KURT VONNEGUT

Happy Birthday, Wanda June

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Kurt Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922 and studied biochemistry at Cornell University. During the Second World War he served in Europe and, as a prisoner-of-war in Germany, he witnessed the destruction of Dresden by Allied bombers. It was from this profoundly disturbing experience that his most celebrated novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, arose – a novel which lifted him into the front rank of contemporary American novelists.

After the war, he specialized in anthropology at the University of Chicago before turning to full-time freelance writing. His earlier books were mainly science-fiction, a genre with which he achieved considerable success, and his first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), has been hailed as a major work of SF anti-utopianism. Although he has since declared that he has abandoned the science-fiction genre, there are still strong elements of this particular style of imaginative writing in his later books.

Graham Greene has called him 'one of the best living American writers' and no matter what type of fiction Vonnegut claims to be writing, his commitment to humanity and his special concern for its more fallible specimens illumines all his work.

By the same author

Player Piano
The Sirens of Titan
Canary in a Cathouse
Mother Night
Cat's Cradle
God Bless You, Mr Rosewater
Welcome to the Monkeyhouse
Slaughterhouse-Five
Breakfast of Champions
Slapstick or Lonesome No More!
Between Time and Timbuktu
Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons
Jailbird
Deadeye Dick

KURT VONNEGUT

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ABOUT THIS PLAY

This play is what I did when I was forty-seven years old – when my six children were children no more. It was a time of change, of goodbye and goodbye and goodbye. My big house was becoming a museum of vanished childhoods – of my vanished young manhood as well.

This was on Cape Cod. There were widows all around me – in houses like mine.

I was drinking more and arguing a lot, and I had to get out of that house.

I was supposedly a right-handed person, but I found myself using my left hand more and more. It became the hand that did most of the giving and taking for me. I asked my older brother what he knew about this. He said that I had been an ambidextrous infant. I had been *taught* to favour my right hand.

'I'm left-handed now, and I'm through with novels,' I told him. 'I'm writing a play. It's plays from now on.'

I was writing myself a new family and a new early manhood. I was going to fool myself, and spooks in a novel couldn't do the job. I had to hire actors – pay them to say what I wished them to say, to dress as I wished them to dress, to laugh, to cry, to come or go when I said to.

Strictly speaking, I was rewriting an old play of mine. But that old play had been written by a right-handed stranger fifteen years my junior.

Fifteen years ago my wife and I conducted a Great Books programme on Cape Cod. And when we read and

discussed *The Odyssey*, the behaviour of Odysseus at his homecoming struck me as cruelly preposterous. So I wrote a play about it, which I called *Penelope*.

Ernest Hemingway was still alive and seemingly well. So I felt free to imagine a modern Odysseus who was a lot like that part of Hemingway which I detested – the slayer of nearly extinct animals which meant no harm.

The play was performed for one week at the Orleans Arena Theatre on the Cape. Harold Ryan, the hero, had a line in that version which went like this: 'Things die. All things die.' After the play closed at Orleans, I said that to my wife, and I returned to writing short stories and novels.

As a footnote to American theatrical history: the Orleans Arena Theatre, run by Gordon and Betsy Argo, produced six new plays by unknown writers, with no financial help from anyone.

During that same year, the Ford Foundation underwrote the production of ten new plays – at a cost of a hundred thousand dollars or more.

The Argos lost something like three hundred and nineteen dollars that year. So it goes.

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Penelope, which became *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, has been around so long that it was once optioned by Estelle Parsons – before she decided to be an actress. Think of that. Estelle used to suppose that she would be a producer some day.

She failed to produce *Penelope* for this reason: it was a lousy play. Actors complained that there were no parts for stars, that everybody got to talk as much as everybody else, that nobody changed or was proved right or wrong at the end.

This intolerable balancing of characters and arguments reflected my true feelings: I felt and I still feel that everybody is right, no matter what he says. I had, in fact, written a book about everybody's being right all the time, *The Sirens of Titan*. And I gave a name in that book to a mathematical point where all opinions, no matter how contradictory, harmonized. I called it a *chrono-synclastic infundibulum*.

I live in one.

Somewhere in there my father died, and one of the last things he said to me was that I had never written a story with a villain in it. That was surely one of the troubles with my play – and that remains a major trouble with it to this day. Even after we opened *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, we experimented shamelessly with endings. We had various people shoot Harold, including children. We had Harold shoot various people, including children. We had Harold do the world the favour of shooting himself.

Nothing satisfied, and I am persuaded that nothing could satisfy, since the author did not have the balls to make Harold or anybody thoroughly vile.

That was chickenhearted of me. It was Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, and some other things, which has made me chickenhearted about villainy. I marvelled at all the epitaphs in Masters' book when I was only twelve years old, and I was bound to say to myself, 'My gosh – all those people *had* to be what they were.'

My father and mother also tended to make me chickenhearted. My father was a frail architect and painter. He was also a gun nut, which used to amaze me. It seemed

so inharmonious with the rest of him, that he should fondle guns.

He left me some guns.

My two siblings didn't like his gunplay, either. One time, I remember, my brother looked at a quail Father had shot, and he said, 'My gosh – that's like smashing a fine Swiss watch.' My sister used to cry and refuse to eat when Father brought home game.

Some homecoming for Odysseus!

Lester Goldsmith produced my play. He had never produced a play before. He used to be an executive at Paramount Pictures. And then he became an independent producer of political films. We met in the spring of 1970, at the home of Don Farber, who was a lawyer for both of us.

Lester remembered having read a synopsis of *Penelope*, which my agents had circulated around Hollywood years before. After we'd all had a few drinks, he said, 'I'll option that play.'

Which he did. And I went home and rewrote it all summer long.

Lester and I were inspired amateurs where legitimate theatre was concerned. We remain good friends. God willing, we'll produce more plays less amateurishly.

Lester hired a theatre before we had a script. And he moved so quickly that we needed a director almost immediately. No New York director was willing to take the job without a finished script in hand. What I had to show at that point, two months before opening night, was a filthy tossed salad of corrasable bond.

A television director from the West Coast examined the tossed salad. He was a good man who had directed

such gruesome enterprises as *Gilligan's Island* and *The Art Linkletter Show*. He had done a lot of little theatre, too, and had as his happiest memories the days when he had been the director of the road company of *Mr Roberts*. His name was Michael J. Kane.

Mike and I must have come within a few hundred yards of each other in 1949 or so, when I saw his production of *Mr Roberts* in Schenectady, New York. I was a public relations man at the time. That was where I learned my nice manners – as a public relations man.

I told Mike, when we met in New York City, that I had seen his show so long ago. We were nearly the same age, and he was so deep into remembering his youth that he said to me, without any hesitation, 'Schenectady! My God how it snowed!'

He agreed to direct *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*. He was running away from home and some other things – for a little while. So was I. So was Lester.

It is my opinion that the writer and the producer and the director were pleasant, enthusiastic fools about theatre. But Mike assembled a cast, headed by Kevin McCarthy, which was the equal of any cast in New York. Eliot Norton, the Boston critic, told me in conversation that our actors worked together as excitingly as Englishmen. High praise! I said of them, towards the end. 'They're like the The Harlem Globetrotters! Look at 'em go!'

The main trouble was with the author, who didn't really know what he was doing – except running away from home. There I was: all alone in a tiny penthouse borrowed from a friend, six doors down and fifteen floors up from the Theatre de Lys, where the actors were rehearsing. I was writing new beginnings and middles and ends. My nice manners and neat appearance decayed. I

came to resemble a madman who was attempting to extract moonbeams from excrement.

We opened on October 7th, 1970, at the de Lys. The reviews were mixed, as they say. We had actors, but no play – or, worse, we had an awfully long, old-fashioned play with no ending. We kept running, though.

And I kept rewriting. I became pathologically suggestible. If somebody had told me to paint my feet blue for the sake of the play, I would have done it solemnly. Blue-footed, I would have asked Lester to do what I was always asking him, 'All right – we're ready. Invite Clive Barnes and John Simon to have another look.' I would do anything anybody told me to do – but go home.

I now thank heaven that my main advisers were the actors, my new family. Their advice, particularly Kevin McCarthy's advice, was expert and beautiful. I was still rewriting six weeks after we opened. And along came an off-Broadway actors' strike.

So we tottered uptown to the Edison Theatre, and opened again. We closed there on March 14th, 1971, after one hundred and forty-two performances. There was standing room only at the final performance, a Sunday matinée. Some good soul shouted, 'Bravo!' The actors had saved the play.

Things die. All things die. My new family dissolved into the late afternoon. As we went our separate ways out of the theatre district, blue movies and peepshows offered to confirm our new solitude, if we cared to drop in.

Walking home along Forty-seventh Street, I remembered having asked Kevin and Nick Coster and Marsha Mason what the end would be like. This was during supper at Duff's, shortly after rehearsals had begun. 'Does being in a play with a person often make that person a friend for life?' I said.

'You'd think it would – and I always think it will,' said Nick.

'When a play closes,' said Marsha, 'everybody promises everybody else that they will go on seeing a lot of each other . . .' She paused to remember the closings she had endured.

Kevin finished the thought for her brusquely, unsentimentally, in the manner of Ernest Hemingway. 'But they *don't*,' he said. He took an iron-jawed bite of hot bread with garlic butter. The subject was closed.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, WANDA JUNE

CHARACTERS

PENELOPE RYAN, 30
PAUL RYAN, 12, her son
HAROLD RYAN, 55, her husband
COLONEL LOOSELEAF HARPER, 50,
her husband's sidekick
HERB SHUTTLE, 35, a suitor
DR NORBERT WOODLY, 35, a suitor
WANDA JUNE, 10, a ghost
MAJOR SIEGFRIED VON KONIGSWALD, 50
a German ghost
MILDRED, 45, Harold's former wife, a ghost