

Love As Always, Kurt: Vonnegut As I Knew Him

Kurt Vonnegut

Loree Rackstraw

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It's the tritest of academic clichés, of course: the professor/student affair. While Rackstraw only suggests that she and Vonnegut may have been intimate, she leaves absolutely no doubt that their relationship was, more than anything else, a friendship—one based on fierce respect, tender admiration, an unabashed zest for life, and an unapologetic appreciation for the absurd.

What began quaintly enough one autumn day in 1965 in a spartan Quonset hut classroom at the Iowa Writers Workshop, endured for more than forty years, surviving the suicide death of her husband, and the failure of Vonnegut's two marriages.

As only one who knew him well could, Rackstraw conjures a robust portrait of this paradoxical legend, drawing on their voluminous correspondence to provide singular insights that both contradict and celebrate his iconic status. Sure, he was a merry prankster who could deliver portentous warnings about society's shortcomings with a twinkle in his eye and a cavalier, "so it goes," but he was also a superlatively sensitive humanist.

Witnessing his anguish both firsthand and from afar, Rackstraw frequently feared for his health and career, yet she knew him well enough to know that he would ultimately be able to work through it. "I knew that restless mind of his could never go into neutral with any degree of comfort," she recalls. "Finding creative ways to transform chaos into artistic vision was his forte."

The former fiction editor of the *North American Review* and professor emeritus at the University of Northern Iowa, Rackstraw's forte is finding that satisfying balance of objectivity and subjectivity that memoirists must bring to their work. Although she occasionally gets bogged down in the minutiae of Vonnegut's numerous public appearances, Rackstraw compensates by applying a scholarly critical analysis to Vonnegut's work. Artfully blending her confidante's understanding of Vonnegut's kaleidoscopic personality with an academician's assessment of his timeless and universal themes, Rackstraw manages to offer both a dignified testimonial to a literary master and a loving tribute to a lifelong friend.

CAROL HAGGAS (April 13, 2009)

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