

Salinger: Phony stuff

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17 October 2013

Written and directed by Shane Salerno

The new documentary-biography *Salinger*, about writer J.D. Salinger, is directed by Shane Salerno, screenwriter on such films and television series as Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998), *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007), *Hawaii Five-0* (2010) and Oliver Stone's *Savages* (2012).

In 2012, the WSWS commented that “*Savages* is a bombastic work, loud and vulgar. It rushes by before one's eyes at an almost manic pace. There is little room for reflection by the audience. Everything but the kitchen sink is thrown in. ... All of it treated superficially, if not merely in passing.”

Salerno was not solely responsible for *Savages*, of course; we also have director Stone to thank, but his career heretofore is not promising when one considers the sensitive and complex subject matter of his new film.

Salinger, author of *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who died in 2010, was one of the most widely read and beloved American fiction writers of the middle and late 20th century. He is generally acknowledged to have been an exacting craftsman and a master of creating unique but genuine voices for his characters. The sarcastic, dismissive, vulnerable Holden Caulfield, the adolescent protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, made an impression on generations of American teenagers and adults.

Alongside his fiction, which included short stories and longer works about the brilliant and dysfunctional Glass family, *Franny and Zooey* (1961), *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1955) and *Seymour, an Introduction* (1963), Salinger was best known for the fact that he withdrew from public view in 1953 and stopped publishing ten years later.

Salinger's life, including his self-imposed isolation, is a legitimate topic for a film or a book. Ideally, a biography of Salinger would tell us something about the society and culture that produced him—and perhaps also encouraged his disappearance—and shed light on the individuality of the man who discovered Holden Caulfield and the children of the Glass family.

It might go further and tell us something about Salinger's readers—who they were and why they wanted or needed to read his work in 1951 and later. And when properly situated in its social and historical context, the media rush to undermine his privacy in later years might come under scrutiny as well.

It can't be said, however, that Salerno's *Salinger* comes close

to answering—or even raising—any of these questions.

The film says almost nothing about Salinger's childhood (he was born in 1919 to an affluent family in New York City), the success of his father as a meat and cheese importer, his parents' mixed religious marriage, or the fact that much of his boyhood was spent in the Great Depression.

Given that Salinger produced perhaps the most popular novel about teenage rebellion ever written, it might be appropriate for Salerno to review the future author's years at Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania, which, critics have noted, is almost certainly the model of Pencey Prep of *The Catcher in the Rye*. His time there has been documented, with many intriguing observations, by biographer Ian Hamilton. But this period is largely skipped over in the documentary.

The film begins a (relatively) more substantive examination of Salinger with the spring of 1939 when Salinger enrolled in a writing class taught by Whit Burnett, the editor of *Story* magazine, at Columbia University. Burnett soon published Salinger's story, “The Young Folks” (1940).

Salerno, however, neglects to underscore the significance of a mentor like Burnett, who played a significant role in American literature for 40 years and was responsible for the first or early publication of authors as diverse as Charles Bukowski, Richard Wright and Truman Capote.

The film picks up somewhat in its depiction of Salinger's war years. He was drafted into the army in 1942, after being rejected in earlier attempts to volunteer.

Much of the material about the war, including original footage shown for the first time, holds one's attention. Interviews with his wartime comrades are moving, as they talk of the great loss of life, especially in the ferocious series of battles (resulting in some 60,000 casualties) in Germany's Hürtgen Forest, along the German-Belgian border, at the end of 1944. We learn that Salinger experienced nearly 300 hundred continuous days of fighting and helped to liberate the Dachau concentration camp where he saw the charred corpses of inmates burnt alive by retreating guards.

After a stay in a hospital for what we would today call post-traumatic stress disorder, Salinger joined an army unit responsible for de-Nazification in occupied Germany. Salerno does not ask what connection this might have had, if any, to what he had seen at Dachau or his half-Jewish ancestry.

Instead, the filmmaker advances the oversimplified idea, with

the help of numerous interviews from critics, celebrities and people who knew Salinger, that World War II was the “ghost in the machine” that drove his later fiction.

While the wartime experiences undoubtedly had a major influence on Salinger, it is telling that the filmmaker does not consider the significance of the immediate postwar period on the author’s work. The war was no doubt horrifying, but what was the impact of the years that followed, in particular the unfolding of the Cold War, the creation of the national security state and the emergence of McCarthyite anti-communist repression? It scarcely seems possible to talk about a bestselling author of the early 1950s without taking this question on.

Salerno proceeds to offer us a portrait of the author’s personal life as an adult, especially his relationship with women, in what is essentially this historical vacuum. The picture never amounts to much more than cheap psychoanalysis, speculation and moralizing.

We discover that Salinger married a German woman, Sylvia Welter, whom the filmmakers speculate might have been a Gestapo informant, and divorced her after eight months. The documentary barely hints at the obvious complexities of such a marriage for a man with a Jewish upbringing who saw the horrors of the Holocaust and participated in hunting for Nazis.

Salerno conducts several interviews with individuals who knew Salinger in his later years, including his daughter and women who lived with him. These commentaries range from the outraged to the sympathetic, the insightful to the self-righteous. Overall, they document the author’s attraction to younger women and his manipulative and often abusive treatment of people close to him. But *Salinger* refuses to do anything with this information that might create a rounded portrait of a writer and a human being.

The central preoccupation of the second half of the film is with Salinger’s isolation in Cornish, New Hampshire, near the Vermont border, from 1953 onward.

Admirers who attempted to glimpse him are interviewed. One individual, who drove hundreds of miles in the 1970s to speak to the writer, indicates he wanted to talk to Salinger about life. He tells the filmmaker that Salinger became angry and asked him if he were under medical care. We wonder the same thing.

The film notes that several murderers were infatuated with *The Catcher in the Rye*, including Mark David Chapman, who shot John Lennon in December 1980. However, as commentators have pointed out, this is hardly surprising for a book that was required reading in public and private school curricula for decades.

Perhaps the sorriest aspect of the film is its treatment of the media hounding the author over many years. A serious documentary might have critically examined the media’s desire to penetrate Salinger’s seclusion and publish stories about it.

There are different aspects to this. The reading public, which was so entranced by *The Catcher in the Rye* and hoped to see more works by that book’s author, was naturally curious about

his sudden removal from public life. However, after a certain point, when disappointed readers and journalists alike should have resigned themselves to Salinger’s Cornish self-imposed exile, the media remained obsessed, hiding in the trees around his residence and waiting in cars outside the local post office. This had less to do with satisfying anyone’s inevitable curiosity than with the drive to make money out of sensational “exclusives.”

Salerno’s *Salinger* doesn’t treat any of the media nonsense with a critical eye. It simply accepts the right of the corporate media to know everything about a person.

Why were the residents of Cornish, New Hampshire so notoriously protective of the writer’s privacy? One suspects that if the filmmaker had asked them, he might have learned something.

Overall, the filmmakers make no serious attempt to account for Salinger’s withdrawal from the literary world, which might begin with the writer’s complex personal psychology produced by a peculiar set of circumstances: his upbringing, the war, the post-war years and the impact of his unexpected and perhaps unlooked-for success and fame.

Most tellingly, while a number of those interviewed, including “celebrities,” speak about the personal impact of Salinger’s work, especially *The Catcher in the Rye*, the film evades the central issue: what is the source of the immense and enduring popularity of Salinger’s work, a book that has sold 65 million copies over half a century?

Unhappily, *Salinger* is not a particularly objective, profound or sympathetic work.

Its only side-benefit is the news that a number of posthumous works by J. D. Salinger will be published after 2015, including *A Counterintelligence Agent’s Diary*, presumably based on his experiences in de-Nazification; *A World War II Love Story*, apparently dealing with his marriage to Sylvia Welter; *A Religious Manual*, about his discovery of Hinduism; and *The Complete Chronicle of the Glass Family*, new short stories about his recurring character Seymour Glass.



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