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My Friendship With Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller

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Because of his love of gallows humor and his courage, I wanted to interview Kurt Vonnegut. Slaughterhouse Five, his moving account of his survival of the bombing of Dresden in WWII, had left an indelible mark on my consciousness. How he could retain his wit after suffering such a catastrophic event boggled my mind. I wanted to question him about this. I wanted to know Vonnegut on a deeper level than turning pages in a book. I wanted to quiz him about where he learned and earned his tenacity, his views on women, his experiences in the military, his journey as a writer. I had known he respected Mailer's War book, The Naked and the Dead, and had difficulty writing about his experiences in the slaughterhouse in Dresden because of this. What freed his muse to be able to let go and let it rip on the page with the brilliance he affects in Slaughterhouse Five?

I loved Breakfast of Champions and Vonnegut's signature of a felt tip India ink pen asterisk as Kilgore Trout, his imaginary alter ego. Vonnegut's battle to gain respect from critics was something I wanted to ask him about and why these critics gave him such a difficult time? Was it because he enjoyed laughing on the page and at himself? With Vonnegut the conflict of literary and laughter reared its ugly head. His following by collegiate youth is humongous, yet during his lifetime he had trouble maintaining respect in the literary world. Today there is a resurgence and, deservedly so, an almost hero worship of his work and of him.

I found him to be humble, kind and handsome with his head of thick hair and penetrating gaze. His friendship with Joe Heller reminded me of the Marx Brothers. Heller had Vonnegut's back and was equally brave fighting his battle with Gillain-BarreSyndrom. Heller's black wit and Vonnegut's gallows humor emulsify in my interview with them which is published in its entirety here. Playboy ran a portion, but this is the unedited version. Enjoy meeting Kurt and Joe in my memoir.

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