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Literary

We Are What We Pretend to Be: The First and Last Works
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Kurt Vonnegut has made a lasting impact on literature, so the promise of any previously unseen work is welcome news. In *We Are What We Pretend to Be*, Vonnegut's first and last works are presented, delivering a final fix of the author's famously acerbic writing style.

The volume's title is a quote from one of Vonnegut's novels, *Mother Night. We Are What We Pretend to Be* begins with *Basic Training*, a novella Vonnegut finished near the beginning of his writing career—only two years before his first novel, *Player Piano*, was published, as his daughter notes in the foreword. *Basic Training* involves Haley Brandon, a decidedly urban young man sent to live with relatives at a farm. The second half of *We Are What We Pretend to Be* consists of another novella, *If God Were Alive Today*, written when Vonnegut was seventy-eight years old, and featuring Gil Berman, a severely misanthropic comedian.

Basic Training, largely inspired by his own youth, is about as innocent and earnest as Kurt Vonnegut's writing gets, but there's still plenty of scathing humor couched within this coming-of-age tale. It features characters who could be cut from the mold of Steinbeck or Harper Lee, but the story and its delivery are pure Vonnegut. It's a nice glimpse into Vonnegut's formative years, and it also succeeds as a novella in its own right.

If God Were Alive Today is less successful, in part because it feels incomplete; the novella, as presented, reads more like an extended character study. Whether or not Vonnegut had more to say about Gil Berman, the character presented is just about anti-everything, and we don't get to see much of a resolution to his travails. Additionally, Berman is supposed to be a famous figure who made his name through his stand-up comedy, but his art reads like Kurt Vonnegut as a stand-up comic. Few would deny Vonnegut's sense of humor, but it's not well-adapted for stand-up comedy, and with Berman echoing Vonnegut's bitter side, his rise to fame seems hard to believe and distracting.

Still, sub-par Vonnegut has its moments, one of which comes when Gil Berman wryly comments about his dead orthodontist father: "He held his course through all kinds of weather until he could at last drop anchor in the tranquil marina of orthodontics, where every patient has deep pockets, and no one dies." Berman continues with a prayer that might serve readers of *We Are What We Pretend to Be*: "Our father, which art in Heaven: Lead us not into the temptation of outsize expectations."

We Are What We Pretend to Be is certainly not Kurt Vonnegut's finest work. But Vonnegut—his early work marked by potential, his final work by slow decline from tremendous peaks—is always worth reading.

Peter Dabbene