

Letters on J.D. Salinger

6 February 2010

On "J.D. Salinger (1919-2010): An appreciation"

Thank you for the great article. Odd that someone, anyone, would have to defend this writer. He turned his back on fame, and that is what they truly hate him for. He refused to be one of their golden calves, and he made fools of them all. Thank God for JD Salinger. These writers who are slamming him will not last very long in history; JD will be here until the burning end.

John R
Illinois, USA
4 February 2010

Thank you for this sensitive and feeling obituary. Those who would write off Salinger's work are indeed, as you say, the very phonies that Holden Caulfield so despised. Your comprehensive overview of his post-"Catcher" work is greatly appreciated. Honestly, I never explored Salinger's post "Catcher" work. You've inspired me to do so.

Ernie M
2 February 2010

As usual, an excellent article on J.D. Salinger. From a political standpoint, however, is it not appropriate to ask how Holden Caulfield's experiences compare to those of protagonists in Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of War* and Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman*? The main characters of these novels are also adolescents, roughly Holden Caulfield's contemporaries chronologically, but who experienced the Hell of what the North Vietnamese and their allies in the South called "the American War" and the Nicaraguan civil war respectively.

Peter L
Connecticut, USA
2 February 2010

Mr. Brookfield, thank you for "appreciating" J.D. Salinger and noting the hypocritical reviews of his work by publications that he himself would deride. So it is no surprise that this talent be celebrated by WWSW for his unique perspective of society and dismissed as "irrelevant" by the others you mention. Of course, we are living through times that clearly resemble those of the 1950s, and this fact remains invisible unless one stands apart from the whole picture as Salinger did then.

Throughout the history of American writing, one finds a

prevailing sense of alienation that fails to find resolution. Lacking resolution, the American writer writes about it.

The 1950s, as I witnessed in my youth, saw the rise, among others, of the non-thinking, non-critical "conformist" willingly deceived by government (*Nation of Sheep*, 1961), the corporate "yes man" (*The Man In The Grey Flannel Suit*, 1956), the nascent rebelliousness of adolescents toward implacably phony adult authority (*Rebel Without A Cause*, 1955), mass-society quiescence to commercialism and its Skinner-box techniques (*The Hidden Persuaders*, 1957), and most relevant to the world of *today* in America was the publication in 1953 of *Fahrenheit 451*—a dystopian depiction of a gentle totalitarianism where books were burned, private and subjective thought eliminated, mass-media devices replaced human contact (TV wall screens, seashells), war was "endless," centralized technological control was seamless and undetected, outsiders (non-aligned individuals) were hunted and removed.... The "mechanical hound" was unleashed on the non-conformist.

The Sixties, which artists and writers anticipated in their creative works of the 1950s, promised to fulfill the failures of that society. In one essay, William Burroughs commanded: "Prisoners of the Earth Come Out"; Timothy Leary declared that the counter-culture generation would "build you a new civilization"; love and peace seemed achievable—through love and peace.

The prisoners did come out in the Sixties and so did the authorities, with repression, political imprisonment, assassinations, Kent State, CIA domestic spying, police-state tactics, attacks on civil liberties, etc. For that brief decade, hope replaced despair, freedom replaced conformity, peace replaced war, community replaced exploitation, equality replaced discrimination. But in almost a second, it now seems, all was destroyed. The forces that prevail *today* are the same reactionary forces that triumphed then in the Sixties.

But the people I speak of then—the "revolutionaries," the Tom Hayden "radicals," the "Whole Earth" hippies—are not the same people *today*. They are the Obama apologists and conformists, the Google book-scanners (burners), the Puritanical anti-smokers, the "politically correct" censors of wayward thought and indiscreet opinion, and so forth. By the 1980s, they became aspiring junior members of the Establishment, not architects of Leary's new civilization or Bucky Fuller's technological world that would "save the planet" from itself. The overarching scholarship of Lewis

Mumford, whose penetrating and thorough historical, sociological and philosophic understanding of America—often from a socialist viewpoint—won't be found in your local library. Young architects don't even know his name.

How many today understand Ray Bradbury's answer to a member of the press in 2008 when asked his opinion of the Kindle and the emerging forms of electronic publishing replacing print? He replied, "E-books smell like burned fuel."

In order to be a Salinger, a Bradbury, or a Mumford, one must stand completely apart from the entire picture. Not being in the picture, one risks becoming invisible, and this is what Salinger chose and why Salinger insisted on personal invisibility following his public appearance in print: to keep clear sight of the entire picture without attachments, loyalties, preferences, memberships, ambition and filters. Salingers *do* exist *today*, but we *may* not see them for these reasons.

Finally, I agree with Mr. Brookfield, Salinger's unpublished material promises to offer great insights.

Thank you for appreciating him, and your general understanding of the plight of an artist, writer and intellectual surviving in a capitalist system.

Michael B
Maine, USA
2 February 2010

The Catcher in the Rye is a brilliant book. Reading Salinger's lines in your review makes me smile and enjoy a euphoria anew, 17 or so years after I first read them.

It's typical of this present period that the high-flying reviewers now look at the book with confusion, indifference or open contempt, just as Holden's headmaster snubs and avoids the parents based on what clothes they are wearing. Sounds quite akin to the goings-on of The Hill and Wall Street as well, I might add.

As we might have heard though, "The clothes don't make the man (or woman)." And, "You can't judge a book by its cover." Have the reviewers also been pulling plums from the Christmas pie, while sitting in the corner?

The attitude of the headmaster and the reviewers is perhaps indicative of people who have had little contact with common people or a variety of people different and other than themselves. This shows a remoteness and contempt of the working class, and isolation from it. What is the obsession with clothes as a sign of status and wealth and familiarity? Is it making up for something lacking in the mind, or a defense of one's class? After all, superficial as it is, it most certainly is not an internal accounting or an integrated look at anything. Pettiness, cruelty and cheap shots are definitely "in" as current fashion.

Furthermore, if the book "wasn't news" in the 50s, why did the newspaper care to mention it, and why was it banned upon its publication? Of course it is, was and will be in the future, brilliant, poignant and much loved by readers as a perceptive,

observant and honest look at society, authority figures, manners and how through observation, honesty to self (through thought and what appears to be "self-talk"), travel and conversation, one's opinions can change, and how one can be brought closer to one's loved ones and one's class, without having to fruitlessly climb "the ladder" of "success."

Mr. McGrath's attack on the poignancy of Salinger's dichotomy of "phoniness" and authenticity might be expected, coming from a newspaper which has become the one of *today*—placing a news blackout over the revelation of further, crucial details of Flight 253—certainly not a model of authenticity or subtlety.

Salinger could see a hint of the dialectical nature of us all, in his characters of all classes. The headmaster goes to greet, then turns away because of the clothes he sees. In the headmaster's heart was some impulse to meet with the handshake (or the vestige of a true impulse of the past, that was passed to the headmaster and now was a ritual) that was then broken by the intervention of his recognition of the style of the parent's clothes, and the look of the parents in the present. Was it some obsession of being up-to-date, or a terror of falling behind that motivates his turning away here? Salinger's characters are essays of such observations of the psychology of daily interactions, those of the 50s, those *today* and perhaps those of *tomorrow*, but for how long, no one knows. Is it something for all time? Is that the source of the fear of being "behind the times?"

There are many such close observations and honest attentions to such hang-ups as these in the characters of *Catcher in the Rye*. I could make analyses of any of them.

Are readers to believe what Mr. McGrath claims, that Holden Caulfield's recognition of "phoniness" vs. authenticity is passé. Or, is it expected that it is authentic human nature to avoid people because of the clothes they wear or how they look? Is this kind of impulse primarily social or biological? Salinger is apparently hinting as to the social nature of such impulses. Is this Mr. McGrath's impulse, or is it just that he isn't getting the point, or that he didn't bother to analyze the data before his attack?

KB

5 February 2010



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