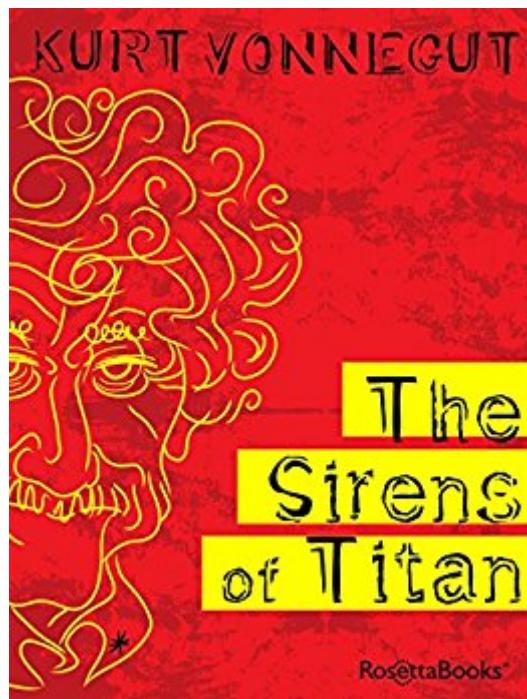


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The Sirens Of Titan



Synopsis

The Sirens of Titan (1959) is Vonnegut's second novel and was on the Hugo ballot with Robert Heinlein's Starship Troopers but lost in what Harlan Ellison has called a monumental injustice. Sirens of Titan is a picaresque novel which almost defies being synposized; it is an interplanetary Candide (lacking perhaps Voltaire's utter bitterness), the book follows lead character Malachi Constant, a feckless but kind-hearted millionaire as he moves through the solar system on his quest for the meaning of all existence. Constant is aided by another tycoon, Winston Rumfoord, who with the help of aliens has actually discovered the fundamental meaning of life (the retrieval of an alien artifact with an inscribed message of greetings). With the assistance of Salo, an alien root and overseeing the alien race, the Tralmafadorians (who also feature in Slaughterhouse-Five), Constant attempts to find some cosmic sense and order in the face of universal malevolence. Together Constant and Rumfoord deal with the metaphysics of "chrono-synclastic infundibula", they deal with the interference of the Tralmafadorians; the novel is pervaded by a goofy, episodic charm which barely shields the readers (or the characters) from the sense of a large and indifferent universe. All of Vonnegut's themes and obsessions (which are further developed and/or recycled in later work) are evident here in this novel which is more hopeful than most of Vonnegut's canon. It is suggested that ultimately Constant learns that only it is impossible to learn, and that fate (and the Tralmafadorians) are impenetrable, unavoidable circumstance. On the basis of this novel, Vonnegut was wholly claimed by the science fiction community (as witnessed by the Hugo nomination), but Vonnegut did not likewise wish to claim the community for himself and the feelings were not reciprocal. He felt from the outset that being identified as a science fiction writer could only limit his audience and trivialize his themes. His recurring character, the hack science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout (who also features in Slaughterhouse-Five), represented to Vonnegut the worst case scenario of the writer he did not wish to become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is one of the most beloved American writers of the twentieth century. Vonnegut's audience increased steadily since his first five pieces in the 1950s and grew from there. His 1968 novel Slaughterhouse-Five has become a canonic war novel with Joseph Heller's Catch-22 to form the truest and darkest of what came from World War II. Vonnegut began his career as a science fiction writer, and his early novels - Player Piano and The Sirens of Titan - were categorized as such even as they appealed to an audience far beyond the reach of the category. In the 1960s, Vonnegut became closely associated with the Baby Boomer generation, a writer on that side, so to speak. Now that Vonnegut's work has been studied as a large body of work, it has been more deeply understood and unified. There is a consistency to his satirical insight, humor and anger which makes his work so synergistic. It seems

clear that the more of Vonnegut's work you read, the more it resonates and the more you wish to read. Scholars believe that Vonnegut's reputation (like Mark Twain's) will grow steadily through the decades as his work continues to increase in relevance and new connections are formed, new insights made.

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Customer Reviews

I've read many of Kurt Vonnegut's novels, and this is perhaps his best one of all (quite a high complement indeed, when considering the man is, in my opinion at least, one of the foremost writers of the 20th century.) Vonnegut's wit is acerbic and as on-target as ever; this time he expells on us about the meaning of life... or the meaninglessness of it. While this is perhaps not his most profound and meaningful novel (which would probably be *Cat's Cradle*), and not his most purposeful one (undoubtedly *Slaughterhouse-Five*), it is perhaps his wittiest and one of his funniest, and works the best as satire. It is astonishingly well-written. Quite a bit leap over his already very good first book, *Player Piano*. This has more of a plot than later novels would, without using much of the non-linear storytelling format that Vonnegut would later make famous use of. At this point, I also feel the need to comment on the review titled "whence..." The reviewer is taking the details of this book too

seriously. The point of this book is not the plot or the details; it is the principle, the style. The reviewer goes to pains to point out scientific inaccuracies and plot holes in the book (yes, the escape maneuver from Mercury is implausible; yes, things happen in the book without any apparent logic or reason; but neither of these matter in the larger context of the book.) This book is not meant to be hard science fiction; nor should it be compared to scientifically stringent fiction by writers such as Arthur C. Clarke (whom the reviewer referenced.) In fact, I would say that this book is not science fiction at all. It is satire, pure and simple.

Today when Kurt Vonnegut is regarded as one of the great American novelists of the second half of the 20th century, it is hard to remember that once upon a time he was regarded as a Sci-fi writer. This was the novel that most solidified that reputation, though it had begun earlier with *PLAYER PIANO* and cemented by both *CAT'S CRADLE* and *SLAUGHTER-HOUSE FIVE*. Only gradually in the early 1970s did it become obvious to all that he was not really a practitioner of Sci-fi as it had become to be defined in the United States. Even in *THE SIRENS OF TITAN* it should have been obvious that he was more an experimental writer exploiting the Sci-fi genre than doing the same sort of thing that Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and their ilk were attempting. For one thing, Vonnegut didn't care much for predicting the future, the scientific plausibility of anything he was saying, or any of the other traditional aspects of Sci-fi. Rather, exploiting the genre on a superficial level gave him a freedom that was lacking in most other mainstream fiction at the time. It gave him license to think and imagine and write about almost anything. This novel ostensibly tells the story of Malachi Constant, hardly the captain of his own fate, but an unwilling tool of fate. More precisely, as we learn, the novel is the story of an alien stranded on Titan, a moon of Saturn, who needs a spare part for his broken space ship. All of human history turns out to have been generated by a distant civilization for the sole purpose of getting Salo, as our alien is known, his missing part. Vonnegut uses farce in telling Malachi's story in order to undercut traditional understandings of God, religion, and the notion that humanity is at the center of the divine narrative.

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