



# And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life

By Charles J. Shields

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From the author of *Mockingbird*?the first authoritative biography of Kurt Vonnegut Jr., a writer who forever altered American literature

In 2006, Charles Shields reached out to Kurt Vonnegut in a letter asking for his endorsement for a planned biography. The first response was no ("A most respectful demurring by me for the excellent writer Charles J. Shields, who offered to be my biographer"). Unwilling to take no for an answer, propelled by a passion for his subject, and already deep into his research, Shields wrote again and this time, to his delight, the answer came back: "O.K." For the next year?a year that ended up being Vonnegut's last?Shields had unprecedented access to Vonnegut and his letters.

While millions know Vonnegut as a counterculture guru, antiwar activist, and satirist of American culture, few outside his closest friends and family knew the full arc of his extraordinary life. *And So It Goes* changes that, painting the portrait of a man who made friends easily but always felt lonely, sold millions of books but never felt appreciated, and described himself as a humanist but fought with humanity at large. As a former public relations man, Vonnegut crafted his image carefully?the avuncular, curly-haired humorist?though he admitted, "I myself am a work of fiction."

The extremely wide and overwhelmingly positive review coverage for *And So It Goes* has been nothing less than extraordinary and confirm it as the definitive biography of Kurt Vonnegut.

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## And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life By Charles J. Shields Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

### An Interview with Amazon

Charles Shields is a writer who writes about writers. He previously penned a bestselling biography of Harper Lee, and now he's written the definitive portrait of Kurt Vonnegut, chronicling Vonnegut's slow and often difficult path to the upper ranks of American literature.



It's not always a pretty portrait. "Kurt wanted to be a writer from the time he was a teenager," Shields told me. But after serving in the military, getting married and having kids, he faced a dreary life behind a desk "which is not the kind of artistic one that he thought he'd have."

Yet the truth about writers is just that: they don't often live the exciting, public lifestyles of a Hemmingway or a Mailer. Most toil in solitary exclusion. It's a desk job in an office of one. It's sedentary, quiet, and often dull. Still, Shields is fascinated by the process of writing, and by the power and reach of the written word, which he discovered at age 15 upon earning a byline for his first high school newspaper story. "That was a magical moment for me," he said.

Shields has worked since to grow and change, to learn from others. That desire led him to study other writers and eventually to become a biographer, joining a group he admiringly refers to as "snoops" and "gossips." (Shields is co-founder of Biographers International Organization.)

When he learned Vonnegut was miffed that no one had tried to write his biography, Shields reached out. He was rebuffed, persisted, and finally received a postcard on which Vonnegut had sketched a self-portrait, smoking a cigarette. The card contained two letters: "OK."

Shields began working with Vonnegut in 2006. A year later, after a two-hour interview session at Vonnegut's Manhattan brownstone, Shields left, returning the next day to learn from the housekeeper that Vonnegut was in a coma. He had gotten tangled in his dog's leash and fell off his front steps, hitting his head. He died a month later at age 84.

"It's too trite to say that it was a shock," Shields said. "I felt a kind of... I felt sort of separate from myself for a little bit. Because I had invested a lot in this, and I had come to like him. And now suddenly, after dubbing me his biographer, he was gone."

Shields's biography was saved by the discovery of 1,500 letters to or from Vonnegut, which had been presumed lost. "So, going on my interviews with him, and all of these long, intimate letters that he wrote, I was able to construct what I felt was a very authentic, personal portrait of this man as writer, father, struggling freelancer, suddenly famous man, divorced parent, divorced husband, over the course of more than fifty years," Shields said.

## Review

“An incisive, gossipy page-turner of a biography.” ?Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

“An engaging, surprising and empathetic page-turner” ?Deirdre Donahue, *USA Today*

“The first truly exacting look into the life of a man who has fascinated so many.” ?*Esquire Magazine*

“Engaging and well paced, the book fills in the reality behind Vonnegut's work” ?Christen Aragoni, *The American Prospect*

“This first authorized biography probes both Vonnegut's creative struggles and family life, detailing his transition from ‘the bowery of the book world’ to counterculture icon. Shields delivers a vivid recreation of Vonnegut's ghastly WWII experiences as a POW during the Dresden firebombing that became the basis for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. . . . Tragedies and triumphs are contrasted throughout, along with an adroit literary analysis that highlights obscure or overlooked influences on Vonnegut. . . . With access to more than 1,500 letters, Shields conducted hundreds of interviews to produce this engrossing, definitive biography.” ?*PW, Starred Review*

“This book fills a much-needed gap, since very little seems to be known about the late Kurt Vonnegut, despite his immense popularity over almost five decades. Shields did a thorough job, interviewing Vonnegut and his friends and family, and examining many letters. Vonnegut was one of the most influential authors of the late twentieth century, and this biography is essential reading.” ?Anis Shivani, *Huffington Post*

“Provide[s] a definitive and disturbing account of the late author, whose ambition and talent transformed him from an obscure science fiction writer to a countercultural icon.” ?Steve Almond, *The Boston Globe*

“[A] thorough and excellent new biography.” ?Tim Gebhart, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“The richest portrait of Vonnegut to date.” ?Craig Fehrman, *Indianapolis Monthly*

“[A] balanced, well-researched study of a flawed yet powerfully imaginative artist.” ?Ariel Gonzalez, *Miami Herald Tribune*

“A triumphant biography: scrupulously researched and powerfully written, compassionate, clear-eyed and compelling. Charles J. Shields manages a rare feat: offering a lucid assessment of Kurt Vonnegut's literary life alongside the moving tale of an American original and a misunderstood hero. From his harrowing survival of the Dresden firebombing through forty years of culture clashes and domestic battles, here is the Vonnegut we all thought we knew and the man we never got to see, a writer of searing wit and wisdom, of driving ambition, and perhaps most of all, of aching loneliness.” ?Jess Walker, author of *The Financial Lives of the Poets and Citizen Vince*

“Vonnegut's life was a fascinating tragicomedy worthy of his best novels, and I can hardly imagine a better teller of that tale than Shields. A superbly researched and above all very entertaining biography.” ?Blake Bailey, author of *Cheever: A Life*

“And So It Goes will entrance lovers of Kurt Vonnegut's fiction. With the blessing of Vonnegut himself and help from scores of Vonnegut's friends, relations, and acquaintances, Charles J. Shields gives us a distinguished, fearless, page-turner of a biography.” ?Carol Sklenicka, author of *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life*

“Vonnegut once said that he kept losing and regaining his equilibrium, and Shields dexterously captures the

ups and downs of Vonnegut's life and work in this definitive biography.” ?Henry L. Carrigan, *Bookpage*

#### About the Author

CHARLES J. SHIELDS is the author of *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life*, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, and *I Am Scout: The Biography of Harper Lee* (Henry Holt Books for Young Readers). He grew up in the Midwest and taught in a rural school in central Illinois for several years. He has been a reporter for public radio, a journalist, and the author of nonfiction books for young people. He and his wife live near Charlottesville, Virginia.

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