

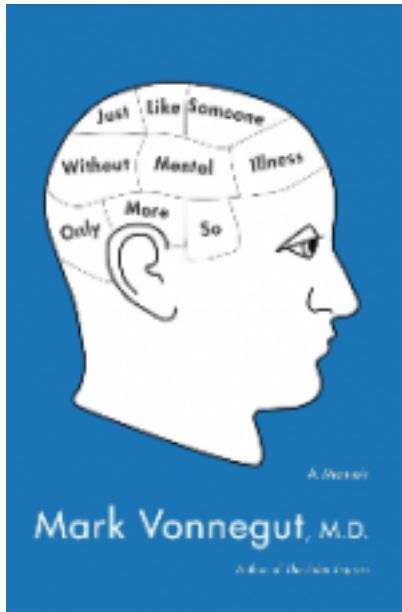
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Theme Essay by Martha Nichols

God Bless You, Mark Vonnegut, for Writing a Realistic Memoir

I will always love good stories, the ones that take you on a rollercoaster journey of emotions, revealing recesses of the human heart. I'm a writer and a teacher of writing, and classic narrative structure is seared into my skull—to borrow an image from Mary Karr, creator of such literary rides as *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit*.



When it comes to memoirs about mental illness and addiction, though, I've grown suspicious of "good stories" in recent years. Their controlled narrative arcs seem worlds apart from what I experienced when visiting my aging, bipolar mother in the midst of a mental breakdown.

Terrified, she would bombard me with stories of the most dramatic kind—raw, metaphorical, taboo-breaking—but they changed each time she told them. During a visit with her a couple of years back, not long before she died, this thought came to me like a sudden punch: *Maybe nothing she's ever told me is true.*

As much as I've appreciated mental-illness-related memoirs by writers like Karr, William Styron, and Martha Manning—they've been touchstones during my own brushes with depression as well as my mother's episodes—there's something about the neatness of their structures that I don't trust.

I feel this way even about one of my past favorites: *The Eden Express*. Mark Vonnegut, son of the famous Kurt, wrote his first "memoir of insanity" almost four decades ago (it was originally published in 1975). While I still appreciate its many strengths, I no longer fully buy into it.

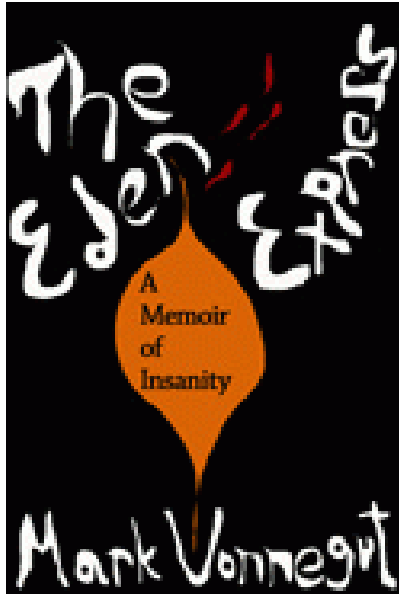
Fortunately, Vonnegut's 2010 sequel, *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*, continues his story

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past a traditional happy ending. When it was first released, *Publisher's Weekly* called the book a "slightly subversive memoir." I wouldn't say slightly. One of the many pleasures of his wryly titled second memoir is that it exposes conventional recovery narratives—including Vonnegut's earlier one—for what they are: tales that have been massaged for dramatic impact.

I remember inhaling *The Eden Express* in the late '70s, gripped by its powerful narrative: young Mark, trying hard to be a "good hippie," lighting out for British Columbia with college friends to live on a commune—and ending up hospitalized during the course of three psychotic breaks.



Psychosis doesn't lend itself to linear plotlines, but *The Eden Express* follows a familiar story arc. There's the lead-up to the crash, with poetic forebodings or just plain weird behavior. There's life on the ward, complete with comic fellow inmates, clueless psychiatrists (Vonnegut describes "Dr. Dale" as having "the emotional depth of a slightly retarded potato"), and moments of connection with Somebody Who Understands ("Dr. McNice"). There's the slow recovery that makes the sufferer wistful but wiser.

Reading this story again more than thirty years later, I'm struck by the benighted attitudes toward mental illness in the '60s and '70s—think R.D. Laing and psychosis as shamanic journey—and by the inevitable navel gazing that going nuts entails. In *The Eden Express*, Vonnegut writes:

Most people assume it must be very painful for me to remember being crazy. It's not true. The fact is, my memories of being crazy give me an almost sensual glee.... Everything I did, felt, and said had an awesome grace, symmetry, and perfection to it....

It's regrets that make painful memories. When I was crazy I did everything just right.

In his first memoir, Vonnegut exhibits a rueful self-awareness about the absurdity of his situation. But he still looks back almost lovingly on his psychosis, luxuriating in its drama. In contrast, the voice of his 2010 book feels hacked to the bone:

Having a famous parent is a leg up to nowhere. It made sense to people that Kurt Vonnegut's son would have mental health problems. It made sense that I would not do well.

'You're Kurt Vonnegut's son? I heard that you had hung yourself in a barn in New Jersey.'

'No. Actually I'm in med school.'

My mother glossed over the chaos we had come from. 'You all turned out so well.'

I don't love *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* the way I did *The Eden Express*, but that makes me trust it more. Like Kurt Vonnegut's fractured stories (a *New York Times* columnist in 1965 dismissed *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as "random meditations" that were "devoid of anything as square as a plot"), Mark Vonnegut's second memoir takes me to unexpected places. With its understated style and sly nod to his father's work, this is the book that really grapples with his regrets.

Stepping off the Eden Express

What *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* offers is a look at the scattered illuminations that drive recovery—not the heroic upward march to mental health, but the wisdom of one who knows that life is tenuous.

Its eighteen short chapters begin with "A Brief Family History" and "Raised by Wolves," which provide the back story to Vonnegut's mental illness. He describes the many relatives on both sides of his family who suffered from manic depression:

We have episodes of hearing voices, delusions, hyper-religiosity, and periods of not being able to eat or sleep. These episodes are remarkably similar across generations and between individuals. It's like an apocalyptic disintegration sequence that might be useful if the world really is ending, but if the world is not ending, you just end up in a nuthouse.

As a child in the '50s and early '60s, Vonnegut notes, "I was mostly left alone to figure things out." He grew up in a rundown house on Cape Cod, when father Kurt was still trying to make money by selling cars and mother Jane struggled with her own mania.

Young Mark often wandered on his own through woods or even down the shoulder of a four-lane highway with his bicycle. He says that his "proudly antisocial" father—"who spent most of his time at a typewriter, reflecting negatively on his neighbors and society"—considered it a badge of honor his son didn't have any friends.

"I tried to breathe next to no air and leave next to no footprints," Vonnegut writes of his troubled coming of age. But then he adds, deadpan, "A psychotic break is the exact opposite of not taking up much space and being as little trouble as possible."



The book then zips through what happened after he went crazy on the commune, recovered, and wrote *The Eden Express*. Vonnegut attended Harvard Medical School, became a celebrated pediatrician, “cracked up” again in 1985, and then got his life back.

On the surface, it sounds like the usual plotline. The difference comes in Vonnegut’s telling the second time around. What could seem meaningful when told as “the story of my life”—the kind of recaps heard in everything from powerhouses like Karr’s *Lit* to the average Twelve Step meeting—isn’t necessarily meaningful at all.

“Life for the unwell is discontinuous and unpredictable,” Vonnegut notes early on. “Things just come out of nowhere. People try but mostly do a lousy job of taking care of you.”

Talk about bursting the bubbles of everyone from therapists to literary critics! Amen. Those who have been mentally ill all their lives, as my own artist mother was, really are ill. Being crazy isn’t a sure ticket to spiritual wisdom or creative transcendence. Vonnegut came to the same conclusion in *The Eden Express*, but it’s clear his youthful self had yet to face up to how little he could control his illness.

Now in his sixties, Vonnegut writes that the obvious dramatic elements of his story “do not make a life.” But, he concludes with a shrug, “if you add up enough things that aren’t in and of themselves enough, it almost starts to add up to something.”

Such Kurt Vonnegut-like adages can be annoyingly evasive. The trick, of course, is how you turn a life that’s “discontinuous and unpredictable” into a book. *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* is not a page-turner. A third of the way in, I was impatient with its sketchy anecdotes and lack of fully fleshed characters.

Kurt Vonnegut is glimpsed only occasionally: the obsessed writer behind a closed door, simultaneously checked out and too hard on his kids. His death in 2007 (after a fall and head injury) is a denouement of sorts, but a muted one. The passage in which Mark describes acting as his dad’s medical proxy—he made sure Kurt wasn’t “shipped to a futile neuro-rehab in New Jersey” when nobody else “wanted to be responsible for the death of an icon”—is both profound and too elliptical:

So I took care of my father like my father had cut through the crap and taken care of me thirty-six years earlier in British Columbia. I was glad to be able to repay the favor. He took responsibility for hospitalizing me, and I took responsibility for letting him go.

The terseness of this passage is typical of *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So*; Vonnegut resists the urge to dwell in the moment, amplifying its significance. Yet, I found myself surprised on every page, asking questions, thinking about whether A connects to B, and realizing, “Ah ha! Maybe they don’t.”

The Chapter of Revelations

“Crack-up Number Four,” the chapter about Vonnegut’s psychotic break in 1985, comes at almost the exact midpoint of the book. Suddenly, the more emotionally distanced telling of the first half is wrenched out of joint. This chapter follows a mini-arc, beginning with Vonnegut loving “the rhythm and rank of being a primary-care pediatrician.” There’s foreboding, then the crash, but the telling is anything but conventional.

The revelation of this chapter comes in its taut little scenes between single asterisks, the descriptions of the voices Vonnegut hears, and what he thought it all meant. His ability to evoke how chronology falls apart during a psychotic episode is masterful.

Many of the “crazy” scenes of *The Eden Express* attempt to do this, too, and they are evocative. But that book’s narrative form, with its colorful cast of hippie commune-mates and the linear progression over time, makes even his ravings about iridescent faces and being able to talk to trees seem more orderly than they do in “Crack-up Number Four.”

In his second book, Vonnegut describes going crazy as “a grammatical shift.... There is no simile or metaphor. There’s no tense but the present”:

It would possibly be tolerable to feel *like* or *as if* one was on fire or *like* the CIA might be after you or *like* you had to hold your breath so that you could be compacted and smuggled to a neutral site in Mongolia to wrestle India’s craziest crazy. But there’s no *like* or *as if*. It’s all really happening, and there’s no time to argue or have second thoughts.

There are wrenching scenes here, sometimes evoked in just a sentence or two. After trying to jump through a third-floor window in his house, Vonnegut was hauled off to the very hospital where he practiced. He describes seeing a nurse whose children he’d treated looking like she wanted to cry: “‘Don’t worry,’ I tried to tell her. ‘This will turn out okay.’” Later he reassures his eight-year-old son—“‘Things will get better, Zachary’”—knowing that might not be the case.

Vonnegut’s version of his experience recognizes the tension that’s always present in storytelling—that is, the pull between the random elements of real life and the sense we make of it internally. “All the arts are ways to start a dialogue with yourself,” he writes toward the end of the book. That dialogue can be enormously therapeutic, but it’s also a faulty and ever-evolving construction.

Finding the Daily Sweetness

“Any way I tell this story is a lie,” writes Mary Karr in her prologue to *Lit*, under the title “Open Letter to My Son.” This is the brazen approach many readers love her for, and she’s right—no well-crafted tale is strictly the truth. The drama is often intensified, as Karr tries to explain here:

[I]t’s a neurological fact that the scared self holds on while the reasoned one lets go. The adrenaline that let our ancestors escape the sabertooth tiger sears into the meat of our brains the extraordinary, the loud. The shrieking fight or the out-of-character insult endures forever, while the daily sweetness dissolves like sugar in water.

Yet, Karr's reference to a "neurological fact" that isn't a fact for everyone, as well as phrasing like "sears into the meat of our brains," tips her hand. The drive to tell your own story in a dramatic way always carries a whiff of narcissism. It's all talk, talk, talk, especially in mental-illness and other recovery narratives, which are still strapped by the outmoded belief that the "talking cure"—the awful childhood, the distant father, the drunken mother—can explain the illness.

As literary writers, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't. But I believe it's possible to write in a less melodramatic key.



Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So captures moments of daily sweetness in the quality of its narrative and in what this author chooses to remember. It reminds me of why I also read literary fiction that resists the rollercoaster ride of the good story, with its overly controlled catharsis and resolution. With both Vonneguts, father and son, the satisfactions come from simple astonishments—the way life is not explained but illuminated.

We all resist the notion that life is a series of scattered moments. Light does occasionally dawn inside our skulls, but then the darkness comes down again. My mother on her worst days wanted it all to mean something. In both his memoirs, Mark Vonnegut calls "too much meaning" one of the chief problems of psychosis. The craziness makes everything appear connected and intentional, from God to John Coltrane to the goats on the farm—with paranoia as one of the most florid forms of storytelling.

There's a plot, all right. But it means far less than the realization that nobody is actually in charge or working the levers of the universe.

In the 2002 reissue of *The Eden Express*, a new foreword by Kurt Vonnegut brings back his remarkable voice and existential attitude so clearly I want to quote the whole thing, and I encourage readers to look it up. Here, I'll settle for one passage. Of the dire days when his son was admitted to a "Canuck loony bin," he wrote:

And I recall now a time when I pondered buying from a gift shop a pretty object sacred to believers in a faith I knew nothing about. Only kidding, I asked the woman who waited on me if she thought it would bring me bad luck if I treated it disrespectfully. Only kidding, she replied, 'That depends, I would think, on how many hostages you have given to fortune.'

I found her answer so unexpectedly eloquent and poignant that I supposed it to be a quotation. I have since

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looked it up. It was written by Francis Bacon, and reads in full: 'He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune.'

Indeed, indeed!

"I've found it helps a lot to get older," Mark Vonnegut says in his second book. It's a small epiphany, neither loud nor extraordinary, and I'm grateful for it. He adds, "Now when honking cars start sounding like my name or other things happen that could be the voices warming up, I'm not thrilled or terrified. 'I've got a lot going on,' I say. 'You'll have to wait your turn.'"



Afterword

An earlier version of this essay appeared in Talking Writing as "God Bless You, Mr. Vonnegut" (February 2011). It's been updated for our "Family Stories" issue, after Martha Nichols interviewed Mark Vonnegut this spring. The current version includes photos supplied by Vonnegut (as well as his painting above) and minor text changes.

For the TW interview, see ["Mark Vonnegut: 'Too Easy, Dad.'" \[5\]](#)

The [Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library \[6\]](#) opened in Indianapolis shortly after *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So* was released and this review first published in TW. Click [here \[7\]](#) to read about the library's 2011 opening.

Publishing Information

- *Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So: A Memoir* by Mark Vonnegut (Delacorte/Random House, 2010).
- *The Eden Express: A Memoir of Insanity* by Mark Vonnegut, originally published by Praeger Publishers in 1975 (Seven Stories Press, 2002).
- ["Just Like Someone Without Mental Illness Only More So: A Memoir." \[8\]](#) review by *Publisher's Weekly*, May 31, 2010.
- Quote about *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is from "Do Human Beings Matter?" by Martin Levin, *New York*

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Times, April 25, 1965.

- *Lit: A Memoir* by Mary Karr (HarperCollins, 2009).

Art Information

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- "The Great Salt Marsh, Barnstable" © Mark Vonnegut; used by permission.



Martha Nichols is Editor in Chief of *Talking Writing*.

For another take on Mark Vonnegut—and the necessity of "cutting the cord" to write a truthful family story—see Martha's Editor's Note for Spring 2014: "[The Random Facts of Life.](#)" [9]

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