



Harrison Bergeron

Kurt Vonnegut

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It is the year 2081. Because of Amendments 211, 212, and 213 to the Constitution, every American is fully equal, meaning that no one is stupider, uglier, weaker, or slower than anyone else. The Handicapper General and a team of agents ensure that the laws of equality are enforced.

One April, fourteen-year-old Harrison Bergeron is taken away from his parents, George and Hazel, by the government.

Harrison Bergeron Details

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From Reader Review Harrison Bergeron for online ebook

Raya ???? says

"??? ??? 2081? ?????? ?????? ??????. ??? ?????? ?????? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?? ???
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Simeon says

There are two paths to equality: elevating some people, and breaking others. Actually, ignoring for a moment the second option (which is the theme of Vonnegut's story), the first is pretty divisive all by itself. All our modern political ideologies seem concerned with it, after all - the extent to which a society, a government, should be responsible for its people, and whether helping each other actually infringes on some inalienable right of not having to help each other.

The reality is that all this nonsense about how involved a modern civilization should be as a whole in helping people isn't an interesting question. The answer to the question: "Should we feed the poor?" is always Yes. That's the moral answer, though not always the practical one. There's nothing wrong with saying that we can't feed the poor right this second because we are also poor – that's ok; it shows an understanding of both our responsibility and our shortcomings – but rationalizing amorality or selfishness or greed via sociopathic-grade egotism masquerading as philosophy, or whining about an ever-flexible definition of "property" (which notion, by the way, is only a temporary contrivance of a our scarcity-driven existence) is an excuse for barbarism.

Many will object, claiming that giving their money away to the poor is unfair. Good point. But suppose for a moment that you agree to live in a civilization, among other humans, and you agree to make the concessions necessary... Why would you ever do such a thing, you ask? Well, it's impossible to be one billionth as grotesquely rich as many, many people are in a civilization without that civilization. In fact, someone like the CEO of Viacom, whom I understand to be – and forgive me if I'm wrong – not only physically weak but

mentally challenged as well, would without a doubt be many times poorer all by himself out in the wild, with bears and wolves and insects for company...

Think about that for a second. Suppose we had not an anarchy, but a complete independence of each other. The richest man would be absolutely poor. Although, such a materially poor soul might actually be happier. And that's the point actually: that having homeless people is pretty much the fault of having a society in the first place – like an unpleasant side-effect – because having a society means that you can purchase land (what a notion!) and soon be left with no place to build a house or make a little home.

In other words, poor people today are many times worse off than they would be without a civilization (compared to everyone else – the definition of wealth), while rich people today are many times richer than they would be without the modern civilization.

So you tell me, to whom falls the responsibility of maintaining civilization, of paying dues for its existence, of feeding the poor, if not those among us who benefit the most? Because trust me, if you're poor, you know what I'm talking about: given a choice between living in the wild without technology, and being homeless today, it's hardly a choice at all. Maybe you'd build a little home in the woods and plant a wee garden and grow tomatoes or something. Or you might starve to death. The point is, either way, you'd certainly be better off than sleeping next to a dumpster in Chicago.

So, end of tangent discussion of the first path to equality.

The second path, breaking others down so we are all equal, also bears a modern ideological parallel of social restriction.

Suppose someone doesn't like marijuana, and as a bigoted corollary determines also not to like anyone who does like marijuana. I was thinking about this the other day. I don't do drugs personally (not because I think it's wrong, I simply can't afford them) but imagine someone who decides to smoke some pot, which I hear is an excellent drug, and other people found out. These other people would actually want to come into his house and arrest him. I know! Isn't it hilarious?

I mean, wait! Here he is in his home, after a long day's work, and he decides that he'd like to inhale some harmless smoke and feel mellow. There are actually people out there, in our exalted government, who believe that the correct social response is to immediately burst into his house and arrest him. All this is done at great expense (something like 40,000 taxpayer money per year, per pothead).

So, instead of building schools and playgrounds and parks, they would rather lock people up to make sure, absolutely sure, that these criminals are no longer inhaling any more smoke.

It boggles the mind!

If you thought this was a nice moral age of reason, I'm sorry to break it to you, but we live in a barbaric world, full of savages and morons.

Alright, so abusing other people because they are different, which can be uncomfortable, is wrong. That's part of Vonnegut's point.

A more superficial warning is that there's a difference between fairness, equal advantage, and equal disadvantage. Running a society based on social and genetic lottery is a stupid idea, but we don't have the

technological or moral know-how to do otherwise, and simply acknowledging that it's a terrible thing we are doing is probably a good start.

I mean, it's all a sort of evolution of our economic morality.

For the modern person, it goes something like:

* Libertarianism: a little smart, a lot stupid. Obviously, being successful under such a system, in contrast to some meritocratic alternatives, would be a matter of opportunity, not talent. But most notably, a libertarian society would forgo all regulations and standards, as things quickly fester into a sort of corporate feudalism, complete with separate cartels and a nice oligarchy, etc. Every day we forgo some freedoms in order to safeguard others. You give up the freedom to pee in the water supply, in exchange for the freedom to not have to drink pee, etc. But, libertarianism: some people like pee.

* Meritocracy: closer. Even if it were possible to actually reward effort based solely on merit, a meritocracy would still rely on some sort of genetic or environmental lottery. Clearly not the paradigm of moral evolution.

* Rawlsianism: seems the likeliest to produce a fair society.

Though personally, I'm rooting for a post-scarcity socialistic anarchy utopia. That's just me.

Seemita says

A rather stinging, unsettling account of a likely future where **absolute equality** doesn't naturally translate into celebrations until the **constructs** establishing it, are also ensured to be without prejudice.

Ouch, did I say too much? Rejoice in this much-in-love couple from that land then.

Sana says

damn what a story!!

smol review to come

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Liz Janet says

The perfect introduction to Vonnegut is here. This is a story about absolute equality, and how dangerous it is. In this world people are completely equal, and the way to make sure of it is by adding things that would hinder them, as illustrated above. No one is uglier nor stupider than anyone else, but no one is also smarter than anyone else, and anyone that breaks this rules is basically an enemy of the state. Harrison Bergeron is taken from his parents for he is not equal to everyone else, and then he goes bananas. I am not joking, he goes bananas, it is glorious.

Erin says

A (hopefully) short review for a short story...

I ran into this on StumbleUpon, so I figured I might as well review it. This is a short story, a dystopian world with the same ultimate goal as in the *Uglies* series. However, this one succeeded in frightening me in a way that *Uglies* never did.

This is a society where equality is everything. No one is allowed to excel in any area, and the government enforces this strictly-- beautiful people must wear grotesque masks, athletic people carry heavy loads to weaken them, the intelligent have to wear ear-pieces that emit loud noises to distract them from thinking. The actual plot of the story wasn't really the point, nor was it especially good. Basically, it's told from the perspective of Harrison Bergeron's parents, as they watch TV. Harrison was taken away by the government as punishment for being completely awesome (none of their handicaps ever worked on him). There's a bizarre scene where Harrison hijacks the program they're watching and declares himself emperor of the world, which is followed by several other bizarre events. To me the plot wasn't really the true focus of the story, it was a means to an end-- showing how terrible the world would be if no one was allowed to be better than anyone else. It completely succeeded in that. The moral? If you're smarter, prettier, stronger, or in any way *better* than average, that's not something to hide. It's part of who you are, and to try to stifle it would be terrible.

A very unsettling story. It accomplished in seven pages what *Uglies* couldn't do for me in three (is it four now?) books.

EDIT: Not sure where I got the idea it's seven pages long, whoops. I can't really tell since it's on a computer screen, but I'd guess it would be around 2 pages long. Which is even more impressive for the strength of its message.

Flannery says

This short story takes about 5 minutes to read and it is absolutely worth it. It is set in a society where, in an effort to make everyone equal, anyone who is above average in any respect is given mechanisms or hindrances by the government to suppress whatever it is they can do. If they are mentally gifted, the Handicapper General (It was written in 1961) gives them an earpiece which plays annoying noises when they

are thinking. If a person is attractive, they are forced to wear masks.

The story focuses on a couple and their son, Harrison, who excels at nearly everything and, as such, is covered with more hindrances than any other citizen. At the risk of this review taking you longer to read than the story, I'll stop there. Go read it at <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/harri....>

Lyn says

Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut is a short fiction dystopian vision that leaves the reader thinking long after the short prose is over.

One of the great things about Vonnegut's short fiction is that he is able to tightly wind a story and never meanders off on tangent (even though those wanderings are often entertaining in his novels). Bergereon is the alpha male amidst a society of forced mediocrity.

Best line in the story, when asked if he would be a good whatever, the answer, "as good as anyone else".

Prashant says

Damn you Vonnegut!!

All these years you let me think that 1984 is one of it's kind.
For god knows how long have I felt awed by the world Orwell imagined 1984 to be.

And here comes a SOB who writes stories which take hardly 5 minutes to read and leaves the reader scarred for life. In spite of the dominance of Orwell and presence of Fahrenheit 451 on the similar lines, Vonnegut is able to deliver the message safely and eloquently.

The story is set in the future when 'Equality' is the norm and 'Competition' in any sense is firmly punished. People are forced to wear masks to cultivate equality among the ugly and the beautiful. A boy named Harrison who is superior to all others decides to flaunt it. The story gravely shows the dilemma and confusion of his parents who have lived in this world for too long to take notice.

You can read the story here

Here is a better story from the same author 2BR02B

If anyone has the desire to read something good on the same lines of creation of an utopian egalitarian society, then my recommendation is The Valley of Masks

Sofia says

Chilling.

I keep thinking of all the handicaps we are saddled with by society. The worse, the kicking yourself in the ass bit, is that most of the handicaps are there by our own choice, albeit unconsciously. Society is devious like that.

ivana18 says

In the year 2081, due to the 211th, 212th and 213th Amendments, people are equal (literally). If one person is "above" others then he or she gets assigned some kind of "handicap" which makes smarter people less smart, prettier people less pretty and athletic people weaker. The objective is to erase all traces of individuality.

Harrison Bergeron is not only smarter than most, but he's also very strong and handsome....so he gets an abundance of handicaps.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever borne heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

That's some image huh?

I'm not going to say anything more, you'll have to read it for yourselves, but it's an amazing short story, and if you are a fan of "the theater of the absurd" you might like it (that ridiculous conversation between George and Hazel reminded me of "The Bald Soprano"). If you can spare 5 minutes of your time you should definitely read this.

Link to Harrison Bergeron: <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/harri...>

Ahmed Hussein Shaheen says

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Srividya says

Eerily brilliant short story.

The story is about an imaginary world, where everyone is forced to be equal, in every conceivable way, often through the use of handicaps. Handicaps are ways by which excellence is brought down to mediocrity, and voilà, people are equal.

Stories like this truly scare me, not merely because of the unimaginable horrors it portrays but mostly because in a world that is so full of competition, what if people were to get tired of it and deem mediocrity to be the rule of law? Worth pondering and downright scary, right?

I value my freedom too much and this book has just brought to light, just how free we are today in the world we live in. Our world, with all its faults and misgivings, is still a free one compared to the world described in this story. A world where parents don't even have access to the basic emotions or knowledge to mourn the death of their son!

Words said by Milton, eons ago, despite being completely out of context in this regard come to my mind.. "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven"... I use this quote very loosely here, to mean that, it is better to live in a world where everyone is not equal than to live in one where everyone is forced to be an equal by taking drastic measures to bring down excellence rather than raise the mediocre and especially where this equality is brought about without any care for their personal needs. That is truly a dreadful state to live in, at least in my honest and humble opinion!

Ashley says

Extremely dark, extremely humorous, extremely sarcastic, extremely beautiful and extremely tragic. Oh I could worship Vonnegut for producing this absurdly inspirational and witty dystopian short story! Hahaha! 'Harrison Bergeron' is a mind-blowing satire on the literal notion of equality. In the short story Vonnegut envisions a world in which physical and mental defects are 'given' to everyone to make them equal to everyone else. How does that work? Read the story to find out!
