Early Vonnegut shows its age, his budding talent


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By Glenn C. Altschuler

Held by the Nazis in an underground meat locker called Slaughterhouse Five, Kurt Vonnegut was one of the few prisoners of war to survive the firebombing of Dresden, Germany. He never forgot "the carnage unfathomable" visited on the citizens of that city.

In well over a dozen novels and hundreds of short stories, Vonnegut wrote about the madness of war and about alienation in the modern machine age. When he died in 2007, he was acclaimed as a great American writer with a signature style.

"While Mortals Sleep" is the second collection of his previously unpublished short stories. Written early in his career, they are concerned less with war and corporate malfeasance than with the pursuit of success, happiness and love.

Vonnegut can be very funny. Especially when he's skewering the super-rich. In "Tango," he writes, the Latin music wandered through the ears of young Robert Brewer, "found nobody at home under his crew cut, and took command of his long, thin body."

His partner, "a plain, wholesome girl with three million dollars and a low center of gravity, struggled in embarrassment, and then, seeing the fierce look in Robert's eyes, succumbed. It simply wasn't done" in posh Pisquontuit.

Even when they are funny, however, some stories seem dated, not only because they are set in manufacturing plants like the Montezuma Forge and Foundry Company, but because many of Vonnegut's women are spinsters or widows, searching, with varying degrees of desperation, for a nice man. And unhappy until they find one.

To be sure, he gives the back of his hand to Earl Harrison (in "With His Hand on the Throttle"), who plays with model trains instead of spending time with his wife. Women "have got the vote and free access to saloons," Earl exclaims. "What do they want now -- to enter the men's shot put?"

He gets his comeuppance, but the oh-so-1950s moral of the story seems to be that wives should be more than content if they get common courtesy and a bit more attention from their hubbies.

At one time "popular, if not dominant," the literature of moral instruction has become unfashionable, writes Dave Eggers, the
editor of this collection. Some of Vonnegut's lessons -- that wealthy people were happier when they had nothing; that we often ignore the real meaning of Christmas -- seem trite or untrue.

But, then again, in an age of relativism, cynicism and self-absorption, we may need sentimental, self-evident truths and reminders that "love and friendship and doing good really are the big things."

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