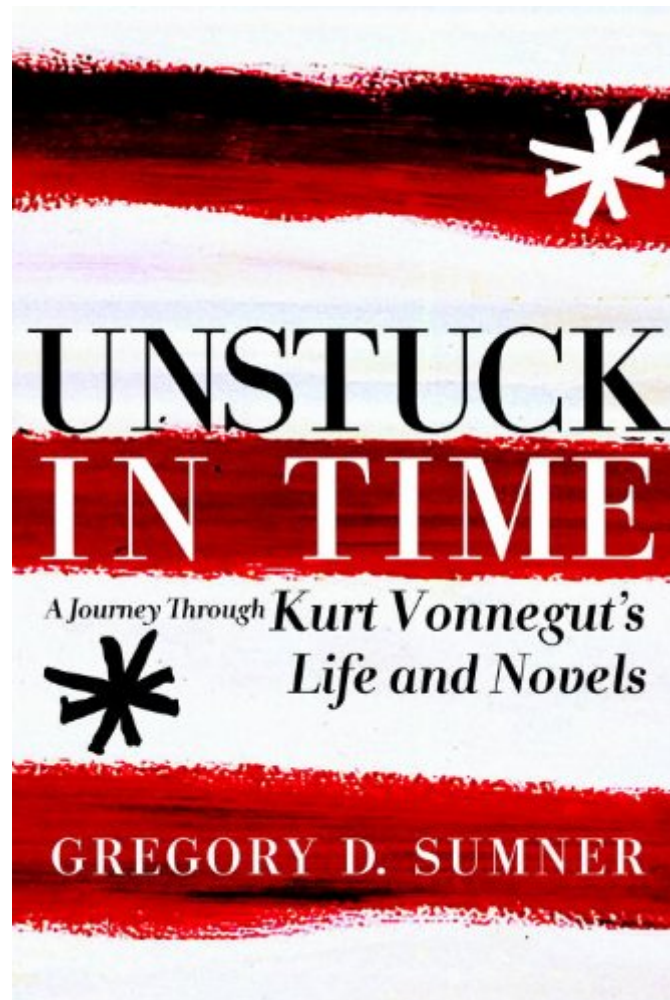




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Unstuck In Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut's Life And Novels



Synopsis

In *Unstuck in Time*, Gregory Sumner guides us, with insight and passion, through a biography of fifteen of Kurt Vonnegut's best known works, his fourteen novels starting with *Player Piano* (1952) all the way to an epilogue on his last book, *A Man Without a Country* (2005), to illustrate the quintessential American writer's profound engagement with the "American Dream" in its various forms. Sumner gives us a poignant portrait of Vonnegut and his resistance to celebrating the traditional values associated with the American Dream: grandiose ambition, unbridled material success, rugged individualism, and "winners" over "losers." Instead of a celebration of these values, we read and share Vonnegut's outrage, his brokenhearted empathy for those who struggle under the ethos of survival-of-the-fittest in the frontier mentality—something he once memorably described as "an impossibly tough-minded experiment in loneliness." Heroic and tragic, Vonnegut's novels reflect the pain of his own life's experiences, relieved by small acts of kindness, friendship, and love that exemplify another way of living, another sort of human utopia, an alternative American Dream, and the reason we always return to his books.

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Customer Reviews

Let's face it: the typical high school student forced to explore the world of American Literature is often turned off by writing that is ponderous, inaccessible and humorless. I'm not saying that Melville or Faulkner aren't great writers, but for many (especially inexperienced readers), they're difficult reads. There are, fortunately, writers that are more fun while still being great. Mark Twain is a good example, as is the man he inspired, Kurt Vonnegut. For a teen compelled to read for school, a Vonnegut book is a nice treat compared to other drier (if still essential) works. Vonnegut has many strengths. He is a modern writer (having only died in 2007), his writing is often funny and it is deceptively simple, disguising deep ideas in seemingly (but not actually) shallow writing. At least two of his novels are true classics - *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* - and many others are excellent, near-classics themselves, including *Mother Night*, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Breakfast of Champions*. Gregory D. Sumner's book *Unstuck in Time* is a biography of Vonnegut as related to his fourteen novels. Beyond the Prologue and Epilogue, there are fourteen chapters corresponding to Vonnegut's novels. Each book is discussed with a summary of the story and how it corresponded to what was going on in Vonnegut's life. Since many of Vonnegut's books have an autobiographical element, this method works well. Sumner shows the primary influences in Vonnegut's life and how they correspond to his novels.

Gregory D. Sumner's *UNSTUCK IN TIME* sets out to collect and analyze all of Kurt Vonnegut's work with respect to his biography. This is a weighty task, and one Sumner attempts out of a love for Vonnegut that is obvious throughout the book's pages. However, the scope of the project is so large that he can't quite do justice to the task --- nor could anyone, perhaps --- and the book turns out to be more an index of every Vonnegut novel than a complete analysis or biography. *UNSTUCK IN TIME* begins with a short bio of Vonnegut that tells in broad strokes of his wealthy upbringing, the demise of his family fortune during the Great Depression, and his time at Cornell studying chemistry and working at the campus newspaper. It then moves on to consider his experience as a soldier during World War II, his attempt at a Masters in Anthropology at the University of Chicago (his thesis ideas were rejected so he quit without finishing, though he was honored with the degree later in life) and his first day job in PR at General Electric. All of these experiences shaped the way Vonnegut writes. Sumner proves this point by spending the book's remaining chapters describing at length the plot of every Vonnegut novel, and outlining how certain plot points and themes connect to events in Vonnegut's life --- or what we know of it from the short description we are given. But Sumner spends far more time describing each book than getting to a point. Had he chosen to

discuss fewer of Vonnegut's works or focused on only certain aspects of them, he could have analyzed his points in more detail, and UNSTUCK IN TIME would have been less of Sumner proving to us that he has read every piece of Vonnegut literature and more of him telling us something interesting about the novels.

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