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INTRODUCTION

THIS is a very great book by an American genius. I have worked so hard on this masterpiece for the past six years. I have groaned and banged my head on radiators. I have walked through every hotel lobby in New York, thinking about this book and weeping, and driving my fist into the guts of grandfather clocks.

It is a marvelous new literary form. This book combines the tidal power of a major novel with the bone-rattling immediacy of front-line journalism—which is old stuff now, God knows, God knows. But I have also intertwined the flashy enthusiasms of musical theater, the lethal left jab of

the short story, the sachet of personal letters, the oompah of American history, and oratory in the bow-wow style.

This book is so broad and deep that it reminds me of my brother Bernard's early experiments with radio. He built a transmitter of his own invention, and he hooked it up to a telegraph key, and he turned it on. He called up our cousin Richard, about two miles away, and he told Richard to listen to his radio, to tune it back and forth across the band, to see if he could pick up my brother's signals anywhere. They were both about fifteen.

My brother tapped out an easily recognizable message, sending it again and again and again. It was "SOS." This was in Indianapolis, the world's largest city not on a navigable waterway.

Cousin Richard telephoned back. He was thrilled. He said that Bernard's signals were loud and clear simply everywhere on the radio band, drowning out music or news or drama, or whatever the commercial stations were putting out at the time.



THIS is certainly that kind of masterpiece, and a new name should be created for such an all-frequencies assault on the sensibilities. I propose the name *blivit*. This is a word which during my adolescence was defined by peers as "two pounds of shit in a one-pound bag."

I would not mind if books simpler than this one, but combining fiction and fact, were also called blivits. This would encourage *The New York Times Book Review* to establish a third category for best sellers, one long needed, in my opinion. If there were a separate list for blivits, then authors

of blivits could stop stepping in the faces of mere novelists and historians and so on.

Until that happy day, however, I insist, as only a great author can, that this book be ranked in both the fiction and nonfiction competitions. As for the Pulitzer prizes: this book should be eligible for a mega-grand slam, sweeping fiction, drama, history, biography, and journalism. We will wait and see.



THIS book is not only a blivit but a collage. It began with my wish to collect in one volume most of the reviews and speeches and essays I had written since the publication of a similar collection, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*s, in 1974. But as I arranged those fragments in this order and then that one, I saw that they formed a sort of autobiography, especially if I felt free to include some pieces not written by me. To give life to such a golem, however, I would have to write much new connective tissue. This I have done.

The reader should expect me to chat about this and that, and then to include a speech or a letter or a song or whatever, and then to chat some more.

I do not really consider this to be a masterpiece. I find it clumsy. I find it raw. It has some value, I think, as a confrontation between an American novelist and his own stubborn simplicity. I was dumb in school. Whatever the nature of that dumbness, it is with me still.

I have dedicated this book to the de St. Andrés. I am a de St. André, since that was the maiden name of a maternal great-grandmother of mine. My mother believed that this meant that she was descended from nobles of some kind.

This was an innocent belief, and so should not be mocked or scorned. Or so I say. My books so far have argued that most human behavior, no matter how ghastly or ludicrous or glorious or whatever, is innocent. And here seems as good a place as any to include a statement made to me by Marsha Mason, the superb actress who once did me the honor of starring in a play of mine. She, too, is from the Middle West, from St. Louis.

“You know what the trouble is with New York?” she asked me.

“No,” I said.

“Nobody here,” she said, “believes that there is such a thing as innocence.”

*Whoever entertains liberal views
and chooses a consort that is captured
by superstition risks his liberty
and his happiness.*

—CLEMENS VONNEGUT (1824–1906)

Instruction in Morals

(The Hollenbeck Press,
Indianapolis, 1900)



THE FIRST AMENDMENT

I am a member of what I believe to be the last recognizable generation of full-time, life-time American novelists. We appear to be standing more or less in a row. It was the Great Depression which made us similarly edgy and watchful. It was World War II which lined us up so nicely, whether we were men or women, whether we were ever in uniform or not. It was an era of romantic anarchy in publishing which gave us money and mentors, willy-nilly, when we were young—while we learned our craft. Words printed on pages were still the principal form of long-distance communication and stored information in America when we were young.

No more.

Nor are there many publishers and editors and agents left who are eager to find some way to get money and other forms of encouragement to young writers who write as clumsily as members of my literary generation did when we started out. The wild and wonderful and expensive guess was made back then that we might acquire some wisdom and learn how to write halfway decently by and by. Writers were needed that much back then.

It was an amusing and instructive time for writers—for hundreds of them.

Television wrecked the short-story branch of the industry, and now accountants and business school graduates dominate book publishing. They feel that money spent on someone's first novel is good money down a rat hole. They are right. It almost always is.

So, as I say, I think I belong to America's last generation of novelists. Novelists will come one by one from now on, not in seeming families, and will perhaps write only one or two novels, and let it go at that. Many will have inherited or married money.

The most influential of my bunch, in my opinion, is still J. D. Salinger, although he has been silent for years. The most promising was perhaps Edward Lewis Wallant, who died so young. And it is my thinking about the death of James Jones two years ago, who was not all that young, who was almost exactly my age, which accounts for the autumnal mood of this book. There have been other reminders of my own mortality, to be sure, but the death of Jones is central—perhaps because I see his widow Gloria so often and because he, too, was a self-educated midwesterner, and because he, too, in a major adventure for all of us, which was the Second World War, had been an enlisted man. And let it here

be noted that the best-known members of my literary generation, if they wrote about war, almost unanimously despised officers and made heroes of sketchily educated, aggressively unaristocratic enlisted men.



JAMES JONES told me one time that his publisher and Ernest Hemingway's, Charles Scribner's Sons, had once hoped to get Jones and Hemingway together—so that they could enjoy each other's company as old warriors.

Jones declined, by his own account, because he did not regard Hemingway as a fellow soldier. He said Hemingway in wartime was free to come and go from the fighting as he pleased, and to take time off for a fine meal or woman or whatever. Real soldiers, according to Jones, damn well had to stay where they were told, or go where they were told, and eat swill, and take the worst the enemy had to throw at them day after day, week after week.



IT may be that the most striking thing about members of my literary generation in retrospect will be that we were allowed to say absolutely anything without fear of punishment. Our American heirs may find it incredible, as most foreigners do right now, that a nation would want to enforce as a law something which sounds more like a dream, which reads as follows:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of the press, or the right of the people

peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

How could a nation with such a law raise its children in an atmosphere of decency? It couldn't—it can't. So the law will surely be repealed soon for the sake of children.

And even now my books, along with books by Bernard Malamud and James Dickey and Joseph Heller and many other first-rate patriots, are regularly thrown out of public-school libraries by school board members, who commonly say that they have not actually read the books, but that they have it on good authority that the books are bad for children.



MY novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* was actually burned in a furnace by a school janitor in Drake, North Dakota, on instructions from the school committee there, and the school board made public statements about the unwholesomeness of the book. Even by the standards of Queen Victoria, the only offensive line in the entire novel is this: “Get out of the road, you dumb motherfucker.” This is spoken by an American antitank gunner to an unarmed American chaplain’s assistant during the Battle of the Bulge in Europe in December 1944, the largest single defeat of American arms (the Confederacy excluded) in history. The chaplain’s assistant had attracted enemy fire.

So on November 16, 1973, I wrote as follows to Charles McCarthy of Drake, North Dakota:

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.

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 consigned to the fires of your furnace?

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 ratlike 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.

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. 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.

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



THAT was seven years ago. There has so far been no reply. At this very moment, as I write in New York City, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been banned from school libraries not fifty miles from here. A legal battle begun several years ago rages on. The school board in question has found lawyers eager to attack the First Amendment tooth and nail. There is never a shortage anywhere of lawyers eager to attack the First Amendment, as though it were nothing more than a clause in a lease from a crooked slumlord.

At the start of that particular litigation, on March 24th of 1976, I wrote a comment for the Op-Ed page of the Long Island edition of *The New York Times*. It went like this:

A school board has denounced some books again—out in Levittown this time. One of the books was mine. I hear about

un-American nonsense like this twice a year or so. One time out in North Dakota, the books were actually burned in a furnace. I had a laugh. It was such an ignorant, dumb, superstitious thing to do.

It was so cowardly, too—to make a great show of attacking artifacts. It was like St. George attacking bedspreads and cuckoo clocks.

Yes, and St. Georges like that seem to get elected or appointed to school committees all the time. They are actually proud of their illiteracy. They imagine that they are somehow celebrating the bicentennial when they boast, as some did in Levittown, that they hadn't actually read the books they banned.

Such lunks are often the backbone of volunteer fire departments and the United States Infantry and cake sales and so on, and they have been thanked often enough for that. But they have no business supervising the educations of children in a free society. They are just too bloody stupid.

Here is how I propose to end book-banning in this country once and for all: Every candidate for school committee should be hooked up to a lie-detector and asked this question: "Have you read a book from start to finish since high school? Or did you even read a book from start to finish in high school?"

If the truthful answer is "no," then the candidate should be told politely that he cannot get on the school committee and blow off his big bazoo about how books make children crazy.

Whenever ideas are squashed in this country, literate lovers of the American experiment write careful and intricate explanations of why all ideas must be allowed to live. It is time for them to realize that they are attempting to explain

America at its bravest and most optimistic to orangutans.

From now on, I intend to limit my discourse with dim-witted Savonarolas to this advice: "Have somebody read the First Amendment to the United States Constitution out loud to you, you God damned fool!"

Well—the American Civil Liberties Union or somebody like that will come to the scene of trouble, as they always do. They will explain what is in the Constitution, and to whom it applies.

They will win.

And there will be millions who are bewildered and heart-broken by the legal victory, who think some things should never be said—especially about religion.

They are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Hi ho.



WHY is it so ordinary for American citizens to show such scorn for the First Amendment? I discussed that some at a fund raiser for the American Civil Liberties Union at Sands Point, New York, out on Long Island, on September 16, 1979. The house where I spoke, incidentally, was said to be the model for Gatsby's house in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I saw no reason to doubt the claim.

I said this in such a setting:

"I will not speak directly to the ejection of my book *Slaughterhouse-Five* from the school libraries of Island Trees. I have a vested interest. I wrote the book, after all, so why wouldn't I argue that it is less repulsive than the school board says?"

“I will speak of Thomas Aquinas instead. I will tell you my dim memories of what he said about the hierarchy of laws on this planet, which was flat at the time. The highest law, he said, was divine law, God’s law. Beneath that was natural law, which I suppose would include thunderstorms, and our right to shield our children from poisonous ideas, and so on.

“And the lowest law was human law.

“Let me clarify this scheme by comparing its parts to playing cards. Enemies of the Bill of Rights do the same sort of thing all the time, so why shouldn’t we? Divine law, then, is an ace. Natural law is a king. The Bill of Rights is a lousy queen.

“The Thomist hierarchy of laws is so far from being ridiculous that I have never met anybody who did not believe in it right down to the marrow of his or her bones. Everybody knows that there are laws with more grandeur than those which are printed in our statute books. The big trouble is that there is so little agreement as to how those grander laws are worded. Theologians can give us hints of the wording, but it takes a dictator to set them down just right—to dot the *i*’s and cross the *t*’s. A man who had been a mere corporal in the army did that for Germany and then for all of Europe, you may remember, not long ago. There was nothing he did not know about divine and natural law. He had fistfuls of aces and kings to play.

“Meanwhile, over on this side of the Atlantic, we were not playing with a full deck, as they say. Because of our Constitution, the highest card anybody had to play was a lousy queen, contemptible human law. That remains true today. I myself celebrate that incompleteness, since it has obviously been so good for us. I support the American Civil Liberties Union because it goes to court to insist that our government officials

be guided by nothing grander than human law. Every time the circulation of this idea or that one is discouraged by an official in this country, that official is scorning the Constitution, and urging all of us to participate in far grander systems, again: divine or natural law.

“Cannot we, as libertarians, hunger for at least a little natural law? Can’t we learn from nature at least, without being burdened by another person’s idea of God?”

“Certainly. Granola never harmed anybody, nor the birds and bees—not to mention milk. God is unknowable, but nature is explaining herself all the time. What has she told us so far? That blacks are obviously inferior to whites, for one thing, and intended for menial work on white man’s terms. This clear lesson from nature, we should remind ourselves from time to time, allowed Thomas Jefferson to own slaves. Imagine that.

“What troubles me most about my lovely country is that its children are seldom taught that American freedom will vanish, if, when they grow up, and in the exercise of their duties as citizens, they insist that our courts and policemen and prisons be guided by divine or natural law.

“Most teachers and parents and guardians do not teach this vital lesson because they themselves never learned it, or because they dare not. Why dare they not? People can get into a lot of trouble in this country, and often have to be defended by the American Civil Liberties Union, for laying the groundwork for the lesson, which is this: That no one really understands nature or God. It is my willingness to lay this groundwork, and not sex or violence, which has got my poor book in such trouble in Island Trees—and in Drake, North Dakota, where the book was burned, and in many other communities too numerous to mention.

“I have not said that our government is anti-nature and anti-God. I have said that it is non-nature and non-God, for very good reasons that could curl your hair.

“Well—all good things must come to an end, they say. So American freedom will come to an end, too, sooner or later. How will it end? As all freedoms end: by the surrender of our destinies to the highest laws.

“To return to my foolish analogy of playing cards: kings and aces will be played. Nobody else will have anything higher than a queen.

“There will be a struggle between those holding kings and aces. The struggle will not end, not that the rest of us will care much by then, until somebody plays the ace of spades. Nothing beats the ace of spades.

“I thank you for your attention.”



I spoke at Gatsby’s house in the afternoon. When I got back to my own house in New York City, I wrote a letter to a friend in the Soviet Union, Felix Kuznetzov, a distinguished critic and teacher, and an officer in the Union of Writers of the USSR in Moscow. The date on the letter is the same as the date of the Sands Point oration.

There was a time when I might have been half-bombed on booze when writing such a letter so late at night, a time when I might have reeked of mustard gas and roses as I punched the keys. But I don’t drink anymore. Never in my life have I written anything for publication while sozzled. But I certainly used to write a lot of letters that way.

No more.

Be that as it may, I was sober then and am sober now, and Felix Kuznetzov and I had become friends during the previous summer—at an ecumenical meeting in New York City, sponsored by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, of American and Soviet literary persons, about ten to a side. The American delegation was headed by Norman Cousins, and included myself and Edward Albee and Arthur Miller and William Styron and John Updike. All of us had been published in the Soviet Union. I am almost entirely in print over there—with the exception of *Mother Night* and *Jailbird*. Few, if any, of the Soviet delegates had had anything published here, and so their work was unknown to us.

We Americans were told by the Soviets that we should be embarrassed that their country published so much of our work, and that we published so little of theirs. Our reply was that we would work to get more of them published over here, but that we felt, too, that the USSR could easily have put together a delegation whose works were admired and published here—and that we could easily have put together a delegation so unfamiliar to them that its members could have been sewer commissioners from Fresno, as far as anybody in the Soviet Union knew.

Felix Kuznetzov and I got along very well, at any rate. I had him over to my house, and we sat in my garden out back and talked away the better part of an afternoon.

But then, after everybody went home, there was some trouble in the Soviet Union about the publication of an out-law magazine called *Metropole*. Most of *Metropole's* writers and editors were young, impatient with the strictures placed on their writings by old poops. Nothing in *Metropole*, incidentally, was nearly as offensive as calling a chaplain's assist-

ant a “dumb motherfucker.” But the *Metropole* people were denounced, and the magazine was suppressed, and ways were discussed for making life harder for anyone associated with it.

So Albee and Styron and Updike and I sent a cable to the Writers’ Union, saying that we thought it was wrong to penalize writers for what they wrote, no matter what they wrote. Felix Kuznetzov made an official reply on behalf of the union, giving the sense of a large meeting in which distinguished writer after distinguished writer testified that those who wrote for *Metropole* weren’t really writers, that they were pornographers and other sorts of disturbers of the peace, and so on. He asked that his reply be published in *The New York Times*, and it was published there. Why not?

And I privately wrote to Kuznetzov as follows:

Dear Professor Kuznetzov—dear Felix—

I thank you for your prompt and frank and thoughtful letter of August 20, and for the supplementary materials which accompanied it. I apologize for not replying in your own beautiful language, and I wish that we both might have employed from the first a more conversational tone in our discussion of the *Metropole* affair. I will try to recapture the amiable, brotherly mood of our long talk in my garden here about a year ago.

You speak of us in your letter as “American authors.” We do not feel especially American in this instance, since we spoke only for ourselves—without consulting with any American institution whatsoever. We are simply “authors” in this case, expressing loyalty to the great and vulnerable family of writers throughout the world. You and all other members of the Union of Writers surely have the same family