

The Vonnegut letters

By Ed Breen

A distinctly Indiana Christmas greeting today, the last vestiges of a nearly 100-year-old Hoosier, wrapped in scruffy attire and topped off by a spaghetti bowl of wildly unkempt hair, sort of a snarl of that ribbon you can curl by running it against the edge of a scissor blade. Springy and stringy and knotted.

He, of course, took some pride in dishevelment so we are in no way damaging his reputation more than be inflicted upon himself.

Talking about the man who, ultimately, may be Indiana’s greatest writer, greatest gift to literature: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. .

And that may be a difficult thought for some Hoosier English teachers to embrace. What of Theodore Dreiser, they sniff, or James Whitcomb Riley, or Lew Wallace? All giants of their time and place, yes, but when was the last time you picked up a nice novel by Dreiser and curled up on a winter night?

Vonnegut, who was born to an Indianapolis hardware store family in 1922, graduated from Shortridge High School, fought in World War II, then went to Cornell University and the University of Chicago before publishing 14 novels, three short story collections, five plays and five volumes of non-fiction and essays before departing at 84 in 2007.

A lot of debate about the best, but a half-century after its publication, “Slaughterhouse Five,” continues to compel, to spark discussion and, above all, lure young readers to join Billy Pilgrim on his ride across time and space from war-raved Dresden to

the escapist planet of Tralfamadore. Plenty of talk about all that last year when “Slaughterhouse” attained age 50 was canonized with the greats of American writing. Satire, humor, tragedy, fantasy.

But now, thanks to the rummaging spirit of his adult daughter, Edie, in their New England attic several years after Dad’s death, there is yet another volume added to the Vonnegut shelf and a special and illuminating little treasure it is.

Love letters, a whole neatly-tied bundle of them, 226 of them, written by a young Vonnegut to the love of his young life, another Indianapolis native, Jane Marie Cox, and all published under the title of “Love, Kurt: The Vonnegut Love Letters, 1941-1945.” It came out a couple of weeks ago and booksellers and Vonnegut’s foremost cheerleader, Julia Whitehead, say it is doing well.

Now, if you have paid attention to the life and times of Mr. Vonnegut, you are wondering, What became of Jane? Because when he died he was married to celebrity photographer Jill Krementz. True. Kurt and Jane were married for 26 years and reared a family before going their separate ways in 1971. He then wed Ms. Krementz eight years later, in 1979.

Seems a shame, especially after you read of their youthful ardor and devotion. But, as Mr. Vonnegut might well have said, “. . . and so it goes.”

Literary types agree that in the lottery that is family heirlooms, this is a major winner. About 40 years after her parents split, Edie – their first born — read her dad’s notes. Sometimes handwritten, sometimes doodled and sometimes typed, they

were filled with uncertainties about his future and effusive declarations of love for her mom. He laid bare his vulnerabilities and acknowledgement of how much his future wife helped him secure his calling.

Facsimiles of the letters, along with previously published messages from after Kurt Vonnegut was released as a prisoner of war, comprise the new book.

“It showed a side of him that was beautifully developed and in love and not writing for money or fame,” Edie Vonnegut told an Indianapolis audience. “They’re beautiful; they just complement the man so much, so very much. I don’t see any reason why he wouldn’t want them published.”

And Julia Whitehead, the founder and CEO of the Vonnegut Museum and Library on Indiana Avenue in Indianapolis, agrees: “Anybody who’s ever been in love can relate to these feelings. It’s what falling in love feels like, and he put that into words and put it on a page,” Whitehead said.

On Jan. 3, 1942, he wrote to Jane back home, “It may be poor technique, but I’m the truest bum you’ve ever come across.”

Ed Breen’s column is sponsored by: First Farmer’s Bank & Trust—see their ad., below.



A MOMENT
Ed Breen



Looking in the rear-view mirror

By Tom Mansbarger

Well, we have almost made it. The year 2020 is almost seen only in the rear-view mirror. There are a lot of descriptive phrases and thoughts we could use to describe it, but in a few days we will be dawning the New Year, 2021. In many respects we are all alike, but at the same time we all have our differences. Make sense to you? I hope so. I like to take every year that I am still here and reflect on the positive things that have taken place as well as the negative. It is always good to realize where we have been, and our outlook on the coming year.

The year 2020 was a year like none I have ever experienced in the past. I guess that stands to reason because we have never had a year like it in the history of our nation. As the year started things were booming. The economy was good, people were working, unemployment was at a 50 year low, and it seemed that we were on our way to living happily ever after. And then ... something changed it all in

Continued on Page 11



JUST A THOUGHT
Rev. Tom Mansbarger



1 FIRST FARMERS BANK & TRUST
Member FDIC

LEARN MORE
FFBT.COM

the financial partner in your corner when it's time to
GET DOWN TO BUSINESS

Business Lines of Credit | Commercial Real Estate Lending | Equipment Financing | Business Term Loans
Cash Management | Positive Pay | ACH Alert | Merchant Services | Online & Mobile Banking | And Much More...

First Farmers Bank & Trust is proud to be an eligible lender for the Main Street Lending Program and the Payroll Protection Program.