

I would like you to meet somebody, my late uncle Mike Alexander. He was my grandmother's little brother.

MIKE: My older sister, I always did everything she said. I'd get dressed to go out on a date or something, she'd look at me and shake her head, that's all she did. I'd go back in my room and get re-dressed. (Laughs)

Mike died in 2014, and I miss him all the time. I miss his sense of humor, his wonderful Boston accent. He sounded like someone from another era. In fact, his life intersected with important moments in history. For instance, he worked with Jack and Ted Kennedy when they ran for Congress.

MIKE: Jack Kennedy was a charming guy! And we have one friend of ours who said, I used to say the hell with the Kennedys, the old man was a bootlegger and everything else and he said, then he met Jack Kennedy, and he was on his back saying, Jack! What do you want me to do for you?! What do you want me to do for you?!

I recorded Mike in 2009 because at that point he was 91-years old, and his stories, that we'd be hearing all our lives, had to be captured for posterity.

In World War II, Mike served alongside the Royal Air Force as a bombardier. He made friends for life in England. After the war, he was part of the occupation of Germany. As a Jew, he was very proud of the fact that he helped liberate concentration camps, and he attended the Nuremberg Trial. His office was full of pictures, and a collection of Nazi beer mugs, which he got in Berlin in 1945. I always thought they were his victory trophies.

But he had never told me much about his actual service as a bombardier. And this is the same crew that destroyed Dresden, which was as close to a non-military city as you could get in the Third Reich. Even the Germans didn't think Dresden would be bombed.

MIKE: And the reason it was so devastating was because they could find it, and there's a picture up there where I did the briefing but I didn't do the raid, but all they did was send them due east until they hit the river, and you find Dresden. Gorgeous city, and they just completely demolished it.

Mike was always upbeat, laughing at his own jokes. But I heard a different side of him of that day – something he'd suppressed for 60 years.

And I should warn you from this point on in this episode, the description of war in this episode is going to be intense and sometimes graphic.

MIKE: Germany only had two seaports, Bremen and Hamburg, otherwise Germany was landlocked, and so we went after those two because their supplies came from the East and so forth, and Hamburg was the biggest raid we had before the atomic bomb, 55,000 civilians killed, which was a terrible feeling. We had never thought of it. But that day we did we did because the whole city was on fire, they called the famous Hamburg firewall where people are running into the water while they were burning and we came back and the flight surgeon for the first time took about ten bombardiers into another room and said, how do you guys feel? Nobody said anything. Finally one guy said, well, I understand they were burning people down there and they were killing people and the flight surgeon yeah, they already killed 4 million people, but that didn't justify the way that you feel so that was part of the silence that bombardiers kept, even to this day, it was terrible (cried) but you did it. And then you forgot it.

Mike has been on my mind lately because this month is the 50th anniversary of a groundbreaking novel -- Slaughterhouse Five, which was based on the author Kurt Vonnegut's own experience during World War II.

Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden. Amazingly, he survived because the Nazis put the American POWs in a slaughterhouse underground – not realizing that would be a perfect bunker for them.

The main character, Billy Pilgrim, has the same experiences as Vonnegut -- except aliens have given Billy Pilgrim the power to jump back and forth in time, so he can relive any moment of his life from birth to death. The problem is Billy can't control the time traveling.

Here's Vonnegut reading from the novel, about a section where Billy is trying to watch a movie about World War II, but time keeps running backwards.

READING: It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this: American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the

ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation. The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Today, we're taking stock of Slaughterhouse Five, looking at what the book has to say to us now -- not just about war, but about the forces that define our lives, and whether we can be masters of our own fate.

That's after the break.

BREAK

In Vonnegut's hometown of Indianapolis, The Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library is doing a lot to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Slaughterhouse Five. Julia Whitehead is founder of the library. She says they're giving away 86,000 copies of the book to high school students across the state.

JULIA: I am so excited about that for us, that is a bold, audacious thing to give away 86,000 books, but I think we can do it. It requires people to donate \$5 for a copy of the book, we're working with Penguin Random House to make that possible for students so that will take us all year to pull that off.

Slaughterhouse Five is a typical reading assignment for high school students today. But when the book first came out, it was really controversial. In fact, when Julia started the library, she discovered the book was banned from a high school in the town of Republic in Missouri.

JULIA: The school board hadn't even read the book when someone had recommended to them that they ban it. So we immediately went to work, we received donations of 150 copies of the book, which we went out to students at

Republic High School. We made national news – international news for giving that book away.

Really?

JULIA: Yeah

The school district objected to the sexual content and profanity in the book. Phil Biedler is a professor of literature at the University of Alabama. He says there's another reason why the book has always been controversial. Kurt Vonnegut is challenging the notion that World War II should be seen the "good war."

PHIL: This phrase comes from Studs Terkel who interviewed people who had gone through it and thinking of World War II as the good war of a war that had to be fought and a war in which Americans did heroic things to defeat the Nazis and defeat the Japanese and to end totalitarian government.

Slaughterhouse Five came out at the height of the Vietnam War. In fact, it was the first novel Phil read when he returned from his service in Vietnam.

PHIL: And of course that's how Slaughterhouse Five spoke to me. I saw a lot of what they were called in those days collateral damage. And then of course that had to do with the Vietnam War and the Mi Lai massacre had eventually made its way into the news by now so. So there are the connections are there.

As a Vietnam vet, Phil understood the book to be about not just the cost of war in casualties, but also in PTSD and survivor's guilt.

PHIL: I still have nightmares after 50 years and I know people who had similar experiences to mine who do. On the other hand I've spent my own life wondering why I was spared. I mean I don't have a big noble reason I've just you know I try to live every day because it's a day and then it's a day that I've been given it's that you know since my 20s I've been sort of a fugitive from the law of averages. And I think PTSD and survivor guilt are intimately related. One of the reasons I am now an emeritus professor is because of the Vietnam War because of Agent Orange. And so a lot of us didn't get killed right away. Sometimes it takes longer.

Back in 1969, Slaughterhouse Five was also polarizing because Vonnegut took this really important subject – the bombing of Dresden – told it in the context of what was considered lowbrow science fiction tropes -- aliens and time travel.

And these aliens – called Tralfamadorians -- look like green toilet plungers with hands instead of heads. They put Billy Pilgrim on display in an intergalactic zoom, where they watch him mate with a porn star from Earth called Montana Wildhack.

Again, here's Vonnegut reading from the novel:

READING: There was a speaker on the wall. The Tralfamadorians had no voice boxes. They communicated telepathicary. They were able to talk to Billy by means of a computer and a sort of electric organ, which made every Earthling speech sound. 'Welcome aboard, Mr. Pilgrim,' said the loudspeaker. 'Any questions?' Billy licked his lips, thought a while, inquired at last: 'Why me?' That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is.

I love this novel, partly because Vonnegut's writing is so sparse and funny when talking about things that are outrageous in every sense of the word.

But at first, I couldn't figure out why he needed aliens and time travel in the novel -- not that I'm against aliens and time travel. I'm a huge Doctor Who fan. But why was that the secret ingredient that finally allowed him to write about the worst experience of his life?

To get answers, I met with Marc Leeds. He wrote a book called The Vonnegut Encyclopedia. When started working on it in the 1980s, he contacted Vonnegut to get his approval. He wasn't sure if this famous author would write him back.

MARC: He wrote me back in less than a week and said I don't know why anybody would want to spend that much time in my work, but if you have that kind of time go right ahead.

And they became friends for the next 20 years, until Vonnegut died.

Marc's apartment in Lower Manhattan is full of Vonnegut memorabilia. There are framed caricatures of Vonnegut on the walls. That day he was wearing a Vonnegut t-shirt under a Vonnegut sweatshirt. He even had a little green doll of the aliens in the book, the Tralfamadorians.

(FADE IN)

MARC: I found it on Etsy.

So why do you think they took on this shape here this idea of the hand looks like a plunger with a eyeball in the middle.

MARC: I never directly asked them so I could only guess on this one. And my sense is that as the old son of a hardware salesman and grandson of a hardware salesman that he knew that this is the handyman special this is what does everything you clean out your pipes

And you just gestured towards your head.

MARC: Yes I think that you use it almost like a Q-tip and go to the other side of the ears and clean out your brains and he has one purpose. He unclogs things.

And Vonnegut had a lot of psychological shit to unclog. Beyond his wartime experience, Vonnegut's life was marked by tragedy.

RODNEY: He grew up with parents who were the toast of Indianapolis.

Rodney Allen is another major scholar of Vonnegut's work. He says Vonnegut's mother came from a very wealthy family of German brewers. His father's side ran a huge chain of hardware stores, and his father a major architect.

RODNEY: First came prohibition, which you know made a considerable dent in that in the fortunes of the Brewers. And then of course came the Depression and the first thing to go during the depression is the architectural profession because nobody's building anything. There were definitely living on a much more modest scale. And his mother never could accept this. She never could stop spending never admit that things have changed and she eventually ended up dead of an overdose on Mother's Day, an overdose of alcohol and pills because she just couldn't face the new realities. So he said he learned a bone deep sadness from his parents.

And there was more tragedy to come. In the 1950s, Vonnegut's sister Alice died of cancer. Literally a day later, her husband died in a commuter train accident. Vonnegut and his wife took custody of their children, and he already had three children of his own.

RODNEY: So Kurt who had quit his steady job with General Electric is essentially as a PR man, years before that, now had you know seven people depending completely on him. So he had to write for money.

Writing for money meant writing high concept science fiction novels like *Cat's Cradle*, and *Player Piano* -- and writing for sci-fi magazines.

He did write non-sci-fi books like *Mother Night* – which was about a German-American spy who was so deep undercover that he ends up inadvertently helping the Nazis. But Vonnegut had a chip on his shoulder because critics never gave him full respect. He once said -- quote -- I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file drawer labeled science fiction and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.

For twenty years, he struggled with how to write about Dresden. At first, he didn't want to use science fiction. But every time he tried telling the story of how he survived the bombing, it didn't feel like a story. It felt like pure madness. And to understand why *Slaughterhouse Five* eventually became sci-fi, we need to delve into what happened to him.

Phil Beidler says, Vonnegut was not supposed to be in combat. The army tagged him as a nerd right away.

PHIL: Vonnegut was given an assignment in ASTP –advanced service training platoons. They were sort of arbitrary units of smart kids that were being kept out of the infantry so they could be used as code breakers or you know in various kinds of technical occupations and when the Battle of the Bulge happened we had no reserves left. And so anybody in the ASTP was simply thrown into combat and particularly in this area where the 106 Division -- a very weak division was posted and it was supposed to be a rest area. And that's where the Germans came in through the den and just gazillions of Americans were taken prisoner.

RODNEY: Then they get put on a train and they're just packed in they can't even all lie down to sleep. They have to take turns sleeping they stay on those trains for. Four days I believe it was. They were without water for two days. Their big Christmas present on Christmas Day in the boxcars was water. And then the train was strafed by American fighter planes and 50 to 70 American prisoners were killed.

Finally, they learned that their destination would be Dresden, which was known then as the Florence of the Elbe River.

RODNEY: Once they discover this is Dresden everyone is euphoric, we made it,

we're going to live, the war is almost over, Dresden isn't a military city. They were whooping it up. And then you know, a week later, the bombs fall and the city is destroyed.

As I said earlier, Vonnegut survived the bombing because the POWs were kept in a slaughterhouse underground – slaughterhouse number five -- so in a weird way, the Germans saved their lives.

Marc Leeds says the bombing of Dresden had another level for irony. Remember, Vonnegut was German-American. He grew up at a time when German-Americans were a very prominent white ethnic group, alongside Irish-Americans and Italian-American. Because of World War I and II, German Americans stopped having German pride parades, and many of them Anglicized their names.

MARC: And so this German American from the Midwest who really thought he was more American than anything else is valued as an American soldier. He can speak a little bit of German gets captured is beaten up for speaking some German at a turn at times. This idea of hyphenated identity a German American. What does that mean. Mother Night is the book where we question identity. He even says in that book if I had been born in Germany and I have been leaving boots sticking out of snow banks belonging to Poles and Jews. By happenstance he was born here. But there were plenty of people who by happenstance were born there to have to bear the guilt for whatever they did.

Again, Rodney Allen.

RODNEY: The thing that I think that I think was even more stunning, over the long term, and turned Vonnegut into a strong voice talking about the absurdity of war was what he and his fellow prisoners were set to doing by the Germans that survived was to pick up the remnants of the corpses and pile them up in piles and put fuel on them and burn them to spread the disease so for six weeks he was picking up what he called jumbo fried grasshoppers that is a lot of these corpses had their arms and legs burned off and it would be a torso and the head left and they would sometimes individually pick up these ghastly charred bodies and then walk, lug them into a pile and toss them for weeks. It defies description really.

There was a guy in Vonnegut's unit named Ed Crone, although everyone called him Joe. And Vonnegut later said that Joe Crone was the inspiration

for the main character of Slaughterhouse Five. In Vonnegut said, quote, Joe was deeply religious and kind and childlike. The war was utterly incomprehensible to him, as it should have been.

JULIA: He was a young man who had been an Eagle Scout; he wanted to be a chaplain.

The story of Joe Crone always haunted Julia Whitehead.

JULIA: He was a young man who really had a heart of gold and was trying to do good things in the world, when he got into the chaos of war, the cruelty he didn't want to be part of this cruel world anymore, and even his fellow soldiers were cruel to him because they saw him as weak, mentally weak, too nice. I think Kurt always remembered that this beautiful soul, this beautiful person just couldn't put up with the cruelty, the harshness of this world.

He died of a hunger strike in Dresden.

JULIA: But he wasn't making any demands, which makes it especially sad, he just didn't want to be part of all of this anymore.

It's interesting to me that Joe Crone was the inspiration for the character of Billy Pilgrim because Joe Crone was so overwhelmed with anguish over what human beings were doing to each other. But in the novel, Billy Pilgrim is emotionally numb. And Billy survives the war. He becomes an optometrist, and has a mundane life in the suburbs, with a wife and kids that don't understand him.

Vonnegut himself was somewhere in the middle. He was just as upset as Joe Crone was about the absurdity and horror of war, but Vonnegut had developed a gallows sense of humor from a young age that he used as a coping mechanism.

Marc says it's not a big leap to go from that kind of absurdist humor to imagining a character like Jon Crone getting plucked out of his world by aliens and given the ability to re-experience his life from birth to death.

MARC: I don't think that Kurt set out to do anything other than to for himself to make sense of his war experience in a way because it was so ridiculously unbelievable to live through that to describe it would really be pornographic in a

certain demented way. So he had to find a way to make it palatable. Science fiction helps us do that because we separate out when it comes to science fiction or economics. Sometimes our politics in Kurt's world he has to find a way to make the horrors that he went through seem more than just the same old bloody war scene and the only way to understand it is in this scattered science fiction motif so that we could accept the irrationality of everything that's going on. And how can you really talk about this rationally. This makes no sense at all.

Hence you need science fiction

MARC: Hence you need science fiction so we can in Coleridge's terms have a willing suspension of disbelief.

And the Tralfamadorians are an interesting contrast to the intensity of war. They have a god's view of the universe that goes along with their credo, "so it goes," which they say after anyone dies. And Kurt Vonnegut is narrating the novel himself, saying he was there in Dresden alongside Billy Pilgrim. And as the narrator, Vonnegut says, "so it goes" after every single death that he mentions. Phil Beidler kept count.

PHIL: It's used 106 times

Wow.

PHIL: And it's just them it's just a matter of fact thing so it goes well here's another victim. Sometimes they're Americans sometimes they're Germans.

The Tralfamadorians don't experience time linearly. They can see the whole universe from beginning to end. And Billy learns that the universe will end when a Tralfamadorian pilot experiments with a new type of rocket fuel that is just as combustible as the Big Bang.

RODNEY: And the Tralfamadorians, they say that's it, so it goes, in the future, we know how the universe ends, one of our pilots is experimenting with new rocket fuel, whole universe disappears, but we know that, there's nothing we can do about that. It just is. Billy says but you got to stop them, you got to somehow make him not press the wrong button, and they say it can't be done. That's the way it is. And he said but what about free will? And the Tralfamadorians laugh and they say, you know we've been to so many planets and seen so many life forms but only on Earth is there any talk of free will.

I think the question Vonnegut is wrestling with is what makes you a survivor? There's a lot of dumb, cruel luck – which is something he explores thoroughly. But I think he's wondering if there's something more -

- something in your attitude – like the old saying that life isn't what happens to you, but how you react to it. But I think Vonnegut is asking, after a traumatic experience, how you can keep on living? How do you keep on choosing life?

That's what's resonates with Marc Leeds about Slaughterhouse Five. In fact he says lately, reading Vonnegut has given him a sense of clarity.

MARC: I now also am on the other side of death if you will. Six years ago I was in a coma. For me everything is a plus. Now I'm not just a plus. It is in fact awesome in the true sense of awe. The fact that I'm alive the fact that I'm able to be with the one I love that my children are doing well that I'm able to have this conversation with you is all a bonus. At the same time I suffer PTSD from all of the medical procedures and I now read Kurt with a different lens.

That's why Slaughterhouse Five was the perfect book for Phil Beidler to read when he got back from Vietnam.

PHIL: Vonnegut just spoke to us and he was thought of as everybody's Dutch uncle. And every so often his statements would be extremely facile. But then in Mother Night he would say things like we are always what we imagined ourselves to be, and we better be damn careful about that.

And if were not -- well, so it goes.

That is it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Phil Beidler, Marc Leeds, Rodney Allen and Julia Whitehead, who says they have a lot more stuff planned to celebrate the novel's 50th anniversary – including a discussion with Salman Rushdie in April. You can learn more at Vonnegut library dot org.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.