## Mid-Year Exam Reading Packet – Selections 1 and 2

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**SELECTION #1**

[**Kurt Vonnegut at Clowes Hall, Indianapolis, April 27, 2007**](http://dointhegrownup.com/2011/02/24/3483887290/)

Thank you. And I stand before you as a role model courtesy of Mayor Bart Peterson, and God bless him for this occasion. If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is. And just think of this: In only three years time, during World War II, I went from private to corporal, a rank once held by both Napoleon and Adolph Hitler. I’m actually Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I mean, that’s what my kids, now in late middle age, like to still call me when talking about me behind my back. Junior this and Junior that. But whenever you look at the Ayers clock at the intersection of South Meridian and Washington streets, please think of my father, Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., who designed it. As far as that goes, he and his father, Bernard Vonnegut, designed the whole darn building. And he was the founder of the Arch’s school. And the Children’s Museum. His father, my grandfather, the architect Bernard Vonnegut, designed, among other things, the Atheneum, which before the First World War was called Das Deutsch Haus. I can’t imagine why they would have changed the name to the Atheneum, unless it was to kiss the ass of a bunch of Greek Americans.

I guess all of you know I’m suing the manufacturer of Pall Mall cigarettes because their product didn’t kill me and I’m now eighty-four. Listen, I studied Anthropology at the University of Chicago after the Second World War, the last one we ever won. And the physical anthropologists, who had studied human skulls going back thousands of years, said we were only supposed to live for thirty-five years or so because that’s how long our teeth lasted without modern dentistry. Weren’t those the good old days? Thirty-five years and we were out of here! Talk about intelligent design! Now all the Baby Boomers who can afford dentistry and health insurance—poor bastards—are going to live to be a hundred. Maybe we should outlaw dentistry. And maybe doctors should quit curing pneumonia, which used to be called “the old people’s friend.”  But the last thing I want to do tonight is to depress you, so I’ve thought of something we can all do tonight which will definitely be upbeat. I think we can come up with a statement on which all Americans—Republican or Democrat, rich or poor, straight or gay—can agree, despite our country’s being so tragically and ferociously divided. The first universal American sentiment I came up with was: “Sugar is sweet.”

And there is certainly nothing new about a tragically and ferociously divided United States of America. And especially here in my native state of Indiana. When I was a kid here, this state had within its borders the national headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan and the site of the last lynching of an African-American citizen north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Marion, I think. But it also had and still has in Terre Haute, which now boasts a state-of-the-art lethal injection facility, the birthplace and home of the labor leader Eugene Debs. He lived from 1855 to 1926 and led a nation-wide strike against the railroads. He went to prison for a while because he opposed our entry into World War I. And he ran for president several times on the Socialist Party ticket, saying things like this: “While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal element, I am of it. And while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” Debs pretty much stole that from Jesus Christ, but it is so hard to be original. Tell me about it.

But alright, what is a statement on which all Americans can agree? “Sugar is sweet,” certainly. But since we are on the property of a university, we can surely come up with something which has more cultural heft, and this is my suggestion: “The Mona Lisa, the picture by Leonardo da Vinci, hanging in the Louvre in Paris, France, is a perfect painting.” OK, a show of hands please. Can’t we all agree on that? OK, take down your hands. Let’s say the voters are unanimous, that the Mona Lisa is a perfect painting. The only trouble with that, which is the trouble with practically everything we believe: It isn’t true! Listen, her nose is tilted to the right, OK? That means the right side of her face is a receding plane going away from us, OK? But there is no foreshortening of her features on that side giving the effect of three dimensions, and Leonardo could so easily have done that foreshortening. He was simply too lazy to do it. And if he were Leonardo da Indianapolis, I’d be ashamed of him. No wonder she has such a cock-eyed smile.

And somebody might now want to ask me, “Can’t you ever be serious?” The answer is no. When I was born at Methodist Hospital on November 11, 1922, and this city back then was as racially segregated as professional basketball and football teams are today, the obstetrician spanked my little rear end to start my respiration, but did I cry? No. I said, “A funny thing happened on the way down the birth canal, Doc. A bum came up to me and said he hadn’t had a bite for three days, so I bit him.”

But seriously, my fellow Hoosiers, there’s good news and bad news tonight. This is the best of times and the worst of times. So what else is new? The bad news is that the Martians have landed in Manhattan and have checked in at the Waldorf Astoria. The good news is that they only eat homeless people of all colors, and they pee gasoline.

Am I religious? I practice a disorganized religion. I belong to an unholy disorder. We call ourselves Our Lady of Perpetual Consternation. We are as celibate as fifty percent of the heterosexual Roman Catholic clergy. Actually, and when I hold up my right hand like this, it means I’m not kidding, that I give my word of honor that what I’m about to say is true. So actually, I am Honorary President of the American Humanists Society, having succeeded the late great science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, in that utterly functionless capacity. We humanists behave as well as we can, without any expectations of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community. We don’t fear death, and neither should you. You know what Socrates said about death, in Greek of course? “Death is just one more night.”

As a humanist, I love science. I hate superstition, which could never have given us A-bombs. I love science, and not only because it has given us the means to trash the planet—and I don’t like it here—it has found the answers to two of our biggest questions: How did the universe begin? And how did we and all the other animals get the wonderful bodies we have, with eyes and brains and kidneys and so on? OK, so science sent the Hubble telescope out in space so it could capture light and the absence thereof from the very beginning of time. And the telescope really did that. So now we know that there was once absolutely nothing, such a perfect nothing that there wasn’t even nothing. For once, can you imagine that? You can’t, because there isn’t even nothing to imagine. But then there was this great big bang. That’s where all this crap came from. And how did we get our wonderful lungs and eyebrows and teeth and toenails and assholes and so on? By means of millions of years of natural selection. That’s when one animal dies and another one copulates. Survival of the fittest. But look, if you should kill somebody, whether accidentally or on purpose, improving our species, please don’t copulate afterwards. That’s what causes babies, in case your mother didn’t tell you.

And yes, my fellow Hoosiers, I’ve never denied being one of you. This is indeed the apocalypse, the end of everything as prophesized by St. John the Devine and St. Kurt the Vonnegut. Even as I speak, the very last polar bear may be dying of hunger on account of climate change, on account of us. And I will surely miss the polar bears. Their babies are so warm and cuddly and tr usting, just like ours. Does this old poop have any advice for young people in times of such awful trouble? Well, I’m sure you know that our country is the only so-called advanced nation that still has a death penalty and torture chambers. I mean, why screw around? But listen, if anyone here should wind up on a gurney in a lethal injection facility, maybe the one in Terre Haute, here is what your last words should be: “This will certainly teach me a lesson.” If Jesus were alive today, we would kill him with lethal injection. I call that progress. We would have to kill him for the same reason he was killed the first time: His ideas are just too liberal.

My advice to writers just starting out? Don’t use semi-colons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites, representing exactly nothing. All they do is suggest you might have gone to college. So first the Mona Lisa. And now semi-colons. I might as well clinch my reputation as a world-class nut case by saying something good about Karl Marx, commonly believed in this country and surely in Indian-no-place to have been one of the most evil people who ever lived. He did invent Communism, which we have long been taught to hate because we are so in love with Capitalism, which is what we call the casinos on Wall Street. Communism is what Karl Marx hoped could be an economic scheme for making industrialized nations take as good care of people, and especially of children and the old and disabled, as tribes and extended families used to do before they were dispersed by the Industrial Revolution. And I think maybe we might be wise to stop bad-mouthing Communism so much. Not because we think it’s a bad idea but because our grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now in hock up to their eyeballs to the communist Chinese! And the Chinese communists also have a big and superbly equipped army, something we don’t have. We’re too cheap! We just want to nuke everybody. But there are still plenty of people who will tell you that the most evil thing about Karl Marx was what he said about religion. He said it was the opium of the lower classes, as though he thought religion was bad for people and he wanted to get rid of it. But when Marx said that, back in the 1840s, his use of the word “opium” wasn’t simply metaphorical. Back then, real opium was the only painkiller available for toothaches or cancer of the throat or whatever. He himself had used it. As a sincere friend of the downtrodden, he was saying he was glad they had something which could ease their pain, at least a little bit, which was religion. He liked religion for doing that and certainly didn’t want to abolish it. OK? He might have said today as I say tonight that religion can be Tylenol for a lot of unhappy people, and I’m so glad it works.

About the Chinese communists? They are obviously much better at business than we are and maybe a lot smarter, communist or not. I mean, look how much better they do in our schools over here. Face it! My son Mark, a pediatrician, was on the admissions committee of the Harvard Medical School a while back. And he said that if they had played the admissions game fairly, half of the entering class would be Asian women. But back to Karl Marx. How subservient to Jesus or to a humane god almighty were the leaders of this country, back in the 1840s, when Marx said such a supposedly evil thing about religion? They had made it perfectly legal to own human slaves and weren’t going to let women vote or hold public office, God forbid, for another eighty years. I got a letter a while back from a man who had been a captive in the American penal system since he was sixteen years old. He is now forty-two and about to get out. He asked me what he should do. I told him what Karl Marx would have told him: “Join a church.”

And now please note, I have raised my right hand, and that means I’m not kidding, that whatever I say next I believe to be true, so here goes: The most spiritually splendid American phenomenon of my lifetime wasn’t our contribution to the defeat of the Nazis, in which I played such a large part, or Ronald Reagan’s overthrow of godless Communism, in Russia at least. The most spiritually splendid American phenomenon of my lifetime is how African-American citizens have maintained their dignity and self-respect despite their having been treated by white Americans, both in and out of government and simply because of their skin color, as though they were contemptible and loathsome and even diseased. Their churches have surely helped them do that. So there’s Karl Marx again. There’s Jesus again.

And what gift of America to the rest of the world is actually most appreciated by the rest of the world? It is African-American jazz and its offshoots. What is my definition of jazz? Safe sex, of the highest order. The two greatest Americans of my lifetime, so far as I know, were Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr. I’ve heard it suggested that Roosevelt wouldn’t have had such empathy for the lower classes, would have been just another rich, conceited, ruling class, Ivy League horse’s ass if he himself hadn’t been humbled by polio myelitis infantile paralysis. All of a sudden, his legs didn’t work anymore.

What can we do about global warming? We could turn out the lights, I guess, but please don’t. I can’t think of any way to repair the atmosphere. It’s way too late. But there is one thing I can fix, and fix this very night, and right here in Indianapolis. It’s the name of another good university you’ve built since my time, but you’ve named it I.U.P.U.I.! I.U.P.U.I.? Have you lost your wits? “Oh, I went to Harvard. Where did you go?” “I went to I.U.P.U.I.” With the unlimited powers vested in me by Mayor Peterson for the whole year of 2007, I rename I.U.P.U.I. Tarkington University. “Hey, I went to Harvard. Where did you go?” “I went to Tarkington.” Ain’t that classy? Done. And done. With the passage of time, nobody will know or care who Tarkington was. I mean, who nowadays gives a rat’s ass who Butler was? This is Clowes Hall, and I actually knew some real Cloweses. Nice people. But let me tell you, I would not be standing before you tonight if it hadn’t been for the example of the life and works of Booth Tarkington, a native of this city. During his time, 1869 to 1946, which overlapped my own time for twenty-four years, Booth Tarkington became a beautifully successful and respected writer of plays, novels and short stories. His nickname in the literary world, one I would give anything to have, was “That Gentleman from Indiana.” When I was a kid, I wanted to be like him. We never met. I wouldn’t have known what to say. I would have been ga-ga with hero worship. Yes, and by the unlimited powers vested in me by Mayor Peterson for this entire year, I demand that somebody here mount a production in Indianapolis of Booth Tarkington’s play, “Alice Adams.”

By a sweet coincidence, Alice Adams was also the married name of my late sister, a six-foot tall blonde bombshell who is now in Crown Hill along with our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and James Whitcomb Riley, the highest paid American writer of his time. You know what my sister Allie used to say? She used to say, “Your parents ruin the first half of your life, and your kids ruin the second half.” James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier poet, was the highest paid American writer of his time, 1849 to 1916, because he recited his poetry for money in theaters and lecture halls. That was how delighted by poetry ordinary Americans used to be. Can you imagine?

You want to know something the great French writer Jean-Paul Sartre said one time? He said it in French of course: “Hell is other people.” He refused to accept a Nobel Prize. I could never be that rude. I was raised right by our African-American cook, whose name was Ida Young. During the Great Depression, African-American citizens w ere heard to say this, along with a lot of other stuff of course: “Things are so bad, white folks got to raise their own kids.” But I wasn’t raised right by Ida Young alone, a great-grandchild of slaves who was intelligent, kind and honorable, proud and literate, articulate and thoughtful, and pleasing in appearance. Ida Young loved poetry and used to read poems to me. I was also raised right by teachers at School 43, the James Whitcomb Riley School. And at Shortridge High School. Back then, great public school teachers were local celebrities. Grateful former students, well into adult life, used to visit them and tell them how they were doing. And I myself used to be a sentimental adult like that. But long ago, all my favorite teachers went the way of most of the polar bears.

The very best thing in life you can be is a teacher, provided you are in love with what you teach and that your classes consist of eighteen students or fewer. Classes of eighteen students or fewer are a family, and feel and act like one. When my grade graduated from School 43 with the Great Depression going on, with almost no business or jobs, and with Hitler taking charge of Germany, each of us had to say in writing what we hoped to do when grownups to make this a better world. I said I would cure cancer with chemicals while working for Eli Lilly. I have the humorist Paul Krassner to thank for pointing out a big difference between George W. Bush and Hitler: Hitler was elected. I mentioned my only son, Mark Vonnegut, a while back, you know, about Chinese women and Harvard Medical School. Well, he is not only a pediatrician in the Boston area but a painter and a saxophonist and a writer. He wrote one heck of a good book called The Eden Express. It is about his mental crack-up—padded cell and straightjacket stuff. He had been on the wrestling team as an undergraduate in college. Some maniac! In his book, he tells how he recovered sufficiently to graduate from Harvard Medical School. The Eden Express by Mark Vonnegut. But don’t borrow it, for God’s sakes! Buy it! I consider anybody who borrows a book instead of buying it, or lends one, a twerp. When I was a student at Shortridge High School a million years ago, a twerp was defined as a guy who put a set of false teeth up his rear end and bit the buttons off the backseats of taxi cabs. But I hasten to say, should some impressionable young person here today, at loose ends or from a dysfunctional family, resolve to take a shot at being a real twerp tomorrow, that there are no longer buttons on the backseats of taxi cabs. Times change.

I asked Mark a while back what life was all about since I didn’t have a clue. He said, “Dad, we’re here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.” Whatever it is. Whatever it is! Not bad. That one could be a keeper. And how should we behave during this apocalypse? We should be unusually kind to one another certainly, but we should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot. And get a dog if you don’t already have one. I myself just got a dog. It’s a new cross-breed. It’s half French poodle and half Chinese shitzu. It’s a “shit poo.” And I thank you for your attention. And I am out of here.

**SELECTION #2**

“Some of Us Had Been Threatening Our Friend Colby” by Donald Barthelme

Some of us had been threatening our friend Colby for a long time, because of the way that he had been behaving. And now he'd gone too far, so we decided to hang him. Colby argued that just because he had gone too far(he did not deny that he had gone too far) did not mean that he should be subjected to hanging. Going too far, he said, was something everybody did sometimes. We didn't pay much attention to this argument. We asked him what sort of music he would like played at the hanging. He said he'd think about it but it would take him a while to decide. I pointed out that we'd have to know soon, because Howard, who is a conductor, would have to hire and rehearse the musicians and he couldn't begin until he knew what the music was going to be. Colby said he'd always been fond of Ives' Fourth Symphony. Howard said that this was a "delaying tactic" and that everybody knew that the Ives was almost impossible to perform and would involve weeks of rehearsal, and that the size of the orchestra and chorus would put us way over the music budget. "Be reasonable," he said to Colby. Colby said he'd try to think of something a little less exacting.

Hugh was worried about the wording of the invitations. What if one of them fell into the hands of the authorities? Hanging Colby was doubtless against the law, and if the authorities learned in advance what the plan was they would very likely come in and try to mess everything up. I said that although hanging Colby was almost certainly against the law, we had a perfect \*moral\* right to do so because he was \*our\* friend,\*belonged\* to us in various important senses, and he had after all gone too far. We agreed that the invitations would be worded in such a way that the person invited could not know for sure what he was being invited to. We decided to refer to the event as "An Event Involving Mr. Colby Williams." A handsome script was selected from a catalogue and we picked a cream-colored paper. Magnus said he'd see to having the invitations printed, and wondered whether we should serve drinks. Colby said he thought drinks would be nice but was worried about the expense. We told him kindly that the expense didn't matter, that we were after all his dear friends and if a group of his dear friends couldn't get together and do the thing with a little bit of \*eclat\*, why, what was the world coming to? Colby asked if he would be able to have drinks, too, before the event. We said, "Certainly."

The next item of business was the gibbet. None of us knew too much about gibbet design, but Tomas, who is an architect, said he'd look it up in old books and draw the plans. The important thing, as far as he recollected, was that the trapdoor function perfectly. He said that just roughly, counting labor and materials, it shouldn't run us more than four hundred dollars. "Good God!" Howard said. He said what was Tomas figuring on, rosewood? No, just a good grade of pine, Tomas said. Victor asked if unpainted pine wouldn't look kind of "raw", and Tomas replied that he thought it could be stained a dark walnut without too much trouble.

I said that although I thought the whole thing ought to be done really well, and all, I also thought four hundred dollars for a gibbet, on top of the expense for the drinks, invitations, musicians and everything, was a bit steep, and why didn't we just use a tree -- a nice-looking oak, or something? I pointed out that since it was going to be a June hanging the trees would be in glorious leaf and that not only would a tree add a kind of "natural" feeling but it was also strictly traditional, especially in the West. Tomas, who had been sketching gibbets on the backs of envelopes, reminded us that an outdoor hanging always had to contend with the threat of rain. Victor said he liked the idea of doing it outdoors, possibly on the bank of a river, but noted that we would have to hold it some distance from the city, which presented the problem of getting the guests, musicians, etc., to the site and then back to town.

At this point everybody looked at Harry, who runs a car-and-truck-rental business. Harry said he thought he could round up enough limousines to take care of that end but that the drivers would have be paid. The drivers, he pointed out, wouldn't be friends of Colby's and couldn't be expected to donate their services, any more than the bartender or the musicians. He said that he had about ten limousines, which he used mostly for funerals, and that he could probably obtain another dozen by calling around to friends of his in the trade. He said also that if we did it outside, in the open air, we'd better figure on a tent or awning of some kind to cover at least the principals and the orchestra, because if the hanging was being rained on he thought it would look kind of dismal. As between gibbet and tree, he said, he had no particular preferences, and he really thought that the choice ought to be left up to Colby, since it was his hanging. Colby said that everybody went too far, sometimes, and weren't we being a little Draconian. Howard said rather sharply that all that had already been discussed, and which did he want, gibbet or tree? Colby asked if he could have a firing squad. No, Howard said, he could not. Howard said a firing squad would just be an ego trip for Colby, the blindfold and last-cigarette bit, and that Colby was in enough hot water already without trying to "upstage" everyone with unnecessary theatrics. Colby said he was sorry, he hadn't meant it that way, he'd take the tree. Tomas crumpled up the gibbet sketches he'd been making, in disgust.

Then the question of the hangman came up. Paul said did we really need a hangman? Because if we used a tree, the noose could be adjusted to the appropriate level and Colby could just jump off something – a chair or stool or something. Besides, Paul said, he very much doubted if there were any free-lance hangmen wandering around the country, now that capital punishment has been done away with absolutely, temporarily, and that we'd probably have to fly one in from England or Spain or one of the South American countries, and even if we did that how could we know in advance that the man was a professional, a real hangman, and not just some money- hungry amateur who might bungle the job and shame us all, in front of everybody? We all agreed then that Colby should just jump off something and that a chair was not what he should jump off of, because that would look, we felt, extremely tacky -- some old kitchen chair sitting out there under our beautiful tree. Tomas, who is quite modern in outlook and not afraid of innovation, proposed that Colby be standing on a large round rubber ball ten feet in diameter. This, he said, would afford a sufficient "drop" and would also roll out of the way if Colby suddenly changed his mind after jumping off. He reminded us that by not using a regular hangman we were placing an awful lot of the responsibility for the success of the affair on Colby himself, and that although he was sure Colby would perform creditably and not disgrace his friends at the last minute, still, men have been known to get a little irresolute at times like that, and the ten-foot-round rubber ball, which could probably be fabricated rather cheaply, would insure a "bang-up" production right down to the wire.

At the mention of "wire," Hank, who had been silent all this time, suddenly spoke up and said he wondered if it wouldn't be better if we used wire instead of rope -- more efficient and in the end kinder to Colby, he suggested. Colby began looking a little green, and I didn't blame him, because there is something extremely distasteful in thinking about being hanged with wire instead of rope -- it gives you sort of a revulsion, when you think about it. I thought it was really quite unpleasant of Hank to be sitting there talking about wire, just when we had solved the problem of what Colby was going to jump off of so neatly, with Tomas's idea about the rubber ball, so I hastily said that wire was out of the question, because it would injure the tree -- cut into the branch it was tied to when Colby's full weight hit it -- and that in these days of increased respect for the environment, we didn't want that, did we? Colby gave me a grateful look, and the meeting broke up.

Everything went off very smoothly on the day of the event (the music Colby finally picked was standard stuff, Elgar, and it was played very well by Howard and his boys). It didn't rain, the event was well-attended, and we didn't run out of Scotch, or anything. The ten-foot rubber ball had been painted a deep green and blended in well with the bucolic setting. The two things I remember best about the whole episode are the grateful look Colby gave me when I said what I said about the wire, and the fact that nobody has ever gone too far again.