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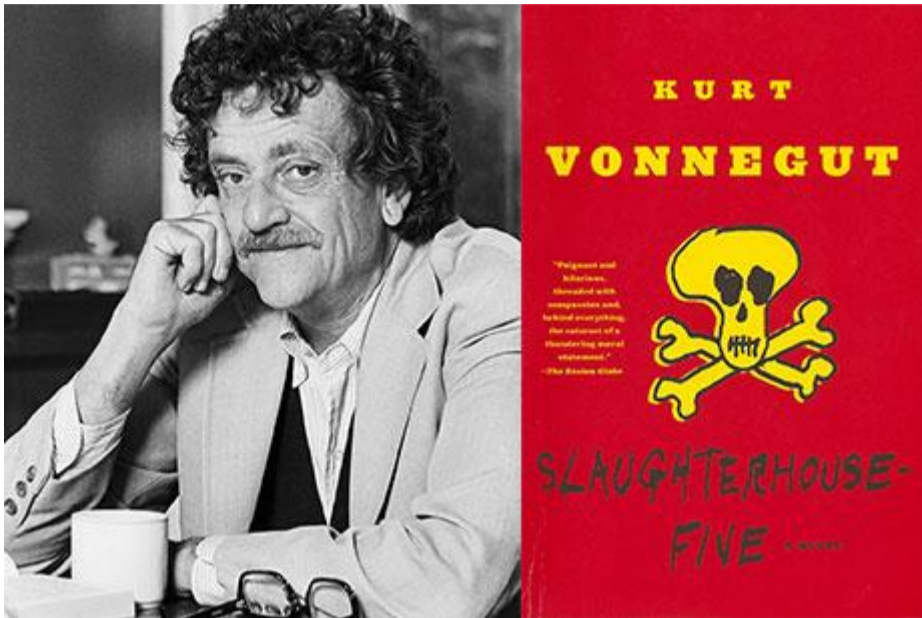
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Exploring Vonnegut and "Slaughterhouse-Five"

The Birss Memorial Program at RWU celebrates Kurt Vonnegut's famous anti-war novel with a series of events open to the public



February 6, 2019 | By Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – How do you make sense of war? Of the atrocities that humans are capable of doing to one another? Or the fact that we seem to endlessly repeat the past in our present, and will continue to do so in our future?

Many great writers have struggled with these difficult questions, including Kurt Vonnegut who made it the focus of his greatest work, Slaughterhouse-Five. An ardent pacifist, he produced an unflinching account of the fallacy and foolishness of war, writing: "There is nothing intelligent to tell about a massacre."

In celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the Roger Williams University community will explore the darkly comic, anti-war protest that made it both to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and on the American Library Association's all-time banned books list. As part of the annual Professor John Howard Birss, Jr. Memorial Program at RWU, the campus community will examine Vonnegut's most famous novel through a series of events, including an exhibition at the University Library, a reading group discussion, and a panel discussion featuring the author's daughter and two local authors.

"*Slaughterhouse-Five* has remained a perennial read for college students because of its masterful mix of humor, pathos, outrage and, in the end, its invocation of the enduring quality of human hope and decency," according to the Birss Memorial Program committee. "It is a remarkable work that remains timely and reads as freshly now as on its publication day 50 years ago."

Published in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of a World War II infantryman who survives the Allied bombing of Dresden and tries to make sense of the aftermath of his life. Vonnegut's masterpiece, part autobiographical and part science fiction, employs his signature charm and irreverent humor while tackling the universal themes of the horrors of war and the reality that wars are often fought by young men more akin to children. It resonated deeply with a generation protesting the Vietnam War, and quickly became a nationwide best-seller.

The Birss Memorial Program offers students a variety of ways to engage in a deeper study of the text, through a literature course and two fellowships open to students in the Honors Program. As Birss Fellows, Nicole Andreson and Zachary Santoro worked with a faculty member and library archivist gaining hands-on experience in learning how to research an important work of literature and create a literary exhibition.

As part of that experience, Andreson and Santoro traveled with RWU Collection Management Librarian Christine Fagan to Indianapolis to conduct archival research, document noteworthy artifacts, and select the pieces for RWU's exhibit that would best tell the story of the author, his work, and set the historical context. They pored through the Vonnegut archive at Indiana University's Lilly Library, and visited the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library.



Nicole Andreson (left) and Zachary Santoro (right) examine artifacts with Christine Fagan in the Vonnegut archive.

From their findings in the archive, Fagan curated the exhibition that opens at the University Library at 4:30 p.m. on Thursday. Andreson and Santoro will serve as docents to share their knowledge of Vonnegut and his work with guests during the exhibition opening.

"As a writer looking at all his early drafts, I gained a lot of insight into the writing process and revision process by looking at an author's first drafts – seeing what he adds and subtracts, and how the drafts change over time," said Andreson, a creative writing major.

As a criminal justice and cybersecurity double major, Santoro said he was excited to get more exposure to literature. "In the archive, we saw 16 drafts of the first chapter of his book and he wrote each one very differently. We got to see things he was drawing, things he was reading and things he was writing. We saw who he was as a person and a writer. That was interesting to me as an academic and scholar, and it opened my mind a little bit more to literature."

This type of immersive literary experience develops students' critical thinking and analytic skills, according to Adam Braver, who teaches the Birss literature course.

"They're learning to engage deeply with a subject, investigate it from all sides and find ways into something they may have not imagined was there and to see all of its possibilities," Braver said.

Join the Celebration of Vonnegut

Each year the Birss Memorial Program celebrates a great American writer, inviting the campus community and greater community to read and open a dialogue about an important work of literature or poetry. The events are free and open to the public, including:

Exhibition Opening at the University Library

Thursday, February 7

4:30 p.m.

University Library entrance & Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

Join a celebration of the library exhibition, "Kurt Vonnegut & *Slaughterhouse-Five*," and view artifacts on display from the national Vonnegut archive. The exhibit includes manuscript pages from multiple drafts of the author's novel, manuscript notes, Vonnegut's signature "doodles" and graphic art, photographs, book cover illustrations from foreign versions of the novel, the author's correspondence to friends and publishers, articles about the author and his work, and fan letters.

The exhibit will be on display during library hours through March 31. A satellite exhibit is on display at Rogers Free Library, 525 Hope St., Bristol.

Reading Group Discussion

Wednesday, February 27

3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.

Rogers Free Library, 525 Hope St., Bristol

Two sessions of a community-wide discussion of the book, hosted by Bristol's public library.

Keynote Panel – Vonnegut and *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Fifty Years On, and So It Goes

Thursday, February 28

4:30 p.m.

School of Law – Appellate Courtroom 283

Featuring Rick Moody, Ginger Strand and Nanette Vonnegut, this panel discussion will offer a variety of perspectives on the author and his work. [Rick Moody](#) is the author of six novels, including *The Ice Storm* and *Hotels of North America*. He teaches at Brown University. [Ginger Strand](#) is an author and writer of narrative nonfiction, including *The Brothers Vonnegut: Science and Fiction in the House of Magic*. She has published essays and fiction in *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times*. [Nanette Vonnegut](#) is an illustrator and the author of *Kurt Vonnegut Drawings*, a retrospective of her father's art. Her artwork and writing have appeared in *Take Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and the Huffington Post.

Co-sponsored by the Professor John Howard Birss Memorial Fund and the Mary Tefft White Endowment.

For more resources about Vonnegut's life and career, explore the University Library's [Lib Guide](#), created by Library Outreach & Communications Coordinator Hannah Goodall.

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