

6.5 Minutes With...Pete Sands
Center for 21st Century Studies – University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee
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C21 Deputy Director:

You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21st Century Studies.

To provide additional context to our Lonely No More program, Director Anne Basting spoke with Dr. Peter Sands, Honors College Director, Associate Professor of English, and expert in American literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Sands gave us some additional insight into Slapstick, the novel by Kurt Vonnegut with the subtitle "Lonesome No More!"

Anne Basting,
C21 Director: [00:41]

You know, how Slapstick is a funky little book, and do you, do you have a perspective of sort of where it fits in in the larger Vonnegut?

Pete Sands:

You know, I think it's generally agreed, and Vonnegut even said to himself, that it's the weakest or the worst even of his novels, it had the worst critical reviews. But, similar to other Vonnegut books which have been, have had mixed reviews, I think it was on the bestseller list or something like six months. When it came out, and it wrote in 75 published in 76, which was just about 10 years after his new publisher had gotten all of his out-of-print books back in the market, and he was fairly popular, but even he agreed that there's a sort of a later Vonnegut interview where he says something like he had a perfect right to write a bad book like everyone else.

Anne: [01:37] So it's, it's, and it has an explicit call to loneliness in it, you know mentioning it as the slogan, that the main character uses for the run for the presidency. As "Lonesome No More!" Do you, do you see echoes of the theme of loneliness, in, in other works?

Pete:

Oh, absolutely. On page 108. He talks about loneliness. And the reason I'm working with this edition. He says "I spoke of American loneliness. It was the only subject I needed for victory, which was lucky. It was the only subject I had." This is just the page after he introduces the button of "Lonesome No More!"

"It was a shame, I said, that I had not come along earlier in American history with my simple and workable anti-loneliness plan. I said that all the damaging excesses of Americans in the past were motivated by loneliness, rather than fondness for sin." So, he's sort of explicitly putting himself up against this sort of puritanical narrative or puritan's narrative of American history. But I think in this edition, the library American edition, there's a really terrific I mean absolutely terrific chronology at the back. And it talks about how in 1946, when he was

doing his MA in anthropology at Chicago, he was very affected by Robert Redfield, who's a Chicago anthropologist, whose theory was that we were supposed to live in folk society. Which was described by Redfield as a society where everyone knew everybody well and associations were for life. There was little change, what one man believed was with all men believed etc. And then Vonnegut, you know repeatedly talks about how we are basically bioengineered or chemically engineered, I think was the words, phrase, he used to live in society. To live with each other.

And sadly, he said, there are no folk societies anymore. So, it's really a running theme what the critic, Peter James Leads, in his 2000 collection identified as a turn from utopian to nightmare in Vonnegut. And I think that's nowhere more on display than in Slapstick where there is this utopian gesture of renaming everyone in the country so that they all have these readymade multi-thousand member families. There's always someone that can turn to. But under underneath that is the idea that essentially the social goods of the welfare state would be supplanted by these families. And it is a novel in which American society becomes chemically controlled alcoholic, drug addicted, violently atomized, and it ultimately simply disappears. I mean there is no America at the end it's devolved into civil wars and ludicrousness and of course the many, many scenes of literal Chaplinian slapstick, that are in the novel.

I think it's a strong theme of loneliness and the absence of folk society that first appeared in Player Piano. Certainly, appears in Galapagos. Absolutely appears in Slaughterhouse Five, his best known and probably best book, which is also where he makes the hard, hard turn to meta fiction, autobiographical narrative, textual [00:11:30] experimentation, and begins, I think, to come to terms with his survivor's guilt about the 1945 bombing of Dresden.

Anne: [05:09] That's a great point that brings us right to today of the resonance potentially of that in this unique historical moment that we find ourselves in, and what questions, resonances, or echoes do you see today?

Pete: Well, I mean, I think the obvious are the rejection of political norms. The rejection of elections. The rejection of our responsibility toward each other in the form of vaccination or based, you know, all the Covid related things but those are symptoms, rather than causes and I think that they represent the extremes of things that have already been happening.

I've been teaching online and writing about being online since 1990, and forever. The sort of utopian promise that this new form of social network would bring us together has time and again proven, at best, elusive and at worst incredibly divisive. And I think it's a symptom of the kinds of things that in the immediate postwar period after Vonnegut's experiences he's looking in the mid-60s, mid-70s and seeing fault lines and fractures, that are most likely irrevocable and unrepairable. And I think reflected today is that sense that American individualism has overtaken any sense of responsibility to community to family to neighborhood, and has resulted in a profound Randian kind of selfishness that permeates the culture and is unthinkable in the same way as any other ideology.

Nicole:

To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for Lonely No More, please visit our website at uwm.edu/c21. If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.