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## Questional: Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade, A Graphic Novel Adaptation

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### Questimonial: *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade* by Kurt Vonnegut

The novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut is a combination of autobiographical fiction, historical fiction and science fiction. The main character, a U.S. soldier named Billy Pilgrim, is taken prisoner by German soldiers near the end of World War II and finds refuge in a slaughterhouse during the fire-bombing of the city of Dresden by allied forces. Vonnegut used his experiences in the war to make the novel realistic in key ways: he emphasized that the war was fought largely by very young men who had no business being there; and he showed that there is nothing glorious about war. Billy Pilgrim is so traumatized by his war experience that he spends years of his adult life in and out of hospital wards for veterans and is largely unable to experience real connections with his family. Instead, he latches on to the science-fiction writings of Kilgore Trout and believes he has been abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. He becomes "unstuck" in time, reliving moments from his past and future, seemingly at random. The aliens teach Billy how they perceive time and provide a kind of relief by assuring him that everything that ever happened or will happen is as fixed as an insect trapped in amber. There is no need to worry about the responsibilities of "free will," a concept that was invented by humans and exists nowhere else in the universe.

I first read this novel in 1995 as part of a special literature survey course in college: a "War and Peace" colloquium. I hadn't read Vonnegut in several years (*Cat's Cradle* in high school was my introduction to his writings) and it inspired me to read all of his novels and short stories. It didn't hurt that the author himself visited the school and gave a talk as part of the colloquium. I was terribly excited at the time to write a story about that visit for the college newspaper. I probably hadn't thought about it in over twenty years, but by chance (or was it meant to happen that way?) I saw a copy of the new graphic novel version in my daughters' high school library during a parent-teacher night. I thought it was worth revisiting and was impressed by the art. It doesn't have every word of the original text (so it goes) but I think Vonnegut would approve. Vonnegut's own cartoon-like doodles appear frequently in his works, so on some level visual humor has always been a companion to his words. Images are important and can be an impactful way to convey something as horrific as a bombed-out city or as outrageous as an alien zoo on another planet. Reds and oranges contrast with ashen grays throughout the book to suggest the Dresden fire and its aftermath. The art is also used creatively to show how the aliens from Tralfamadore communicate – in a series of carefully chosen images that are all meant to be viewed simultaneously.

If the Tralfamadorians are right, we'll relive moments from our lives for all eternity - so we had better make sure there are plenty of nice moments. Their advice is to concentrate on the good moments and ignore the ugly ones. In considering the question of "**What should matter to me?**" one suggestion offered by this novel is that small moments of pleasure matter and we should cherish them. One of Billy Pilgrim's happiest moments is lying peacefully in the back of a wagon with the sun warming his face. Peace, quiet – simple things – are what Billy craves. The bird that appears in the novel can't comprehend the horrors of war and it would seem that Billy Pilgrim can no longer comprehend the natural order of things. The war has made him fragmented and alienated from nature – as well as from his own family. The happiest moments I can recollect in my own life often involve interactions with family and friends, many from my childhood or involving my own children. Human relationships would seem to be high on the list of things that should matter.

Reading this novel again after so many years has made me dwell on the moments that matter in my own life and how I try to preserve them. Like so many others, I cling to physical photographs, collections of artifacts, writings and retold stories. These moments might seem mundane to an outside observer, but in my own mind they take on mythic proportions and are keys to unlocking parts of my past. A Thanksgiving meal in the overcrowded kitchen of my grandparents' coal region house in Pennsylvania – all the windows fogged from the heat of the oven. A kiss under the stars of a brisk fall evening on the sidewalk of a small suburban town. Entertaining my infant daughter with a stuffed green frog on the floor of our living room. I tell my kids that back in my day we weren't carrying cameras around with us every moment of our lives. If my daughters wanted to, they could (like the Tralfamadorians) stretch out a series of images on a computer screen and view practically every day of their lives. Is there a danger in that? If we spend too much time recording the present moment, are we spending enough time living it? A fundamental part of being human is that we know death will come – an end to the moments that make up our lives. So we should, by that logic, try to live each moment to the fullest.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* also has great relevance to the question “**How should we live together?**” Wars are fueled on the idea of other people being inferior in some way or less than human. They are waged not only over matters of physical territory, but also to destroy the culture and identity of the enemy “other.” The book reminds us of the Holocaust victims (“Jews and Romani and communists and queers”) as well as the German civilians killed in the Dresden bombing. It is easy to drop bombs from the sky or render an undesirable into soap or candles once you have removed their humanity. In order to live together we must learn to respect cultural differences and acknowledge our commonalities as human beings. But these are lessons we continually refuse to learn. Vonnegut's book hasn't stopped any wars. As I write this, Ukraine and Russia send their children to die. Nazism and all kinds of extremism seem to be thriving. Vonnegut was told he might as well write an “anti-glacier” book instead of an “anti-war” book. We now live in a world where the glaciers will likely be wiped out (so it goes). In order to survive, we must develop compassion for one another and respect for the planet we all share.

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