

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Dan Wakefield December 2018

Dan Wakefield was a longtime friend of Kurt Vonnegut. In addition to editing three collections of Vonnegut writings (letters, speeches and now short stories), Wakefield is an accomplished and well-known writer, journalist and screenwriter. He has written more than two dozen books, including "Starting Over" and "Going All the Way," which were turned into movies. His book "New York in the Fifties" was turned into a documentary.

Wakefield was the first western journalist to interview Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meier, and also interview Robert Kennedy, William F. Buckley, and other prominent figures of the 1950s and 1960s for magazines including The Nation, Atlantic Review, Playboy, Harpers and others. The Atlantic Monthly gave him an entire issue in 1968, "Supernation at Peace & War," to write about the Vietnam War's effect on the United States. It was the first time any major news magazine gave its entire issue to one author.

Eva Sable: One of my favorite Vonnegut moments is the cameo from Back to School and the comment "whoever wrote that paper doesn't know a thing about Vonnegut." Was this based on a real incident? And how did the cameo come about?'

Dan Wakefield: I don't know how it came about - your guess as good as mine

David Stuckey: Have we any indication how much of Kilgore Trout's character and philosophy of science fiction writing was shared by Vonnegut personally, and how much was simply for dramatic/satirical purposes?

Dan Wakefield: Best answer to this would like in Vonnegut's essay on Science Fiction which I think is in *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s

Bill Keck: Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that he started his career writing porn novels. He could crank out one a month. And he had to take a pay cut to change to writing science fiction. Is Kilgore Trout an autobiographical projection of Kurt Vonnegut?

Dan Wakefield: Kurt never wrote any porn novels - again, his feelings on Sci Fi are all in the essay on Science Fiction

Eva Sable: Did Vonnegut ever consider himself a genre writer? Several of his novels touch science fiction, others fantasy, all to me were modern fables, even if the moral of the story was "and so it goes." Is fabulist an apt description?

Dan Wakefield: Kurt did NOT consider himself a genre writer!!!! He would be really dis-heartened to think you suspected that!

Mel Powell: With his recurring themes and characters, I always feel that KV was trying to perfect his message with each novel; or at least find a way of silencing his demons. Do you think he saw himself as part philosopher or was writing just his way of emptying his head? A cathartic exercise? In any event, strange though it may sound, I read KV when I need a lift or just to remind myself that life is ridiculous, humans are probably collectively insane and there's no point in taking it all too seriously

Dan Wakefield: No one ever wrote a novel by "emptying their head." Try it some time. It took him 23 years to write *Slaughterhouse*. Writing a novel is more like performing brain surgery on yourself - without an anesthetic. Read his son Mark's book *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*. It's a wonderful memoir and says a lot about growing up with Kurt and Jane. He writes how Kurt would work for hours - or more - to perfect a *joke*.

It's healthy not to take it too seriously - I *think*.

D'Arcy Ward: What did Kurt Vonnegut think of the movie version of *Slaughterhouse Five*? I thought it was quite good.

Dan Wakefield: Kurt loved the move of *Slaughterhouse*. He said "They took the book and put it on the screen - just like *Gone With the Wind*!" There is also a terrific movie of *Mother Night* with Nick Nolte.

Robert Hamelin: I've actually been disappointed by the various film adaptations of Vonnegut's work. Have any of his other novels been optioned? Can we hope for 'The Sirens of Titan' or 'Galapagos' movies?

Dan Wakefield: Kurt LIKED his movie versions, felt he was very lucky. I did too.

Eva Sable: Is everything you have told us thus far nothing but foma? ;)

Dan Wakefield: Foma to you too!

Robert Hamelin: In keeping with the 'Lonesome No More!' agenda set forth in *Slapstick*, what new name was assigned to Mr. Vonnegut? Was it Peony-13?

Dan Wakefield: I don't know, but I love John LeCarre and in his latest he has a terrific woman spy with the code name "Tulip." I loved that.

Eva Sable/Lucius Sorrentino/SFBC Member: What did Kurt Vonnegut think of Philip Jose Farmer's ...uh... Expansion of his work (*Venus on the Half-Shell*)? What was his relationship with Farmer?

Dan Wakefield: Vonnegut had NO relationship with Farmer. Out of what many felt was Too Much generosity he let Farmer use the name Kilgore Trout and let people think it was by Kurt and Kurt never got a cent out of any of it. He didn't want to sue a fellow writer. But I assume KV's lawyer must have said No More!

Mel Powell: What authors did Kurt rate? What works inspired him?

Dan Wakefield: On their honeymoon, Jane made him read *The Brothers Karamazov*. He liked it a lot. He loved *The Odyssey*, that was the inspiration of the play he kept writing over and over - "Happy Birthday, Wanda June." You can see the plot is based on it.

Seth A. Milman/SFBC Member: As someone who knew Mr. Vonnegut personally, my theory is that he always hung onto hope (or at least tried to) in the face of gloom and pessimism, correct? If so, from where do you think he drew this optimism?

Dan Wakefield: I don't know if people get their optimism from a particular source. He was very loyal and kept up with his friends - you can see it in *Kurt Vonnegut Letters*. I loved editing that book, it shows what kind of person he was - he enjoyed his friendships. He liked talking, liked telling jokes. Silly jokes. Once we were walking home from lunch he said "What's the opposite of an upholsterer?" I gave up. He said "A *down*polsterer." He got a big kick out of that, just because it was silly. He enjoyed his friends - look at his time with his army buddy, as he tells it in the beginning of *Slaughterhouse*. I always felt that night with his army buddy and the angry wife cracked open the deadlock of *Slaughterhouse*. It was her being angry thinking he would write a "war novel" with a part for John Wayne, and the truth was he and the other soldiers were just children. That's why he subtitled it "The Children's Crusade."

Patrick Manion: What was KV's attitude toward science? I recall he seemed to think the moon landing was a waste of money (another reason I don't think of him as an SF writer). Also he had a brother Bernard who was an atmospheric scientist; what was his relationship with him?

Dan Wakefield: He used science in his work, obviously. He got the whole idea of "Ice-9" from talking to a scientist at a cocktail party. He admired his brother Bernard's work as a scientist. Listen, there is a terrific book called *The Brothers Vonnegut* about Kurt and Bernard. It's by Ginger Strand and it is absolutely terrific. Don't bother with the bio which is crummy.

Michael Kilman: Did his studies in biochemistry and anthropology have a direct impact on some of his books?

Dan Wakefield: Absolutely. You can trace it yourself. Look at the anthropology in *Player Piano* - using the Ghost Dance of the Plains Indians. (That was one of his thesis proposals that was turned down at U of Chicago - comparing The Ghost Dance with the French Impressionist painters. It would have been great!)

Carl Rosenberg: in *Slaughterhouse Five*, it seems to me that the Tralfamadorians are basically figments of Billy Pilgrim's imagination, brought on by his voluminous reading of science fiction. (There is what seems to me a strong hint to this effect near the end of the book.)

Dan Wakefield: That's a good theory - your guess is as good as mine.

Steve Staab: Was Vonnegut as successful in foreign markets as he was in America?

Dan Wakefield: Yes, KV was very popular abroad. Someone brought me back a book she got in a bookstore in Lithuania with *Slaughterhouse Five* in English and Lithuanian. He was big all over Europe, Scandinavia, he got to know his Russian translator, took a trip to Russia with his publisher Sam Lawrence. They could only spend his royalties in Russia - they had a ball.

John Grayshaw: You were friends with Vonnegut for many years, what was he like?

Dan Wakefield: He was the most generous man I've known - in spirit, and in every way. He loaned money - gave it I mean- one writer friend who was always on the brink (not me!) When there was some kind of disappointment he'd say "Just another Indiana catastrophe!"

He made my novel *Going All The Way* a best-seller - reviewed it in *Life* magazine. Did all he could to get me on my way. I thought of him as *The Godfather* of my novel - of all of them really. Year before his death he came to a talk I gave in New York for a not very successful book - he took me to dinner after. I wrote about it in the Intro to the *Letters* book.

John Grayshaw: What other writers was Vonnegut friends with?

Dan Wakefield: Kurt was a good friend of Richard Yates and helped Yates get a teaching job at Iowa. Yates novel *Revolutionary Road* was nominated for a national book award but was edged out and didn't get it. Yates was always on the edge of survival; Kurt was always willing to help. He enjoyed the other writers teaching at Iowa, like Vance Bourjaily and Nelson Algren-also taught some good students like John Irving and Andre DuBus. When he lived in NYC he hobnobbed with a lot of writers, but always stayed in touch with friends from high school, GE, the army, U of Chicago, Iowa, Cape Cod.

He went through a very tough time while raising his three kids, his sister died of cancer the day after her husband was killed in a commuter train wreck and he took in all their children and he and Jane raised three more with their own. Times were tough. He was turned down for a job teaching English at Cape Cod Community College, tried to sell Saab automobiles when no one in this country had heard of them.

John Grayshaw: Vonnegut famously rated his own works in *Palm Sunday*. Do you agree with his self-reflection?

Dan Wakefield: I don't think grading his own works was a good idea. It's bad enough when others do it. He was too hard on himself.

John Grayshaw: What is your favorite Vonnegut novel? And why?

Dan Wakefield: I like *Jailbird* a lot. When he was writing it he called up Roy Cohn the lawyer and asked if he minded if Kurt used him in a novel, and Cohn was amused and agreed. I like the intro stuff telling about how he met Powers Hapgood a labor leader who was always fighting for the underdog. Kurt was also fighting for the underdog. In *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* he talked about the people who lived far away from "the money river." I also loved in one of his essays he went to the Republican convention in 1972 and he noticed that all the big shots from both parties and the press hung out together. He wrote that "The American people think there are two political parties in this country - the Republicans and the

Democrats. In reality, those are just "imaginary political parties." The real political parties are The Winners and The Losers, and the Winners always win."

He often quoted the Sermon on the Mount and in "Palm Sunday. He said that so far the only good idea that humans have had is the idea of mercy. He said maybe someday we will get another good idea. Then we will have two good ideas."

John Grayshaw: Do many of Vonnegut's novels take place in the same universe?

Dan Wakefield: I don't know, you'd have to count them...Vonnegut needs more places for people to escape so he gives them other universes. He is always for the underman, the underdog, and the exploited.

John Grayshaw: Was Vonnegut working on anything when he died? Have all his unfinished works/shelved works been published?

Dan Wakefield: I co-edited *Kurt Vonnegut Complete Stories* that included every short story he ever wrote, and all the novels have been published so as far as I know there is nothing left.

John Grayshaw: What were Vonnegut's hobbies?

Dan Wakefield: Kurt was doing more painting than writing when he died. He did a lot of silk screens. He wrote some nice essays for a biweekly paper in Chicago. He collected some of those in a book *I Love A Man Without a Country*.

John Grayshaw: Why are Vonnegut's works popular with young people?

Dan Wakefield: His work is popular with young people because he gives them new ways of seeing things, and he always tells the truth. He is the guy who always points out the Elephant in the room and that The Emperor has no clothes. He tells the truth. He wrote once "The truth is often shocking, because we hear it so seldom."

I hope you read *The Letters* book which tells all about him and also *The Brothers Vonnegut*, really a good one.

I like this from *Mr Rosewater*: "There's only one rule I know, babies: Goddam it, you've got to be kind."

John Grayshaw: Why do you think Vonnegut's works are still so popular? What is their staying power?

Dan Wakefield: Other contemporary writers of his era seem "dated" like Updike and Roth, who are writing of their time - Vonnegut is writing of past, present and future. Young people are not interested in the suburban life of the 1950s. Vonnegut transcended that.

He gave people hope, he showed he cared for the planet. What other writer of his time did that? Mailer? Mary McCarthy? Fitzgerald or Hemingway?

He cared about the clumsy, the poor, and the downtrodden. He saw that they too had a right to be fed and clothed and housed against the elements.

He refused to write battle scenes of war, knowing they made people see slaughter as glamorous. He wrote a war novel in which there are no battles. Saturation bombing is not a "battle" It is only devastation.

Next to the Beatitudes the lines he quotes most were from his fellow Hoosier Eugene V. Debs:
"As long as there is a lower class I am in it, as long as there is a criminal class I am of it, as long as there is a soul in I am not free."

He asked why people don't say things like that anymore. He said them. He dramatized them. He built stories around them. He fed our imagination. He knew we were hungry.

Nuff said.

SO IT GOES...