident somewhat differently. Although the biography's main source in describing this event is Jane's memoir, the biography leaves out Jane's recollection of her husband's outrage when she is finally able to reach him in Florida just before the arrival of Charles Nice from Birmingham. According to Jane's memoir, Kurt vehemently denies giving his sister-in-law permission to let the child go, and he immediately drops everything in order to travel by bus, plane, and train to arrive home at 10:45 the following night. While we may never know exactly who knew what when during this incident, again, I feel the biography glosses over the complexities of the situation in order to tell its chosen story about Vonnegut as a selfish man uninvolved in the life of his family. One thing I admire about Jane's memoir is that she openly acknowledges difficulties with memory—how various peoples' memories of the same incident differ greatly. The few examples I've discussed here and others like them are disturbing to me because, in what remains an extremely compelling, readable, and well-written biography, I worry that they tend to oversimplify and end up painting less than a full portrait of a complex man who lived through extremely trying times, all the while writing funny, kind, and humane stories that brought great pleasure to many.