

HARRISON BERGERON BY KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

An extravagant satire by a
hero of American literature

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh?" said George.

"That dance—it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer," said George.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK UNRUH

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel, a little envious. "All the things they think up?"

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well—maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it anymore. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately—kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean—you don't compete with any-

body around here. You just set around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd get away with it—and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. "The minute people start cheating on laws,

No one, seeing a graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in.

what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly.

"Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows," said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and gentlemen—"

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right—" Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and gentlemen—" said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful,

because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. "Excuse me—" she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever borne heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not—I repeat, do not—try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have—for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. “My God—” said George, “that must be Harrison!”

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die.

“I am the Emperor!” cried Harrison. “Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Every-

body must do what I say at once!” He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

people. “Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!”

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

“Now—” said Harrison, taking her hand, “shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!” he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. “Play your best,” he told them, “and I’ll make you barons and dukes and earls.”

The music began. It was normal at first—cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was

much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while—listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl’s tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on. It was then that the Bergerons’ television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. “You been crying?” he said to Hazel.

“Yup,” she said.

“What about,” he said.

“I forget,” she said. “Something real sad on television.”

“What was it?” he said.

“It’s all kind of mixed up in my mind,” said Hazel.

“Forget sad things,” said George.

“I always do,” said Hazel.

“That’s my girl,” said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

“Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy,” said Hazel.

“You can say that again,” said George.

“Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy,” said Hazel. LC

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The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware.

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison’s scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

“I shall now select my Empress!” he said, looking down on the cowering

A Closer Look

- 1 Why does Harrison break into the TV studio? What does he want?
- 2 Note where Vonnegut mentions the sounds George has to endure. Why does he mention so many? What do these details add to the story?
- 3 What is this story saying about conformity? Satiric works involve the use of humor to point out human vices or foibles. Is this story satiric?

MEET THE AUTHOR

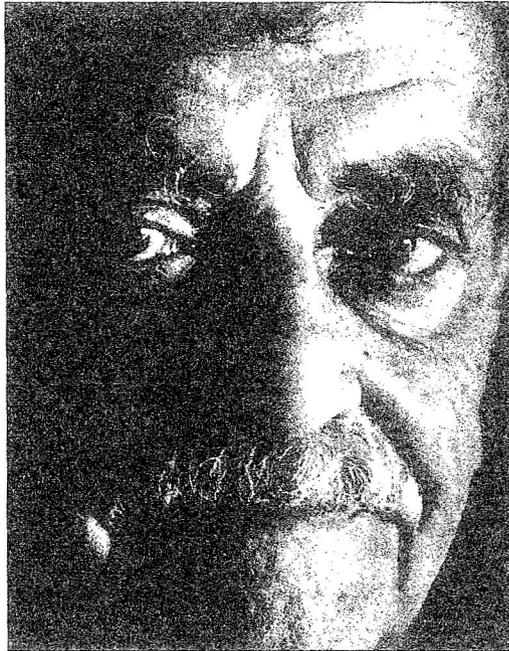
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, you almost could not visit an American household without finding a well-thumbed Kurt Vonnegut novel lying on the coffee table. Vonnegut was talked about, laughed over, read aloud, and nearly deified as few writers have been in recent decades.

His caustic and comic work took the side of the individual against the state, against technology, against ideologies of any kind. In the era of Vietnam and Watergate, people related to the Vonnegut message. Then, suddenly this writer who had always been far too independent to be a standard-bearer for any cause, became a fad. He pays the price now for this onetime elevation to cult status: perhaps overestimated during the period of his immense popularity, he is sometimes underestimated now. Regardless of the moods of critics, Vonnegut's work of five decades remains wonderfully readable, funny, bitter, and tender.

Born in 1922 in Indianapolis, Vonnegut seemed destined for a science career. But the Great Depression of the 1930s intervened, and Vonnegut's architect father went 10 years without receiving any work. Vonnegut survived those bleak years listening to the great radio comedians of the day. Later, while expressing gratitude to James Joyce and Mark Twain, Vonnegut admitted owing more to Laurel and Hardy, Jack Benny, and Charley Chaplin than to literature's giants. "They made me hilarious during the Great Depression," Vonnegut wrote "and all the depressions after that."

Following in the footsteps of his older brother Bernard, Vonnegut went to college to study science. (An important physicist, Bernard discovered the process of seeding clouds to start rain.)



But Vonnegut's college life ended when he joined the Army. World War II was in full force, and, without realizing it, Vonnegut was headed toward one of those strange collisions of time and place that can define a life.

In December of 1944, Vonnegut found himself in the Battle of the Bulge against the German army. His unit was shattered, and Vonnegut was captured. He was sent to the city of Dresden in Germany, where he was put to work with other prisoners producing vitamin-enriched malt syrup for pregnant women.

So it was that on the night of February 13, 1945, Vonnegut was present in Dresden when Allied bombers rained 2,690 tons of bombs on the city. The bombs created a thermal column of wind with temperatures of 1,400 degrees that sucked oxygen from the air, killing by asphyxiation those who were not incinerated. Between 35,000 and 130,000 civilians died.

Vonnegut survived the bombing because he was imprisoned several stories below ground in a meat locker with

other prisoners. Afterwards he spent days pulling burned bodies from the rubble and stacking them in pyres throughout the city.

After the war, Vonnegut returned to the States still intent on becoming a scientist. He went to the University of Chicago to study anthropology, but his thesis proposal was rejected. (Years later, the university awarded the degree, substituting his fiction writing for the required thesis.)

With few options, Vonnegut took a job as a public-relations copywriter for General Electric. During this period, he also wrote his first novel and began selling stories to magazines. For the next decade he supported his family with his writing, though his work never broke through to a larger audience.

Meanwhile, his desire to write about the Dresden bombing grew. It was during a stint teaching writing at the University of Iowa in the mid-1960s, when Vonnegut realized that the bizarre experience of surviving the bombing could not be told in any conventional narrative. The resulting book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, uses a science-fiction character and the idea of time travel to recall the World War II events. The book was a huge success, catapulting its author to immense fame.

Vonnegut's short-story collection, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, remains an excellent introduction to his work. But don't stop there, or you will miss some of Vonnegut's finest characters: Kilgore Trout, a failed science-fiction writer; Billy Pilgrim, a time traveler; or Eliot Rosewater, an altruistic millionaire. As for the caustic comedy of his novels, little has been lost in the passage of time. After two decades of technological and geopolitical transformation, Vonnegut's eye for the darkly absurd seems more keen than ever.—*Pete Vilbig* **LG**