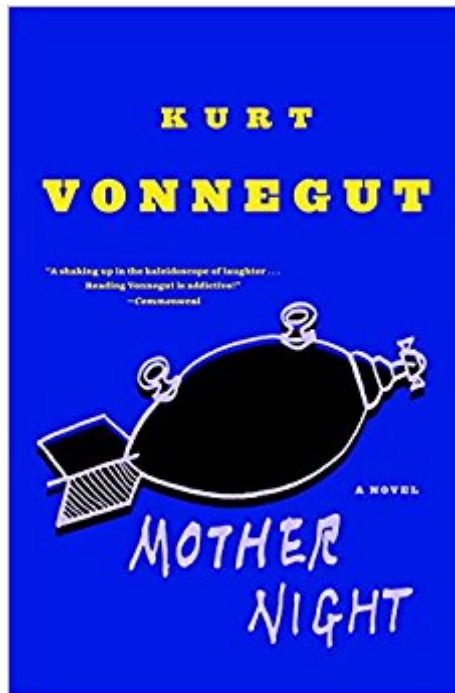




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Mother Night: A Novel



Synopsis

Mother Night is a daring challenge to our moral sense. American Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a spy during World War II, is now on trial in Israel as a Nazi war criminal. But is he really guilty? In this brilliant book rife with true gallows humor, Vonnegut turns black and white into a chilling shade of gray with a verdict that will haunt us all. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To the best of my knowledge, there really is no other writer quite like Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Mother Night appears to be a rather straightforward, albeit quirky, novel at first glance, but as one delves down into the heart of Vonnegut's prose one finds grounds for contemplation of some of life's most serious issues. This novel is the first-hand account of Howard Campbell, Jr., a most remarkable character. Campbell is an American-born citizen who moved to Germany as a child and became the English-speaking radio mouthpiece for Nazi Germany during World War II. In the fifteen years since the end of the war, he has been living an almost invisible life in a New York City attic apartment. He misses his German wife Helga who died in the war, sometimes thinks about his pre-war life as a successful writer of plays and poems, and perhaps just waits for history to find him once again. As

we begin the novel, he has been found and is writing this account from a jail cell in Israel, awaiting trial for his crimes against humanity. While he is reviled by almost everyone on earth as an American Nazi traitor, the truth is that he was actually an agent working for the American government during the war; this is a truth he cannot prove, though. Thus, in this 1961 novel, the hero is ostensibly a Nazi war criminal. The primary moral of *Mother Night*, Vonnegut tells us in his introduction, is that "we are what we pretend to be" and should thus be pretty darned careful about what we are pretending to be (a secondary moral being the less enlightening statement "when you're dead, you're dead"). In the eyes of the entire world, Campbell is exactly what he pretended to be during the war, a traitorous Nazi purveyor of propaganda who mocked and demoralized allied troops as well as regular citizens.

"My name is Howard W. Campbell, Jr. I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination" are the opening words to Kurt Vonnegut's tale of an American playwright living in Germany who, once World War II begins, becomes a Nazi radio propagandist. He becomes infamous for his disgustingly brutal radio shows which distributed wicked Nazi propaganda. He was thoroughly hated by the Americans, and loved by the Nazis. But there is one thing that you should know about Howard W. Campbell. He is an American spy. His radio shows are the medium for transmitting secret codes out of Germany to aid the American cause in the war. He was one of the most effective spies of World War II, and one of the only ones to survive the war. But after the war, he is simply discarded in a small New York attic apartment, with enough money to live the rest of his days there, but with no more direction to his life. He lives his life simply there, away from civilization and anyone who might recognize him as a war criminal, until a white supremacist discovers where he is located, and he once again must face his past. *Mother Night* is not a traditional war book, for rather than concentrating on the brutal aspects of combat, it focuses heavily on the equally gruesome subject of hate. Vonnegut also dissects the schizophrenic mind of a spy after the war has ended who has not only lost the trust of everyone he loves, but most importantly, his identity altogether, as he realizes he is a "nationless" person. The narrator is constantly questioning his identity, which has been muddled by his spy experiences.

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