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 from the November 20, 1997 edition

Describing the Future by Re-Creating the Past

James Turner

BOSTON— Timequake

By Kurt Vonnegut

Putnam, 219 pp., \$23.95

The Shockwave Rider

By John Brunner

Ballentine

288 pp., \$5.99 (paperback)

It is hard to decide whether to categorize Kurt Vonnegut's most recent book as fiction or autobiography. Timequake mixes reminiscences of his childhood and working years with a fictional account of the years from 1997 to 2010. His alter ego, Kilgore Trout, makes frequent appearances as well.

In the year 2001, time gets tired of moving forward, and skips everyone back to 1991. Forced to relive the last 10 years of their lives without the chance to change anything that has occurred, people forget how to exercise free will.

When the rerun ends, chaos ensues. This device serves to tie together the stream-of-consciousness style Vonnegut adopts, as he bounces around his life, blending fact and fiction into illusion. As with all Vonnegut, the profanity and explicit imagery may not be to everyone's taste, but the work is surprisingly tender and thoughtful.

Nothing ages faster than science fiction, and no genre of science fiction slips into anachronism faster than books with computers. It's worthwhile, then, to take another look at a novel that is still relevant more than 20 years after it was written.

The Shockwave Rider addressed many issues in 1972 that are just becoming important today. Privacy, rapid technological change, bioethics, and information overload are just a few of the situations into which Brunner saw more deeply than he might have known at the time. In Brunner's world, computers and networks have become ubiquitous, and someone who can slip into the worldwide databases and change things can write his own ticket.

Nickie Haflinger, a product of a government experiment that tried to produce geniuses, travels across the country changing identities and jobs at will, one step ahead of his keepers who are trying to bring him back to the lab. After he falls in love and finds a colony of rebels working against the all-powerful government, he is transformed from an apathetic fugitive into a man with a cause.

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