



November 19, 2010

Indianapolis Honors Its Literary Native Son

By EMMA GRAVES FITZSIMMONS

INDIANAPOLIS — In Kurt Vonnegut’s novel “[Cat’s Cradle](#),” the narrator meets a woman on a plane who is delighted to discover that he is from Indiana. Holding his arm tightly, she tells him, “We Hoosiers got to stick together.”

Mr. Vonnegut’s writing was filled with references to his Midwestern roots and to the tight-knit families he met growing up here. Still, some readers may be surprised that his memorial library is opening in his hometown, Indianapolis, and not on the East Coast, where he lived for most of his life.

As the library welcomed the public for the first time last week, the author’s friends and family said that it belonged in Indianapolis, with which he had a complicated and not always complimentary relationship. Despite his criticism of the traditionally conservative city, this is where he developed his voice as a writer and learned the values expressed in his books.

“All my jokes are Indianapolis,” Mr. Vonnegut said at a speech here in 1986. “All my attitudes are Indianapolis. My adenoids are Indianapolis. If I ever severed myself from Indianapolis, I would be out of business. What people like about me is Indianapolis.”

Tourism officials hope the library will draw visitors from around the world to a city known more for auto racing than its literary scene.

The [Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library](#), run as a nonprofit, resides in the historic Emelie Building downtown. Several of its rooms were donated by a local law firm — a beneficence that was not always recognized by Mr. Vonnegut during his lifetime. In “[God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater](#),” he wryly characterized the quest of a lawyer to be present “where large amounts of money are about to change hands.”

The library items on display range from the ordinary to the intergalactic, many of them donated by his children. They include the author’s typewriter and an unopened box of his Pall Mall cigarettes, alongside a painting devoted to the Tralfamadorians, the green aliens Mr. Vonnegut wrote about in books including “[Slaughterhouse-Five](#).” Several of Mr. Vonnegut’s drawings are also displayed, including one of a gravestone that reads “Life is no way to treat an animal.”

Mr. Vonnegut, who died in 2007 at the age of 84, was born here to a prominent family of architects. But after graduating from Shortridge High School, he left to attend [Cornell University](#) and then enlisted in the Army.

While serving in World War II, Mr. Vonnegut was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge and sent to a P.O.W. camp near Dresden, where he was forced to dig bodies out of the rubble after the devastating firebombings. The experience haunted him for years and served as the basis of "Slaughterhouse-Five."

The library's executive director, Julia Whitehead, said her favorite item on display was his Purple Heart medal. "The more I look at the Purple Heart," she said, "the more I consider that horrific experience as a prisoner of war in Dresden, and how it was the defining moment of his life and obviously influenced his writing and his worldview. It's very touching to me."

After the war, Mr. Vonnegut married and worked as a reporter in Chicago before moving his family to Schenectady, N.Y., and then to Cape Cod, in Massachusetts. In 1970, Mr. Vonnegut moved to New York, later remarrying there.

Although he never lived in Indianapolis again, Mr. Vonnegut did visit over the years. Some of his fans have also come here hoping to learn more about his life, but they were on their own until now.

"The Vonnegut name resonates with so many different people," said Chris Gahl, a spokesman for the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association. "There is intrigue about who he was as a person."

The library will include a replica of his writing studio and rejection letters (among the boxfuls he received) from magazines showing that he did not have an easy time of it. One editor said he did not have time to work with Mr. Vonnegut because he was not as talented as other writers.

Perhaps most mysterious is the unopened letter Mr. Vonnegut's father sent him while the writer was overseas. "Knowing my father, it was more just to keep the potential and the mystery," said Mark Vonnegut, the author's son, musing about the decision not to open it.

The library fits into plans by Indianapolis to highlight cultural activities in a city that has tended to bill itself as a sports destination. The landmark Indianapolis Motor Speedway has been here since before Mr. Vonnegut was born.

A new [cultural trail](#) through downtown is being built in advance of the city's hosting the [Super Bowl](#) in 2012. The library, which sits near the trail, is already drawing out-of-town visitors like Julie Pagano, 25, a computer engineer from Pittsburgh, who hopped in a car with a friend and drove six hours to attend a "sneak peek" event last Friday.

Mark Vonnegut is on the library's board, but Mr. Vonnegut's widow, the author and photographer

Jill Krementz, told the board she did not want to be involved.

Mr. Vonnegut remained “the kid from Indianapolis,” his son said. “I think his values are very much in line with the Midwestern values of [Abraham Lincoln](#), Carl Sandburg and [Mark Twain](#).”

Mr. Vonnegut often used Indianapolis as a symbol of American middle-class values, said William Rodney Allen, an English professor at the Louisiana School for Math, Science and the Arts who has written two books on the author. His upbringing here gave Mr. Vonnegut a friendliness and folksiness that made his books more accessible to readers, Dr. Allen said.

“He invites you right in. ‘Come in and have a cigarette, have a cup of coffee,’ ” he said. “But then you suddenly start talking about Kafka and cosmic time and aliens and politics and Dresden.”

Mr. Vonnegut may have had a fondness for his hometown, but that did not mean it was immune from his biting humor. In “[Breakfast of Champions](#),” the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout visits Midland City, an unsophisticated city many believe is meant to represent Indianapolis. When he wades through a creek, his feet are coated in sludge from a nearby bomb manufacturing plant. Christopher Stack, a doctor who attended the opening, said that the people of Indianapolis did not take the jabs personally. “He’s a beloved character in this town,” he said.

So it goes.