

English 11

Summer Reading Assignment for *Welcome to the Monkey House*.

Welcome to the Monkey House is a collection of short stories by Kurt Vonnegut. These stories vary in content and structure, yet are held together by similarities in theme, symbols, motifs, and style. We will be reading and discussing many different short stories during the junior year as well as a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, and the stories in this collection should help better prepare you for our later readings while providing an enjoyable summer reading experience. Please remember that you are also expected to engage in an independent reading selection (see the school website for additional information).

Vonnegut's work is often concerned with themes of **self-awareness, love, free will, companionship, peace and violence, technology, and social reflection**. You should consider these themes as they apply to the stories you read. The stories are often funny, sometimes a bit crude, but always insightful. Vonnegut often used science fiction as a means of examining contemporary realities, and several of the stories in this collection occur in the future, yet very clearly reflect on modern times.

I have listed several specific stories below that I plan to use as a focus for our discussions and that I expect you to read, but you should not feel limited by the list.

As a point for future discussion and as an introduction to the author, please reflect on the comments from Vonnegut himself, who provided the following rules for writing short stories in the introduction to a collection of his works entitled *Bagombo Snuff Box*:

- “1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things — reveal character or advance the action.
5. Start as close to the end as possible.
6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them — in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.”

You might consider some of the above concepts as you construct your responses.

While I hope you will read all of the stories in the collection, I do ask that you be especially prepared to discuss the following:

“Harrison Bergeron”

“Who Am I This Time”

“Welcome to the Monkey House”

“Report on the Barnhouse Effect”

“The Euphio Question”

“Unready to Wear”

“EPICAC”

“Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow”

Writing Assignment: I would like you to choose at least three stories from the collection on which to reflect in short essay form; for each story you choose, please write a brief (one page or so) personal response. Just as Vonnegut’s writing is unpredictable and quite varied, I would like to provide you with lots of flexibility in your responses. Some concepts you *might* think about can be taken from the following suggestions (you might even try three different prompts for the three different responses):

1. Choose one character and provide observations and analysis in a character study. Why might Vonnegut have provided the characterizations he did? Consider the list of common themes (self-consciousness, love, free will, companionship, peace, technology and social reflection) and contemplate which if any of these reflects on your character. As much as possible provide specific details to support your observations and draw personal conclusions based on the information you provide in your essay.
2. Vonnegut has often been regarded as a social critic. Is he critiquing society or any particular aspect of society in his stories? What “point” might he be trying to make? How does he make this point?
3. Vonnegut’s stories often contain an individual searching to define himself and his role in society. Do any characters in the stories fit this description? Explain. What prevents a character from knowing him or herself? What obstacles stand in the way of self-understanding?
4. Discuss the use of technology in one or more of Vonnegut’s stories. What role does technology serve in the story? What seems to be Vonnegut’s perspective on technology? How does he use technology to advance themes he explores through other means in his stories?

Good luck, have a great summer, and enjoy the reading!