

## PICK OF THE SYLLABUS

# What is Real in Fiction?

Khachig Tölölyan, Professor of English,  
selects *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.



Every two or three years, in a freshman course on recent American fiction, I put Vonnegut's novel on the syllabus, and each time this accessible, reader-friendly text, often condescended to by contemporary American criticism when it is not simply dismissed from academic curricula, enables me and my students to engage hard literary questions about the real and the imagined, subject matter and the subjective, about history, context, ideas, ideals, ethics, and literature's way of dealing with them all.

The novel gently invites us to confront questions that, in my view, are at the core of teaching literature. How does the imaginative, the fictive, "represent" the historical and the real in language? What is "the real" in fiction? How do we learn to read, interpret, and assign meaning to texts and the events they represent when, as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the events include, on the one hand, the all-too-

real aerial bombing by the Allies of Dresden, a defenseless German city where more people may have died (around 135,000) than at Hiroshima, and on the other hand, instantaneous voyages to a planet named Tralfamadore, where little green creatures construct a zoo for two naked earthlings, a man and a woman, an Adam and an Eve?

The first is subject matter, an extra-textual reality that I must contextualize for my freshmen: There was no military need to obliterate this beautiful and undefended city in the final months of the war in Europe. Why and how the decision to do so was reached, why and how it was almost erased from the collective memory of World War II, how it was brought back and has remained a subject of controversy—these are weighty issues we briefly discuss.

Yet within Vonnegut's fiction, the Tralfamadoreans are as "real" as Dresden. Before magical realism, there was science fiction and fantasy, and Vonnegut made a living writing versions of these; he made the world his imagination summoned into being as textually "real" as the world the young Kurt experienced in February 1945, in Dresden. Vonnegut is a midwestern German-American who remained very conscious of his family's origins in the post-1848 liberal German immigration to the United States; an infantryman, he was captured in the winter of 1944 and shipped to Dresden, where he was housed with other prisoners in an unused slaughterhouse and witnessed the firebombing and its aftermath.


Teaching *Slaughterhouse-Five* also obligates me to unpack the book as a collection of genres, each of which

joins a specific kind of subject matter to a particular kind of perspective and narrative voice. The novel calls attention to itself as an autobiographical memoir. But whereas too many contemporary texts commodify memories of trauma and congratulate themselves for their virtue in doing so, Vonnegut's novel does the work of ethics without the melodrama of piety and self-congratulation. It is also a testimony written before the genre of Latin American *testimonio* emerged, a testimony that is indignant but learns to manage its indignation, because its author knows that he cannot afford to lose its intended large and youthful audience by turning fatally solemn. It succeeds, but at some cost to its esthetic integrity; consequently, it enables me to show students that in art as in life, achievement has costs that only the very greatest manage to hide or dispense with.

At yet another level, this is a war novel that functions as a critique of Allied historiography and of postwar collective amnesia, but a critique that always remains aware of what Germany did, not only to Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies, but also to Russian prisoners of war and to bombed Dutch and English cities. But the history the book addresses is not just that of World War II. When it was published in 1968–9, the book was a political intervention in the present: It was written after Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, in the half-decade (1968–1973) when World War II was, to use Christina Jarvis's term, "Vietnamized" by writers like Vonnegut and perhaps Thomas Pynchon. Vonnegut's protagonist has a son who serves in the Special Forces in Vietnam. He uses this and other means to make his novel a quasi-allegorical critique of an ongoing war.

Still another history that the book enacts is literary history, namely the emergence of postmodernism in the United States. Vonnegut refers to debates about "the exhaustion of the novel" that prompted the embrace of postmodern narrative techniques. He

is witty, prescient, and uncannily slippery as he creates a narrative that sidesteps the "rules" of traditional narrative, yet does not become postmodern in the styles of John Barth, or Thomas Pynchon, or Raymond Federman and Kathy Acker. Vonnegut is also interested in how novels think. He reflects on fiction's claim that telling stories is an important way of criticizing the real and its desire to avoid the consequences of such criticism. In this context, I sometimes raise the question of free speech and the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie.

Students at Wesleyan and elsewhere like "enthusiasm" in their faculty. When I teach *Slaughterhouse-Five*, my students notice that my enthusiasm for discussing the issues the novel raises is not matched by my appreciation of the book as a whole. They are puzzled that I feel uneasy about the novel's failure to be as great, or greater, than the sum of its parts, to create an esthetic totality. It offers experiences—visceral, intellectual, and ethical—that engage students and to which contemporary criticism condescends at its own peril. But the intriguing and rewarding dilemmas the book creates for itself require that Vonnegut find a way of uniting what he bundles together: genres, histories galore, questions about the status of the real, episodes of great comic and tragic power. He fails. I teach the book because it is such a wonderfully instructive "failure" and also because my own persistent failure to teach it to my full satisfaction keeps me alert to the enormous difficulties that any author faces when dealing with historical subject matter that he or she cannot or does not want to render as history. This impulse to address and use the real, be it historical past or current history, without becoming historiographic, to turn subject matter into subjectivity, is at the heart of the development of fiction, and Vonnegut's book lets me get at how hard and great the task is for authors and readers both. 

## BOOKS

## A Rigorous Study of Smash! Boom!

Eric Lichtenfeld '97 writes about his book, *Action Speaks Louder* (Praeger, 2004), a comprehensive analysis of the American action movie, which began as a Wesleyan film thesis.

I screened upwards of 100 films for my new book, *Action Speaks Louder*. Many of these films required multiple viewings and my running scenes over and over in slow-motion. On average, screening a two-hour movie would take three. It is tempting to say, “expand into three,” but spending 10 minutes on a two-minute gunfight or half an hour on an eight-minute hijacking was not only expansion, but also violent contraction and hypnotic lull all at once.

For 18 months, this was often how I experienced time—which is ironic, considering that in retrospect, taking on the book may have been an attempt to purge what remained of my post-September 11 anxieties. Off and on since that morning, thoughts of terrorism had brought with them spells of mortal fear that I had eventually reduced to neurotic fret. Now, immersing myself in the genre’s ridiculous excess might actually be an odd way to rid myself of my remaining unease: Piling all the violent avengers and blasted settings and explosives and weapons and one-liners and rituals on top of one another would surely propel my fixations past the lunatic and into the just plain loony. But however successful I may have been at this part of my enterprise, it is a resilient fantasy, this concoction of genre devices. Founded on the traditions of vigilantism and race war inherited from Westerns and frontier literature, and crossbred with aspects of *film noir* and police procedurals, the action film is not only the ultimate mutt movie genre, but also a fantastical compass in the social, political, economic, and global wilds.

And though today’s action movies do not speak as directly to our baser passions as they did less than 20 years ago, the ethos remains the same. In particular, the 1980s’ fantastical delusion of foreign invasion and resulting American insurgency distills two essential elements of the American imagination: “Us and Them” and “This is Ours.” During those years, that fantasy was best typified by *Red Dawn* (1984), which braided that decade’s movie-militarism around a new mythologizing of teenagers, but also by films such as *First Blood* (1982) and *Die Hard* (1988), films where hounded heroes wage quasi-mythical turf wars. This fantasy has a prominent place among the time- and box office-tested heroics of supermen from Harry Callahan (of the *Dirty Harry* film series)

to Spider-Man—vigilantes who bring into focus America’s paradox of a self-image: a lone-wolf juggernaut who fights with the might of a superpower and the divine sanction of the underdog.


And this image plays out not just in our multiplexes and home theaters, but also on FoxNews and CNN. When the United States “stands up” to the United Nations to shake the world with war, or when action superstar and “outsider” Arnold Schwarzenegger comes to govern the world’s fifth-largest economy, one can almost hear the exchange: “So,” Fantasy says to Politics (or vice versa), “we meet again.”

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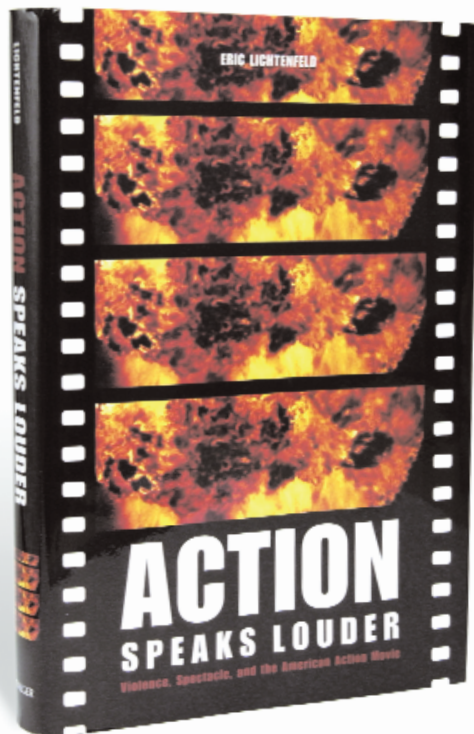
I first turned my ear to this dialogue while at Wesleyan. A film major, I spent much of 1996 writing a history/theory thesis under Jeanine Basinger’s and Richard Slotkin’s supervision. Each had a framework (formalism and Hollywood history on the one hand, American history and ideology on the other) that together formed a latticework, one that structured my thinking then and has ever since. As it happened, my thesis also provided me with a taste of notoriety. Although I had tried to convince my friends that I was examining the relationships between movie genres and their landscapes, I was often stopped by near strangers, on and off campus, and asked, “Hey, aren’t you the guy writing his thesis on *Die Hard*?”

I was proud of the finished product. But it would take five years and a phone call from my good friend and Wesleyan classmate Eric Levy '97 to compel me to revisit it. Eric was now an editor at Praeger Publishers. I was back in school, a graduate student at UCLA’s School of Film and Television. We both felt that despite the number of academ-

ics who have written on race and gender and sexuality in the action film, the scholarly community had done little to root around inside the real guts of the genre: its history, its aesthetics, its narrative structures, its marketing. Eric was largely immune to the pleasures of the action movie, but not to its potential as the subject of a rigorous (and hopefully enjoyable) study. So in retrospect, my recently published first book is really a sequel. Or, more accurately, a remake.

Like most good remakes, this one draws out a side of the story not previously highlighted. Yes, the molten, noisy, feral stuff that churns within our national character cools into culture, tradition, myth, and other indomitable terms; but it also remains sensory, kinetic, and *fun*—at least on screen, at least some of the time. In this dichotomy rests the confounding thing about action movies. Simple though the genre may seem, at its core is a question that has no simple answer: Where is the action film its most elemental self? In the centuries-old race-war ethos of its founding traditions or in the immediacy of the punch to the face, the bullet to the chest, the gasoline explosion? Oddly, the more action movies one sees, the harder it becomes to tell if the violence is a function of the ideology or if the ideology is just an excuse for the violence, for the pleasure of raw sensation. But whichever way we track the equation, and however keen a critical eye we train upon it, what is reflected back is never an image of our higher selves. And even among people who would like to think they’re above this sort of thing, there are those who do love the view of the conflagration below. 

Eric Lichtenfeld has written about film for various publications, including *The Scenographer*, *Film Score Monthly*, and *DVDFile.com*, and has provided commentary for the Special Edition DVDs of *Die Hard*, *Predator*, and *Speed*. He lives in Los Angeles, where he currently works in motion picture advertising.



# Just Published

Our selection of noteworthy books by Wesleyan University alumni, faculty members, and parents.

## POETRY:

JEFFREY ENCKE '93

**Most Wanted: A Gamble in Verse**

(Last Tangos Editions, 2004)

GLORIA GERVITZ (author),

MARK SCHAFER '85 (translator)

**Migrations/Migraciones**

(Junction Press, 2004)

## NONFICTION:

WILLIAM JOHNSTON, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY

**Geisha, Harlot, Strangler, Star: A Woman, Sex, And Morality in Modern Japan**

(Columbia University Press, 2004)

GARY ISEMINGER '58

**The Aesthetic Function of Art**

(Cornell University Press, 2004)

CHARLES LEMERT, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY

**Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony**

(Polity Press, 2004)

BURK MURCHISON '71

AND BERYL HUTCHINSON

**The Island Remembered: Great Food and Good Times at Spanish Cay**

(Five Points Press, 2004)

MAHDI OBEIDI AND KURT PITZER '88

**The Bomb in My Garden: The Secrets of Saddam's Nuclear Mastermind**

(John Wiley & Sons, 2004)

ROBERT A. RICHTER MALS '98

**Eugene O'Neill and Dat Ole Devil Sea: Maritime Influences in the Life and Works of Eugene O'Neill**

(Mystic Seaport, 2004)

DAVID W. SAMUELS '79

**Putting a Song on Top of It: Expression and Identity on the San Carlos Apache Reservation**

(The University of Arizona Press, 2004)

ROBERT J. SOIFFER '79, MD

**Stem Cell Transplantation for Hematologic Malignancies**

(Humana Press, 2004)

ARTHUR G. TYPERMASS '57

**My Thoughts Exactly: Stories and Essays**

(Xlibris, 2004)

## OF NOTE:

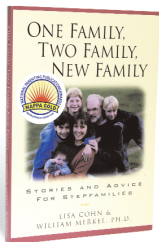
EMILY WARREN '02 is the editor of the *Art Directors Annual 83* (RotoVision, 2004), an international review of 2004's most innovative work in visual communication, with more than 1,400 images representing the work of creative professionals from 26 countries who work in advertising, graphic design, interactive media, photography, and illustration.

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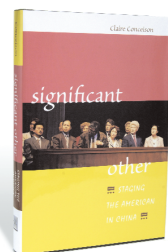
LISA COHN '79 AND WILLIAM MERKEL '67

**One Family, Two Family, New Family**

(RiverWood Books, 2004)



In this useful book for stepparents, dating single parents, and relatives of stepparents, Cohn and Merkel share their experiences dealing with a multitude of stepfamily challenges during their first years together. The book, organized by topics ranging from dating to dealing with troublesome ex-spouses, contains practical advice and revealing anecdotes about both the joys and difficulties involved in stepparenting, which are told with directness and honesty by the authors and three other families. Cohn and Merkel write: "Our biggest challenge was letting go of our fantasies about raising a 'normal' family and creating new traditions."

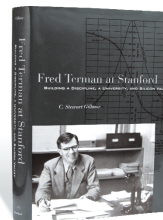


CLAIRE CONCEISON '87

**Significant Other: Staging the American in China**

(University of Hawai'i Press, 2004)

This intriguing and original study investigates representations of Americans that emerged onstage in China between 1987 and 2002 and explores how they function as racial and cultural stereotypes, political commentary, and innovative artistic expression. Based on her fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai, Conceison, a Western academic who is both a Chinese studies scholar and an assistant professor of drama at Tufts University, examines how the Chinese staging of American actors reveals cultural norms and attitudes regarding the United States, reflects Sino-American political relations, and gives insights into Chinese national and cultural identity. The author also considers how Chinese views of the United States have changed dramatically since the 1980s, with changes in foreign relations, increased travel of Chinese citizens to the United States, and wide circulation of American popular culture in China.



C. STEWART GILLMOR, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND SCIENCE

**Fred Terman at Stanford: Building a Discipline, a University, and Silicon Valley**

(Stanford University Press, 2004)

Fred Terman (1900–1982) was exceptional in all his endeavors: as an engineer, teacher, entrepreneur, academic administrator, and manager. In this extensively researched biography, Gillmor focuses on Terman's dedication to engineering and his loyalty to Stanford University and its surroundings; it is not just the story of an extraordinary American but also an examination of university life and of the numerous relationships Terman nurtured among individuals in academia, government, and industry. Terman was a respected professor and an adviser to many of Stanford's best students, including William Hewlett and David Packard. He was considered the magnet that brought talent together into what became known as Silicon Valley. Gillmor writes that "Terman's formula for success, both in life and for his university, was fairly simple: hard work and persistence, systematic dedication to clearly articulated goals,



accountability, and not settling for mediocre work in yourself or in others." This book explores how one man's standard of excellence had a lasting influence on his students and the university he served.

MAESTRO MARTINO OF COMO (AUTHOR), LUIGI BALLERINI '62 (EDITOR), JEREMY PARZEN (TRANSLATOR)

**The Art of Cooking: The First Modern Cookery Book**

(University of California Press, 2005)

This lovely book is the first complete translation of an important treatise on Renaissance cookery by Maestro Martino of Como, who has been called the first celebrity chef. His work is considered to be the first-known culinary guide to specify ingredients, cooking times and techniques, utensils, and amounts. Editor Ballerini, who teaches medieval and modern Italian literature at the University of California, Los Angeles, contributes an introduction that considers the chef in the context of his time and place and steers the reader through the complexities of Italian and papal politics. The book also contains 50 modernized recipes by an acclaimed Italian chef, Stefania Barzini. —David Low '76