

Playboy Interview

PLAYBOY: Beyond the fact that it's become a profitable way to make a living, why do you write?

VONNEGUT: My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to *how* writers should serve. Mainly, I think they should be - and bio-logically *have* to be - agents of change. For the better, we hope.

PLAYBOY: Biologically?

VONNEGUT: Writers are specialized cells in the social organism. They are evolutionary cells. Mankind is trying to become something else; it's experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also a means of responding symbolically to life. I don't think we're in control of what we do.

PLAYBOY: What *is* in control?

VONNEGUT: Mankind's wish to improve itself.

PLAYBOY: In a Darwinian sense?

VONNEGUT: I'm not very grateful for Darwin, although I suspect he was right. His ideas make people crueler. Darwinism says to them that people who get sick deserve to be sick, that people who are in trouble must deserve to be in trouble. When anybody dies, cruel Darwinists imagine we're obviously improving ourselves in some way. And any man who's on top is there because he's a superior animal. That's the social Darwinism of the last century, and it continues to boom. But forget Darwin. Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society - just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists - all artists - should be treasured as alarm systems.

PLAYBOY: And social planners?

VONNEGUT: I have many ideas as to how Americans could be happier and better cared for than they are.

PLAYBOY: In some of your books - especially *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* - there's a serious notion that all moments in time exist simultaneously, which implies that the future can't be changed by an act of will in the present. How does a desire to improve things fit with that?

VONNEGUT: You understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit.

PLAYBOY: Of course.

VONNEGUT: Well, we do live our lives simultaneously. That's a *fact*. You *are* here as a child and as an old man. I recently visited a woman who has Hodgkin's disease. She has somewhere between a few months and a couple of years to live, and she told me that she was living her life simultaneously now, living *all* the moments of it.

PLAYBOY: It still seems paradoxical.

VONNEGUT: That's because what I've just said to you is horseshit. But it's a useful, comforting sort of horseshit, you see? That's what I object to about preachers. They don't say anything to make anybody any happier, when there are all these neat lies you can tell. And everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can't get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That's what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don't do enough of it. <...>

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PLAYBOY: Do you think organized religion can make anybody happier?

VONNEGUT: Oh, of course. Lots of comforting lies are told in church - not enough, but some. I wish preachers would lie more convincingly about how honest and brotherly we should be. I've never heard a sermon on the subject of gentleness or restraint; I've never heard a minister say it was wrong to kill. No preacher ever speaks

out against cheating in business. There are fifty-two Sundays in a year, and somehow none of these subjects comes up.

PLAYBOY: Is there any religion you consider superior to any other?

VONNEGUT: Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous gives you an extended family that's very close to a blood brotherhood, because everybody has endured the same catastrophe. And one of the enchanting aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous is that many people join who *aren't* drunks, who pretend to be drunks because the social and spiritual benefits are so large. But they talk about real troubles, which aren't spoken about in church, as a rule. The halfway houses for people out of prisons, or for people recovering from drug habits, have the same problems: people hanging around who just want the companionship, the brotherhood or the sisterhood, who want the extended family.

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PLAYBOY: Aren't links by name, though, what you call a false *carass* in *Cat's Cradle* - a group that finds its identity in an irrelevant or artificial shared experience?

VONNEGUT: I don't know, but if it works, it doesn't matter. It's like the drug thing among young people. The fact that they use drugs gives them a community. If you become a user of any drug, you can pick up a set of friends you'll see day after day, because of the urgency of getting drugs all the time. And you'll get a community where you might not ordinarily have one. Built around the marijuana thing was a community, and the same is true about the long-hair thing: You're able to greet and trust strangers because they look like you, because they use marijuana, and so forth. These are all magical amulets by which they recognize one another - and so you've got a community. The drug thing is interesting, too, because it shows that, damn it, people are wonderfully resourceful.

PLAYBOY: How so?

VONNEGUT: Well, thousands of people in our society found out they were too stupid or too unattractive or too ignorant to rise. They realized they couldn't get a nice car or a nice house or a good job. Not everybody can do that, you know. You must be very pleasant. You must be good-looking. You must be well connected. And they realized that if you lose, if you don't rise in our society, you're going to live in the midst of great ugliness, that the police are going to try to drive you back there every time you try to leave. And so people trapped like that have really considered all the possibilities. Should I paint my room? If I get a lot of rat poison, will the rats go away? Well, no. The rats will still be there, and even if you paint it, the room will still be ugly. You still won't have enough money to go to a movie theater; you still won't be able to make friends you like or can trust.

So what can you do? You can change your *mind*. You can change your insides. The drug thing was a perfectly marvelous, resourceful, brave experiment. No government would have dared perform this experiment. It's the sort of thing a Nazi doctor might have tried in a concentration camp. Loading everybody in block C up with amphetamines. In block D, giving them all heroin. Keeping everyone in block E high on marijuana - and just seeing what happened to them. But this experiment was and continues to be performed by volunteers, and so we know an awful lot now about how we can be changed internally. It may be that the population will become so dense that *everybody's* going to live in ugliness, and that the intelligent human solution - the only possible solution - will be to change our insides.

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PLAYBOY: How does it feel to have been doing for years what must have seemed to you like good work and only now getting really noticed?

VONNEGUT: I don't feel cheated. I always had readers, even when not much money was coming in. I was in paperbacks, you see, and from the first, I was getting friendly notes from strangers who had found me in PXs and drugstores and bus stations. *Mother Night* and *Canary in a Cathouse* and *The Sirens of Titan* were all paperback originals, and *Cat's Cradle* was written with that market in mind. Holt decided to bring out a hard-cover edition of *Cat's Cradle* after the paperback rights had been sold. The thing was, I could get \$3,000 immediately for a paperback original, and I always needed money right away, and no hardcover publisher would let me have it.

But I was also noticing the big money and the heavy praise some of my contemporaries were getting for their books, and I would think, “Well, shit, I’m going to have to study writing harder, because I think what I’m doing is pretty good, too.” I wasn’t even getting reviewed. *Esquire* published a list of the American literary world back then and it guaranteed that every living author of the slightest merit was on there somewhere. I wasn’t on there. Rust Hills put the thing together, and I got to know him later and I told him that the list had literally made me sick, that it had made me feel subhuman. He said it wasn’t supposed to be taken seriously. “It was a joke,” he said. And then he and his wife got out a huge anthology of high-quality American writing since World War Two and I wasn’t there, either.

(Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*)