

## Book Review

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## Still Asking the Embarrassing Questions

## HOCUS POCUS

By Kurt Vonnegut.  
362 pp. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$21.95.

By Jay McInerney

**F**OR purposes of comparison with our own stodgy, inherited universe, contemporary philosophers sometimes conjure up the concept of possible worlds. They've got nothing on Kurt Vonnegut, who in 12 previous novels has frequently resorted to other planets for slyly comparative purposes. But unlike most contemporary philosophers — who fastidiously restrict themselves to questions of linguistic and logical analysis — or most contemporary novelists, for that matter, Mr. Vonnegut is still asking the big, embarrassing, childish theological questions. He is probably our leading literary big-question asker. He keeps posing the kind of questions, as he himself once put it, that college sophomores ask. Like, why are we on the planet? Or, why is there war? And, is technology inherently lethal? Unlike most sophomores, he has the imagination to illuminate these questions.

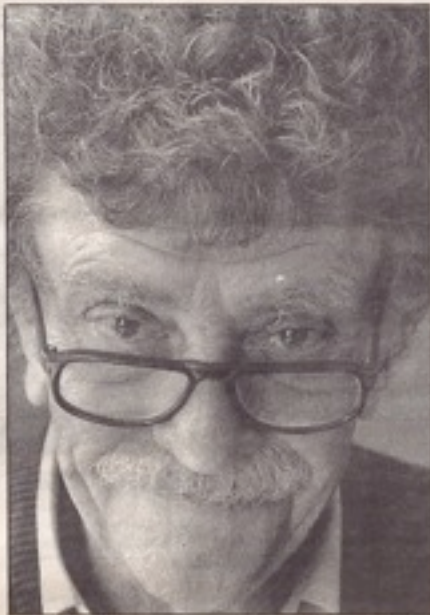
Although it is set in the near future, "Hocus Pocus" is the most topical, realistic Vonnegut novel to date, and shows the struggle of an artist a little impatient with allegory and more than a little impatient with his own country. Nationality has previously been a spurious category — a granfalloon — in the Vonnegut world view. The possible world portrayed here verges shamelessly on the actual.

Like many of Mr. Vonnegut's novels, "Hocus Pocus" is a retrospective first-person narrative in which several time and story lines gradually converge. It is told by one Eugene Debs Hartke and purportedly written in prison on scraps of paper, each scrap a thought, story or digression into itself — a form ideally suited to Mr. Vonnegut's thumbnail essayistic bent and his high-speed forward- and reverse-narrative time travel.

Hartke is a graduate of West Point and a veteran of the Vietnam War, a thoughtful but not tormented man who killed many human beings on the orders of his Government and dispensed many official lies as an information officer. After leaving Vietnam and the Army he becomes a teacher at Tarkington College in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, a gentle institution that specializes in nurturing the dystopic and morose sons and daughters of the ruling class.

After years of pleasant academic rustication, Hartke is fired from the college at the behest of a right-wing television demagogue who feels that Hartke is too

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Kurt Vonnegut.

possimistic. Pessimism, as everyone knows and as the board of trustees reminds him, is un-American and probably even anti-American. A physics teacher, Hartke has made the mistake, among others, of informing his students that the idea of perpetual motion is a pipe dream. Unpatriotically, he explains, "I see no harm in telling young people to prepare for failure rather than success, since failure is the main thing that is going to happen to them."

When he is dismissed, ostensibly for sexual misconduct, Hartke finds employment just across the lake at the former state prison, run by a Japanese corporation that operates it much more efficiently and profitably than the state did. "Color-coded" prisons have become a growth industry, in part because most productive domestic industry has disappeared. "Poor and powerless people, no matter how docile, were no longer of use to canny investors." The prison where Hartke works, near the college town of Scipio, is populated entirely by black inmates, the Supreme Court having decided that it was cruel and inhuman to confine one race with another.

## Save Us From the Lower Classes



When I tried to tell the hostages a little about their captors, about their childhoods and mental illnesses, and their not caring if they lived or died, and what prison was like, and so on, Jason Wilder actually closed his eyes and covered his ears. He was being theatrical rather than practical. He didn't cover his ears so well that he couldn't hear me. Others shook their heads and indicated in other ways that such information was not only tiresome but offensive. It was as though we were in a thunderstorm, and I had begun lecturing on the circulation of electrical charges in clouds, and the formation of raindrops, and the paths chosen by lightning strokes, and what thunder was, and on and on. All they wanted to know was when the

storm would stop, so they could go on about their business.

What Warden Matsumoto had said about people like them was accurate. They had managed to convert their wealth, which had originally been in the form of factories or stores or other demanding enterprises, into a form so liquid and abstract, negotiable representations of money on paper, that there were few reminders coming from anywhere that they might be responsible for anyone outside their own circle of friends and relatives.

They didn't rage against the convicts. They were mad at the Government for not making sure that escapes from the prison were impossible. The more they ran on like that, the clearer it became that it was their Government, not mine or the convicts' or the Townies'. Its first duty, moreover, was to protect them from the lower classes, not only in this country but everywhere.

Were people on Easy Street ever any different?  
From "Hocus Pocus."

America has been largely resegregated — black insulated from white, rich from poor.

Hartke manages to teach some inmates how to read, though the immediate reported benefits of literacy are mainly an increased pleasure in masturbation and wider circulation for the anti-Semitic tract "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." "The lesson I myself learned over and over again when teaching at the college and then the prison was the uselessness of information to most people, except as entertainment."

When gang members launch a military operation to break out a drug dealer, the entire prison population escapes and crosses the frozen lake to the Tarkington campus. For a variety of reasons, not least the racist supposition that blacks could not possibly have planned the escape, Hartke is eventually arrested as the leader of the uprising and incarcerated himself. Prison may not be such a bad place to be in the year 2001. Most of the United States has been sold to foreigners, and what is left is broken down and depleted. Black markets, race war, martial law, tuberculosis and AIDS are all somewhere between endemic and epidemic.

**L**IKE Eugene Debs Hartke, Mr. Vonnegut has always been a pessimist — "a pillar of salt," as he describes himself in his novel "Slaughterhouse-Five." Like Let's wife, he looks back at the carnage. In this case, he also looks forward, somewhat in the manner of another biblical personage, Jeremiah.

The bitter ironies in his books have always been tempered by a whimsical stoicism, despair averted by glimpses of individual compassion and the mild palliative of "harmless untruths" like the pleasantly ditsy religion of Bokonomism in "Cat's Cradle." He is a satirist with a heart, a moralist with a whoopee cushion, a cynic who wants to believe. His fiercest social criticism is usually disguised in parable. In "Cat's Cradle," for instance, a substance called Ice Nine, which on release freezes all the water on the face of the earth, stands in for nuclear weapons. In "Slaughterhouse-Five," the extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians provide a cosmic perspective on the inexplicable suffering and horror of the firebombing of Dresden. In "Jailbird," the terrestrial rape of the environment is echoed in the story of the planet Vicuna, where scientists found a way to convert time into food and energy, thereby running out of it.

As if racing against such a clock, Mr. Vonnegut is working much closer to the ground in "Hocus Pocus," which has more in common with Anthony Trollope's book "The Way We Live Now" than with Arthur C. Clarke's "2001." It is the most richly detailed and textured of Mr. Vonnegut's renderings of this particular planet. Unlike many of his major characters, Hartke seems like a real person, and Scipio seems like a real town. Some readers may miss the wilder leaps of imagination and the whimsy, but what is gained is a muscular dignity of voice that only rarely is tendentious. And, like outer space in "The Sirens of Titan," "Hocus Pocus" is not without "empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death."

If he eschews parables, Mr. Vonnegut still finds abundant metaphors for our current situation. Hartke compares the land of the free and the home of the brave to a vast plantation, the soil and labor of which has been exhausted. The owners, whites of European descent, are selling it off, dispossessing the laborers. The buyers, mainly Japanese, find themselves as an army of occupation in a hostile, primitive land, bogged down in a terrible quagmire that may prove as destructive to their nation as Vietnam was to ours. Prisons spring up like the antibodies that attempt to form hard protective shells around the germs of tuberculosis, which is enjoying a comeback.

But don't worry. There is sort of a bright side to all of this. The science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout briefly appears — along with others in Mr. Vonnegut's repertory company, represented by a story called "Protocols of the Elders of Tralfamador," in which he speculates that the whole point of human history is to breed strains of germs powerful enough to travel through space and spread DNA throughout the universe. Once we are through trashing and poisoning the planet, any germ hardy enough to survive here could presumably make it anywhere. □