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Prefatory Note

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Prefatory Note

Every now and then a university faculty member gets rewarded for reading self-multiplying freshman papers and attending university meetings designed to create new levels of ennui. Such was the case when I walked into a late afternoon class last fall and became acquainted with a delightfully diverse—and maybe even perverse—group of students assembled to read and discuss the novels of Kurt Vonnegut for a whole semester.

A few English majors were scattered here and there in various states of sophistication and knowing. But subversives from anthropology and economics and marketing and philosophy lurked in the back rows, all Vonnegut aficionados. To explore this extraordinary author with such a group was a rare academic pleasure.

Some wanted to argue that his work exemplified (or failed as) the best of postmodern fiction. Others debated whether his novels were nihilistic or moralistic; some saw them as comparable to Goethe's *Faust*; others thought they functioned more as folk tales of anthropological interest. For some students his novels were sexist; for others, expressions of mystical Oriental wisdom. They offered complex scientific insights; they were hilarious entertainment. Some students of semiotic suasion were intrigued by Vonnegut's play with language and symbols. Some found profound religious insight in his work; others were annoyed by his religious satire.

In short, it was not the usual literary seminar fare, nor did we ever confine ourselves to traditional critical approaches to literature. Many of us gained new insights into Vonnegut's work.

Four students were kind enough to respond to my invitation to meet together over another semester to work further on essays I thought were unusual in their insight and approach to Vonnegut's fiction. Those essays comprise this volume.

Jill Minehart, a secretary in the University Department of Marketing who plans to "drop out" and take up farming, found a curious affinity with another former drop-out—Vonnegut's son, Mark. She explored Mark's *The Eden Express* and *Angels without Wings* by the late Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky for clues to Vonnegut's vision.

Devin McKinney, an English major and film critic for the University newspaper, gained a surprising sense of Vonnegut's optimistic vision by comparing his *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* with Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Lynn Olson, a recent graduate now pursuing a career in journalism, examined the mythic and symbolic keys to the ubiquitous birds populating most of Vonnegut's novels, focusing especially on *Mother Night*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Jailbird*.

David Gibson, himself a fiction writer and an anthropology student, tested the credibility of the narrator in Vonnegut's *Galapagos* by reading his report of the fictional evolution of the new human race against Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* and *The Origin of the Species*.

It was quite by accident that we realized all four of these critical approaches found a common theme of hope in Vonnegut's novels. Since Vonnegut himself has said he has learned to live without hope, we are pleased to dedicate this volume to him.

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