from Chicago

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I am writing this from a hotel room in cold, damp, foggy Chicago, where I have been for several days and from which I am headed home tomorrow. Right now I have an hour's free time before a lunch engagement...and then a trip to Naperville for a bookstore event at Anderson's this evening.

I spent yesterday at the Chicago Latin School. I don't usually visit schools any more (too old, too tired, too busy) but for various reasons had accepted this invitation some time ago. And it is always a treat to be in a school...to be with librarians! and kids! and teachers! and to see the excitement that books still bring. It always makes me a little sad about my own childhood recollections, my years in a small town public elementary school that had no libraryand no books except textbooks. Fortunately my town had a wonderful public library not far from my home, and fortunately I had a mom who took me there by the hand when I was probably five, and then let me go there alone from the time I was six or so. So there was never a shortage of books in my life or in my home...but there must have been in the lives of so many of my classmates. And today it is schools that fill that void for so many children. I love the brightly lit, colorful feel of school libraries, the way librarians greet each child by name, the eagerness with which the kids discuss what they're reading.

But I was saddened this morning to hear of the banning of "The Chocolate War" in Harford County, Maryland. To read about it: http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/harford/

....and saddened, too, to read of Kurt Vonnegut's death.

Cormier and Vonnegut, both of them gone now; both of them monumental literary figures in the lives of young people for several generations. Bob Cormier was a friend of mine. A soft-spoken, intelligent, and thoughtful man. I remember that just three weeks or so before his death in 2000, he sat in my living room sipping wine and describing his wife's wonderful gardens.

He was no stranger to book-banning, of course, and today's news would not have surprised him, though he would have been saddened and puzzled by it.

I didn't know Kurt Vonnegut. I met him once, at a fancy party, and was amused by the fact that in a small sea of tuxedos he was wearing a rumpled brown suit. It seemd appropriate to his cyncism and lack of pretension. Here is his poem titled

REQUIEM

When the last living thing

has died on account of us,

how poetical it would be

if Earth could say,

in a voice floating up

perhaps

from the floor

of the Grand Canyon,

“It is done.”

People did not like it here.

I can't echo his dark resignation, really, but I think if the world were to end tomorrow, they could say of Harford County, Maryland, "People did not like it here." I hope that will change.

Tags: Untagged