

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

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More on titles

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Following Kurt Vonnegut's death and my [recent post](#) on titles, I'm reminded that Slaughterhouse-Five is actually an abbreviation of the [full title](#):

Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade – A Duty-Dance with Death By Kurt Vonnegut

A fourth-generation German-American now living in easy circumstances on Cape Cod [and smoking too much], who, as an American Infantry Scout Hors De Combat, As a prisoner of war, witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, "The Florence of the Elbe," a long time ago, and survived to tell the tell. This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from. Peace.

And did you know about F. Scott Fitzgerald's original title for The Great Gatsby?

If you walked into a bookstore and saw the title "Trimalchio in West Egg" would you be seduced into grabbing it off the shelf? How about "The High-Bouncing Lover"? Perhaps a bit more alluring and at least fathomable. Or "Gold-Hatted Gatsby." Closer maybe, but it doesn't sing.

Finally, after much anguish, it became "The Great Gatsby." But according to a book about book titles, "Now All We Need Is a Title" (W. W. Norton) by Andre Bernard, Fitzgerald was still lamenting after "Gatsby" was published that he had allowed himself to be talked out of "Trimalchio."

In a 1999 [New York Times article](#), Martin Arnold discusses Trimalchio and other interesting anecdotes about book titles. I liked this passage:

E. L. Doctorow has what he calls "working titles. They usually get used up during the course of the book."

He said that these temporary titles give his work "a propulsive capacity. They supply little bursts of inspiration and excitement. They exhaust themselves and are replaced by others. The last one is the one that works."