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Sirens of Titan by Kurt Vonnegut

Discussion questions used at SPL -- January 2011

1. Would you really consider this Science Fiction? How would you classify it?
2. How did you like his writing style. . . the simple sentences, the repetitious phrases. . .
3. Did you find humor in this book? Did it help make the book easier to read and understand?
4. What did this book reveal about the author? Do you think this was a peek at his philosophy of the world? Of religion? Was he an optimist? Pessimist?
5. Does this feel “timeless” to you . . . even though it was written in 1959?
6. Was there a “hero” or a “villain” in this story? Who was most sympathetic to you? Who drove you the craziest as a character?
7. What did you think of his treatment of women in the story? The few that there were! Do you think it was typical of the time it was written? Could he have been more sensitive of the rape scene in which Chronos was conceived?
8. Did you get a sense of how he viewed scientific progress?
9. What did you think when it was revealed that human’s history was manipulated by the Tralfamadorians to send a message? What do you think Vonnegut was saying with that? Do you think we as humans have a say in where we are going? Can we control our own destiny?
10. Would you agree that Rumfoord held power over humanity? Or was it just something that would have happened anyways? Did he seem to enjoy that power, false though it may be?
11. What was your reaction to the revelation that Rumfoord was being used by the Tralfamadorians much like he was using Malachi Constant? Do you think the Tralfamadorians were used by someone else?
12. What was the role of the Sirens of Titan?
13. What was the point of Salo’s (the Tralfamadorian) mission? Was there a point?
14. What did you think of the rules of the church that Rumfoord established? That God really doesn’t care what happens to you? That no one should be “luckier” than anyone else? If you lived under those rules, what would you have to handicap? How would you do it?
15. What was your reaction to the kidnapping of all those people to become Martians? Can you see some of that lock-step behavior in our time, even without those antennas stuck in our head?
16. Would you want to live in the world Rumfoord created? There was no war, but what did it lose to gain that peace? Was it worth the death of all of those “Martians”?
17. How would you relate that war with what we read in Hiroshima? Is there a time when it is worthwhile to sacrifice human life for a greater good?
18. Would you agree with Constant that we are all “victims of a series of accidents”?
19. Do you think he was asking “what is the purpose of life” in this book? Did you get an answer?

20. What did you think of Chance? Why wasn't he happy with all of his wealth, before he became entangled in Rumfoord's plans?
21. Why did he create Beatrice as a woman in white, with a great fear of getting dirty?
22. What was Boaz's role in the story? What was his act of redemption?
23. Were there any healthy relationships in this book - especially between parent and child?
24. Explain, if you can, why Chronos chose to stay on Titan and live with the birds!
25. From what you've read in this book, what do you think he thought of our use of technology and science? What do YOU think of our use of it?
26. What did you take away from this book? Would you recommend it to someone else? Did It make you want to read more by Vonnegut?

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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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Information on Kurt Vonnegut and his beliefs

Died April 2007

Religious stance: Member of the Humanist movement

In 1959 Vonnegut wrote "The Sirens of Titan," a science fiction novel featuring the Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent in which he decried the use of religious and ethical systems as tools of manipulation.

And in 1965, he wrote "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater" in which the title character stated here what he (and Vonnegut) believed was the moral imperative:

"Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies -- 'God damn it, you've got to be kind.'" http://newsblogs.chicagotribune.com/religion_theseeker/2007/04/rip_kurt_vonneg.html

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

http://www.americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism

A recurrent theme in Vonnegut's novels is that of technological progress as a threat both to humans and to the planet. His novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* was inspired in part by the controversial Allied bombing of Dresden, which he personally experienced as a POW during World War II. Vonnegut and his fellow prisoners survived the attack by hiding out in a slaughterhouse. In his novel *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut imagined a substance known as ice-nine that could result in the destruction of life on Earth by freezing all water upon contact. Vonnegut portrayed the inventor of this substance as a technocrat with no concern for humanity.

Vonnegut, a Unitarian Universalist and an atheist, was critical of religious faith and of Christianity in particular. In *Cat's Cradle*, he envisioned a fictional religious system known as "Bokononism," which the local dictator uses both to console and to control its adherents.

When discussing the specific tenets of his own belief system, humanism, Vonnegut was hard to pin down. In 1996, upon accepting the American Humanist of the Year award, he questioned the definition of "humanism," suggesting that his dog might be more of a humanist than he, but ultimately dismissing this due to the dog's minimal intelligence. He concluded the speech by criticizing science as a tool that was too easily bent to evil ends. <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art24921.asp>