

**E**xcept for the chain-smoking, Kurt Vonnegut's got good sense and a talent for looking ahead to avoid all sorts of crises. The sixty-seven-year-old author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Sirens of Titan*, *Galapagos*, *Bluebeard*, and a dozen other noted books knows as well as anyone about the consequences of blind devotion to anything, most especially technology. "I began to have my doubts about truth," he once said, "after it was dropped on Hiroshima." For our purposes, on this Monday afternoon in his kitchen, Truth was an Aiwa tape recorder, which, thank goodness, made a stunning comeback just as we began to talk about the important stuff.

*CV magazine: Who do you read these days? What strikes you as being interesting?*

**Kurt Vonnegut:** Well, I know so many writers, very good ones, who are close friends of mine. [E. L.] Doctorow is a good friend of mine, so I'll read his books for social reasons as well as literary. Carl Bernstein is a friend. Nadine Gordimer is a good friend. Unfortunately, I know so goddamned many people.

*CV: How do you keep up?*

**KV:** I can't. I actually can't. I'm scared to death that someone is going to send me another book.

*CV: What about the next generation? Are there any heirs apparent to the Vonnegut literary tradition?*

**KV:** I don't know. I would hope that people are inheriting some of my attitudes. English departments are structured so as to suggest to students that one writer stands

# Duty to One's Country

*A conversation  
with Kurt Vonnegut  
about freedom of  
expression, life,  
liberty, and the  
pursuit of happiness.*

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BY DAVID SHENK



on the shoulders of another and that some evolutionary process is going on. But this is simply a way of organizing an English department.

CV: *What are some of the distinguishing characteristics in the stuff that's coming out these days?*

KV: We weren't as free to speak frankly when I started out as we are now. We were restrained by a lot of things, including mere politeness. We skirted obscenity and were delicate when discussing sex, because we really didn't want to harm anybody and it was widely believed that we could. We have become more frank as it has become more obvious that frankness never hurt anybody, and that truth is probably the safest substance you can possibly swallow.

CV: *You were one of the first writers to be so open.*

KV: Yes, I was the first person to use *fuck* in a title. [laughs] I wrote a story called "The Big Space Fuck," just to break new ground... Of course, it makes for trouble in the libraries, because the word *fuck* has to go right on the library card. Usually you have to get to the text to find that sort of thing.

CV: *So you helped to disprove the notion that openness was going to bring the house down?*

KV: Well, psychiatrists pretty much found that out. As more and more people went to therapists for help, a larger body of evidence came into being that frank discussion of sex, or anything else, wasn't responsible for making people ill.

CV: *But, even today, your work is fairly controversial.*

KV: Only on theocratic grounds. Religious people find me controversial. I'm just a unitarian, which is to say that I'm by no means convinced that Jesus was the son of God. It really doesn't matter. He was a great teacher in any case, whether he was the son of God or not. I'm much impressed with what he said, or what he was said to have said, on the Mount of Olives and that's good enough for me.

But this is an inherited religion. People who find my religious skepticism objectionable should at least know that I'm honoring my parents and my grandparents and my great-grandparents. They were so-called freethinkers. And very good people, too.

CV: *Slaughterhouse-Five was one of the most popular works in the book-banning movement some time ago. Is your work still being banned?*

KV: Just in rural communities. There is a list of supposedly "bad" books which has been circulating since 1972. God knows where it originated. People on school committees, good citizens—they're not book readers. They get on school committees to help the kids, to try and keep them from going crazy from dope and sex and all that. Obviously, the trouble is coming from somewhere, and these people are willing to be persuaded that it's coming from books. And then there's this list that says "Are these books in your public school library?" Like *Catcher in the*

*Rye*—can you imagine how much damage that book is doing to America's youth right now? Or *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

CV: *Doesn't Mark David Chapman (John Lennon's murderer) claim to have been inspired by Catcher in the Rye?*

KV: He was more inspired by the National Rifle Association, wasn't he? Talk about perversity. They regularly misstate the Second Amendment, which concerns the right to bear arms. They don't invite people to read that amendment for themselves. There's a dependent clause in it: *in order to provide a well-regulated militia*, the right to bear arms shall not be infringed.

So some cooked-up woman who goes to a sporting goods store and purchases a .357 magnum in order to blow her husband away is part of a "well-regulated militia"!

CV: *How can the NRA get away with such propaganda?*

*Freedom is not easy.  
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KV: You tell me. You live in this country as much as I do. You can get away with anything in this country. This country is based entirely on extortion.

CV: *What about this movement to label certain rock albums with warnings about the lyrics?*

KV: Well, again, I understand what the parents are talking about. These people aren't bad. Tipper Gore is a good parent to do this. Freedom is not easy. Freedom is uncomfortable. The First Amendment is a tragic amendment in that it inflicts a great deal of pain on a lot of people. A case in point is when the American Nazis marched in Skokie, Illinois. My god, there are plenty of Holocaust survivors still alive, and this could only have caused them agony. And I myself, on a much lower level, am deeply offended by *Screw*, and all of the porn magazine shops and movies on 42nd Street. But I still am not able to see a way that this can be outlawed, without it going like wildfire.

There's much that pains me. And the best I've been able to do about it is to declare certain people schmucks. [laughs] Al Goldstein [publisher of *Screw*] thinks he's a hero of the First Amendment, but he's really a schmuck who puts the First Amendment in terrible jeopardy for no other reason than celebrity and money. And the same



with Larry Flynt [publisher of *Hustler*]*—*he says he has given more to the First Amendment than anybody. He's put it in worse danger than anybody! Anyone who would run such great risks with such a fragile structure as the First Amendment scares the hell out of me.

The people who want to bugger the First Amendment have a point. They can make a very good case in terms of the welfare of their children and all sorts of other things. And when we finally do lose the First Amendment, it will be in order to protect family values, I'm sure.  
**CV:** *You think this will happen?*

**KV:** I think everything is going to happen. We've got a long time to go.

**CV:** *So how should college students be preparing for this treacherous world?*

**KV:** Well, they're trapped, most of them, because they're just one person, and they have to figure out what Monsanto wants in an employee or what General Electric wants. It's almost like giving instructions on how to act in a hurricane or in an avalanche. [laughs] The forces that are going to shove you in this direction or that direction are enormous. And I know all about that: I've been involved in spectacular military defeats. [laughs]

**CV:** *So everyone is powerless?*

**KV:** No, those who have inherited money should figure out what the Republic should do to rescue itself. One thing we need rescuing from is ignorance. We are a disgrace—mathematically, in our knowledge of geography and other things. Something has to be done about that, because we are not fit to survive.

**CV:** *Do these people with money have a responsibility to do something?*

**KV:** Well, money is power, and the people who have money might spend it on behalf of the Republic.

**CV:** *Is it a moral obligation?*

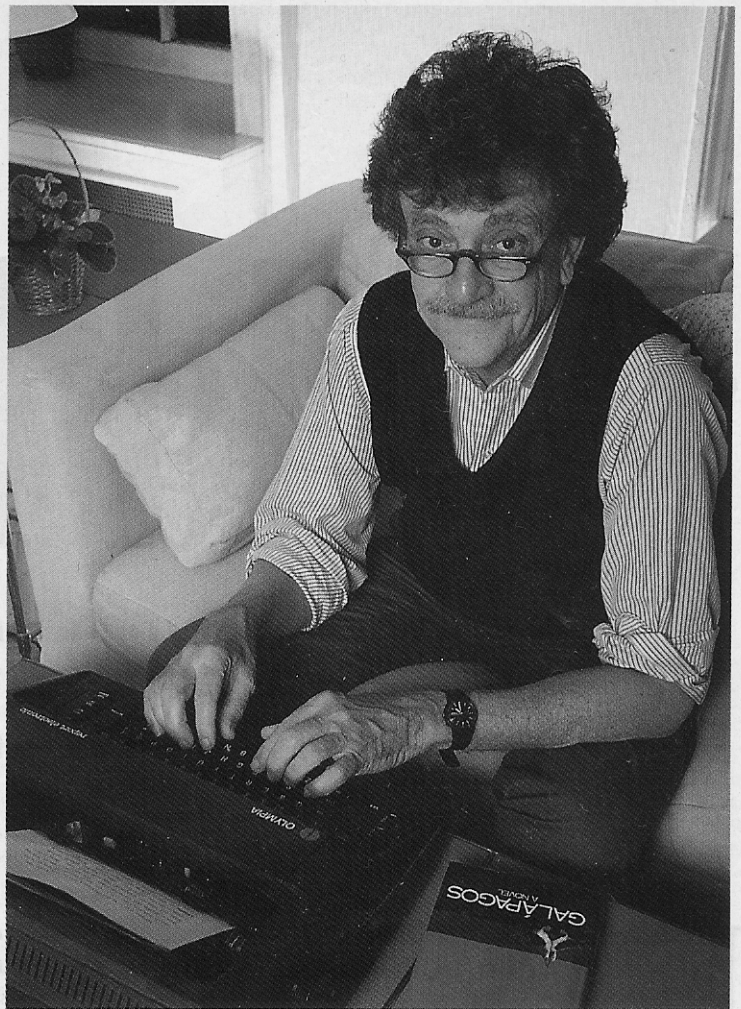
**KV:** I don't think God gives a goddamn what happens next, but I care. And they should too.

**CV:** *How is freedom of expression doing in this country? It looks pretty good these days, doesn't it?*

**KV:** Well, yeah. But we can't really tell. Rarely does the government step in and actually squash something. It does happen with ex-CIA employees, but those are rare cases... In the Soviet Union they've been scared to death that the whole government is going to be brought down by one essay. [laughs] But it doesn't work that way. For two hundred years, we've let people say any goddamned thing they want, and the consequences have been zilch.

**CV:** *And now they're finally realizing this in the East. What are your expectations of Perestroika?*

**KV:** Any country that heads in that direction—and I think they really are trying—is going to run into the same problem that you run into here. Which is that freedom is an upper-class enthusiasm. The working people in the Soviet Union hear about *Perestroika*, that things are gonna get a whole lot better... And they probably will. The movies will be a whole lot franker; the music will get more interesting. But they're still not gonna get a car, they're still not gonna get a new drill press, they're still not gonna get decent food and all that. The working



**Vonnegut believes that Americans have misinterpreted the First Amendment. They insist that the right to bear arms gives them license to wield semi-automatic weapons.**

people are gonna get very little out of it, and they're going to be bitter.

**CV:** *It's the same in this country, though, isn't it? Poor people don't get involved in writing, for the most part.*

**KV:** No, they don't. Poor people don't buy books, either. It's entirely a middle-class activity.

**CV:** *So books will last as long as the middle class does? Or are they in more immediate danger?*

**KV:** I don't know. It seems to me that books are going very fast.

**CV:** *So you're pretty much a pessimist, through and through?*

**KV:** I am a pessimist because my education was scientific. We have a government full of lawyers who don't give a damn about science. If a scientist says that the atmosphere is shot and won't support us much longer, the lawyer will say: "Well, there are two sides to that question." We regularly elect people to office who have no interest in science whatsoever, because it's very inconvenient to have a leader worrying about what there really is to worry about. It's too scary for everybody.

So I'm very pessimistic about our future as animals. Never mind our souls. I think our stomachs and lungs and so forth are going to be in trouble in very short order.

**CV:** *So you might as well be a chain-smoker, is that it?*

**KV:** Well, I'm addicted. I have a great sympathy for addicts... You want a cup of coffee? ■



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