



U.S. President Ronald Reagan, photographed with his wife Nancy during his inaugural parade in 1981.

aim at the 1968 Brezhnev doctrine (that the establishment of a communist regime was irreversible), the Reagan doctrine led to a substantial increase of U.S. aid to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan and also to the opponents of Marxist regimes in Africa, Asia, and Central America. The U.S. president even contested Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. In addition, Reagan directed the largest expansion and diversification of America's military and nuclear forces since the late 1940s in order to establish U.S. predominance and force concessions on the U.S.S.R.¹⁴

Although the tens of thousands of nuclear warheads in the Soviet arsenal were undoubtedly a very real threat, the U.S.S.R. was in a far weaker position in 1980 than in 1950. Both the arms race and the enormous spending in support of communist governments throughout the world were bankrupting the U.S.S.R. The Western media eagerly passed along reports of long lines for food and other basic staples in major Soviet cities. The lengthy quagmire in Afghanistan both eroded popular support for the Soviet regime—the leadership of which changed three times in rapid succession from 1982 to 1985—and diverted increasingly scarce monetary resources from the national economy. The American public's perception of the U.S.S.R.'s might had diminished considerably by the middle of the 1980s, eventually undermining Reagan's claims about the gravity of the Soviet threat. Reagan gradually toned down his belligerent rhetoric by the mid-1980s, setting the stage for the Cold War's

somewhat anticlimactic ending.

THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Mikhail Gorbachev brought an alternative political vision to the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. in 1985. He was the first Soviet leader who came from the

new generation of scientists, engineers, technicians, administrators, diplomats, intelligence analysts, lawyers, and teachers, all of whom had benefited from the heavy investment the Kremlin had made, during the 1950s and 1960s, in mass higher education. The purpose had been to strengthen the Soviet system in its competition with capitalism.... It is difficult to educate, however, without provoking curiosity. That quality, in turn, produces questioning, which leads to criticism, which if unanswered invites dissatisfaction with the status quo.¹⁵

Although Gorbachev was a committed communist, he also recognized that the U.S.S.R.'s political and economic policies were unsustainable. Not long after coming to power, he proposed a pair of sweeping reforms designed to revive Soviet society. Whereas *perestroika* ("restructuring") opened unparalleled avenues for foreign, especially Western, investment in the U.S.S.R., *glasnost* ("openness") encouraged greater individual and social freedoms for Soviet citizens. Gorbachev also encouraged the governments of communist states in Eastern Europe to follow suit.

Even though his policies clearly shifted away from the hardline attitudes of his predecessors (and many of his contemporaries), Gorbachev's goal was neither to destroy the U.S.S.R. from within nor even to end the Cold War. A series of summits between Reagan and Gorbachev from 1985 through 1988 revealed that his relatively enlightened policy changes did not automatically create trust and goodwill from the U.S., which still recalled Khrushchev's mixed signals. Gorbachev took further steps, though, to demonstrate his sincere wish for improved relations, such as initiating the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and signing the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which mandated the dismantling of nearly four times more warheads by the U.S.S.R. than by the U.S.

against technocracy”¹⁰⁴ like that represented by the amoral researchers at General Forge and Foundry.

Chapters 106–115: The Ice-Nine Genie Leaves its Bottle

This section represents the climax of the novel’s action. Soon after Dr. Von Koenigswald discovers the frozen corpse of “Papa” in his golden bed, he accidentally kills himself as well by touching some of the mysterious new ice to his own lips. Jonah angrily confronts the Hoenikker children about how “Papa” got his hands on *ice-nine*, after which they all begin frantically cleaning up the remnants of the mess as though they had done so before. The siblings begin bickering among themselves, and Newt directly accuses Frank of being irresponsible in getting his “fancy job” from “Papa” by promising him “something better than the hydrogen bomb.”¹⁰⁵ Frank defends himself by pointing out that each of them has basically done the same thing: “His glassy smile went away and he turned sneeringly nasty for a moment—a moment in which he told [Angela] with all possible contempt, “I bought myself a job, just the way you bought yourself a tomcat husband, just the way Newt bought himself a week on Cape Cod with a Russian midget!”

Jonah quickly comprehends the terrifying implications of Frank’s outburst:

*I gathered that the Republic of San Lorenzo and the three Hoenikkers weren’t the only ones who had ice-nine. Apparently, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had it, too. The United States had acquired it through Angela’s husband, whose plant in Indianapolis was understandably surrounded by electrified fences and homicidal German shepherds. And Soviet Russia had come by it through Newt’s little Zinka, that winsome troll of the Ukrainian ballet. I was without comment.*¹⁰⁶

The Hoenikkers’ exposed selfishness justifies Lyman Enders Knowles’s calling them “[b]abies full of rabies”¹⁰⁷ during his brief appearance in the novel in chapter 28. However, the clandestine processes by which *ice-nine* proliferated among both superpowers parallel those of nuclear weapons development during the Cold War, thereby implicating not only Vonnegut’s fictional characters, but also the technocrats and politicians of the Cold War world for lusting after such



Kurt Vonnegut, photographed by his daughter Edie Vonnegut, in 2006.

Photograph: Edie Vonnegut / AP

exceptionally deadly knowledge. Jonah makes this broader connection clear by lamenting “What hope can there be for mankind...when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as *ice-nine* to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?”¹⁰⁸

After carefully disposing of all the *ice-nine* they can find in the room, the Hoenikkers tell Jonah the story of how they acquired their three chips of *ice-nine* on the Christmas Eve when their father died. Unbeknownst to them, their father had been experimenting with *ice-nine* in the kitchen of their Cape Cod cottage when he died of a sudden heart attack while the children were out walking on the beach. When they returned home with a stray Labrador retriever, the dog licked a rag covered in frozen *ice-nine* and instantly froze stiff itself. When they looked for their father to report this odd event, the children found him stiff as well, though from far less unusual causes. None of the Hoenikkers can recall which of them proposed dividing the *ice-nine* amongst themselves, but “there was no talk of morals”¹⁰⁹ in regard to doing so, as was sadly typical for the family. Their last act in the process of hiding their father’s discovery is both a practical necessity and a grotesquely comical echo of the methods used to dispose of murdered prisoners in the Nazi death camps; they dispose of the frozen dog by putting him in the oven.

Upon concluding their most recent sanitation of *ice-nine*, Jonah and the Hoenikkers return to the battlements directly above the contaminated bedroom for the beginning of the ceremonies honoring the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy, having also spread the convenient lie “among the household staff that ‘Papa’ was feeling much better.”¹¹⁰ Unaware of the



The city of Dresden, Germany, lay in ruins following bombing by Allied forces during World War II. Vonnegut survived the Allied firebombing of Dresden while a POW there and later wrote about that experience in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969).

painting. Jonah goes off to find him, and they discuss Bokononism and the noble ways in which the Castles and Angela faced their deaths in the aftermath of the storm. The Castles returned to the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle to offer whatever ultimately inconsequential aid they could, whereas Angela picked up her clarinet and played, much as the orchestra on the *Titanic* is reputed to have continued to play until the moment the great ship sank. As he did upon discovering the note at the site of the mass-suicide, Jonah rages against Bokonon and his book's seeming lack of reassurance; he even directs a racial slur against Bokonon before Newt suggests that the most useful course of action remaining is to "find some neat way to die, too."¹¹⁸ Jonah responds by saying that he has come to believe that his *karass* has been "working night and day for maybe half a million years"¹¹⁹ to get him to the top of Mount McCabe with "some magnificent symbol"¹²⁰ to leave there. He cannot, however, conceive of what that symbol might be (though it surely is not Hazel's flag).

While he is saying this, their car passes a black man sitting by the side of the road, and Jonah belatedly realizes he has finally seen Bokonon. He loops back to speak with Bokonon, asking him simply what he is thinking. Bokonon replies that he, like Jonah and Vonnegut, is drawing his book to a close and hands Jonah a piece of paper with its final lines written on it. As Susan Farrell notes, "The history that the narrator is writing, the novel *Cat's Cradle* itself, and *The Books of Bokonon* all become inextricably intertwined in this

final page. Each begins with a warning that the pages contained within are nothing but lies, and each can be read as a history of human stupidity."¹²¹

Bokonon's final lines (and thus the final lines of the other two books as well) involve using *ice-nine* to turn himself into a reclining statue atop Mount McCabe that perpetually thumbs its nose at God. Such a gesture acknowledges God's existence while simultaneously undermining the moral and/or ethical significance thereof, making it the perfect closing statement for a writer who elsewhere called himself both a "Christ-worshipping agnostic"¹²² and a "scorner of the notion that there is a God who cares how we are or what we do."¹²³

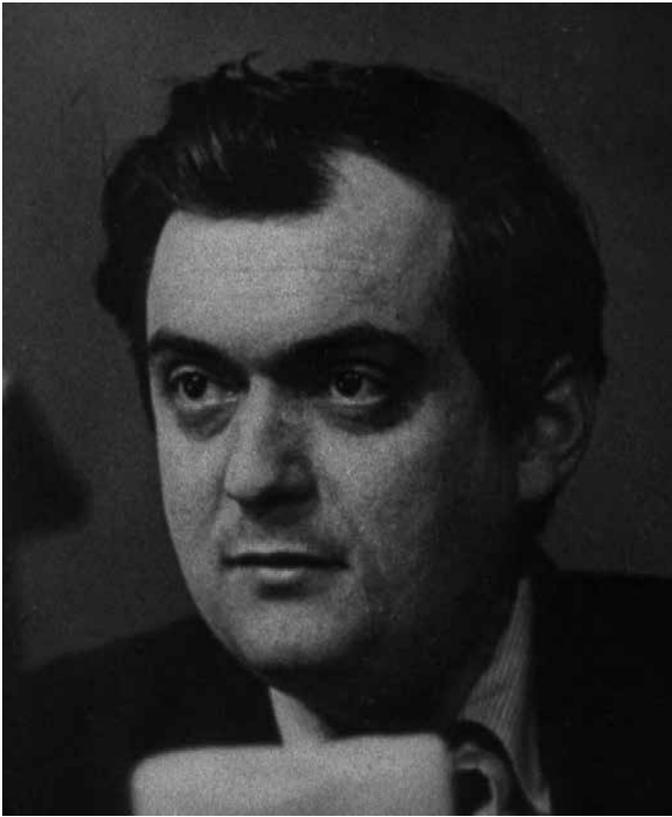
CONTEXT: VONNEGUT'S EARLY NOVELS

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s career as a writer only began after some fairly significant troubles in his early life. Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1922, he served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He was captured by German forces during the Battle of the Bulge late in 1944 and thereafter survived the Allied firebombing of the city of Dresden in February 1945 while a military prisoner there. He eventually wrote about this experience in his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), but he published several other books—including *Cat's Cradle* (1963)—well before he turned his attention to writing directly about his intense wartime trauma.

Vonnegut got a job in Schenectady, New York, in the late 1940s, where he wrote public relations copy for the General Electric Research Laboratory. While employed there, he began writing fiction and published his first story in 1950. Both encouraged by this success and disillusioned by his work at General Electric, he quit his job and moved his family—which by the end of the decade included his wife, their three biological children, and his sister's three orphaned sons—to the Cape Cod village of West Barnstable, Massachusetts, where he started work on his first novel.

Player Piano

Each of the first three novels Vonnegut published contained elements that would later be combined in *Cat's Cradle*. His debut, *Player Piano* (1952), is a **dystopian** novel that is based significantly on Vonnegut's own negative experiences as an employee



Screenshot of director Stanley Kubrick from the trailer for his film Dr. Strangelove (1964).

Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)

Dr. Strangelove offers some of the most bizarrely iconic images (Major T. J. “King” Kong riding a nuclear bomb out of the cargo-hold of his plane like a rodeo pony) and one-liners (“Gentlemen, you can’t fight in here...this is the War Room!”) of Cold War black humor in telling the story of an insane American general named Jack D. Ripper who attempts to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the U.S.S.R. in order to safeguard his bodily fluids from communist infiltration. The film alternates between the general’s office, a gathering of military and political leaders at the Pentagon, and a B-29 bomber that is on course to deliver a nuclear bomb to the heart of the U.S.S.R. The main wrinkle in the story is that if the attack succeeds, it will trigger a secret “Doomsday Machine” that will destroy the entire world; as a result, the American and Soviet governments have to set aside their distrust and animosity in order to stop the plane from getting through to its target. Unfortunately, that task is entrusted to a cast of characters who are themselves only slightly less mad than General Ripper, dooming



Tom Lehrer performing at UCLA in 1960.

them (and thus the entire world) to a catastrophic failure at the end of the film.

The Comic-Satirical Songs of Tom Lehrer

Although he enjoyed a long career as a mathematician and college teacher, Tom Lehrer became wildly popular in the 1950s and 1960s for his comic musical performances in which he accompanied himself on the piano. While most of his songs were witty tunes about academic life or scientific concepts,¹⁴¹ many of his most memorable compositions also provided satirical commentary on such Cold War issues as nuclear war and civil defense. “We Will All Go Together When We Go” (1958) is a tongue-in-cheek celebration of the fact that there will be no need for attending funerals in the aftermath of a nuclear war because everyone will die at roughly the same time. One of the songs’ most memorable verses runs as follows: “And we will all bake together when we bake/There’ll be nobody present at the wake/With complete participation/In that grand incineration/Nearly three billion hunks of well-done steak.”¹⁴² In a similarly dark fashion, “So Long, Mom (A Song for World War III)” (1965) purports

The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home—if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel—in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls, tomb-like though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallizing the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker's construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the west wall like runic ideograms. Variations on these ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers, the unique signature of the island. In the mornings, if Traven was awake, he would always find the sun divided into its five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these to make a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of beri beri, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside it a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blonde-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand painful memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implement, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling legs and arms with indifference.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing strip and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectilinear shadows made them appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he would sit, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the atoll.

Above him, the five apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth.

The Lakes and the Spectres

The lakes had been designed to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the spectres of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble forward across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting soundlessly at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven would return to the bunker and lie on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife's cheeks, floated on the river of his memory.

The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realized he would never leave the island.

At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted his small cache of food, and the symptoms of beri beri had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the palliasse of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualizing them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off towards the light. Within a hundred yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken coca-cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. From the plain below it the recording towers rose into the air like obelisks. Traven walked down towards them. On their grey walls were the faint outlines of human forms in stylized poses, the flash-shadows of the target community burnt into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic models. Most of them lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral, the sunlight reflected off their backs.

Traven advanced towards them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides. This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile, the half-submerged hulks, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, like the abandoned wombs that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualize sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. There were two thousand of them, each a perfect cube 15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of a gigantic dieplate, devised to stamp out rectilinear volumes of air the size of a house. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze. As he walked from the perimeter line into the centre of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded.

Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid: the walls of the remainder were of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt the sense of fatigue that had dogged him for so many months begin to lift. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. He walked on into the centre of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back to one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. For the first

time since his arrival at the island the sense of dissociation set off by its derelict landscape began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realized that he had lost himself. However he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, he found himself back again at his starting point. Only when darkness came did he manage to make his escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses. He pulled them across the atoll on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blonde-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like a fragmenting mirror of himself. Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebro-spinal reached towards the future). Each evening when he woke he would eat without appetite and then wander among the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days on end.

The Submarine Pens

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a solitary camera tower, their faces watching him expressionlessly. He realized that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. At about this time he once again saw the distant light beckoning, and decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants. The warning light winked at intervals from the apex of a metal scaffold. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the pier outside. Greedily, Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions stored inside one of the metal shacks.

With this change of diet, the beri beri receded, and during the next days he returned often to the camp. It appeared to be the site of a biological expedition. In the field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realizing that these were the most appropriate captions. Thus embroidered, the charts took on many layers of associations.)

Traven: In Parenthesis

Elements in a quantal world:

- The terminal beach.
- The terminal bunker.
- The blocks.

* * *

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future=Levels in a spinal landscape=zones of significant time.

August 5. Found the man Traven. A strange derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffering from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him ...

He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project—unstated—but I suspect