

Winter

READING

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SARAH DECKER



fiction

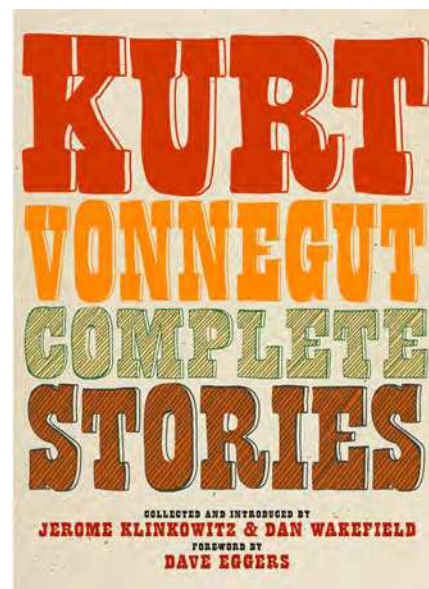
The Refugees by Viet Thanh Nguyen. Grove Press, \$25.



Since 2016, Viet Thanh Nguyen has published three incredible books that offer a vibrant glimpse into the world of Vietnamese-American life and history, as well as invaluable insights into the effects of the war itself. The first, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, is nonfiction and an extension of Nguyen's academic career. The others, *The Sympathizer* and this collection of short stories, *The Refugees*, are his first published works of fiction. I highly recommend all three, but *The Refugees* is a perfect starting point, given its brevity and accessibility. These stories take place in the U.S. and Vietnam, and though varied in character and tone, all serve to communicate a vital and lucid vision of Vietnamese-American identities and realities.

For me, these stories felt like befriending a community I knew existed yet had only caught vague glimpses of from the outside before suddenly being given access to it, in very colorful and complex detail. Nguyen does a terrific job of lacing background information into narrative, offering a stunning opportunity to consider life in a tight-knit minority community trying to retain, but also refashion, its identity in a new country after a dirty war whose legacy lives on in overwhelming, complicated ways. — *Paul Quillen*

Kurt Vonnegut: Complete Stories Seven Stories Press, \$45.



When Kurt Vonnegut died in 2007 at the age of 84, American literature lost not only one of its most distinct and inventive voices but also the finest and most durable representative of a generation of writers whose output and impact is not likely to be repeated. Vonnegut, who came of age during the Great Depression before witnessing the firebombing of Dresden as a private in the Second World War, cut his teeth writing short stories for slick popular magazines in the 1950s. It's here that he developed a voice that was clear and plainspoken, almost avuncular, and yet beneath his homey style burbled a visionary impulse that was equal parts prophesy, moral outrage and Twain-like satire aimed at the apocalyptic idiocy of the damned human race.

"The moral story is gone," Dave Eggers laments in the foreword to *Kurt Vonnegut: Complete Stories*, an absolute brick of a book (more than 900 pages!) that compiles everything from previously published stories to those dug posthumously out of the archives. Early stories reveal a young writer tip-toeing gently but diligently into his craft, penning fables that read like the chiding pastorals of Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce. It's the later, mid-career work — and there's a ton of it here — that captures this great American author in full stride. Classic corkers like "Harrison Bergeron" and "Welcome to

I was listening to a rerun of *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* on KLCC the other day, and it featured an interview with prolific romance novelist Nora Roberts (who is also a prolific crime writer under the name J.D. Robb.)

When asked if she ever gets writer's block, she responded that she'd never let herself believe in it. "Writing is as much a habit as it is an art and a craft. If you walk away from it, you are breaking the habit. If you are writing crap, you are still writing and you can fix it."

I love that, and while I have experienced writer's block, I've always battled it by sitting down and writing.

One thing I've never experienced is reader's block. It too is more than a habit; it's a mental getaway or sometimes a reality check. I can always sit down and read, no matter where I am or what mood I'm in. And this year, yet again, *Eugene Weekly* presents you with all that we have read and enjoyed this year. — *Camilla Mortensen*

'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid.'

— JANE AUSTEN, *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

■ = OREGON AUTHOR OR OREGON-CENTRIC BOOK