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Rest in Peace, Billy Pilgrim

What's Your Reaction?

Review of Look at the Birdie. By Kurt Vonnegut. Delacorte Press, 251 pps., $27.00

Posthumous publishing could be called the business of endings. It often involves a confederacy of dunces and rarely yields A Confederacy of Dunces. Especially in the case of prominent authors, who may have chosen to hold back material that did not cut the mustard. Their books often appear because of estate considerations and the desire of the public for a victory lap, a montage of memories. The manuscript becomes the finale of a body of work. It's tricky stuff. How, after all, does a writer say goodbye?

It is in this context that we look at Look at the Birdie, a set of fourteen previously unpublished stories by the late Kurt Vonnegut. Over his long career Vonnegut explored the American landscape with a cartoony style, emblemized by his caricatured persona. It has been said of him, "Like Abe Lincoln and Mark Twain, he is always being funny when he's not being depressed." Long and lanky with bushy hair and eyebrows, he was the laconic and likeable brooder of American letters.

Vonnegut was forever marked by the action he saw in World War II, most notably the firebombing of Dresden. His experience shaped his fiction, and, just as his friend Joseph Heller will be remembered for Catch 22, Vonnegut's legacy will undoubtedly be led by the charming, quirky and heartbreaking, Slaughterhouse-Five. A sort of sadness permeates his writing, and in novels like Slaughterhouse and Breakfast of Champions he returned time and again to the senselessness of war, the corroding effects of technology, and his lack of hope for the human race. These themes are served up in unpredictable and funny story settings, with prose economical and distinctive. He believed "every scene, every dialogue should advance the narrative and then if possible there should be a surprise ending."

Look at the Birdie, for better and worse, is vintage Vonnegut. His skill begins with the beginnings, as even in the weaker stories he introduces a story context faster than you can say Mr. Rosewater. The narratives are simultaneously unique and familiar, like new stories from an old uncle. The book starts wonderfully, as Vonnegut offers up lonely, grievously unhappy characters, like a housewife in "Confido" whose husband invents a mindreading machine, and the company man in "FUBAR," whose company man in "FUBAR," whose whole life is lived in a warehouse.

But, it must be said, the collection also show Vonnegut's flaws. The book's flow is slowed in the overly long night for a small town couple in "Ed Luby's Key Club." And Vonnegut's alchemy goes missing in the stranger tale "Hello, Red." Worst of all, the allegorical story, "The Petrified Ants," in which a pair of Russian scientists discover an amazing colony of insects, falls prey to the author's tendency to be preachy and political. One of the scientists declares: "We're the ones without pincers, Josef. We're done. We aren't made to work and fight in huge hordes, to live by instinct and nothing more, perpetuating a dark, damp anthill without the wits to even wonder why." It's a bit of a wince, this Cold War cold sore, and is an occasion to recall the posthumousness-of-it-all. In fact, each of the down moments reminds you that someone raided the file cabinet.

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Still, Vonnegut’s touch delights, and even when he is shrill he usually warms the heart, as with "The Honor of a Newsboy," the story of a small town cop, a bully and a paper boy. Asked if he delivered the paper on Wednesday, the boy says, "Of course, it's the rule." The cop is moved to proclaim, "If everybody were ten...maybe rules and common decency and horse sense would have a Chinaman's chance."

Which brings us back to the business of endings. There is something almost old-fashioned about Vonnegut's confidence in finishing stories. Nothing if not the most assured of writers, Kurt Vonnegut is always showing you something to hold up against an abstract future. And though somewhere along the line writers of short fiction have decided not to knit the whole sweater, one of the chief pleasures of *Look at the Birdie* is being reminded that yarns can, and maybe should, end.

True to his word, the author wraps most of these stories up with a surprise, and some feel a little rushed and not fully earned. But if you are already settled in with *Look at the Birdie*, it is probably because in your book Kurt Vonnegut deserves the victory lap, the montage of memories, the endings and the ending. There ain't nothing wrong with that.

And so it goes.