

Review and Personal Opinion on Cats Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut

I'm going to warn people here that I'm not the greatest fan of Kurt Vonnegut. If you're reading this because you want some sort of confirmation bias for your own tastes, then turn away now.

Sure, Vonnegut's witty. Much of his dialogue between characters is particularly funny and shows great comic timing. He has mostly interesting things to say. His writing is okay ; although I think from video that I've seen he was actually a better speaker and performer than author. I'll preface this by saying I have only read two of his books (Slaughterhouse Five being the other one). But on the whole I find the man curiously over-rated and his popularity a little baffling. Some of this no doubt comes from my slight disdain for Postmodernism and Vonnegut's pessimistic take on that. More on that later.

Cats Cradle is the tale of a journalist, Jonah, who finds some strange coincidences driving him to the Carribean island of San Lorenzo (modelled on Haiti perhaps, complete with a dictator called 'Papa' and American Aid that focuses on military assistance rather than health or education). Jonah originally started out writing a book about the day the bomb was dropped on Japan, but his investigation of the Hoenikker family leads him down a strange path (Felix Hoenikker is the oddball scientist most responsible for the invention of the deadly device). Eventually he ends up on San Lorenzo with Felix's children ; Frank, Angela, and the charming midget Newt. The scene is set for a farcical and tragic conclusion as the deadly legacy of Felix unravels.

Much of this book is flavoured by Vonnegut's fear of science after seeing what the A-bomb did. In particular he seems to harbor a fear of 'pure research', believing it is irresponsible because it can lead to literally Earth threatening consequences (such as when the atom was split). It's this rather one-sided view of science that makes me bristle a bit against Vonnegut. I can see him reclining comfortably in his heated apartment, enjoying his booze and cigarettes, and railing against the dangers of the scientific method.

To be fair, it's not just science that is in Vonnegut's sights. Religion is the other big target, as Jonah also investigates the mysterious new religion that is Bokonism. By degrees, this Faith (or rather lack of) is revealed to us as Jonah recounts how he ended up on San Lorenzo as a devout 'Bokonist'.

In fact, any kind of institution seems to be on the table for Vonnegut. Though the book is not written in a very Postmodernist style per se with regards to structure, the ideas and philosophy are very much so. Country, patriotism, family ; any kind of bond that a politician or religious leader ever appeals to is roundly mocked in this admittedly effective and biting satire. Urbanisation (" Illium was an ugly city. But then aren't they all ?") and capitalism are in for it too (the Crosbys attempting to set up a bicycle factory in San Lorenzo are well lampooned). Indeed, even the idea of Love itself is mocked for it's unhealthy tendency to exclude the un-Loved. Bokonism calls such foolish attempts to group humanity 'Granfallons' . Instead it asserts that chance or some strange sort of fate throws people together in a 'Karass'. That's what happened to Jonah, and that's how, after abandoning his book on Felix Hoenikker, he nonetheless finds himself coincidentally assigned on a magazine job to San Lorenzo where he meets the Hoenikker children (Newt and Angela) on the plane no less. Here we also find out the truth about Bokonism, and how " a religion founded on lies can be so useful."

Science and religion are perhaps the main targets here because they purport to tell 'Truth'. And perhaps Science is the premier target in Cats Cradle because it purports to discover truth with Knowledge, yet this knowledge has awesome destructive power. Science seems to believe it is better than religion, but are people putting their faith in another False Prophet ? Vonnegut gives us the impression with Cats

Cradle that too many people are treating science like a God. We're being duped as badly as the Russians were with Stalin's Communism. Truth as a goal, in all its many forms, is Vonnegut's real enemy behind all these thought systems. Human society yearns for Truth and 'answers' in various forms but it usually ends badly. If the Truth does exist at all, it's not useful or nice. Better instead to 'live by the Foma (lies) that make you happy'. So rather than become a nihilist (because that seems too close to pointless violence, as Jonah discovers when a Nihilist nails his cat to his fridge), Jonah is ready to become a Bokonist.

It turns out that before Dr. Felix Hoenikker died, he invented a potentially world destroying crystal (?) called Ice-Nine. Ice Nine has the potential to turn all of the worlds water to ice at room temperature. Including the water that is in our bodies. Much of the message here seems to dwell on the fact that Felix discovered this world-killer simply for the fun of it (although he was prompted in that direction by a marine who complained of always having to slog through mud). Worse is what happens later when Felix's children get hold of Ice-Nine. The implicit message is that, perhaps instead of perverting the natural world for curiosity's sake, we should all just focus on being nice to each other, or at least not killing each other. That would be a start. Whilst Bokonism intimately connects people through ceremonies (such as the rubbing of the souls of the feet together) , Dr. Felix Hoenikker is so disconnected from people that he once absent -mindedly tipped his own wife after she served breakfast. This indifference of scientists to other people and the potential consequences of their work is also highlighted when Dr Breed, crucial in making the Atom bomb, shudders when recounting a serial killer who murdered twenty six people. It's his reaction that is particularly telling. "Can you imagine ?" he exclaims "Twenty six people ! " Yet Breed is utterly oblivious to his own status as a murderer on a God-like scale.

Yeah, I get it. Vonnegut wrote Slaughterhouse Five and went through a really tough time in World War Two with the bombing of Dresden (Vonnegut was a POW there and saw the city reduced to rubble by Allied firebombing). So did my Grand-dad. Then he came back like millions of others and did his best to build a better world, instead of whining about what had already been done. Perhaps Vonnegut was too much a victim of his own time and circumstances ; too sensitive and plagued by alcoholism and mental health issues. Then again maybe my Grand-dad and others just couldn't write like Vonnegut.

Admittedly 1962 saw the Cuban missile crisis and the World has never come so close to The End. In times like that maybe you just have to hold your nerve and wait for the danger to pass. Hope is suspended but does not have to permanently abandoned as it seems to have been in Cats Cradle. Yes, there's a form of Hope in Bokonism, but it's delusional and aware that it's delusional. These 'bittersweet lies' are designed to comfort, but there is no real Hope. The German doctor to Papa is a case in point. He spends his spare time working at the Mission hospital, trying to atone for his sins during the Holocaust. But what would Vonnegut have such people do ? They can't take the Holocaust back. Yeah, a Nazi can't ever really make up for it, and he should face justice. But he's also better than those who chose to live it up in Argentina instead. Vonnegut dismisses him as beyond redemption. It's a cautionary warning to us all perhaps, and I agree with the sentiment ; I'm no fan of apologists for Evil. But it all adds to the sometimes overwhelmingly cynical and dreary tone of the book. Sometimes the humour just isn't enough to balance out the moroseness.

I had to read Cats Cradle a few times for it to stick. Vonnegut's writing could afford to be more descriptive ; it's a bit minimalist for my taste, although the style works well for the the humorous conversations. The conversation between Jonah and Julian Castle, the hotel owner, made me laugh out loud. Some of the characters are a little crudely drawn. The plot is somewhat chaotic, with many characters thrown in that we meet only once ; but then such is the Postmodernist style I guess, and such

is the message. Life itself is chaotic, and it's pointless to try and understand. People, come in and out of your life. Stuff happens. Nobody really knows what's happening. As Bokonon himself says : "Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's going on."

On the whole, though Cat's Cradle is generally an amusing read with some laugh out loud moments, I just found Vonnegut's story a little too pessimistic. Whilst much of the message seems to be : 'Just be nice to each other ' and 'stop worrying about Truth or Knowledge', there is also a strong vein of fatalism ; that life is pointless and meaningless. Yet clearly science has relieved much suffering. Science is quantifiably superior to Religion (remember that whole 'The World is Flat' debate, and pretty much every one since ?) yet Vonnegut thinks the A-bomb cancels all that out. Science is not to be crudely characterised as 'magic that works' (the insinuation from Papa here is that it can be used like black magic e.g to abuse power) but science is also medicine and arguably knowledge that can make us more humane. Ask the victims of the Salem witch-hunts. Have we really just replaced superstition with something worse, because it is so much more powerful ? It's a lot easier to be kind and love one another with advanced medicine and agriculture. Plus, the Knowledge that when my kid died it wasn't my neighbour throwing a curse could stop me lynching them (Just an analogy, I don't have a kid. Or a neighbour).

Vonnegut initially studied BioChem at Cornell before switching to writing. He was clearly a bright chap. Perhaps if he had persisted with science he could have done something useful with it. He needn't necessarily have found himself working at a Germ Warfare division as seems to be implied with Cats Cradle. We did also eradicate smallpox and pretty much polio. Again, maybe the guy was just too much a victim of his time ; World War Two and the Cold War at it's height were the depressing backdrop here.

I think we can all agree with Vonnegut on some points; there is indeed no point or meaning to life that can be 'found'. Religion is utterly redundant in this respect, and scientific discoveries do not tell us what we should do with our time on Earth. Prophets don't know the Truth. Scientists can tell us it's something to do with 'protein' (as Vonnegut satirizes it) but that doesn't change our lives (again, at least according to Vonnegut) . Newt Hoemaker sums it all up when he comments on the title of the book. He points out that the Cats Cradle toy with strings is confusing, just like life : " No wonder kids grow up crazy....No damn cat, and no damn cradle".

But that means you can make your own meaning of life up. And it doesn't have to be apathetic fatalism like Bokonism. Perhaps Bokonism hints at this in it's creation story, though sadly it's a little overshadowed by the rest of the novel :

God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close to mud as man sat, looked around, and spoke. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.

And He went away."

Here is the real Humanist message of the novel that unfortunately gets a little lost in the overwhelming pessimism (Vonnegut was the honorary President of the American Humanist Association).

It's no accident perhaps that this book seems to be popular with angst-ridden twenty-somethings who rail against 'the system' and how authority can't be trusted. The realisation that the people in charge of the world are actually idiots is indeed an unsettling one. I think we all felt that way a bit when George W Bush was elected, and we discovered that somehow Condeleeza Rice has a PhD. But it doesn't have to be that way forever. Maybe according to Vonnegut, because of human nature it will be that way forever. I disagree, and admittedly it's coloured my bias against the tone and message of what, for many, is a much loved novel.

Ok, Vonnegut, people stink. A lot of the time. But you could also say "Right on, let's get up and do something constructive". Foot-mingling (Bokonist style) might be a start, but you could do a lot more. Maybe one day we will destroy the world with technology. If Vonnegut's message is that we need to be mindful of this, I'm on board. But I refuse to be depressed about it and wait for it to happen. This for me is the biggest failure of the book ; a key message seems to be : 'Life Sucks and you can't change that ; so therefore try and laugh and enjoy the absurdity of it all'. Unfortunately Cats Cradle puts a bit too emphasis on the former rather than the latter. It is a lot easier to be cynical and pessimistic than it is to be genuinely funny. I'm afraid Vonnegut has proved this here. His reputation for humour and intelligence seems much overblown.

Life is indeed short and precious. Too short and precious to dwell too much on books like this. If life is meaningless, then literature should at least be entertaining and enjoyable, and Cats Cradle falls down a little bit on its own message here. We made it through the Cuban Missile Crisis. Maybe we'll keep on making it. Unlike Vonnegut, I'm hopeful. But then I guess I've had an easier life.

For those new to Postmodernism I recommend instead the brilliant 'Immortality' by Milan Kundera (Review to follow) or perhaps a well known book by Vonnegut's good friend Joseph Heller : 'Catch-22'.

Key Quote (from the Books of Bokonon) : "The Fourteenth Book is entitled, "What can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?"

It doesn't take long to read The Fourteenth Book. It consists of one word and a period.
This is it: "Nothing."