

## Previewing the big new Vonnegut biography

*Author Charles Shields spent time with—and uncovered secrets about—Indianapolis’s most accomplished son.*

Sooner or later, every major writer gets a Big Definitive Biography—a 500-page, five-years-in-the-making book packed with surprising details, flashes of personality, and the full birth-to-death story. In 2004, Charles Shields wrote this kind of biography for Harper Lee, the beloved author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Then he turned to his next subject: Indianapolis’s own Kurt Vonnegut.

Shields’s *And So It Goes* comes out this month, but, back in 2006, his first task was getting Vonnegut on board. The biographer wrote Vonnegut a letter asking for his cooperation; Vonnegut sent back a sketch of himself smoking a cigarette, along with this caption: “a most respectful demurring.” So Shields tried again, outlining his own background—growing up in Illinois, dabbling in the 1970s counterculture—in a second letter. Vonnegut sent back another sketch, this time captioned with one word: “O.K.”

Shields ended up sitting down with Vonnegut twice, in addition to interviewing 125 contemporaries and tracking down 1,500 letters. Those sources make *And So It Goes* the best portrait of Vonnegut to date. Vonnegut’s parents both came from wealthy Indianapolis families, and his mother liked to dress her children in expensive outfits from L. S. Ayres, the city’s best department store (and a building designed by Vonnegut’s architect grandfather). But she didn’t like to talk or show affection to them—and this only worsened once the Great Depression wiped out the family’s finances.

While his older brother and sister received private educations, Vonnegut had to attend Shortridge High School. During his time there, Vonnegut’s mother decided she could earn money as a writer and enrolled in a class at Indianapolis’s YWCA. “Hearing her talk about editors, guidelines, and submissions,” Shields writes, “her son became intrigued with the idea of being an author.” Vonnegut still needed something to write about, and, according to Shields, he found it in his mother’s suicide and his time as a World War II P.O.W.

After the war, Vonnegut got married and did P. R. for General Electric. He also started writing short stories and novels. It took years for him to break through, but, when he did, it was as both an author and a college-campus guru—an angry voice decrying corporations, consumerism, and environmental abuse. But Shields’s research reveals that Vonnegut’s actions rarely lined up with his image. In his first novel, *Player Piano*, Vonnegut satirized General Electric’s power and ambition—but he also used his connections there to play the stock market. Vonnegut grew his hair out and added a George Harrison mustache—but only after he saw how many students were buying his books. When it comes to authenticity, Shields likes to draw a contrast between his two biographical subjects. “Harper Lee was Scout,” he says. “Kurt Vonnegut was in public relations. He knew how to create an image.”

That image helped propel Vonnegut's *Slaughter-house Five* to the top of the *New York Times* Best-seller list. It took longer for him to find an audience at home. In 1969, Vonnegut did a book signing for *Slaughter-house Five* at L. S. Ayres; only a few family members show up. By 2007, of course, Indianapolis was announcing the Year of Vonnegut. That also turned out to be the year of Vonnegut's death, and Shields spoke with him the day before he fell down some stairs and slipped into a coma. Vonnegut liked to call Shields late at night to see how his biography was coming along. "My sense was that he was very lonely," Shields says.

*And So It Goes* shows that Vonnegut, an often unhappy man (and a miserable husband), was lonely for a reason. But it also reminds us of his wonderful books—and of the ways his hometown helped shape those books. "Indiana was everything to him," Shields says. "He told me, 'No matter where I go, I will always be writing about Indianapolis.'"