

Welcome to the Slaughterhouse

Kurt Vonnegut biography reads like a nasty tweet

Behind every great writer hides an asshole. Dostoyevsky was a religious freak with a gambling problem. William Burroughs plinked a slug through his wife's forehead. Faulkner guzzled a half-gallon of rye every day before noon. Shakespeare only willed his wife the spare bed.

I'm far from a great writer, but I sure can be an asshole sometimes. It's true. Maybe you should stop reading this.

Listen: Charles J. Shields has come unglued by loathing. Among his other nebulous pastimes, Shields is a biographer, and his latest subject is the late American countercultural writer Kurt Vonnegut, author of some 20-plus works of fiction and non-fiction. Shields' book, *And So It Goes—Kurt Vonnegut: A Life* (Henry Holt & Co.; \$30), derives its title from the fatalistic, cosmically sad refrain Vonnegut employs throughout his 1969 masterpiece *Slaughterhouse-5*.

A self-declared atheist, pacifist, feminist, humanist and chain-smoker of Pall Malls, Vonnegut is an oddly divisive figure: Adored by millions of fans and writers, he nonetheless draws ire from critics who believe his brand of absurdist, dystopic satire is best relegated to the genres of science fiction and young adult reading.

The first half of Shields' bio depicts Vonnegut's early life and burgeoning career, leading up to the publication of *Slaughterhouse-5*. The writing is swift and engaging, and Shields — with almost unlimited access to Vonnegut's archives — paints a lively picture of Vonnegut's family life during the Great Depression and his devastating experiences as a soldier in World War II. All of this background makes for fascinating reading. Then something goes sour.

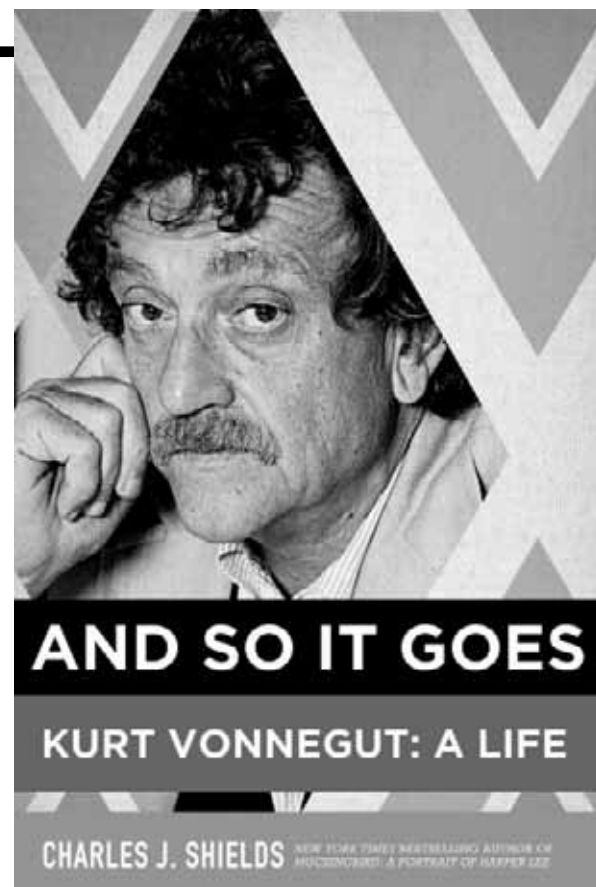
A writer's literary tone is difficult to parse, but were I to take a shot at deciphering Shields' character from his words, I might say something like this: Charles Shields exhibits the

kind of shocked disenchantment and psychological burn-out suffered by many wrongheaded biographers who appear constitutionally unprepared to confront the all-too-human foils of their subjects. Shields just doesn't have the stomach for this kind of work; he is too anal and earnest and pie-eyed. For instance, he seems dismayed to discover that Vonnegut was given to occasional fits of anger, envy and obtuseness, emotions that Shields almost invariably labels "immature."

At some point, the biographer's disappointment curdles into rancor, and he can scarcely conceal his disgust for Vonnegut's professional jealousies, his remoteness as a parent, his ideological hypocrisies. As Shields unearths every venal sin and ethical hiccup, his writing grows shrill, nit-picky and condescending, sort of like a hall monitor on a grade-A power trip. But in correcting one error, a fool often rushes into its opposite, and Shields, a man once under the thrall of Vonnegut's writing, obviously feels it is his duty to call out the real Kurt Vonnegut.

He becomes trite and wheedling, and prone to error. For instance, Shields notes that Vonnegut, an avowed socialist, once sampled caviar on first-class flight (gasp!), but then relegates to a footnote the fact that Vonnegut donated to a "rescue fund" for Richard Yates and, further, that he organized another fund to pay for the medical bills of paralyzed author Andre Dubus. Shields says that Vonnegut's famous "chalk talk" was published in *A Man Without a Country*, when in fact it first appeared nearly a quarter century earlier in *Palm Sunday*.

It's difficult to say exactly where Shields jumps the shark. Whatever the specific moment, by the conclusion of his biography the poor man has completely succumbed to the kind of apoplectic outrage one witnesses in children not getting their way. Am I calling Shields immature? Maybe.



More precisely, he seems the sort of reductive Manichean who needs to believe in the catholic purity of immaculate heroes living in an unambiguous universe of good vs. evil.

And here I yield the floor to Vonnegut himself, and bow out: "I am not pure," Vonnegut said at a 1973 rededication Wheaton College Library. "We are not pure. Our nation is not pure. And I insist that at the core of the American tragedy ... is the illusion engendered by World War Two: that in the war between good and evil we are always, perfectly naturally, on the side of good. This is what makes us so unrestrained in the uses of weaponry." **EW**

Preserving Sacred Cultures

Ancient Jun is modern delicious

Jerry Smith's quiet corner of the universe lies down Willamette Street between Cappella Market and Tsunami Books. Like many Eugene hippie-folk, Smith is a private man; he doesn't reveal much and, until now, has never granted an interview. Even now he tells me he's been having second thoughts about this.

But despite this reclusion, Smith's small health food company, Herbal Junction, has caused quite a stir among fermenters and foodies all across the country. Until only a year or so ago, Smith was the first and only known commercial brewer of the probiotic drink known as Jun.

Smith sits his small frame in a chair across from me in the tiny storefront and thanks an attendant as he's handed a cup of tea. His usual blend. I'm given a small glass of Flower Power Jun — it's golden colored and topped by a fizzy lace of white bubbles. There's a musty smell of herbs in the air and a buzz of activity in the back room, where a few workers are blending teas. Smith says he wants to dispel the rumors.

Jun is, from a layman's point of view, a drink similar in many respects to kombucha. A major difference is that the Jun culture prefers strictly green tea and raw honey to kombucha's sugar and cooler fermenting temperatures. According to Smith, a true Jun culture is completely bacterial, whereas kombucha cultures are a mix of yeast and bacteria.

Maintaining the integrity of that pure, bacterial culture has become Smith's life work and separates him, in that respect, from all other purported Jun fermenters. He even at one point collaborated with academics at Cornell University, who gave him tips on how to keep out wild yeasts. But it's a constant battle, he says

"I'm trying to follow the sacred path of it," says Smith. "I'm practicing what I was taught."



It used to bother him that people were brewing, bottling and calling their cultures Jun, but Smith says he's let that go. He recognizes the importance of drinking any healthful, fermented drinks, regardless of what people call them.

"I used to have a lot of mixed feelings about it," says Smith, "but now it's just gotten so out of control. I wish people would just do their own thing, make up their own names."

Smith was given his first culture and taught to brew at the age of 25 by a Chinese herbalist living in Wonder, Ore. It was a 1,500-year-old culture that had been passed down through Tibetan lore. But Smith says he was young and inexperienced, and eventually he neglected the culture and threw it away. He came back to the herbalist for another but was turned away. Smith didn't come across another one for years; then, during a period of illness, he was gifted one by a roaming Tibetan family. This culture was allegedly 800 years old, and it's the one he uses today.

Smith says the original, 1,500-year-old unadulterated culture has been used in fermentation at the City of 10,000 Buddhas monastery in Ukiah, Calif. Heng Shun, a monk at

10,000 Buddhas, says he was around when Jun showed up there in the late 1970s.

"This was first introduced to some of the monks in the monastery by one of our lay-members from Eugene, Ore., at the time," Shun says. "Several monks continued to use the tea for a couple of years."

Shun's description of the Jun gifter aptly fits that of Smith's first mentor: a proficient Chinese herbalist, a lay Buddhist monk who had been living in Oregon. Shun says he believes that this person is now living in Hawaii.

Many of the Jun stories Smith can't qualify. He says most of them are contrived from bits and pieces of truth he's let out over the years, though now these stories have taken on myths of their own. He says he knows nothing about Loa Tzu ever possessing heirloom cultures, as one tale would have it, and he can't speak to the tales about the anarcho-Buddhist Khampa monks-turned-warriors from Tibet who travel on motorcycle with swords on one hip and flasks of Jun on the other.

Smith can say that Jun is indeed consumed throughout the Tibetan highlands, and that a protégé of his who traveled to Tibet found monks walking from one mountaintop monastery to the next, with containers of Pu'er tea, yak milk and Jun strapped across their chests.

You've probably seen Herbal Junction's 6-ounce bottles of Jun in stores like Sundance and The Kiva. The elixirs are packed with medicinal Chinese herbs whose healing properties are further enhanced in combination with the Jun. The Jun "opens the channels of the body," Smith tells me, allowing other medicines to catalyze within the body; he says this is evidenced by his own healing process. At one point, Smith says, he was even contracted to brew a special batch with maple syrup for an ill Jerry Garcia, who was allergic to honey.

The stories of sacred elixirs like Jun will never have a clear-cut history. And that's where the beauty lies: in the mystery of the sacred, preserved and known only by those who choose to sit, learn and commune with them. **EW**