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978-0-521-37798-0 - New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye

Edited by Jack Salzman

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

JACK SALZMAN

I

IN 1959, eight years after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Arthur Mizener began a *Harper's* magazine essay about J. D. Salinger by noting that he was "probably the most avidly read author of any serious pretensions of his generation." There were good reasons why this should be the case, Mizener commented. Whatever limitations the work might have had – either of technique or of subject matter – within these limitations it was "the most interesting fiction that has come along for some time."¹ Although, as we will see, there was little critical agreement about what the limitations of *The Catcher in the Rye* may have been, there was little disagreement with Mizener's contention that Salinger was the most avidly read "serious" writer of his generation. Soon after *Nine Stories* appeared in April 1953, it made the *New York Times* best-seller list. By 1961 sales of *Catcher* were reported to have reached one and a half million copies in the United States alone.²

But Salinger's popularity did not go unquestioned. Although numerous scholarly articles appeared during the 1950s, and continued into the early 1960s, by 1959 at least one eminent critic, George Steiner, had attacked what he referred to as "The Salinger Industry"; and two years later Alfred Kazin joined in criticizing the author he called "Everybody's Favorite."³ At the same time, voices very different from those of Steiner and Kazin continued to denounce Salinger's work, especially *Catcher*. In one of the earliest reviews of *Catcher*, T. Morris Longstreth, writing in *The Christian Science Monitor* for July 19, 1951, offered a view that continues to haunt Salinger's novel. It is a story, Longstreth began, "that is not

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fit for children to read." For although Holden is alive and human, he is also "preposterous, profane, and pathetic beyond belief." It is a matter to be feared and not taken lightly: given wide circulation, a book like *Catcher* might multiply Holden's kind – "as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intentions."⁴ It was not long before *The Catcher in the Rye* began to be banned from high school reading lists. And more than thirty-five years later, an editorial in the *New York Times* would call attention to the force of Longstreth's warning: parents in Boron, California, had persuaded the school board to ban *Catcher*, a not unusual occurrence. "That sort of stuff is forever happening to 'Catcher'," the editorial noted; according to an officer of the American Library Association, it is "'a perennial No. 1 on the censorship hit list.'"⁵ Yet, removed from reading lists, banned from libraries, and increasingly ignored by critics who seem uneasy with both its technique and its subject matter in a postmodern literary world – critics who at times seem more interested in Salinger's whereabouts than in his writings⁶ – the novel remains one of the most popular, and more importantly one of the most read, of all works of modern fiction.

II

For some, Salinger's popularity may have to do with his elusiveness and silence. He has, after all, published no fiction since 1966, and he has steadfastly refused to talk or write about his life (and, indeed, apparently has done all he can to keep others from invading his privacy). But the autobiographical enterprise, the need to find the writer in his or her work, to see fiction not as fact or history but as autobiography, is always of dubious value. There may well be, as one critic has written, "a public hungry to possess the famously elusive J. D. Salinger."⁷ But surely the public that continues to read *The Catcher in the Rye*, even that part of the public which demands that the book not be read, is more concerned with the fiction written than with the man in New Hampshire who may or may not be writing more stories.

Just how much of Salinger one can find in his fiction – that is,

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how many scenes and characters have cognates in actual events and people in Salinger's own life – is at best unclear. (How much of Salinger is in Holden – or in Seymour or Buddy Glass?) What is clear is that well before the publication of *Catcher* on July 16, 1951, Salinger was thinking about the type of character who would become Holden. Just how far back the origins of Holden can be traced is hard to determine. Although Salinger did some writing at Valley Forge Military Academy and later at Ursinus College (where he enrolled in 1938 but stayed only nine weeks), there is nothing of any consequence in that work. Not long after he left Ursinus, however, Salinger enrolled in Whit Burnett's short-story writing class at Columbia University. There, as a class assignment, he wrote a short story called "The Young Folks." There is nothing in this work that anticipates Holden either (although at least one critic sees in one of the characters a "thinly penciled prototype of Sally Hayes in *The Catcher in the Rye*");⁸ but Burnett, who also was the editor of the literary magazine *Story*, offered to publish it. Salinger was paid twenty-five dollars, and "The Young Folks" appeared in *Story* in the spring of 1940.

In November of the following year – after stories had appeared in the *University of Kansas City Review* ("Go See Eddie") and *Collier's* ("The Hang of It") – Salinger sold what seems to have been his first story about Holden Caulfield to *The New Yorker*. However, the entry of the United States into World War II delayed publication of the story until 1946, when it appeared as "Slight Rebellion off Madison" in the December 21 issue. In the meantime Salinger had been drafted into the army, where he was trained for counterintelligence, landed in Normandy on D-Day, took part in five campaigns in Europe, and was discharged in 1945.

Several stories were published during those years, but none is of much substance. Even "I'm Crazy," which appeared in the December 22, 1945, issue of *Collier's*, is really of consequence only because it is the first published story to contain material that is actually used in *Catcher*. Nor were the stories published immediately after Salinger's discharge from the army significantly more interesting. A ninety-page manuscript about Holden Caulfield was accepted for publication by *The New Yorker* in 1946, but for reasons that remain obscure it was subsequently withdrawn by Salinger.

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One of the two stories published in 1947, “The Inverted Forest” – the other was “A Young Girl in 1941 with No Waist at All” – is of interest now mostly because the story’s central figure, Ray Ford, seems to foreshadow Seymour Glass in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.”

But it was not until the publication of “Bananafish” itself, in *The New Yorker* on January 31, 1948, that Salinger’s stories began to show the consummate artistry that would make his fiction among the most significant produced by a writer in the post–World War II generation. In 1948, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” was quickly followed in the pages of *The New Yorker* by “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut” (March 20) and “Just Before the War with the Eskimos” (June 5). The following year “The Laughing Man” appeared in *The New Yorker* (March 19) and “Down at the Dinghy” in the April issue of *Harper’s*. In 1950, perhaps the best known if not the best story by Salinger was published, “For Esmé, With Love and Squalor” (*New Yorker*, April 8); and earlier in the year, on January 21, Samuel Goldwyn Studios released *My Foolish Heart*, its disastrous version of “Uncle Wiggily.” A year and a half later, on July 14, 1951, the *New Yorker* published Salinger’s intriguing story of infidelity and self-deception, “Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes.” Two days later, on July 16, Little, Brown brought out *The Catcher in the Rye*.

III

The earliest critical responses to Salinger’s first – and what increasingly seems likely to be his only – published novel were, as noted earlier, somewhat mixed. Some of the reviewers were clearly impressed. S. N. Behrman wrote a lengthy and very favorable review in *The New Yorker*, and Clifton Fadiman, on behalf of the Book-of-the-Month Club, which had selected *Catcher* as its main selection for July, wrote, “That rare miracle of fiction has again come to pass: a human being has been created out of ink, paper, and the imagination.” In a review that appeared in the *New York Times* on the day of the novel’s publication, Nash K. Burger called *The Catcher in the Rye* “an unusually brilliant first novel,” and Paul Engle, in a review that appeared on the previous day in the *Chicago*

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Tribune, found it “engaging and believable,” a novel “full of right observation and sharp insight.” Other critics were equally enthusiastic: Harvey Breit, in the August 1951 issue of the *Atlantic*, commented that Salinger’s novel “has sufficient power and cleverness to make the reader chuckle and – rare indeed – even laugh aloud”; Harold L. Roth, writing in *Library Journal*, noted that Salinger’s novel “may be a shock to many parents who wonder about a young man’s thoughts and actions, but its effect can be a salutary one. An *adult* book (very frank) and highly recommended”; James Yaffe, in the autumn issue of *Yale Review*, commented that “Salinger has written a book, with life, feeling, and lightheartedness – very rare qualities nowadays”; the critic for *Time* praised Salinger for being able to “understand the adolescent mind without displaying one”; Harrison Smith, in the pages of *Saturday Review*, called the novel “remarkable and absorbing . . . a book to be read thoughtfully and more than once”; and Dan Wickenden, in a review titled “Clear-Sighted Boy” showed his own clear-sightedness by calling *Catcher* a modern picaresque novel similar to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and suggesting that it too might become a classic.⁹

Other reviewers were less enthusiastic. In *The New Republic*, Anne L. Goodman called *Catcher* “a brilliant tour-de-force,” but felt that in a writer of “Salinger’s undeniable talent one expects something more.” Similarly, Ernest Jones, writing in *The Nation*, found that although *Catcher* was always lively in its parts, the book as a whole was “predictable and boring.” Virgilia Peterson, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, expressed misgivings about Salinger’s language: the novel “repeats and repeats, like an incantation, the pseudo-natural cadences of a flat, colloquial prose which at best, banked down and understated, has a truly moving impact and at worst is casually obscene.” In England, where *Catcher* was published in August by Hamish Hamilton, the critic for the *Times Literary Supplement* also had a mixed response: Holden is “very touching,” but “the endless stream of blasphemy and obscenity in which he talks, credible as it is, palls after the first chapter.”¹⁰

Even less enthusiastic were the notices that appeared in *Catholic World* and *Commentary*. Riley Hughes, in *Catholic World*, adopting a position not unlike that of T. Morris Longstreth in *The Christian*

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Science Monitor, condemned the novel's "excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language," which he argued made Holden's iconoclastic character "monotonous and phony." Even more critical was a review by William Poster that appeared in the January 1952 issue of *Commentary*: "The ennui, heartburn, and weary revulsions of *The Catcher in the Rye*," Poster wrote, "are the inevitable actions, not of an adolescent, however disenchanted, but of a well-paid satirist with a highly developed technique, no point of view, and no target to aim at but himself."¹¹

IV

The initial critical response to *Catcher in the Rye*, then, certainly was not remarkable. The few critics who regarded the novel as "a brilliant performance and in its own way just about flawless"¹² were more than offset by reviewers who had serious reservations about the novel's worth. But the book sold well, if not remarkably so. Within two weeks of its publication, *The Catcher in the Rye* made its way on to the *New York Times* best-seller list, where it remained for almost thirty weeks. During this time, however, it never moved higher than fourth place, and failed to attain the success of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, James Michener's *Return to Paradise*, or Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea*. On March 2, 1952, *Catcher* made its last appearance on the list, in twelfth place.¹³

Even after *The Catcher in the Rye* lost its position on the best-seller list, Salinger was not long out of the public eye (though he would try to become so by moving from Westport, Connecticut, to the more private surroundings of Cornish, New Hampshire). On April 6, 1953, a little more than a year after *Catcher's* disappearance from the best-seller list, Little, Brown brought out the first collection of Salinger's short fiction, *Nine Stories* (all previously published, and all but two – "Down at the Dinghy" and "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" – having originally appeared in *The New Yorker*).¹⁴ Again, the critical response was somewhat uneven. A few critics complained that however great their insight, the stories were "little more than specialized reporting" or thought Salinger guilty of "a dodging of issues." But, in an important review in the *New York*

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Times, Eudora Welty praised the collection, noting especially Salinger's ability to honor with a loving heart "what is unique and precious in each person on earth." Welty's endorsement was joined by such highly regarded literary critics as Gilbert Highet ("There is not a failure in the book; I would rather read a collection like this than many a novel which is issued with more fanfare.") and Arthur Mizener (unlike *Catcher*, *Nine Stories* has "a controlling intention which is at once complex enough for Mr. Salinger's awareness and firm enough to give it purpose"), as well as by critics for *Kirkus* and the *Chicago Sun Tribune*.¹⁵ It was not long before *Nine Stories* was on the best-seller list, where it stayed among the top twenty books for three months.

At the same time, *The Catcher in the Rye* was attracting new audiences. By 1954 the novel was not only available in translation in Denmark, Germany, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands; even more significantly, it was made available in paperback by the New American Library, thereby beginning *Catcher's* long involvement with high school and college students.¹⁶ Yet despite his increasing popularity – or perhaps because of it – Salinger continued to shy away from any encounter with his widening audience. He not only insisted that his picture be removed from the jacket of the Little, Brown edition of *Catcher*; he also refused to comment on either his marriage to Claire Douglas on February 17, 1955, or on the birth of their daughter, Margaret Ann, in December of that year.

What Salinger did do was write more stories. "Franny" and "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" both appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1955 (on January 29 and November 19, respectively). "Zooney" was published two years later (*The New Yorker*, May 4, 1957) and "Seymour: An Introduction" two years after that (*The New Yorker*, June 6, 1959). In 1960, a son, Matthew, was born to the Salingers. The following year, on September 14, *Franny and Zooney* was published. Within two weeks, 125,000 copies had been sold, and for six months the thin volume remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Yet, despite his popularity, Salinger's world was becoming increasingly unsettled.

For some, Salinger's obsession with Eastern philosophy was a clear indication of his troubled state; for others, the end of his

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marriage in 1967 was a more obvious manifestation of his personal turmoil. But, above all, something was wrong with the writing: nothing of any consequence was being published. The publication of *Franny and Zooey* was followed in 1963 by the publication in one volume of two previously published stories, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*. Two years later *The New Yorker*, in its issue of June 19, 1965, did publish another Seymour Glass story, "Hapworth 16, 1924." But this long, rambling story found little critical favor when it appeared, and it has never been reissued. Whatever the cause of the artistic failure of "Hapworth 16, 1924," it is the last work we have by Salinger. The rest, as critic and scholar alike have noted for the past twenty-five years, has been silence.

The silence, of course, has been primarily Salinger's. Yet despite the continued popularity of *The Catcher in the Rye* with students, critics have become relatively silent about the novel; Salinger's fiction no longer attracts the critical attention it once did. Indeed, beginning in 1965, the year when Salinger published his last story in *The New Yorker*, there has been a steady decline in critical interest in Salinger's work.

Not that the initial critical and scholarly response to *Catcher* was particularly striking. The first substantial essays devoted to Salinger's novel appeared in 1956. In "J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff," Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. set the tone for much of the criticism of the next ten years by arguing that *The Catcher in the Rye* belongs to major traditions of Western literature in general and American literature in particular.¹⁷ "It is clear," they began their essay, "that J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* belongs to an ancient and honorable tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction. . . . It is, of course, the tradition of the Quest." In addition, they noted, American literature "seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies tradition in order to arrive at some pristine knowledge, some personal integrity." Natty Bumpo, Huckleberry Finn, and Quentin Compson are such figures; so, too, is Holden, only unlike other American heroes Holden "needs to go home and he needs to leave it." He is, Heiserman and Miller somewhat grandly proclaim, "Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom rolled into one crazy kid." Somewhat more moderately,

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Charles Kaplan limits his comparison to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, arguing that both novels are concerned with “the right of the nonconformist to assert his nonconformity,” and that Holden, like Huck, has earned his “passport to literary immortality.”¹⁸

The interest in Huck and Holden was given fuller consideration the following year when Edgar Branch’s thoughtful “Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity” appeared in *American Quarterly*.¹⁹ Branch was not interested in revealing any influences that Mark Twain’s novel might have had on Salinger’s work. Rather, by looking at the two novels, he hoped to “bare one nerve of cultural continuity in America.” For Branch, Huck’s flight down the Mississippi and Holden’s through the streets of New York are not very different: “*The Catcher in the Rye*, in fact, is a kind of *Huckleberry Finn* in modern dress.” Above all, Branch concludes, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher* “are brothers under the skin because they reflect a slowly developing but always recognizable pattern of moral and social meaning that is part of the active experience of young Americans let loose in the world, in this century and the last.”

Years later, Mary Suzanne Schriber would publish an interesting attack on the views of critics like Kaplan and Branch. Her concern, in “Holden Caulfield, C’est Moi,” is not with the comparison of Huck and Holden, any more than her attack is on Salinger or *Catcher* (which, she acknowledges, “perhaps legitimately deserves its popularity and its designation as a ‘classic’”). What concerns Schriber is most readily seen in the ease with which Branch can speak of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher* as “brothers under the skin,” the unquestioned assumption on Branch’s part – as it is on the part of Kaplan and most male critics – that the two youths speak not only for all adolescence but for the nation as well. *Catcher* criticism, Schriber writes, is guilty of androcentricity; “an adolescent male WASP,” she reminds us, “is not automatically nature’s designated spokesperson for us all.”²⁰

Schriber, of course, has not been the only critic to question the universality of Salinger’s novel; nor has the gender issue been the only reason for the rejection of Holden as our designated spokesperson. In 1956, John W. Aldridge, writing about Salinger in *In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity*

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(the same year as the publication of Heiserman and Miller's laudatory essay) echoed some of *Catcher's* original reviewers in expressing his reservations about the novel. Along with Kaplan and Branch, among others, Aldridge notes that *Catcher*, like *Huckleberry Finn*, "is a study in the spiritual picaresque." But Holden is not Huck; Holden "remains at the end what he was at the beginning – cynical, defiant, and blind." As for ourselves, writes Aldridge without explaining who "ourselves" may be, "there is identification but no insight, a sense of pathos but not of tragedy." Salinger may have made the most of his subject, but if so, his subject was not adequate to his intention. Nor, Aldridge harshly concludes, is Holden's world adequate to his contempt, and "that is probably because it does not possess sufficient humanity to make the search for humanity dramatically feasible."²¹

The vagaries of literary criticism are such that the year after Aldridge published his deprecating view of *Catcher*, Ihab Hassan produced one of the most positive – and balanced – essays yet written about Salinger. In "Rare Quixotic Gesture: The Fiction of J. D. Salinger" Hassan argues that Salinger has written "some of the best fiction of our time." Salinger's voice is genuine and new, if startlingly uneven. Hassan takes exception to the criticism leveled against *Catcher* by Aldridge and others. To Hassan, Salinger's neo-picaresque novel is "concerned far less with the education or initiation of an adolescent than with a dramatic exposure of the manner in which ideals are denied access to our lives and of the modes which mendacity assumes in our urban culture." The book, finally, is both funny and terrifying: "a work full of pathos in the original sense of the word."²²

Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, in the first published monograph devoted to Salinger, *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger*, continue along the lines of Hassan and of those critics who liken *Catcher* to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (The colloquial language, the picaresque structure have "exciting resemblances"; even the ending of *Catcher* is as artistically weak as that of *Huckleberry Finn*, and as "humanly satisfying.") But it is Jesus Christ, not Huckleberry Finn, to whom Gwynn and Blotner want to compare Holden. Holden, the reader must realize, is a saintly Christian person. And