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LIFE AND LETTERS HOLDEN AT FIFTY

"The Catcher in the Rye" and what it spawned.
by LOUIS MENAND

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"The Catcher in the Rye" was turned down by *The New Yorker*. The magazine had published six of J. D. Salinger's short stories, including two of the most popular, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," in 1948, and "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," in 1950. But when the editors were shown the novel they declined to run an excerpt. They told Salinger that the precocity of the four Caulfield children was not believable, and that the writing was showoffy—that it seemed designed to display the author's cleverness rather than to present the story. "The Catcher in the Rye" had already been turned down by the publishing house that solicited it, Harcourt Brace, when an executive there named Eugene Reynal achieved immortality the bad way by complaining that he couldn't figure out whether or not Holden Caulfield was supposed to be crazy. Salinger's agent took the book to Little, Brown, where the editor, John Woodburn, was evidently prudent enough not to ask such questions. It was published in July, 1951, and has so far sold more than sixty million copies.

The world is sad, Oscar Wilde said, because a puppet was once melancholy. He was referring to Hamlet, a character he thought had taught the world a new kind of unhappiness—the unhappiness of eternal disappointment in life as it is, Weltschmerz. Whether Shakespeare invented it or not, it has proved to be one of the most addictive of literary emotions. Readers consume volumes of it, and then ask to meet the author. It has also proved to be one of the most enduring of literary emotions, since life manages to come up short pretty reliably. Each generation feels disappointed in its own way, though, and seems to require its own literature of

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disaffection. For many Americans who grew up in the nineteen-fifties, "The Catcher in the Rye" is the purest extract of that mood.

Holden Caulfield is their sorrow king.

Americans who grew up in later decades still read Salinger's novel, but they have their own versions of his story, with different flavors of Weltschmerz—"Catcher in the Rye" rewrites, a literary genre all its own.

In art, as in life, the rich get richer. People generally read "The Catcher in the Rye" when they are around fourteen years old, usually because the book was given or assigned to them by people—parents or teachers—who read it when they were fourteen years old, because somebody gave or assigned it to them. The book keeps acquiring readers, in other words, not because kids keep discovering it but because grownups who read it when they were kids keep getting kids to read it. This seems crucial to making sense of its popularity. "The Catcher in the Rye" is a sympathetic portrait of a boy who refuses to be socialized which has become (among certain readers, anyway, for it is still occasionally banned in conservative school districts) a standard instrument of socialization. I was introduced to the book by my parents, people who, if they had ever imagined that I might, after finishing the thing, run away from school, smoke like a chimney, lie about my age in bars, solicit a prostitute, or use the word "goddam" in every third sentence, would (in the words of the story) have had about two hemorrhages apiece. Somehow, they knew this wouldn't be the effect.

Supposedly, kids respond to "The Catcher in the Rye" because they recognize themselves in the character of Holden Caulfield. Salinger is imagined to have given voice to what every adolescent, or, at least, every sensitive, intelligent, middle-class adolescent, thinks but is too inhibited to say, which is that success is a sham, and that successful people are mostly phonies. Reading Holden's story is supposed to be the literary equivalent of looking in a mirror for the first time. This seems to underestimate the originality of the book. Fourteen-year-olds, even sensitive, intelligent, middle-class fourteen-year-olds, generally do not think that success is a sham, and if they sometimes feel unhappy, or angry, or out of it, it's not because they think most other people are phonies. The whole emotional burden of adolescence is that you don't *know* why you feel unhappy, or angry, or out of it. The appeal of "The Catcher in the Rye," what makes it addictive, is that it provides you with a reason. It gives a content to chemistry.



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Holden talks like a teen-ager, and this makes it natural to assume that he thinks like a teen-ager as well. But like all the wise boys and girls in Salinger's fiction—like Esmé and Teddy and the many brilliant Glasses—Holden thinks like an adult. No teen-ager (and very few grownups, for that matter) sees through other human beings as quickly, as clearly, or as unforgivingly as he does. Holden is a demon of verbal incision. He sums people up like a novelist:

"You had to feel sort of sorry for her, in a way." The secret to Holden's authority as a narrator is that he never lets anything stand by itself. He always tells you what to think. He has everyone pegged. That's why he's so funny. But *The New Yorker's* editors were right: Holden isn't an ordinary teen-ager—he's a prodigy. He seems (and this is why his character can be so addictive) to have something that few people ever consistently attain: an attitude toward life.

The moral of the book can seem to be that Holden will outgrow his attitude, and this is probably the lesson that most of the ninth-grade teachers who assign "The Catcher in the Rye" hope to impart to their students—that alienation is just a phase. But people don't outgrow Holden's attitude, or not completely, and they don't want to outgrow it, either, because it's a fairly useful attitude to have. One goal of education is to teach people to want the rewards life has to offer, but another goal is to teach them a modest degree of contempt for those rewards, too. In American life, where—especially if you are a sensitive and intelligent member of the middle class—the rewards are constantly being advertised as yours for the taking, the feeling of disappointment is a lot more common than the feeling of success, and if we didn't learn how not to care our failures would destroy us. Giving "The Catcher in the Rye" to your children is like giving them a layer of psychic insulation.

That it might end up on the syllabus for ninth-grade English was probably close to the last thing Salinger had in mind when he wrote the book. He wasn't trying to expose the spiritual poverty of a conformist culture; he was writing a story about a boy whose little brother has died. Holden, after all, isn't unhappy because he sees that people are phonies; he sees that people are phonies because he is unhappy. What makes his view of other people so cutting and his disappointment so unappeasable is the same thing that makes Hamlet's feelings so cutting

and unappeasable: his grief. Holden is meant, it's true, to be a kind of intuitive moral genius. (So, presumably, is Hamlet.) But his sense that everything is worthless is just the normal feeling people have when someone they love dies. Life starts to seem a pathetically transparent attempt to trick them into forgetting about death; they lose their taste for it.

What drew Salinger to this plot? Holden Caulfield first shows up in Salinger's work in 1941, in a story entitled "Slight Rebellion off Madison," which features a character called Holden (he is not the narrator) and his girlfriend, Sally Hayes. (The story was bought by *The New Yorker* but not published until 1946.) And there are characters named Holden Caulfield in other stories that Salinger produced in the mid-forties. But most of "The Catcher in the Rye" was written after the war, and although it seems odd to call Salinger a war writer, both his biographers, Ian Hamilton and Paul Alexander, think that the war was what made Salinger Salinger, the experience that darkened his satire and put the sadness into his humor.

Salinger spent most of the war with the 4th Infantry Division, where he was in a counter-intelligence unit. He landed at Utah Beach in the fifth hour of the D Day invasion, and ended up in the middle of some of the bloodiest fighting of the liberation—in Hürtgen Forest and then in the Battle of the Bulge, in the winter of 1944. The 4th Division suffered terrible casualties in those engagements, and Salinger, by his own account, in letters he wrote at the time, was traumatized. He fought for eleven months during the advance on Berlin, and by the summer of 1945, after the German surrender, he seems to have had a nervous breakdown. He checked himself into an Army hospital in Nuremberg. Shortly after he was released, and while he was still in Europe, he wrote the first story narrated by Holden Caulfield himself, the real beginning of "The Catcher in the Rye." It was called "I'm Crazy." (It was published in *Collier's* in December, 1945.)

"A Perfect Day for Bananafish," published a little more than two years later, is, of course, the story that both introduced Seymour Glass, the oldest and most improbably gifted of the improbably gifted Glass children, and finished him off, since Salinger has Seymour kill himself on the last page. If we know Seymour only from the later stories in the Glass saga, in which he appears as a kind of saint—"Franny" and "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" (both published in *The New Yorker* in 1955), "Zooney" (1957), "Seymour:

An Introduction" (1959), and "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965), Salinger's last published work—we are likely to assume that he killed himself because the world's stupidity had made him crazy. But in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" it is clear that Seymour kills himself because the war has made him crazy. He has just been discharged from an Army hospital, and his behavior in the story isn't saintly or visionary or engagingly eccentric; it's nutty and, in the end, psychotic. Seymour is a war casualty. So, much more obviously, is the unnamed protagonist of "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," an American soldier who is befriended by a thirteen-year-old English girl just before he goes off to take part in the D Day invasion. "The Catcher in the Rye" was a best-seller when it came out, in 1951, but its reception as some sort of important cultural statement didn't happen until the mid-fifties, when people started talking about "alienation" and "conformity" and "the youth culture"—the time of "Howl" and "Rebel Without a Cause" and Elvis Presley's first records. It is as a hero of that culture that Holden Caulfield has survived. But "The Catcher in the Rye" is not a novel of the nineteen-fifties; it's a novel of the nineteen-forties. And it is not a celebration of youth. It is a book about loss and a world gone wrong.

By the mid-nineteen-fifties, Salinger had disappeared down his New Hampshire rabbit hole. *The New Yorker's* rejection of "The Catcher in the Rye" plainly had no effect on him as a writer. Criticized for creating a family with four precocious children and for writing in a style that drew attention to itself, he proceeded to create a family with *seven* precocious children, and to produce, in "Zooney" and "Seymour," works of supreme literary exhibitionism.

"Zooney" and "Seymour" are exhibitionistic because the emotional current driving the characters has become unmoored from anything that has actually happened to them. They are not thrown into a state of higher intensity by trauma or by grief. They are just in a state of higher intensity. In "Franny," Franny Glass's spiritual crisis is a kind of screen shielding the rather mundane circumstance that she has been made pregnant by a man who she realizes will remain, all his life, a pompous English major. But in "Zooney," published two years later, Franny's spiritual crisis is genuine, because, apparently, having spiritual crises is the price one pays for being a Glass in this lousy world. There is no suggestion of pregnancy. We get Seymour's Fat Lady instead. After 1955, Salinger stopped writing stories, in the conventional sense. He

seemed to lose interest in fiction as an art form—perhaps he thought there was something manipulative or inauthentic about literary device and authorial control. His presence began to dissolve into the world of his creation. He let the puppets take over the theatre.

T*he New Yorker* had no trouble publishing "Zooney" (which remains the longest piece of fiction it has ever run) and "Seymour." The magazine seems to have got over its anxiety about credibility and transparency. Salinger changed *The New Yorker's* aesthetic, at a time when *The New Yorker's* aesthetic was the gold standard for short fiction, and that is one testament to the impact he has had on American writing. There are many more. Philip Roth's early stories, collected in "Goodbye, Columbus," have something of Salinger's voice and comic timing, and it is hard to read Roth's later funny, kvetchy, mournful monologuists without imagining Holden Caulfield and Zooney Glass as ancestral presences.

Still, Roth was not trying to rewrite "The Catcher in the Rye"; Salinger's complete lack of irony could hardly have appealed to him. But other writers have tried, at least one in every decade since it appeared. Sylvia Plath made a version of it for girls, in "The Bell Jar" (1963); Hunter Thompson produced one for people who couldn't believe that Nixon was President and Jim Morrison was dead, in "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" (1971). Jay McInerney's "Bright Lights, Big City" (1984) was the downtown edition; Dave Eggers' "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" (2000) is the MTV one. Many books featuring interestingly unhappy young people have been published since "The Catcher in the Rye," of course, and some of them were written by people who no doubt regarded Salinger as a model and an influence. But that doesn't make those books "Catcher in the Rye" rewrites. The bar is set a good deal higher than that, and the reason has to do with the Salinger mystique.

Why Salinger chose to drop out of sight and then out of print is his own business, and it probably ought to have nothing to do with the way people read the work that he did publish. But it does. Readers can't help it. Salinger's withdrawal is one of the things behind, for example, Holden Caulfield's transformation from a fictional character into a culture hero: it helped to confirm the belief that Holden's unhappiness was less personal than it appears—that it was really some sort of protest

against modern life. It also helped to confirm the sense, encouraged by Salinger's own later manner, that there was no distinction between Salinger and his characters—that if you ran into Salinger at the Cornish, New Hampshire, post office (which is where his stalkers generally seem to have run into him) it would be exactly like running into Holden Caulfield or Seymour Glass. By dropping out, Salinger glamorized his misfits, for to be a misfit who can also write like J. D. Salinger—a Holden Caulfield who publishes in *The New Yorker*—must be very glamorous indeed.

This is why the narrator in a "Catcher in the Rye" rewrite is always a magazine writer. So, of course, is the author of the "Catcher in the Rye" rewrite, and the author and the narrator are separated by barely a hair. The model for the narrator is no longer Holden Caulfield. And it is not J. D. Salinger imagined as Holden Caulfield. It is the author imagined as J. D. Salinger imagined as Holden Caulfield. You can't, in other words, rewrite "The Catcher in the Rye" simply by telling the story of an unhappy teen-ager and updating the cultural references, or transposing the events to a different city, or changing the sex of the protagonist. You have to reproduce the Salinger mystique, because the mystique has become part of what "The Catcher in the Rye" is. The end product of the ideal Salinger rewrite isn't a Salinger story. It's Salinger. To rewrite the story of Holden Caulfield you have to become a melancholy genius, too. You have to be your own sorrow king.

The book that seems, in some ways, closest to Salinger's is Plath's. Plath belonged to the first generation of "Catcher in the Rye" readers. She read it sometime before 1953, when she spent part of a summer in New York City as a twenty-year-old intern at *Mademoiselle*. (When she arrived at the magazine, she asked to be assigned to interview Salinger, whose "Nine Stories" had just been published. She got Elizabeth Bowen instead.) That internship and her subsequent breakdown and hospitalization became the basis, ten years later, for "The Bell Jar."

Reviewers noticed the similarity to "The Catcher in the Rye" immediately, and there are echoes of Holden's voice and story in the voice and story of Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood. But Plath was not merely borrowing. She must have felt that an aspiring magazine writer in New York City in 1953, when Salinger was in his prime, would naturally see life in a Salingeresque way. When Esther says, for example, "I'm stupid about executions" (1953 is the year the Rosenbergs were executed), she is adopting a

Caulfield attitude. Esther's vague loathing of sex is a loathing learned partly from "The Catcher in the Rye"; her obsession with madness and suicide is partly the obsession of an admirer of "Teddy" and "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." In other ways, though, "The Bell Jar" and "The Catcher in the Rye" are very different books, and the difference can be summed up by saying that no reader has ever wanted to be Esther Greenwood. Holden (despite the confusion of the Harcourt Brace executive) is not crazy; he tells his story from a sanatorium (where he has gone because of a fear that he has t.b.), not a mental hospital. The brutality of the world makes him sick. It makes Esther insane.

"The Bell Jar," too, has become a staple of ninth-grade English, an officially approved text for adolescents, a book about the culture of youth. The later "Catcher in the Rye" rewrites—Thompson's and McInerney's and Eggers'—are not yet canonical in this way. People don't read them because their parents recommended them. They read them for the same reason they listen to alternative rock or go to see "Pulp Fiction" six times—because these are things that teach them an attitude. They are sensibility manuals; they show what sort of unhappiness is in style this decade.

"Catcher in the Rye" rewrites are all constructed on roughly the same pattern: a trauma triggered by a death (in Thompson's book, it's the death of the sixties), followed by an episode of emotional regression and a kind of shadow war, mostly in the head, with the rest of the world. They share with "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Bell Jar" a fuzzy Christian thematics about salvation, redemption, and rebirth, and they draw heavily on the Salinger and Plath catalogue: mummies, fetuses, comas, sensational headlines, perversions, botched sex, suicide attempts, suicides, death fantasies, deaths. The narrators have a mordant contempt for everyone and everything, including themselves. The books are funny, but they are about loss and frustration and defeat. And each one seemed to hit a generational nerve, as though no one had ever told that story, or sounded those notes, before. What makes their melancholy so irresistible?

We think of nostalgia as an emotion that grows with age, but, like most emotions, it is keenest when we are young. Is there any nostalgia more powerful than the feelings of a third grader revisiting his or her kindergarten classroom? Those tiny chairs, the old paste jars, the cubbies where we stuffed our extra sweaters—we want to climb back into that world, but we're third graders now, much too

large. We've fallen off the carousel. Although "youth" is supposed to mean an enthusiasm for change, young people don't want change any more than anyone else does, and possibly less. What they secretly want is what Holden wants: they want the world to be like the Museum of Natural History, with everything frozen exactly the way it was the first day they encountered it.

A great deal of "youth culture"—that is, the stuff that younger people actually consume, as opposed to the stuff that older people consume (like "Lord of the Flies") in order to learn about "youth"—plays to this feeling of loss. You go to a dance where a new pop song is playing, and for the rest of your life hearing that song triggers the same emotion. It comes on the radio, and you think, *That's when things were truly fine*. You want to hear it again and again. You have become addicted. Youth culture acquires its poignancy through time, and so thoroughly that you can barely see what it is in itself. It's just, permanently, "your song," your story. When people who grew up in the nineteen-fifties give "The Catcher in the Rye" to their kids, it's like showing them an old photo album: *That's me*.

It isn't, of course. Maybe, in fact, the nostalgia of youth culture is completely spurious. Maybe it invites you to indulge in bittersweet memories of a childhood you never had, an idyll of Beach Boys songs and cheeseburgers and convertibles and teen-age crushes which has been constructed by pop songs and television shows and movies, and bears very little relation to any experience of your own. But, whether or not the emotion is spurious, people have it. It is the romantic certainty, which all these books seduce you with, that somehow, somewhere, something was taken away from you, and you cannot get it back. Once, you did ride a carousel. It seemed as though it would last forever. ♦

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