



Eleanor Roosevelt High School

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11th Grade American Literature Summer Assignment 2013-2014

BOOK: SLAUGHTERHOUSE-5, OR THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE by KURT VONNEGUT

All this happened, more or less. (opening sentence)
That was me. That was I. That was the author of this book. (repeated)
—Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-5

Stories are a contract between the author and the reader: writers are expected to produce an engaging version of reality which is ultimately revelatory of some truth of human character or experience; readers are expected to look for clues as to the author's purpose, and to follow details carefully in their quest for understanding the story's messages. Slaughterhouse-5 deals with the border between fiction and fact, the way in which while telling a story about something that has happened we inevitably shape and transform it. As you read, consider Vonnegut – How does he use imagination to make sense of events that are otherwise unbearable? As his readers, what can we learn through symbol, metaphor, and the “fantastic” that we cannot through fact?

As the availability of “information” multiplies in our world, we are expected to know how to judge the truth of a story for ourselves, and to acknowledge that much around us is a construction—one person's view of reality, filtered, rather than an “objective truth.” Because literature is an art, its purpose is not simply to tell us what happened. As a result, many fiction writers—like Flannery O'Connor—have argued that a deliberately distorted narrative reveals more about reality than any attempt to be “realistic.”

READING AND JOURNALING ASSIGNMENT

Start a reading journal. After each reading session, jot the date, the time you read, and the pages you read and write down your responses. Start with your reading EXPERIENCE. This is your ‘pre-critical’ response and should freely explore your impressions, personal connections, emotional responses and wondering questions. This is the key to writing about literature in an engaging way. This is ‘writing to understand’ NOT writing to explain. No interpretation, no plot summary, not yet.

As you read, use post-it notes or write directly in your book

- § the use of humor;
- § the presentation of alternative versions of traumatic events;
- § ways in which Vonnegut presents his book as “a true story”;
- § improbable/“fantastical” plot turns;
- § the insertion of Vonnegut as a character into his narrative.

We suggest you actually do not start your Summer reading until mid August so that it is fresh in your mind when you do your ‘in class’ writing in September. As you get deeper into the book you can begin interpreting in your journal – consider the nature of reality, of imagination, of the border between fiction and fact, and the tacit contract between author and reader. We will talk about these in the first weeks of school.