

Name: _____ Class: _____

I Am Very Real

By Kurt Vonnegut
1973

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) was an American author and humorist. One month after an English teacher at Drake High School in North Dakota decided to teach Kurt Vonnegut's novel Slaughterhouse-Five in his classroom, Charles McCarthy, the head of the school board, decided that the novel's "obscene language" was not appropriate. Every copy of Slaughterhouse-Five at Drake High School was burned in the school's furnace. In response, Vonnegut wrote the following letter to McCarthy. As you read, take notes on the author's main arguments throughout the letter.

[1] Dear Mr. McCarthy:

I am writing to you in your capacity as chairman of the Drake School Board. I am among those American writers whose books have been destroyed in the now famous furnace of your school.

Certain members of your community have suggested that my work is evil. This is extraordinarily insulting to me. The news from Drake indicates to me that books and writers are very unreal to you people. I am writing this letter to let you know how real I am.



"Burning Books Page1" by Jason Verwey is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

I want you to know, too, that my publisher and I have done absolutely nothing to exploit the disgusting news from Drake. We are not clapping each other on the back, crowing about all the books we will sell because of the news. We have declined to go on television, have written no fiery letters to editorial pages, have granted no lengthy interviews. We are angered and sickened and saddened. And no copies of this letter have been sent to anybody else. You now hold the only copy in your hands. It is a strictly private letter from me to the people of Drake, who have done so much to damage my reputation in the eyes of their children and then in the eyes of the world. Do you have the courage and ordinary decency to show this letter to the people, or will it, too, be consigned¹ to the fires of your furnace?

[5] I gather from what I read in the papers and hear on television that you imagine me, and some other writers, too, as being sort of rat-like people who enjoy making money from poisoning the minds of young people. I am in fact a large, strong person, fifty-one years old, who did a lot of farm work as a boy, who is good with tools. I have raised six children, three my own and three adopted. They have all turned out well. Two of them are farmers. I am a combat infantry veteran from World War II, and hold a Purple Heart. I have earned whatever I own by hard work. I have never been arrested or sued for anything. I am so much trusted with young people and by young people that I have served on the faculties of the University of Iowa, Harvard, and the City College of New York. Every year I receive at least a dozen invitations to be commencement speaker at colleges and high schools. My books are probably more widely used in schools than those of any other living American fiction writer.

1. **Consign (verb):** to send or give

If you were to bother to read my books, to behave as educated persons would, you would learn that they are not sexy, and do not argue in favor of wildness of any kind. They beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are. It is true that some of the characters speak coarsely.² That is because people speak coarsely in real life. Especially soldiers and hardworking men speak coarsely, and even our most sheltered children know that. And we all know, too, that those words really don't damage children much. They didn't damage us when we were young. It was evil deeds and lying that hurt us.

After I have said all this, I am sure you are still ready to respond, in effect, "Yes, yes – but it still remains our right and our responsibility to decide what books our children are going to be made to read in our community." This is surely so. But it is also true that if you exercise that right and fulfill that responsibility in an ignorant, harsh, un-American manner, then people are entitled to call you bad citizens and fools. Even your own children are entitled to call you that.

I read in the newspaper that your community is mystified by the outcry from all over the country about what you have done. Well, you have discovered that Drake is a part of American civilization, and your fellow Americans can't stand it that you have behaved in such an uncivilized way. Perhaps you will learn from this that books are sacred to free men for very good reasons, and that wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them. If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own.

If you and your board are now determined to show that you in fact have wisdom and maturity when you exercise your powers over the education of your young, then you should acknowledge that it was a rotten lesson you taught young people in a free society when you denounced and then burned books – books you hadn't even read. You should also resolve to expose your children to all sorts of opinions and information, in order that they will be better equipped to make decisions and to survive.

[10] Again: you have insulted me, and I am a good citizen, and I am very real.

Kurt Vonnegut

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2. refers to crude or offensive language

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements expresses a central idea of the text?
 - A. School boards should not have the power to ban books from classrooms.
 - B. It is immoral to claim that controversial books may poison students' minds.
 - C. Burning books goes against the freedoms that Americans hold dear.
 - D. Like all good citizens, Kurt Vonnegut has not lied or produced evil work.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "I am a combat infantry veteran from World War II, and hold a Purple Heart... I am so much trusted with young people and by young people that I have served on the faculties of the University of Iowa, Harvard, and the City College of New York." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "And we all know, too, that those words really don't damage children much. They didn't damage us when we were young. It was evil deeds and lying that hurt us." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "books are sacred to free men for very good reasons, and that wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them. If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely" (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "If you and your board are now determined to show... maturity when you exercise your powers over the education of your young, then you should acknowledge that it was a rotten lesson you taught young people" (Paragraph 9)

3. PART A: What does the word "exploit" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 4?
 - A. to produce
 - B. to abuse
 - C. to benefit from
 - D. to criticize or disagree with

4. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 4 best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "the disgusting news from Drake"
 - B. "crowing about all the books we will sell because of the news"
 - C. "to damage my reputation in the eyes of their children and then in the eyes of the world"
 - D. "the courage and ordinary decency"

5. Which statement best describes how the author uses rhetoric in paragraphs 4-5 to advance his argument?
 - A. The author presents the contributions he has made to the country in order to prove that he is a real American.
 - B. The author describes his background in order to explain why coarse language is simply part of how he speaks.
 - C. The author portrays himself as a father and a veteran as further proof of his desire to shield the nation's youth from harmful books.
 - D. The author explains that he is a man of integrity in order to show why the school's reactions were excessive and wrong.

6. How does the author expand his argument in paragraphs 7-8?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. What do you think Vonnegut means when he says that he is a “real person”? Why does he work so hard to convey this point? Explain your answer.
2. According to Vonnegut, what does being American mean? Do you agree with Vonnegut when he says the burning of books is un-American? Why or why not?
3. In the context of this letter, which is more important: freedom of speech, or the protection of young people from what some may see as harmful ideas? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of this letter, what makes America unique? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.