Are there things a novelist shouldn't joke about? An interview with Kurt Vonnegut: An interview with Kurt Vonnegut

by Harry James Cargas
November 23, 1976

This article appeared in the Christian Century *on November 24, 1976.*

Novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr. first gained a following on American college campuses as a cult figure for young readers who identified with his comic and pessimistic view of the world. In recent years a wider audience has come to know his books—Player Piano; Cat's Cradle; Slaughterhouse-Five; Sirens of Titan; Mother Night; God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; Breakfast of Champions; *and others.*

Vonnegut was an American delegate to the last International P.E.N. Congress when that association of writers met in Vienna, Austria. He addressed the meeting, as did Harry James Cargas, an author and member of the English department at Webster College in St. Louis. At the close of the weeklong session, Cargas interviewed Vonnegut.

I

Cargas: Let me begin by rather brazenly asking if, in your opinion, everything is a fit subject for humor.

Vonnegut: I try to be careful. When I'm being funny, I try not to offend. I don't think much of what I've done has been in really ghastly taste. The only shocks I use are occasional obscene words. I don't think I have embarrassed many people or distressed them by what I've said other than by the impact of certain obscene words that soldiers use.

Cargas: What I mean, though, is do you think that there are some subjects per se that are not fit for humor?

Vonnegut: Yes. I can't imagine a humorous book or skit or whatever about Auschwitz, for instance. Otherwise I can't think of any subject that I would steer away from, that I could do nothing with. Total catastrophes are terribly amusing, as Voltaire demonstrated. You know, the Lisbon earthquake is funny.

Cargas: Well, is it funny one year after the Lisbon earthquake or do we have to wait 200 years? The slaughterings of Genghis Khan, I imagine, could be made somewhat amusing because they don't affect anybody right now. Will Auschwitz become a subject for humor 500 years for now?

Vonnegut: Well, of course, humor is an almost physiological response to fears, as I understand it. What Freud said about humor was that it is a response to frustration—one of several. A dog, he said, when he can't get out a gate, will scratch and start digging and making meaningless gestures—perhaps growling or whatever to deal with frustration or surprise or fear. I saw the destruction of Dresden. I mean I saw it before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterwards, and certainly one response is laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief. So yes, I suppose any subject is subject to laughter and I suppose there was laughter of a very ghastly kind by victims in Auschwitz.

Cargas: I've heard this laughter described as defiance to God, in the sense of Isaac's laughter. But then there would be a distinction between laughter and humor.

Vonnegut: Yes. A great deal of laughter is induced by fear. We were working on a funny television series years ago—we were trying to put one together—and we had as a basic principle that death had to be mentioned in every show. And this ingredient would make any laughter deeper without the audience's realizing how we were inducing belly laughs—we hoped. We intended to do it with the mention of death.

There is a superficial sort of laughter. I don't consider Bob Hope a humorist, really. He's a comedian. It's very thin stuff; nothing troubling is mentioned. I used to laugh my head off at Laurel and Hardy and could still do it now. And there's terrible tragedy there somehow, as these people are too sweet to survive in this world and they are in terrible danger all the time. They could be so easily killed.

Cargas: I've heard you speak about technology in contemporary fiction as a parallel to the situation of sex in Victorian fiction. Would you say a word about that?

Vonnegut: It was what I came across when I became a so-called science fiction writer, or when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I'd offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology and most American fine writers know nothing about technology. I'm a contemporary of Truman Capote, for instance; he very quickly gained a reputation as a literary person, and I very quickly gained a reputation as a hack.

I think one reason was that critics felt that a person could not be a serious artist and also have had a technical education—which I had. I know that English departments in universities, customarily without knowing what they're doing, teach dread of the engineering department, the physics department and the chemistry department. And this fear, I think, is carried over into criticism. Most of our critics are products of English departments and are very suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in technology. I have an interest in technology because my father told me I could go to college only if I studied something serious.

Cargas: You mean practical?

Vonnegut: Yes, something practical. I am from a family of artists. Here I am making a living in the arts, and it has not been a rebellion. It's as though I had taken over the family Esso station. My ancestors were all in the arts, so I'm simply making my living in the customary family way. But my father, who was a painter and an architect, was so hurt by the Depression, unable to make a living as an artist, that he thought I should having nothing to do with the arts. He warned me away from the arts because he had found them so useless as a way of producing money.

Cargas: Just to get back to that original question for a moment: You were saying that technology is absent from our novels in the same way that sex was absent from the Victorian novel.

Vonnegut: Well, I said that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex.

Cargas: Previously you referred to the distinction that somebody else is obviously making between science fiction and serious literature. Do you make that distinction?

Vonnegut: There was a time when I would, and I can understand why people would make that distinction. Science fiction was very badly paid. There were many outlets for it. But it was customary to pay a penny a word, half a cent a word, and so science fiction writers, in order to make a living, had to go extremely fast. Therefore almost all science fiction stories were, and continue to be, first drafts simply because of the amount of money involved. They are not done well, usually. I would say that one science fiction story in 200 is a really good story. That one story is usually extraordinarily good—it's as fine as anything that's being written in the United States.

Cargas: That percentage may even apply to non–science fiction, mightn't it?

Vonnegut: No. I think the so-called mainstream writers tend to work harder on their stories. A science fiction writer is not careful with language, usually uses quite simple language. And science fiction stories are not subtle. A mainstream writer, chances are, is more of a writer, is more obsessed with the language and will work over his material more.

Cargas: How do you classify yourself?

Vonnegut: I consider myself a mainstream writer, and I think I always was. I got classified as a science fiction writer simply because I wrote about Schenectady, New York. My first book, *Player Piano,* was about Schenectady. There are huge factories in Schenectady and nothing else. I and my associates were engineers and physicists and chemists and mathematicians. And when I wrote about the General Electric Company and Schenectady, it seemed a fantasy of the future to critics who had never seen the place.

Cargas: A commentary on the critics?

Vonnegut: Yes.

II

Cargas: How do you regard the critics and their reception of your work? Are you being understood by them?

Vonnegut: Well, I am a critic, too. Criticism in the United States is commonly done by persons like myself. We have very few professional critics. I can really think only of those who work on the *New York Times.* There are a few others—Digby Diehl on the west coast. But I have reviewed perhaps a hundred books since I have been in the writing business, and on occasion I have done a very bad job. So I'm not entitled to complain if someone as shallow as I am reviews my books.

Do the critics understand me? I don't know. There are some critics who are completely humorless. There's a man on *Newsweek* who has reviewed every damn one of my books and he never sees anything funny in them. He does not understand that I am being ironical sometimes. He misses all my jokes. And I wrote him a letter and told him: really, you shouldn't review books with jokes in them. The same man has now attacked my son's book. So it goes on generation after generation.

The reason I have written so little is that it's so damn hard to make jokes work. In *Cat's Cradle,* for instance, there are these very short chapters. Each one of them represents one day's work, and each one is a joke. If I were writing about a tragic situation, it wouldn't be necessary to time it to make sure the thing works. You can't really misfire with a tragic scene. It's bound to be moving if the right elements are all present. But a joke is like building a mousetrap from scratch. You have to work pretty hard to make the thing snap when it is supposed to snap.

Cargas: Can you tell when your own stuff snaps?

Vonnegut: Yeah, I can tell when a joke works. As a kid I was a jokemaker. I was the youngest member of my family, and the youngest child in any family is always a jokemaker because a joke is the only way he can enter into an adult conversation. My sister was five years older than I was, my brother was nine years older than I was, and my parents were both talkers. So at the dinner table when I was very young, I was boring to all those other people. They did not want to hear about the dumb childish news of my days. They wanted to talk about really important stuff that happened in high school or maybe in college or at work. So the only way I could get into a conversation was to say something funny. I think I must have done it accidently at first, just accidently made a pun that stopped the conversation—something of that sort. And then I found out that a joke was a way to

break into an adult conversation.

I grew up at a time when comedy in this country was superb—it was the Great Depression. There were large numbers of absolutely top comedians on radio. And without intending to, I really studied them. I would listen to comedy at least an hour a night all through my youth and got very interested in how jokes worked, and what they were.

Cargas: How about now? Do you intentionally stay away from comedy because it might affect your style, or do you cultivate attention to it still?

Vonnegut: I still listen to comedy. There's not much of that sort of comedy around. The closest thing is the reruns of Groucho Marx's quiz show. I've known writers who were funny who stopped being funny, who became serious persons and could no longer make jokes. I'm thinking of Michael Frayne, the British author who wrote *The Ten Men.* He became a very serious person. Something happened in his head.

This may happen to me; I really don't know what I'm going to become from now on. I'm simply along for the ride to see what happens to this body and this brain of mine. It may be that I am no longer able to joke—if that is no longer a satisfactory defense mechanism. Some people are funny and some are not. I used to be funny, and perhaps I'm not any more. There may have been so many shocks and disappointments that the defense of humor no longer works. You asked whether there are things we can't joke about. Yes, I realize now that it's not possible for me to make a joke about the death of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King. It may be as I mature, as I become a middle-aged man and then an old man, that I will become rather grumpy because I've seen so many things that have offended me that I cannot deal with in terms of laughter.

Cargas: But the way you say that—you are observing what you're doing—you don't seem to have a fear of losing that ability to be funny.

Vonnegut: No. I'm simply interested in what is going to happen next. I don't think I can control my life or my writing. Every other writer I know feels he is steering himself, and I don't have that feeling. I don't have that sort of control. I'm simply becoming. I'm startled that I became a writer.

Cargas: We've been talking about humor and you as a humorist, and yet you have been labeled by some a prophet of doom. How do you react to

that?

Vonnegut: Well, anyone who has studied science and talks to scientists notices that we are in terrible danger now. President Ford is optimistic, and he would hear me prophesying doom and he would say "Nonsense." He's an optimist, but he's a lawyer. He will argue that our atmosphere will not become poisoned, that our water will not become poisoned, that human beings are very durable animals. He will simply argue this. Meanwhile, our atmosphere is deteriorating in measurable ways. Scientists are sending up balloons at the time to sample. They're sampling our rivers and our seas. The bad news that they find can't be argued with, but it is in fact ignored by our President.

We haven't had a really active science adviser for years now. JFK had a science adviser, but every subsequent President has virtually done without one—probably because a scientist brings nothing but bad news and has information that would slow the President down in his optimism. [President Ford has appointed a science adviser since this interview took place. —ED.]

Cargas: In the context of this discussion, that's the humanist's joke, isn't it, in the sense of defense mechanism—that he doesn't want to face this truth?

Vonnegut: Yeah. The biggest truth to face now—what is probably making me unfunny now for the remaining one-third of my life—is that I don't think people give a damn whether the planet goes on or not. It seems to me as if everyone is living as members of Alcoholics Anonymous do, day by day. And a few more days will be enough. I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildren.

When I went to grade school in Indianapolis, the James Whitcomb Riley School #43, we used to draw pictures of houses of tomorrow, boats of tomorrow, airplanes of tomorrow, and there were all these dreams for the future. Of course at that time everything had come to a stop. The factories had stopped, the Great Depression was on and the magic word was Prosperity. Sometime Prosperity will come. We were preparing for it. We were dreaming of the sorts of houses human beings should inhabit—ideal dwellings, ideal forms of transportation. There's very little of that going on now. I don't think children do it. And I meet very few grown-ups who care about the future and get excited about it. Carl Sagan the astronomer does talk about

his great-grandchildren’s world and does speculate about that. Charles Eames, the designer who designed the Eames chair, will talk about such things. I can’t think of anyone else who does it.

III

Cargas: Let me switch topics. What authors do you read?

Vonnegut: I have so many friends who are writers that I read only friends’ books. I don’t have any systematic reading program. I’ll read anything that comes to hand. As far as research goes, usually the Encyclopaedia Britannica is more than adequate for what I want to know. When I wrote *The Sirens of Titan,* I found out everything I wanted to know about the solar system from a children’s book. I think it was probably written for an eight-year-old. It showed all the planets and described them very nicely and told me about their moons and told me about the moon of Saturn called Titan. My research has not been profound.

Cargas: Is it satisfying for you to be a writer?

Vonnegut: It used to be. It’s not particularly satisfying now. I think I accomplished so much more than I ever thought I would that I’m astonished to look back and see that I wrote as many books as I did. I’m not a prolific writer, but I’m quite content with what I have done. I’m sort of looking around for something else to do.

I think most careers last about 20 years. I think that physicians are excited about being physicians for about 20 years. My father was excited about being an architect for about 20 years. Writers my age, I think, most of them, are looking around for something else to do. They would like to get off this particular merry-go-round. John O’Hara had a sort of anger that kept him going until the very end. I don’t have anger to draw on for energy.