

We Are What We Pretend To Be: The First and Last Works

By Perseus

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Called “our finest black-humorist” by *The Atlantic Monthly*, Kurt Vonnegut was one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Now his first and last works come together for the first time in print, in a collection aptly titled after his famous phrase, *We Are What We Pretend To Be*.

Written to be sold under the pseudonym of “Mark Harvey,” *Basic Training* was never published in Vonnegut’s lifetime. It appears to have been written in the late 1940s and is therefore Vonnegut’s first ever novella. It is a bitter, profoundly disenchanted story that satirizes the military, authoritarianism, gender relationships, parenthood and most of the assumed mid-century myths of the family. Haley Brandon, the adolescent protagonist, comes to the farm of his relative, the old crazy who insists upon being called The General, to learn to be a straight-shooting American. Haley’s only means of survival will lead him to unflinching defiance of the General’s deranged (but oh so American, oh so military) values. This story and its thirtyish author were no friends of the milieu to which the slick magazines’ advertisers were pitching their products.

When Vonnegut passed away in 2007, he left his last novel unfinished. Entitled *If God Were Alive Today*, this last work is a brutal satire on societal ignorance and carefree denial of the world’s major problems. Protagonist Gil Berman is a middle-aged college lecturer and self-declared stand-up comedian who enjoys cracking jokes in front of a college audience while societal dependence on fossil fuels has led to the apocalypse. Described by Vonnegut as, “the stand-up comedian on Doomsday,” Gil is a character formed from Vonnegut’s own rich experiences living in a reality Vonnegut himself considered inevitable.

Along with the two works of fiction, Vonnegut’s daughter, Nanette shares reminiscences about her father and commentary on these two works—both exclusive to this edition.

In this fiction collection, published in print for the first time, exist Vonnegut’s grand themes: trust no one, trust nothing; and the only constants are absurdity and resignation, which themselves cannot protect us from the void but might divert.

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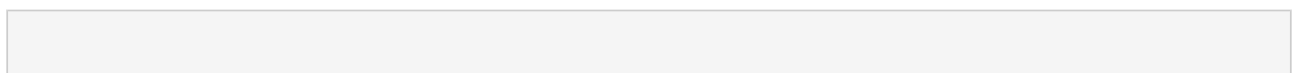
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Editorial Review

Review

"Nature", 10/24/13

"Vonnegut's first and last pieces are pervaded by his trademark dark humour."

"Hudson Valley News", 10/16/13

"Written forty years apart, these two pieces share the typical Vonnegut voice. And if you love his work, you will want to add this book to your collection."

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"Turn off the electronics and put aside your contemporary crises, for what stands before us is a truly transhistorical story teller that deserves at least one read. This book should be our first, and our last, concern."

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Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is one of the most beloved American writers of the twentieth century. Vonnegut's audience increased steadily since his first five pieces in the 1950s and grew from there. His 1968 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* has become a canonic war novel with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* to form the truest and darkest of what came from World War II.

Vonnegut began his career as a science fiction writer, and his early novels--*Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*--were categorized as such even as they appealed to an audience far beyond the reach of the category. In the 1960s, Vonnegut became closely associated with the Baby Boomer generation, a writer on that side, so to speak.

Now that Vonnegut's work has been studied as a large body of work, it has been more deeply understood and unified. There is a consistency to his satirical insight, humor and anger which makes his work so synergistic. It seems clear that the more of Vonnegut's work you read, the more it resonates and the more you wish to read. Scholars believe that Vonnegut's reputation (like Mark Twain's) will grow steadily through the decades as his work continues to increase in relevance and new connections are formed, new insights made.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Richard Hood:

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Carmela Williams:

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