

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

James Brookfield  
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American author J.D. Salinger, best known for his 1951 classic *The Catcher in the Rye*, died Wednesday, January 27. He was 91.

*The Catcher in the Rye* proved highly popular among several generations of post-war youth, not only in the US, but around the world. Audiences, especially but by no means exclusively young people, greatly appreciated its narrative of adolescent contempt for the hypocrisy of official society. Even his critics had to concede that Salinger's talent for capturing dialogue was brilliant. His admirers would refer to it as being on par with that of Mark Twain.

The novel's plot is well known. The narrator, Holden Caulfield, is being expelled from Pencey Prep, an exclusive East Coast school, just prior to the Christmas break. Following encounters with classmates and an instructor, Holden makes his way back to Manhattan, staying at a hotel so as to avoid the inevitable confrontation with his parents for at least a few days. His misadventures in the city conclude with a visit to a sympathetic former teacher, which ends unhappily for Holden. In response to his 10-year-old sister's outpouring of tenderness and affection, Holden decides to return to his parents rather than run away.

Holden's is a genuinely original voice in American literature. He scorns the superficial ethics dispensed to young people. Above all, he cannot abide those he deems "phony"—i.e., the guardians of official morality who are banal, duplicitous, inhumane, even cruel. The "phonies" in the story—school officials, wealthy alumni, certain parents—function as a proxy for much of the adult world.

One example is the namesake of the dormitory in which Holden lives. Mr. Ossenburger "made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pencey. What he did, he started these undertaking parlors all over the country that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece. You should see old Ossenburger. He probably just shoves them in a sack and dumps them in the river. Anyway, he gave Pencey a pile of dough, and they named our wing after him."

Holden and classmates are subjected to a pep talk by the benefactor, who, predictably enough, holds himself up as a model of religious piety—someone who talks constantly to God and Jesus. Holden imagines prayers full of requests "to send him a few more stiffs."

A more profound example is the following: "One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills [one of his former schools] was because I was surrounded by phonies.... For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life.... On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents.... I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff."

The dialogue was polarizing, especially in 1951, under conditions of the Cold War and the ideological offensive against politically rebellious and subversive ideas in American public life. Both Wikipedia and an obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that *The Catcher in the Rye* was one of the

most taught as well as one of the most banned books in the US. Its censors were aghast at the book's derision of official morality and its liberal (though hardly excessive) use of profanity.

The book-banners aside, official opinion at the time of Salinger's death seems to be shifting toward a fairly hostile view. *Time* magazine was dismissive: "Salinger was an author whose large reputation pivots on very little," it wrote.

This marks a decided reversal in its literary assessment. In 1961, in a cover story, it wrote of *Catcher's* hero, "Like Huck, speaking the superbly authentic dialect of his age and his place, Holden is a runaway from respectability, the possessor of a fierce sense of justice, the arbiter of his own morality." And of the author himself, it said: "Salinger, like a lonely child inventing brothers and sisters, has drawn most of his characters out of his own rare imagination."

The *New York Times* was fairly disparaging in its obituary, writing: "The novel's allure persists to this day, even if some of Holden's preoccupations now seem a bit dated...." This idea is elaborated in a piece written by the same author, Charles McGrath, for the *Times* just before Salinger's 90th birthday last year: "In general what has dated most in Mr. Salinger's writing is not the prose—much of the dialogue, in the stories especially and in the second half of *Franny and Zooey*, [a later work] still seems brilliant and fresh—but the ideas. Mr. Salinger's fixation on the difference between 'phoniness,' as Holden Caulfield would put it, and authenticity now has a twilight, '50s feeling about it. It's no longer news, and probably never was."

The *Times* argument is emerging as something of a consensus: Holden Caulfield is not terribly relevant to the contemporary world. This reviewer takes objection to that verdict. The character is a creation of a particular time and place that helped shape his author. His significance, however, endures.

One suspects that those who question Holden's relevance are seeking to justify and legitimize modern-day hypocrisy and cynicism. In other words, they are defending the outlook and lifestyles of the "phonies" that Caulfield so despised. After all, publications like *Time* and the *New York Times* have done no small amount of work in building up one of the biggest latter-day "phonies"—the one who is to be found presently in the Oval Office.

There is more to the novel than the contrast of duplicity and authenticity, as important as that theme is. One cannot easily bring to mind another popular work of post-war fiction with so many scenes that remain imprinted on the reader's mind for decades after last reading the novel: Holden's recollection of holding a girl's hand in a movie, his anxiety that his boorish roommate may have assaulted a young woman, his encounter with a prostitute whom he pays but does not sleep with, and, above all, the scenes with his sister Phoebe that reveal a real closeness (reinforced, one imagines, by the shared tragedy of their brother's childhood death from leukemia). The lasting impact of such scenes is bound up with the fact that Holden is an intriguing character with a wide range of emotions on display; it does not take the reader long to discover a vulnerable—even despondent—side to his generally defiant posture.

Echoes of the novel's story line and sensitivities are evident in some of

the more interesting later works of popular American fiction and film, such as *Ordinary People*, *Dead Poet's Society*, and *The Squid and the Whale*.

A recurrent theme in the novel is the vulnerability of children and the cruelty inflicted on young people. The following passages are memorable in this regard:

"[In the forensics class]...there was this one boy, Richard Kinsella. He didn't stick to the point too much, and [the other students] were always yelling 'Digression!' at him. It was terrible, because in the first place, he was a very nervous guy—I mean he was a very nervous guy—and his lips were always shaking whenever it was his time to make a speech, and you could hardly hear him if you were sitting way in the back of the room. When his lips sort of quit shaking a little bit, though, I liked his speeches better than anybody else's."

Another episode recounted in the novel is the death of a student, a "skinny little weak-looking guy, with wrists about as big as pencils," who commits suicide after being harassed by classmates. Of the punishment that the group had meted out to the victim beforehand, Holden says only that "I won't even tell you what they did to him—it's too repulsive...."

The precarious condition of young people at the hands of adults is also suggested near the end of the book when Holden visits his former teacher, Mr. Antolini, at the latter's home. Antolini, probably the most sympathetic adult in the book, allows Holden to stay the night and listens with some sympathy to his recollections. Antolini can't do without dispensing some advice, though it seems less hypocritical than what Holden has been accustomed to getting (if somewhat superficial nonetheless). Holden then falls asleep only to find the teacher running his fingers through the boy's hair, an experience he finds so startling and inappropriate that he gives a pretext to leave the apartment immediately.

A longtime friend of Salinger, Lillian Ross, wrote in the *New Yorker* last week, "He loved children with no holds barred.... After watching his son, Matthew, playing one day, he said, 'If your child likes—loves—you, the very love he bears you tears your heart out about once a day or once every other day.' He said, 'I started writing and making up characters in the first place because nothing or not much away from the typewriter was reaching my heart at all.'"

Children figure prominently in Salinger's *Nine Stories*, published as a collection in 1953, though comprising stories that were published as early as 1948. Traumatized World War II veterans find genuine interactions with children, as contrasted with their callous and insensitive treatment by their contemporaries, in both *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* and *For Esmé—with Love and Squalor*. In another story, *Down at the Dinghy*, a precocious boy is brought to tears after hearing the family's maid refer to his father using an anti-Semitic slur.

Like two of the protagonists just mentioned, Salinger was a veteran of traumatizing experiences in the war. He was drafted into the army in 1943 and saw considerable combat, including at Utah Beach in the June 6, 1944, invasion of Normandy by Allied forces and in the Battle of the Bulge. According to the biography written by his daughter Margaret in 2000—a work that, while not free of controversy, is, one hopes, accurate here—Salinger said of the trauma of wartime, "You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how long you live." He is also said to have received treatment for "battle fatigue," the euphemism of the day for the psychological and emotional damage inflicted on soldiers.

The popular success of *The Catcher in the Rye* brought with it the possibility of stardom and celebrity, a prospect that horrified its author. In an attempt to escape it, Salinger moved in 1953 from Manhattan to Cornish, New Hampshire, a small town known a half-century earlier as an artist's colony. The publication of an interview he gave to students in a local newspaper apparently upset him. He may also have been affected by

critical comments by contemporary authors. As years passed, he became increasingly reclusive, speaking and corresponding only with close friends and family.

Of what Salinger hoped to avoid, Lillian Ross wrote: "The trouble with all of us, he believed, is that when we were young we never knew anybody who could or would tell us any of the penalties of making it in the world on the usual terms: 'I don't mean just the pretty obvious penalties, I mean the ones that are just about unnoticeable and that do really lasting damage, the kind the world doesn't even think of as damage.' " He told Ross that he didn't want to become "vain" or "puffed up."

Salinger put a related idea in to the mouth of Holden Caulfield, who tells Phoebe that he doesn't want to be a lawyer, even one of the better ones, because "[e]ven if you did go around saving guys' lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really wanted to save guys' lives, or because you did it because what you really wanted to do was be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren't being a phony? The trouble is, you wouldn't."

Salinger's later works—which merit separate consideration—focused on the Glass family—seven highly interesting children of two vaudevillians, the eldest of whom takes his own life in the first of the *Nine Stories*. The later fiction included *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and a compilation published in 1963, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. The most recent publication of the series, a novella titled *Hapworth 16, 1924*, appeared in the *New Yorker* in June 1965, though Salinger apparently continued writing after that time.

According to the obituary published in the *Guardian*: "Ten years ago, it was revealed that Salinger had a secret cache of about 15 novels which had never been published. In his last interview, in 1980, he said that he wrote only for himself."

He may have said this, but the reader suspects that he felt otherwise. At any rate, the publication of other stories in the series would be widely welcomed.

Major works by J.D. Salinger

- *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
- *Nine Stories* (1953)
- *Franny and Zooey* (1961)
- *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963)
- *Hapworth 16, 1924* (1965)



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