

# A brief tribute to Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*

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The renowned American author, Joseph Heller, died last month at the age of 76. He is best known for *Catch-22*, a hilarious and moving novel set in Italy during the Second World War. The phrase ‘catch-22’ has entered American English, used to describe an absurd and no-win situation. His other novels include *Something Happened* (1974), *Good as Gold* (1979), *God Knows* (1984), *Picture This* (1988) and *Closing Time* (1994). *Now and Then*, his memoirs, was published in 1998.

Heller was born in 1923 in Coney Island, a neighborhood in the southernmost part of Brooklyn, New York. He lived there with his family (his mother and two siblings) throughout his childhood, in a Jewish working-class neighborhood. While his family lived only upon the meager income earned by his mother as a seamstress during the years of the Great Depression, Heller got through childhood without ever feeling the effects of extreme poverty. He writes in his memoirs that the social upheavals of the time—lynchings, strikes, Hoovervilles, mass poverty and unemployment—were distant from his secluded neighborhood. “Somehow, we, on that minute parcel of seashore at the lower tip of Brooklyn ... managed to escape the worst of the consequences of the stock-market crash and the Depression.”

The times were, however, hard on nearly everyone, and Heller came out of his childhood with a markedly ‘left’ political orientation. But it is perhaps his relative seclusion from the worst of the depression that separated him from the dominant mass movements of that time and of the postwar period. “The occasional neighborhood Communist proselytizer got nowhere with us. Neither, I must record, did the dedicated anti-Communist ideologue, not then or later.” His political heroes were F.D. Roosevelt and the New York Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia. Increasingly during the postwar era, Heller, while maintaining disgust for social inequality and injustice, developed a cynical attitude towards all social movements. This pessimism towards attempts at social change colored all of his writings.

At the age of nineteen, Heller enlisted as an air force bombardier in Italy. Experiences that he had during World War II formed the basis for *Catch-22*. After the war he studied English at the University of Southern California and New York

University. Before *Catch-22* was published in 1961, Heller taught at a number of institutions, including the City College of New York, Yale and the University of Pennsylvania. His first novel achieved great success, and by the time of the publication of his second novel, *Something Happened*, in 1974, his financial situation was secured. He went on to publish six more books before his death in December.

*Catch-22* is a brilliant satirical critique of a number of modern social phenomena. It is generally referred to as an antiwar novel, but Heller's criticisms extend beyond the absurdity of war to capitalism itself and the social relations that arise from it. To be sure, his analysis is at times confused, and is often directed at surface elements while neglecting more fundamental issues. Nonetheless, *Catch-22* stands as a strong protest against the conditions of modern society.

The novel focuses on a bombardier named Yossarian who, after flying 60-some bombing missions, is sick of the war and afraid of death, and desperately wants to go home. There is a set number of missions required before discharge, but every time Yossarian comes close to completing his duty, the number is raised, and he has to fly again. Within this context, Heller creates a number of memorable characters—from the petty and vain officers, whose only aim is to advance through the ranks, to Yossarian's roommate Orr, who crashes every time he goes on a bombing run to practice for his planned escape to Sweden. The novel is a loosely connected series of events and character descriptions without a single unified plot. While this is no place to go in to a detailed exposition of the long book, there are a number of characters who deserve to be discussed here. Unfortunately, I cannot convey the humor that pervades the novel.

First, there is Milo Minderbender, Heller's prototypical capitalist. Milo is the mess officer for Yossarian's squadron, who develops a trading “syndicate,” out of which he makes huge profits. Gradually, as the syndicate grows in power, Milo includes in his operations the armies of the rival nations. For one battle he gets paid by both the US and German armies—by the former for organizing the attack, by the latter the defense. On another occasion the Germans pay him to use his planes to attack his own squadron, which he does “for the sake of the syndicate.” Milo claims that all the actions of the syndicate are

beneficial for everyone, for all the profits go to the syndicate “and everyone has a share.”

After cooperating with the German troops, Milo runs into trouble with his superior officers. “Milo was all washed up until he opened his books to the public and disclosed the tremendous profit he had made.... And the sweetest part of the whole deal was that there really was no need to reimburse the government at all [for the damage he had done]. ‘In a democracy, the government is the people,’ Milo explained. ‘We’re people, aren’t we? So we might just as well keep the money and eliminate the middle man.... If we pay the government everything we owe it, we’ll only be encouraging government control and discouraging other individuals from bombing their own men and planes. We’ll be taking away their incentive.’”

Elsewhere Milo attempts to raise the prices of food at his mess hall to exorbitant levels. When the officers intervene, Milo gives way, “valiantly defending the historic right of free men to pay as much as they had to for the things they needed in order to survive.” The rationalizations for greed never seem to change. “Milo had been caught red-handed in the act of plundering his countrymen, and, as a result, his stock had never been higher.”

And then of course there is Yossarian himself, who in many ways embodies Heller’s political outlook. Yossarian wants to get out of the absurd situation in which he finds himself, but he can’t. He is trapped in the war—and in modern society in general—by ‘catch-22’. What is catch-22? In the narrow sense, it is the “catch” that keeps Yossarian and the others in the war: If a soldier acts irrationally he has to be sent home, but if he *asks* to be sent home and therefore out of danger, he is acting rationally and therefore ineligible to get out of the fighting!

More broadly, catch-22 is a metaphor for the ordinary person caught up in the madness of war or modern social life in general. Heller boils his catch-22 down to this, that “they [i.e., whoever has control] have a right to do anything we can’t stop them from doing.” Yossarian cannot go home because the people who run the war won’t let him, and it makes no difference what justification they might give for making him stay.

In one of the final chapters, Heller provides a powerful depiction of poverty and destitution in war-ravaged Rome. Why does this misery exist? Why are children hungry and the poor thrown out into the streets? Why do men fight in wars and die by the hundreds of thousands? For Heller the answer is ‘catch-22,’ i.e., the dispossessed have no control over the situation, and therefore cannot do anything to change it. “Catch-22 did not exist, [Yossarian] was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up.”

Catch-22 stands as a symbol for relations of power, relations

that exist even if they are nowhere put down in writing, and it is these relations that are responsible for the misery and senseless death of millions and millions of people. In essence, Heller is pointing to the fundamental nature of modern politics, that, in spite of all talk of democracy and freedom, it is the Milo Minderbenders, in collusion with the petty officers and politicians, who run the show. “When I look up,” Heller says, speaking through Yossarian, “I see people cashing in. I don’t see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy.”

Given this state of affairs, what can be done? Here neither Heller nor Yossarian has a viable answer. In the end, when faced with the choice of either ceasing his protest and accepting the way things are, or else going to prison, Yossarian chooses to run away. Why does he run? For the simple reason, that as a single individual there is nothing else for him to do to protest against catch-22. He feels helpless and powerless to do anything to change things for the better.

In many ways Heller faced the same dilemma as the principal character in his most famous work. After achieving success with the publication of his writings, Heller drew further and further away from the mass movements of the time. He participated ever so briefly in the Vietnam War protests of the 1960s, but stopped after finding them distasteful. He continued writing novels of social criticism, but did not take any active role in an effort to change social conditions. “I can’t create a revolution in the country,” he said in a recent interview, “We don’t organize well. And unfortunately I think it may be the best of all possible worlds or political systems. It’s terrible, and it gets worse with every election. But if you asked me to sort of conceive or construct an alternative I could not do it.... What happens does happen, and what does happen in life is that the virtuous usually do not triumph, and those who are triumphant usually lack virtue.”

It would seem that the high point of his artistic life was the writing of *Catch-22*, and that he poured what was most critical and perceptive in himself into that work. He could see no alternative to the wretched conditions that exist in the world and eventually more or less disappeared into the liberal milieu. He will be remembered for the biting social criticism of his novels, and, of course, for his riotous sense of humor.



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