

This is Dedicated to Those Who Burn Books (If They Only Took the Time to Read Them)

Author Charles Bock on himself, Kurt Vonnegut, and all those who get burned

BY CHARLES BOCK

MY DAD CALLED. He's calls whenever he reads news coverage of my novel, *Beautiful Children*. The book takes place in Las Vegas, where I was born and where my dad still lives. Seventy-four and mostly deaf, my pop likes to keep me updated on local responses. Our conversations are one-sided these days, mostly consisting of stuff he wants to tell me. This time, dad said, "You made the cover of *City Life*." Referring to the local weekly giveaway newspaper, his voice wasn't happy. In fact, I could tell he was troubled, trying to figure out how to proceed. "It's a very provocative cover." Finally my dad spilled the beans: "They're burning your book."

Awkward as the moment was, it actually could have been worse. I was somewhat prepared for the call. Via the wonders of Google Alerts, I knew about the offending photo: some guy in a red shirt roasting my novel over an open spit fire. This hipster-looking guy (black glasses, emo hair, the paper's managing editor) had written about why, despite a fair amount of accolades and publicity, my novel was, in fact, an atrocity. Apparently, this angle was his entry point as to why nobody had ever been able to write a decent novel about Las Vegas. I use *apparently* because I did not read the article.

The cover photo ended any interest I might have had. That, plus the three other photos that accompanied the text—the first showing yon managing editor holding torn pages of my novel and standing contemplatively in front of the fire, the second capturing the guy leaping, mid-air, preparing to stomp on my novel's smoldering carcass, and the final one, a close-up, my book's cover and pages physically burning, half charred, with parts still aflame.

Honestly, looking at pictures of my hard work going up in smoke was enough to make me vomit. Talking my dad out of writing a profanity-laced letter to the editor was no joy, either. But, really, so what? Why does any of this matter to you, the educators of America? After all, that particular book was the guy's property. He presumably purchased the thing; it was his right to do whatever he wanted to do with it. Freedom of expression includes, say, the freedom to express your dissatisfaction with the political direction of this country by taking a flag and setting it on fire. It includes the freedom to express bitterness with your writing career via ranting about some other guy's novel. Whether I like it or not, this dude and his newspaper have every right in the world to run those photos. "The first amendment is a tragic amendment," said Kurt Vonnegut, "because everyone is going to have his or her feelings hurt. Your government is not here to protect you from having your feelings hurt."

Educators of America, my reason for bringing this occurrence to your attention has nothing to do with my hurt feelings, or even whether someone calls my novel sucky and overrated. No. I bring this to your attention because there is a line that binds that one poor, charred corpse of my novel with Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*—a book which, in 1973, was banned by a school district and then physically taken out and burned in Drake, North Dakota.

Any time a book is burned in a public square, no matter how benign or misguided the motivations, what is actually happening is the literal death of thought. An end point to all the wonderful things that civilization is supposed to provide

And this is where you come in, dear, underappreciated teachers of America. Because your job is nothing less than to try and civilize your students.

I don't mean civilize in the sense of turning your students into good little robots, drones, or mindless followers. Rather, civilize in the sense that your students will emerge from a day in your class that much better equipped to navigate the world, that much more able to search out a space for themselves in a culture which, at this moment, is awash with the existential dilemma of what Sartre famously referred to as *too much freedom*.

Right now our culture is so blinking, so instant. Odds are that you won't get through this essay without breaking to answer an email or two. Learning, serious thought, even the act of reading itself is at odds with this immediacy. Sustaining a mental connection with a narrative, getting lost in a novel—an act which is one of the novel's fundamental pleasures—is completely at odds with the deluge of options that now present themselves in each and every given moment. Fact is, it's kind of a miracle when anyone reads for pleasure any more. And things are only going to get faster. None of this is going to get any better.

With this in mind, burning a book—whether it's done as an act of self-aggrandizement, as an act of aggression, or with the paternalistic intent of somehow shielding innocents from offensive or unwise content—is ridiculous. It's asinine. And yet, all too recently, intimidation, the attempt to suppress an idea, a song, or point of view, has been far too common. Some examples are easy. Others might be more obscure, but are no less chilling.

For example: In February of 2006, the Arizona state Senate circulated what it called an “academic bill of rights” which allowed students to avoid any book which came into conflict with their system of belief, and be replaced with a different, agreeable book. Arizona's Senate Committee on Higher Education actually approved this bill. At the committee meeting, state senator Thayer Verschoor cited Rick Moody's novel *The Ice Storm*, saying, “There's no defense of this book. I can't believe that anyone would come up here and try to defend that kind of material.”

The book was being taught in a course called “Currents of American Life” at Chandler-Gilbert Community College. The teacher made sure his syllabus contained a warning about the adult themes of some of the class materials. But according to *Inside Higher Education*, the complaining student hadn't paid attention, either to the syllabus or the warning the teacher gave, during the first day of class.

And that's just it. Dogma could care less about facts. Dogma does not allow for rational thought. Dogma does not allow for probing, for counters, or an exchange of viewpoints. Dogma does not teach someone to consider the merits (and errors) of a new idea, new premise, or different perspective. Manifestos proscribe, as opposed to absorb; if they change it's usually a cosmetic change, plastering over holes or flaws. By contrast, the term *enlightenment* refers to an 18th century philosophical movement, one that

BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN: A Novel

by Charles Bock

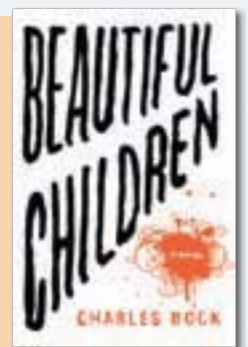
In this masterly debut novel, Charles Bock mixes incandescent prose with devious humor to capture Las Vegas with unprecedented scope and nuance and to provide a glimpse into a microcosm of modern America. *Beautiful Children* is an odyssey of heartache and redemption—heralding the arrival of a major new writer. Visit the official website: <http://www.beautifulchildren.net/>

Random House, HC, 978-1-4000-6650-6, 432pp., \$25.00

Paperback coming January 2009

Do not order before 1/31/09

Random House, TR, 978-08129-7796-7, 432pp., \$14.00





stressed the use of reason, scrutinized previously accepted doctrines and traditions, and brought about humanitarian reform.

This much is certain: if you teach literature, teach science, teach evolution, or teach anything that actually makes someone think, you are going to get challenged. You are going to get criticized. You might even be censored. It will come from parents. It will come from principals. It will come from school board members. It might even come from state senators who have no more idea of what a novel is supposed to do than they know about life on Mars. That's a part of your reality. The larger part of your reality, I believe, is how you can engage your students in such a manner as to keep their attention and get their minds working and make them, well, *want* to learn.

But you already know this. You know that the world is dividing itself into people who read and people who do not, into people who listen and people who do not. You know that people who read are going to be smarter than everybody else, that the people who do not listen are basically going to be a huge headache, for all kinds of reasons, and that the gap between A and B is only going to get wider with time. You know that life is complicated and sometimes the books which best illustrate and draw out that complexity will use profanity. So maybe I'm not saying anything new here.

Books by Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut was a master of contemporary American literature. His black humor, satiric voice, and incomparable imagination first captured America's attention in *The Sirens of Titan* in 1959 and established him as "a true artist" with *Cat's Cradle* in 1963. He was, as Graham Greene declared, "one of the best living American writers." Mr. Vonnegut passed away in April 2007.

All books published by Dell Publishing

Also Available:

BLUEBEARD
TR, 978-0-385-33351-1, 336pp., \$14.00

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS
TR, 978-0-385-33420-4, 320pp., \$14.00

DEADEYE DICK
TR, 978-0-385-33417-4, 288pp., \$14.00

GALAPAGOS
TR, 978-0-385-33387-0, 336pp., \$14.00

GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER
TR, 978-0-385-33347-4, 288pp., \$14.00

JAILBIRD
TR, 978-0-385-33390-0, 320pp., \$14.00

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE
Slaughterhouse-Five is one of the world's great anti-war books. Centering on the infamous fire-bombing of Dresden, Billy Pilgrim's odyssey through time reflects the mythic journey of our own fractured lives as we search for meaning in what we are afraid to know.
Teacher's Guide Available
TR, 978-0-385-33384-9, 288pp., \$14.00
MM, 978-0-440-18029-6, 224pp., \$7.99

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE
Or *The Children's Crusade, A Duty Dance With Death* (25th Anniversary)
Delacorte Press, HC, 978-0-385-31208-0, 224pp., \$25.00

CAT'S CRADLE
One of Vonnegut's major works, this is an apocalyptic tale of the planet's ultimate fate, featuring a cast of unlikely heroes.
Teacher's Guide Available
TR, 978-0-385-33348-1, 304pp., \$14.00

A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY
Random House, TR, 978-0-8129-7736-3, 160pp., \$13.95

MOTHER NIGHT
TR, 978-0-385-33414-3, 288pp., \$14.00

PALM SUNDAY
An Autobiographical Collage
TR, 978-0-385-33426-6, 320pp., \$14.00

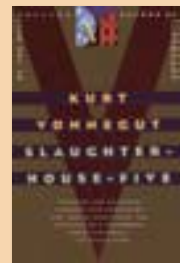
PLAYER PIANO
TR, 978-0-385-33378-8, 352pp., \$14.00

THE SIRENS OF TITAN
TR, 978-0-385-33349-8, 336pp., \$14.00

SLAPSTICK: Or Lonesome No More!
TR, 978-0-385-33423-5, 288pp., \$14.00

WAMPETERS, FOMA & GRANFALLOONS
TR, 978-0-385-33381-8, 320pp., \$14.00

WELCOME TO THE MONKEY HOUSE
TR, 978-0-385-33350-4, 352pp., \$14.00



At the end of the Vietnam War, Vonnegut was one of a handful of people who successfully turned what was supposedly low culture into high art, and his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* became something of a flashpoint in the cultural wars. The book tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American soldier who is taken prisoner during World War II and survives the Dresden bombing in an underground meat locker. The story moves back and forth through time, and has a middle-aged Billy convinced that he's been taken hostage by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. Every time there's a reference to something killed or dying in the book, the paragraph ends with the Tralfamadorian response to death: "So it goes." When the book came out, many communities condemned it: Rochester, Michigan actually banned the thing in 1973 because it "contains and makes reference to religious matters." Drake, North Dakota burned the thing. For the next sixteen years, religion, explicit language, sexual references, sexual drawings, vulgarity, violence, and insulting portrayals of women were all cited as reasons for banning this book. The novel has all of these things. It also has a tremendous heart. It has a scene where a German officer tries to get American prisoners to fight for the Germans, against the Russian army. And it has the following three paragraphs, the first two appearing in succession on pages 24-5 of the paperback:

"I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee."

"I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that."

And then this one, from the middle of page 148:

"As you know I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time. I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen, who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time." This was true. Billy saw the boiled bodies in Dresden. "And I have lit my way in a prison at night with candles from the fat of human beings who were butchered by the brothers and fathers of those schoolgirls who were boiled. Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe! If other planets aren't now in danger from the Earth, they soon will be. So tell me the secret so I can take it back to Earth and save us all: How can a planet live at peace?"

Fact is: the books are going to burn. The wolves are going to howl and bark and bay. A free society must include the freedom to destroy itself. And still, in the midst of all this, your job, my poor doomed friends, is to give young men and women a chance for something better. One kid at a time. It is your job to try and save this world.

Good luck. ■

About the Writer

CHARLES BOCK is the author of the novel Beautiful Children, which was a New York Times and national bestseller, and is basically like the rock-ingly cool novel that anybody's written in a long freaking time. Mr. Bock carries a membership card for the American Civil Liberties Union, although, honestly, the membership ran out and as of this moment, Mr. Bock has yet to renew—he's going to renew it though (seriously.) Charles lives in NYC with his beautiful wife Diana. She sometimes tells him to turn down his music, but always does so with love.

