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Kurt Vonnegut



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as Vonnegut ever
comes to a memoir."

—*Los Angeles Times*

A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

I

As a kid I was the youngest member of my family, and the youngest child in any family is always a jokemaker, because a joke is the only way he can enter into an adult conversation. My sister was five years older than I was, my brother was nine years older than I was, and my parents were both talkers. So at the dinner table when I was very young, I was boring to all those other people. They

A Man Without a Country

did not want to hear about the dumb childish news of my days. They wanted to talk about really important stuff that happened in high school or maybe in college or at work. So the only way I could get into a conversation was to say something funny. I think I must have done it accidentally at first, just accidentally made a pun that stopped the conversation, something of that sort. And then I found out that a joke was a way to break into an adult conversation.

I grew up at a time when comedy in this country was superb—it was the Great Depression. There were large numbers of absolutely top comedians on radio. And without intending to, I really studied them. I would listen to comedy at least an hour a night all through my youth, and I got very interested in what jokes were and how they worked.

When I'm being funny, I try not to offend. I don't think much of what I've done has been in really ghastly taste. I don't think I have embarrassed many people, or distressed them. The only shocks I use are an occasional obscene word. Some things aren't funny. I can't imagine a humorous book or skit about

KURT VONNEGUT

Auschwitz, for instance. And it's not possible for me to make a joke about the death of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Otherwise I can't think of any subject that I would steer away from, that I could do nothing with. Total catastrophes are terribly amusing, as Voltaire demonstrated. You know, the Lisbon earthquake is funny.

I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief.

Any subject is subject to laughter, and I suppose there was laughter of a very ghastly kind by victims in Auschwitz.

Humor is an almost physiological response to fear. Freud said that humor is a response to frustration—one of several. A dog, he said, when he can't get out a gate, will scratch and start digging and making meaningless gestures, perhaps growling or whatever, to deal with frustration or surprise or fear.

And a great deal of laughter is induced by fear. I was working on a funny television series years ago.

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