



Hocus Pocus

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Awaiting trial for a crime he did not commit, Eugene Debs Hartke--West Point graduate, decorated Vietnam veteran, and self-proclaimed atheist--has time to meditate on his life. HOCUS POCUS purports to be the product of Hartke's reflections, written in the year 2001. Hartke's testament is fragmentary in form; having been written on whatever scraps of paper came to hand, it is divided into many short sections, some only a sentence long. These fragments have been assembled by "editor" Kurt Vonnegut, who in a prefatory note describes the text and the circumstances in which it was composed.

Hartke's real subject, the thread that connects his scattered memories and musings, is his education--not education as it is usually understood, but rather a kind of unlearning. In Vietnam he was a true believer in the American cause, nicknamed Preacher by the troops he exhorted. Gradually, however, he has become disillusioned, not only with the self-righteous political agenda of the United States but with the entire human race and with all the stories (the hocus-pocus, in short) by means of which people beguile themselves rather than face the absurd realities of human existence.

Such sustaining stories take many forms, and Vonnegut is careful to show that he is a nondiscriminatory debunker. Nevertheless, perhaps because the United States is still described in some circles as a "Christian nation," Christianity is the foremost target of his mockery and disgust. Vonnegut's title provides the key to his intentions. One theory holds that the expression "hocus-pocus" originated as a travesty of a phrase in the Mass ("hoc est corpus," meaning "this is [my] body"). In the novel, Vonnegut travesties Christianity as the ultimate con-game.

HOCUS POCUS is far more blasphemous than Salman Rushdie's THE SATANIC VERSES, but to make an impact blasphemy requires a community of belief. Like some writers of the past who, in their old age, issued manifestos of total disillusionment and expected thunder and lightning to follow, Vonnegut may be disappointed to see how easily the literary marketplace assimilates his jeremiad.

Sources for Further Study

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