

IN THE NEWS

# Kurt Vonnegut’s Daughter: 'My Dad, The Doodler' (INTERVIEW)

Nanette Vonnegut gives us a glimpse into who her father really was from his art to his love of a certain TV star and more...

LAURIE ULSTER · MAY 29, 2014

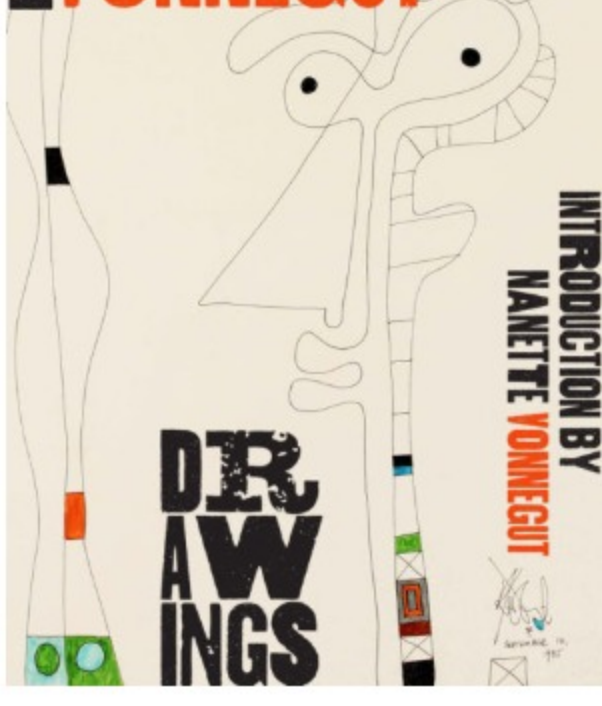
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Nanette Vonnegut at a book reception for 'Kurt Vonnegut Drawings' at the Margo Feiden Galleries in NYC. (Photo: Rommel Demano/Getty Images)

**Kurt Vonnegut** wasn't just one of the most prolific and talented contemporary writers in America (and one of my favorite writers of all time), he was also a prolific and talented artist. Fans of Vonnegut's writing are somewhat familiar with his drawings, which popped up most notably in his novel *Breakfast of Champions*, but they may not know that he designated his daughter **Nanette**, an artist in her own right, as the keeper of a large selection of his artwork.

In the mid-90s, Vonnegut shipped many of his drawings to Nanette and her husband Scott, also an artist, with no specific instructions other than to store them. And there they sat until a few years ago when the couple decided the drawings deserved a life beyond storage. The result: a beautiful and exhilarating book, *Kurt Vonnegut Drawings*.



As a lifelong fan of Kurt Vonnegut, interviewing Nanette was an exciting but intimidating assignment. Like her father, she's whip-smart, thoughtful, and direct. And, luckily for me, she was a lot of fun, too, as she generously shared her very personal memories of Kurt Vonnegut - the author, the artist, and the genius who happened to be her dad.

**There's a lot of whimsy to these drawings, which is in his writing as well. A whimsy and a sadness, at the same time. Do you think they reveal another side of your father that's different from what's in his writing?**

I think it's working another part of the brain. I think some of them are masterful, and some are not quite finished, but I think it shows his potential. I think it shows *our* potential, actually, what we can be capable of. For one reason or another, he was able to tap into many different parts of his brain. He had a huge brain. And he could shift from one thing to the other. But I think it reveals the same thing also, though, like you said, there's whimsy and there's also a lot of ominous parts, too.

I think he just had a lot of horsepower in that head of his.

**As his daughter, and an artist yourself, do you feel that you're getting something from these drawings that his fans like me might not necessarily get?**

Honestly, I didn't take them that seriously when I got them. Now I'm looking closer and thinking, 'Boy, they deserved more.' What I'm getting is his discipline of sticking with it to the very end. And some of them are very well thought out.

I should've taken them out one by one when he sent them and said, 'Dad, this one's great, this one's great,' but I wasn't ready to do that, then.



A family snapshot of Kurt Vonnegut and his daughter Nanette. (Photo courtesy of Nanette Vonnegut.)

He really was quite complimentary to me, as an artist. If I said I didn't like something, he listened. And if I sent him something I wrote? He once told me it was just terrible, he said, 'This is just terrible.' And I laughed, it was funny, I said 'Okay,' and he said, 'Now you'll believe me when I tell you it's good.'

I don't know if I'm trying to learn anything from the drawings, but I'm just appreciating them in a way that I hadn't been able to. It's taken all this time.

**Wasn't your dad into music, too?**

Yes! I grew up with him taking breaks and playing the piano. He was self-taught. I would call it, doodling on the piano. . . in his very distinctive way. You know, he played such funny songs.

'How could you believe me when I told you that I loved you / When you know I've been a liar all my life.'

That's what I remember him playing, glowering at us. We'd say, oh my god, he's doing that song again and [laughs hard at the memory] he's so funny.

He also played clarinet. He wasn't a master of it, but he loved it, so he had that in his life, too.

**What was his favorite music to listen to?**

Well to work to, he played just crappy, background Muzak, like you'd hear in a grocery store because he couldn't be distracted by good music.

**Dave Brubeck**, I remember that playing a lot. I heard a lot of jazz, blues. And he loved The Statler Brothers.



Nanette and her father 'doodling' at the piano. (Photo courtesy Nanette Vonnegut.)

**Really?**

The Statler Brothers. (Laughs)

*The Music Man*. I think of my father, my parents, when I hear *The Music Man*. And you know, it's the kind of good taste that they brought into my life, because they just stamped it in my bones. I never forgot that music.

**A random question: What were his thoughts on the Internet?**

He had no use for it. None! He looked down his nose at it. I think he was upset that people don't read anymore, that there's not a hands-on, tactile connection with books and paper and. . . doing something with your hands. He couldn't make room for the Internet.

You know, he loved his television. He really admired good television.

**What shows did he like?**

He loved Judge Judy. 'Cause she's so fair. Dad always loved it when people were weighing in intelligently...

**And she's funny, too, and she's always right.**

He liked it when people were fair and right.

I wish they had gotten together. It would have been so great. They would have had so much fun together. That didn't happen.

**I went to see your Dad speak, I was in college at the time. And he told the crowd that he was a happy person, and that he was an optimist. And people responded as if they thought he was joking, and he said, 'No, no, no, I'm really an optimist.' Would you agree with his self-assessment?**



Kurt Vonnegut at his New York City home in 1972. (Photo by Santi Visali/Getty Images)

No. He was very tough and able to get through things in a very dignified [way], and, of course, he had a whole lot of horrible trials thrown his way. The war, losing his mother, and with grace, with my mother's help, when his sister died, they took on a bigger family. And that all worked out.

He would tell me to stop being too optimistic because I'd be horribly disappointed. Once I said, 'Dad, things are really looking up.' He said, 'Ohhh, darling, as soon as you start thinking that, it will turn to shit.' He said that. When I was 15. And I don't mind. In a funny way. . . why wouldn't you think that way with what he'd seen in life?

I remind myself of my father a lot, you know, what's the next shit pie going to be thrown at me? He would say that, and laugh.

**And yet, had a big sense of humor.**

His greatest gift to me is that. The humor in the face of whatever's going to get thrown in your way, you can always find humor, I swear, in everything. And he did.

His favorite quote was said by a politician – I don't know who it was: 'It's hopeless but it's not serious.'

**His writing was always plain and it would be a sad or dark thought with this liit of humor in it.**

Yeah. Well somebody was saying they saw an original manuscript of *Slaughterhouse Five*, and in pencil he wrote, "And so it goes." This was like 'how do I mark this moment?' And there it is. And his timing is brilliant. He's like a great performer, a great comedian. . . you want to see [what he did] as a dance. I always am thinking of dance when I think of Dad, the jitterbug. All that footwork he does is so beautiful.

As I get older, I can see how magnificent he was, but he was just my Dad, and he had very human moments. But, I wonder, how do you get so big? How come him, not another...? Well, there's a reason. He's extraordinary. That's all there is to it.

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