

*What book has influenced you most and why?*

Tobias Straus

I was assigned *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 10th grade, when I was 16. I was lucky to have a particularly skilled English teacher who assigned books to students individually, and for whatever reason she thought Kurt Vonnegut and I were a match. And she was right: *Slaughterhouse-Five* aroused in me something nothing had before—it unveiled the excitement of complex problems without easy answers, made playthings of the most serious subjects, and set the stage for what would become my most preoccupying questions which draw me to political philosophy.

The first chapter is an introduction directly from Vonnegut, who quickly gives the reader one of the book's central puzzles: asked if this is an anti-war book, he replies with an unenthusiastic yes, then immediately remarks that war is as easy to stop as glaciers—there'd always be war, there'd always be glaciers. Vonnegut's main character, Billy Pilgrim, assumes that given their powers to see all of time, a technologically advanced race of aliens called Tralfamadorians must live in peace. But they tell him they in fact *do* have wars, and they too see them as natural as glaciers. "We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments." Billy, who embraces the determinism of these aliens so much that he preaches against free will through newspaper op-eds and radio shows, commits himself to a mental hospital *for his own decisions*. With this puzzle, Vonnegut captures a certain kind of dissatisfaction of living under lack of free will. Billy himself thinks of Tralfamadorian ideas as "prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls," and I hear Vonnegut whispering a kind of inhumanity in these views which might drive a man mad.

These brash contradictions were a wonder and a joy. They were difficult to hold, they confused me, grabbed me, and their seeming impossibility was tauntingly addictive. *Slaughterhouse-Five* became the first book I could not put down. The most important effect the book had on me wasn't an ideological model, nor a mandate to oppose war or glaciers. It triggered some kind of reaction in my head which gave me a thirst for these kinds of puzzles and questions. I began to seek books and ideas which confronted death, God, war, modernity, innocence, human nature, and how one ought to live, many of which contained even harder questions and more challenging puzzles.

Throughout college I've been drawn to political philosophy, and although Vonnegut was the starting line, I've found ideas he presents in *Slaughterhouse-Five* continuously relevant—Vonnegut invited me to pull up a chair at the table of great ideas and enticed me to listen in. I found Plato weighing what Vonnegut recounts: Billy overheard a friend he met in the veterans' mental hospital tell a psychiatrist "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living." The horrors of World War Two, the firebombing of Dresden, a war fought by the innocent (an alternative title of the book is *The Children's Crusade*), tore people away from conventional views of Justice, and brought overall dissatisfaction with the current lies. The free pursuit of life, liberty, and property

is a difficult idol to hold next to the bombing of thousands of innocent civilians and the flattening of a city. I found this same dissatisfaction, alongside confusion and suggested solutions for the specific problems of this time in the works of many of my other favorite 20th century authors, like James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Albert Camus.

I found Nietzsche examining the Tralfamadorian philosophy, to spend eternity looking at pleasant moments, thinking their knowledge of time has invented happiness, and asking if they still have the ability to *give birth to a dancing star*. As mentioned, Billy Pilgrim, ardent follower of their message, goes voluntarily into a madhouse. Vonnegut, whose book eternally captures very unpleasant moments, doesn't seem to approve of the Tralfamadorian view.

Vonnegut largely sparked my passion for serious reading, though the kindling for it was present before. I've always loved learning, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is my go-to recommendation to people who tell me they envy the way I read and learn. There's something *exciting* about the way Vonnegut writes—humor to examine the biggest questions, far-out extreme situations, and bizarre characters—which has great potential to show people that books and comedy can be a very fun and playful route to answering life's most pressing questions (later in my education I've found Vonnegut is not alone on the thoughtful strategy of comedy). I recommend *Slaughterhouse-Five* to young people I think have potential to see the benefits of asking these questions, and I often think of how thankful I am to my 10th-grade English teacher for guiding me towards these benefits.