



*Breakfast of Champions* (1973), a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., had a big impact on my life. It's a whacky novel with odd characters who bounce from plot to plot and time to time, who bring their humanity--their neurosis and psychoses--to a world that doesn't much care about them. It's irreverent and satirical in the way Vonnegut became famous for, and it came to me at a rather destructive time in my life when I wanted to be irreverent and didn't know how.

It came to me from an older kid at school, one whom I respected, in hard cover, a book that he'd actually bought, which was pretty impressive. The book gave me a model for irreverence, one that was playful and funny and bitingly sarcastic without being hurtful. I learned from it that cruelty is a symptom of weakness, a symptom of a lack of imagination. I learned that in a book I could find adventures in ideas, that I could discover parts of myself laid out in the experiences of others, that the struggle to understand oneself among the absurdities of our society is difficult but common.

*Breakfast of Champions* sits comfortably with peers like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Heller's *Catch-22*, both classics of satire. But as sarcasm and cynicism can become mundane in times like ours, when satire is lapped so easily by the societal tragedies it might otherwise attack, when we don't need help to discover the inadequacies of our leaders and institutions, Vonnegut's cynical refrain, "So it goes" isn't so attractive these days. But I look forward to revisiting Vonnegut at a time when discovering our fallibility isn't quite so easy, and we'll need his help more.

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