



Book club 1: History & memory

Slaughterhouse-Five
by Kurt Vonnegut



Rules

In this book club you will discuss *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut in a group of 4-6 readers. You will start a conversation by responding to discussion questions about the text. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 quiz questions about the text. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of genuine questions that you have. Each group member consults the group about a part of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of questions for discussion. There are two categories to choose from. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit www.litlab.nl. A teachers' manual and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at www.litlab.nl/docenten.



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Introduction

"You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?"

"No. What do you say, Harrison Starr?"

"I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?'"

What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too.'

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut tells the intriguing story of Billy Pilgrim, who is considered one of the most unique characters in modern American literature. Billy is many things at once: a World War II veteran, a survivor of the bombing of Dresden in 1945, and someone who seems to travel through time and space. The novel follows Billy on his journey to the past while we, the readers, try to piece together Billy's memories of the war, which are tangled up with his experiences in the present. The narrator presents the story of Billy Pilgrim as an 'anti-war novel', but what does that mean exactly? What can we learn about the past and the present by reading a novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five*? In this book club you are invited to discuss these topics, and to find answers to your own questions about the book.

Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

Round 4: Review

Review *Slaughterhouse-Five* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



Question 1

What is the name of the aliens who kidnap Billy Pilgrim?

Question 2

What does the title of the novel refer to exactly?

Question 3

Billy Pilgrim loves books written by one particular science-fiction author. What is his name?

Question 4

What phrase is repeated throughout the novel every time someone, or something, dies?

Question 5

What is Billy's profession after the war?

Answers

1. Tralfamadorians
2. Slaughterhouse-Five is the name of the slaughterhouse in which Billy and other prisoners of war take shelter during the devastating bombing of Dresden.
3. Kilgore Trout
4. 'So it goes.'
5. optometrist



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



Personal connections? 1

Do you know anyone who has experienced war? If so, do you notice any similarities between their experiences and Billy's war memories? If you don't know anyone who has experienced war, what questions would you like to ask them if you could?

Personal connections? 2

What did you already know about the bombing of Dresden before reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*? What is the most important thing you have learned from the novel about this event?

Personal connections? 3

Many war veterans like Billy suffer from mental trauma like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). What do you already know about this mental health condition? Try to find more information about PTSD. Which symptoms do you observe in Billy?

Personal connections? 4

Describe Billy Pilgrim's character in three words. What do you like and dislike about his personality?

Personal connections? 5

The quote mentioned in the introduction of this book club suggests that writing an anti-war book is like writing an anti-glacier book because wars 'were as easy to stop as glaciers'. Do you agree? Explain your perspective.

Personal connections? 6

Consider ongoing conflicts in places like Sudan, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Gaza, and Syria. Do you believe we can gain insights into these contemporary issues by reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*? Share and explain your thoughts.

Personal connections? 7

The narrator points out that while few Americans are familiar with the bombing of Dresden, they typically know about the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Why do you think the Dresden bombing has been largely forgotten?

Personal connections? 8

Billy's time-travelling can be interpreted as a metaphor for how memories can unexpectedly transport us to the past. Do you think reading a novel can also evoke such memories? Share an example from your own reading experience and explain how it works.



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



Food for thought? 1

The narrator presents *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an anti-war novel. What aspects of the novel, in your view, contribute to its anti-war message?

Food for thought? 2

If you could sum up the story's main political message in just one sentence, what would it be and why?

Food for thought? 3

Considering that Kurt Vonnegut published this novel in 1969, during the Vietnam War era, can you pinpoint elements within the story that seem to challenge not just war in general but the Vietnam War specifically?

Food for thought? 4

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut frequently makes use of self-reference, moments where the novel indicates to itself and to the reader that it is indeed a work of fiction and not 'real life'. The opening line 'All this happened, more or less' is a good example. What purpose do you think this technique serves in the storytelling?

Food for thought? 5

Despite the novel's depiction of cruel and violent events, its tone is often humorous and light-hearted. What do you think about the novel's use of humour in combination with its exploration of dark and serious topics? Do you think it works well? Why or why not?

Food for thought? 6

The mantra 'So it goes.' can be interpreted in various ways, such as 'That's how things go.', 'So it dies.', 'So it disappears.', or 'So the story goes.'; which interpretation do you think fits best and why?

Food for thought? 7

Billy discovers that the Tralfamadorians inhabit a reality where events occur simultaneously, rather than in chronological order like in most stories. Do you think *Slaughterhouse-Five* mirrors this unstructured, 'Tralfamadorian' style, and why might this lack of structure be significant? What is the effect of this on us as readers?

Food for thought? 8

According to the narrator, Billy Pilgrim cannot alter the past, present, or future. How would you explain Billy's passive demeanour? What is the purpose of conveying an anti-war narrative if one cannot affect the present or future?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

4

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

7