

Before their time

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Even in these early stories, ample helpings of Vonnegut's wit

By Dan Wakefield, Globe Correspondent | March 7, 2010

It's easy to see why some of these stories of Kurt Vonnegut from the 1950s might have been considered unsuitable by the popular magazines he wrote for back then, like *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Cosmopolitan*. These short fictions were too far ahead of their time, too subversively radical or darkly ironic to suit the smooth veneer of the era. Vonnegut's early novels had been published with scant attention until the college students of the 1960s began to pass them around like dog-eared treasures, and the mass public discovered the author with the publication of "Slaughterhouse Five" in 1969.

Vonnegut is hardly an American Kafka, but more in the vein of Twain and Swift. He delivers kicks to the sacred cows of the era (psychoanalysis, big corporations, money, success, the dawn of sexual liberation) with such hilarity that readers forget we have just witnessed a body blow.

Vonnegut's power to work that magic is already on display in these early stories. In "Confido," a man who works as a laboratory assistant for the Accousti-gem Corporation, which manufactures hearing aids, accidentally invents a device that he knows will make him rich and famous. It's a small black box with an earpiece that gives the listener "Somebody to talk to! Somebody who really understands!" and that, he tells his wife, Ellen, is "the key to happiness." Excited at the prospect, Ellen gives the invention its name - "an appealing combination of confidant and household pet - Confido."

Ellen urges hubby to wait before quitting his job, but he assures her that Confido is "bigger than television and psychoanalysis combined" and will make him a billionaire. The high, small voice of Confido assures whoever wears it that money is the key to happiness, the neighbors with the new car are undeserving shysters, your mother loves your sister more than she loves you, and you've been getting a raw deal all along. Finally Ellen realizes that anyone who listens to the device becomes bitter and discontent. She buries Confido in the backyard and explains to her husband his invention is "a direct wire to the worst in us . . . That little voice is loud enough as it is."

Like all good stories, these are about change, and in Vonnegut's stories, it's often the small things of daily life that bring about big changes in attitudes, moods, and understanding. These stories are about "little people" caught in the grip of big forces: faceless corporations, crooked politics, jealousy, and greed.

"Fubar" is the Army term for "fouled up beyond all recognition," and Vonnegut explains that "it describes a misfortune brought about not by malice but by administrative accidents in some large and complex organization." It is the title of one story in this collection and the theme of many. "Fuzz Littler, for instance, was fubar in the General Forge and Foundry Company," and when he heard the word he knew that "it fit him like a pair of stretch nylon bikini shorts."

In a neat O. Henry ending, a fresh young secretary shows Littler how to benefit happily from the company's foul-ups, but there is always a darker shade to these stories that give them a deeper texture. Outside of his job, Littler spent years caring for his sick mother, and when he closed his eyes "[w]hat he contemplated within the purple darkness of his eyelids was what he considered the cruelest fact of life - that sacrifices were really sacrifices. In caring for his mother, he had lost a great deal."

Not all the characters in these stories work for corporations, yet many are "fubar" in everyday life. In "The Good Explainer," a husband travels at his wife's urging to see a doctor who she says is famous for solving sterility problems. Dr. Abekian confesses the woman's sterility is because of a botched abortion that he arranged when she worked for him as a student nurse, and he got her pregnant. He asks why she went to so much trouble so many years later to have him confess his guilt to her husband.

"Because you were always so much better than I was at explaining why everything we did was always for the best," she said, "every step of the way."

Snobbery over money and social position draws some of Vonnegut's greatest ire. In "Ed Luby's Key Club" he takes Harve and Claire, an unassuming couple who have "a lot of kids and a lot of love" to a once-favorite restaurant that's become an exclusive hangout for the town swells. Harve and Claire are harshly turned away and plunged into a

nightmare world of false accusations where they “had only one thing to cling to - a childlike faith that innocent persons never had anything to fear.” They are saved in the end, but not before “Harve realized that pure evil was his friend, too. Eluding it, outwitting it, planning its destruction all gave his life inconceivably exciting meanings.”

Vonnegut’s quirky, memorable pen and ink drawings punctuate the book. The most recent one, dated four months before his death in 2007 is a tree with naked, winter limbs reaching toward the sky. The sketch is titled “A Tree Trying to Tell Me Something.” Like the tree, Vonnegut is trying to tell us something.

Dan Wakefield’s memoir, “New York in the Fifties,” was recently republished. ■

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