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10-1-2013

The Vonnegut Effect. Entering the potato barn

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The author discussed the Vonnegut effect on his writings and what he wanted to do as a human being.

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Recommended Citation

Cliff, Craig, "The Vonnegut Effect. Entering the potato barn" (2013). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 499.
http://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/499

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The Vonnegut Effect

Entering the Potato Barn

By Craig Cliff (New Zealand)

When I tweeted my excitement at being on a panel about Kurt Vonnegut — one of my literary idols — a number of other New Zealand writers expressed jealousy. One commented that “*Slaughterhouse Five* woke me up to fiction as a teenager.”

And here was me thinking the experience I had with Vonnegut’s best known book in the quiet of the Palmerston North City Library was unique to me! The ability to speak so personally, especially to the awakening mind, is surely one of Vonnegut’s eleven secret herbs and spices and a big reason his books travel well, both across oceans and over time.

In the course of preparing for this panel, I’ve dug into Vonnegut again. It’s has been interesting to see what appealed to me as a 15-year-old (that jokey, avuncular voice; those ready apocalypses) and what appeals to me now, 15 years later, with a wife, a daughter and two of my own books out in the world (the depth of feeling; the resolution of technical challenges through bold structural moves¹).

There are things I knew that I had pilfered or repurposed from Kurt Vonnegut before digging in again. The title of my short story, “Facing Galapagos,” which featured in my evolution-obsessed debut short story collection, *A Man Melting*, and was re-issued as a standalone eBook this year, is a not so subtle nod to Vonnegut’s novel *Galapagos*. I stared Vonnegut in the face and wrote my story about Darwin and mental instability and jolly despair (though I stole the structure from a story by one of Vonnegut’s literary heirs, George Saunders).

And that Vonnegut voice. That’s something I spent my apprenticeship aping traces of it remain in the genetic code of my writing.

In *Timequake*, Kilgore Trout declares: “In real life, as in Grand Opera, arias only make helpless situations worse.” Hence the telegraphic rather than operatic style of Vonnegut’s often pessimistic (or at least: resigned) novels. This is important, he seems to be saying, and I can’t afford to lose you.

But there are still flourishes, moments of bravura. From *Timequake* again: “The lottery ticket suckers, decorticated by hope and numerology...” *Decorticated*. As in, having had their bark removed. Though those without a dictionary to hand might surmise it has something to do with the removal of the cerebral cortex. That works too!

And the use of zeugma: “hope and numerology.”

Ting-a-ling!

These past few weeks I’ve also encountered other echoes of Vonnegut in my own work — things beyond technique or voice — that have surprised me. Things that cut to the heart of what I want to do as a writer and a human being.

We first meet Rabo Karabekian, the abstract expressionist and narrator of my favourite of Vonnegut’s novels (*Bluebeard*), in *Breakfast of Champions*. He asks a waitress who the girl is on the cover of the Midland City Arts Festival program. The waitress replies that it is Mary Alice Miller who has trained for years, under the guidance of her father, to become women’s 200 metre breaststroke champion of the world.

“What kind of man,” Rabo replies, “would turn his daughter into an outboard motor?”

The waitress reacts with rage and is joined by the others in the Tally-Ho Room of the Holiday Inn. Rabo has hit a nerve, as Gregory D. Sumner puts it, by “tapping into the fear that beneath all the boosterism, their lives might be ridiculous.”²

My novel, *The Mannequin Makers*, which came out in August this year, features Colton Kemp, a father who puts his twins through an exacting training regime so they can pretend to be

¹ Such as the narrator of *Galapagos* being the ghost of Leon Trout, who is able to narrate the events of 1986 and the next million years. I’m also drawn to Oliver W. Ferguson’s theory that Trout is mad and the evolution of humanity into cuddly, seal-like creatures is his fantasy.

² Gregory D Sumner, *Unstuck in Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut’s Life and Novels*, Seven Stories Press, 2011, p.164.

The Iowa City Book Festival (www.iowacitybookfestival.org) and the International Writing Program (www.iwp.uiowa.edu). October 12, 2013

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mannequins in the window of his department store. They learn to stand perfectly still for hours on end, control their eyelids and breathe imperceptibly. “What kind of man,” Karabekian might ask, “would turn his children into mannequins?” My novel sets out to answer this question (and also: “So they’re living mannequins. Now what?”).

The twins first perform in the window of Donaldson’s Department Store in 1919. Having been raised in seclusion (just as the mystery of what’s in Karabekian’s padlocked potato barn drives *Bluebeard*, the goings on in Colton Kemp’s barn drives *The Mannequin Makers*), the children know nothing of the First World War. My hope, though, is that the reader notices this void and draws the comparison between Kemp raising his children for his own shoddy purposes and his peers sending their children off to die in Europe and the Middle East.

This now strikes me as a Vonneguttian proposition. An outlandish premise explored in order to discuss, obliquely, something even more outlandish that actually happened.

Or perhaps it is something Kilgore Trout might write and leave in a trash can.
So it goes.

One of the things I admire most about *Bluebeard* is the way it talks about art without shirking the responsibility of providing examples. The mystery in the potato barn is finally revealed as the panels of Karabekian’s *Windsor Blue Number Seventeen*, which hung in the GEFFCo headquarters until the Sateen Dura-Luxe paint rebelled and peeled off the canvas, repainted to depict sunrise in a valley on VE day, 1945. *Now it’s the Women’s Turn* depicts 5,219 figures and Rabo knows the life story of each of them. This work, a kind of palimpsest in reverse, represents Vonnegut’s vision for art that weds both artistic technique and human feeling, the “meat” and the “soul.”

Bluebeard stands ably alongside Nabokov’s *The Gift* (which deals with poetry) and Steven Millhauser’s long story “August Eschenberg” (making clockwork figurines), as a triumph of fictional art.

I’ve tackled this myself, in short stories such as “Copies,” where an artist photocopies images five-hundred times until they become “more about the viewer than the viewed,” and the carvers of ship figureheads and mannequins in *The Mannequin Makers*. I don’t think the idea to do this came from Vonnegut (or Nabokov, or Millhauser) but I think I inherited some of his moxie. Which, if you ask me, is a pretty good legacy.

Ting-a-ling.