

INTRODUCTION



J. D. Salinger

(1919-2010)

Jerome David Salinger made literary history with his huge bestseller *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951. He rendered the alienation of an adolescent in the idiom of the day with such timeless authenticity that the book made a sensational and lasting impact. Still assigned in schools, it is reported to be selling about 250,000 copies a year. Like *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), to which it has often been compared, *Catcher* has many literary qualities that transcend the “young adult novel,” though it is far less complex and wise than *Huck*. Salinger also wrote several distinguished short stories, in particular “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut” for its continuing pertinence, though most critics have judged “For Esme--with Love and Squalor” to be his best. His *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and other stories about the precious fragile Glass family of sensitive geniuses provoked critics such as Mary McCarthy to satire, perhaps one of the factors prompting Salinger’s retreat into seclusion. “If I were a piano player,” he said, “I’d play it in the goddam closet.”

Although *Catcher* is a descendant of *Huck*, the adolescent protagonists contrast in significant ways, as do the refined Salinger and Twain. Salinger is a social Realist of manners in the sophisticated tradition of Chopin, Wharton, Lewis, and Fitzgerald, though his scope and his productivity were smaller than theirs. Usually described as “brilliant” and “dazzling,” he is Impressionistic, economical, symbolic, allegorical, ironic, and witty. He exhibits some characteristics of literary Modernism: (1) references to God; (2) affirming spirituality against materialism; (3) championing traditional family values, especially children; (4) advocating independent self-reliance as opposed to collectivism; (5) criticizing Postmodern trends harmful to humanity and society including solipsism, narcissism, hedonism, and drug addiction; (6) straight rather than hip. At the same time, Salinger also has Postmodernist characteristics: (1) dissociation from Nature; (2) urban angst in the “Unreal City” of Eliot’s waste land; (3) elite sense of superiority; (4) East Coast provinciality; (5) inclination to androgyny rather than masculinity; (6) alienation from America; (7) agnostic disbelief in an afterlife. Many writers have credited Salinger with influencing them, most notably Roth and Updike--who wrote a lot more but not as well—whereas Norman Mailer called him “no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school.”

BIOGRAPHY

Salinger was born in New York City, son of a Scots-Irish mother and a prosperous Jewish importer. “You can hit my father over the head with a chair and he won’t wake up, but my mother, all you have to do to my mother is cough somewhere in Siberia and she’ll hear you.” He had an older sister, Doris. Raised in

Manhattan, Salinger grew up an urbane New Yorker in consciousness, subject matter and style. In 1932 the family moved to prestigious Park Avenue.

EDUCATION

“*The Great Gatsby*...was my *Tom Sawyer* when I was twelve.” At 13 he was enrolled in the McBurney School, an elite private school near Park Avenue, where he managed the fencing team, acted in plays and wrote for the student newspaper. Then he attended Valley Forge Military Academy, an elite boarding school in Pennsylvania that became the model for Pencey Prep in *The Catcher in the Rye*. There his academic record was “mediocre” and his IQ measured far below that of a genius, unlike his creations the Glass children. He went on to Ursinus College, New York University, and Columbia. Holden Caulfield says, “In every school I’ve been to, all the athletic bastards stick together”; “You never even hear any hints dropped on a campus that wisdom is supposed to be the goal of knowledge.” At Columbia he studied short story writing with Whit Burnett, who edited *Story* magazine and published several of Salinger’s first stories. His urbane polished style eventually led to acceptance of other stories by major slick magazines—*Cosmopolitan*, *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

In 1937 his father sent Salinger to Vienna, Austria to learn the meat-importing business by working at a company there. He came home just a month before Austria got annexed by Nazi Germany. Back in New York he began dating the debutante Oona O’Neill, the daughter of playwright Eugene O’Neill. He courted her with some persistence despite feeling that “Little Oona’s hopelessly in love with little Oona.” Soon little Oona took up with the big Charlie Chaplin, leaving Salinger behind—a nobody. That year alone, seven of his stories had been rejected by *The New Yorker*. He escaped his disappointments by taking a job as activity director on a Caribbean cruise ship. Oona eventually married Chaplin. Salinger broke through as a writer in December of 1941 when *The New Yorker* accepted his story “Slight Rebellion off Madison,” about an alienated adolescent named Holden Caulfield—but within days the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor delayed its publication until after the war.

WORLD WAR II

After the United States entered World War II, in 1942 he got drafted and sent to Europe with the Army Signal Corps, then got assigned to the Counter Intelligence Corps because he was fluent in French and German. The locale of Salinger’s training in Devonshire, England was the basis for his most admired story “For Esme—with Love and Squalor.” On D-Day, the epic allied invasion at Normandy in 1944, he landed on Utah Beach with the Fourth Division five hours after the initial assault. He remained with the Division as a security agent through five campaigns, interrogating civilians and German prisoners of war, identifying agents of the Gestapo—at the famous Battle of the Bulge and at the horrendous battle at Huertgen Forest. Half Jewish himself, he was one of the first American soldiers to enter a Nazi concentration camp. Later he told his daughter that “You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how long you live.” In *Catcher*, Holden says of a veteran, “He once told Allie and I that if he’d had to shoot anybody, he wouldn’t have known which direction to shoot in. He said the Army was practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were.” Such disgust with the human race recalls Twain.

Salinger had been influenced by Hemingway, like nearly all short story writers. Now Hemingway was a war correspondent attached to his Division. Salinger was impressed by his friendliness and modesty, contrary to the popular stereotype. Hemingway agreed to read some of his stories and is reported to have exclaimed, “Jesus, he has a helluva talent.” They became friends, though Salinger was disgusted when Hemingway demonstrated the efficiency of a German luger by shooting off a chicken’s head. Later when he was recovering from combat trauma in a hospital at Nuremberg he wrote Hemingway a letter joking that the only reason he was there was because he was looking for a nurse like Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*. In another of his letters, he told Hemingway that their talks were among his few positive memories of the war. Critics have assumed that when Holden calls Frederick Henry a “phony” Salinger is belittling Hemingway, but Holden is an unreliable narrator, a frustrated adolescent too young to have experienced romantic love. Salinger may have been frustrated himself. In 1945 at the end of the war he married a woman he met in Germany, but the marriage only lasted eight months.

The New Yorker

Back home in New York after the war, Salinger published stories in *The New Yorker*, the most elite literary magazine of the day, beginning in 1948 with “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” about the suicide of the genius Seymour Glass. Salinger thought of himself as a successor to Fitzgerald and “Bananafish” was compared to Fitzgerald’s story “May Day.” Salinger’s sensibility and style were so compatible with the *New Yorker* editors that they signed him to a contract giving them right of first refusal on all his future stories. He established himself as the model *New Yorker* story writer, as Updike would be later, publishing there a number of stories about the Glass family—two retired vaudeville performers and their seven brilliant children: the genius Seymour, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walt, Zooey, and Fanny. Also during the 1940s Salinger became a Zen Buddhist, so dedicated that he gave Zen reading lists to his dates. He said “I write just for myself and my own pleasure.” Aesthetic, spiritual pleasure. Writing was Salinger’s religion, as it was for Flaubert and Henry James. He also wanted to make money.

HOLLYWOOD

In 1948 Salinger’s literary agent sold film rights to “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut.” Samuel Goldwyn turned it into a melodrama retitled *My Foolish Heart*, starring Dana Andrews and Susan Hayward. The picture got bad reviews and changed the story so much that, like Willa Cather before him, Salinger never allowed another movie adaptation of his work.

The Catcher in the Rye (1951)

Holden Caulfield at age 16 is expelled from Pencey Prep after being expelled from three other schools. He tells of his experiences in New York, an archetypal story of the innocent youth who thinks he is so smart getting taken in the big city. He is the American Adam, falling. Holden is an unreliable narrator, but the reader identifies with him—especially adolescent readers—because he is cute, has an entertaining voice and is a rebel who believes in truth, loyalty, loving his sister, and the phoniness of adults. As an adolescent he resists developing an adult social persona. Salinger said in an interview, “My boyhood was very much the same as that of the boy in the book....[It] was a great relief telling people about it.”

The review in *The New York Times* launched the book among the literati by calling it “an usually brilliant first novel.” On the contrary, many reviewers outside New York made the same complaints that were still being made against *Huckleberry Finn*: The language is ungrammatical, coarse, profane, and monotonous; there are religious slurs and swearing; the hero is immoral and a bad influence on the young. *Catcher* is worse than *Huck* because there is also sex and prostitution. Holden says goddam 237 times and even uses the F word—6 times. The book was banned in some countries and in many American schools. Some teachers who assigned it were fired or forced to resign. In 1979 it was both the most frequently censored book in the country and the second-most frequently taught novel in public high schools. *The Catcher in the Rye* became a forbidden apple to many young Adams and Eves and it spent 30 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestseller list.

FAME

Salinger rejected numerous offers from Hollywood producers to adapt *Catcher* in a movie, including Goldwyn, Billy Wilder, Harvey Weinstein, Stephen Spielberg, and Jerry Lewis. In 1953 he published *Nine Stories*, which made the *New York Times* Bestseller list for three months, very rare success for a collection of stories. As the notoriety increased, so did his contempt for publicity. “You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any.”

SECLUSION

Salinger felt besieged by requests and increasingly withdrew, becoming a legendary recluse known as “the Greta Garbo of American literature.” Later in 1953 he moved out of his apartment on East 57th Street in New York and up to a place in the small town of Cornish, New Hampshire. With pride in his military service, he wore his Army jacket, kept his hair cut short and drove an old Jeep. “I’m known as a strange, aloof kind of man. But all I’m doing is trying to protect myself and my work.” The bohemian Greenwich Village scene had no appeal to Salinger, nor the Beatnik movement out on the West Coast. “And the worst

of it is, if you go bohemian or something crazy like that, you're conforming just as much as everybody else, only in a different way." He turned inward. "It's very hard to meditate and live a spiritual life in America. People think you're a freak if you try to." Journalists were always calling him and fans and college students from nearby Dartmouth often came in groups to disturb his peace and try to catch a glimpse of him at his house or in the small town of Cornish. He lamented, "A community of seriously hip observers is a scary and depressing thing."

Between 1955 and 1959 he published four more long stories in *The New Yorker*, about members of the Glass family, then collected two each in two books, *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963). His last published story was "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965), a novella in the form of a letter from Seymour Glass at summer camp. *The New Yorker* devoted most of one entire issue to it. Nobody else liked it.

WOMEN

Salinger got married again in 1955, to Claire Douglas, a Radcliffe student who dropped out of school within four months of graduation at his insistence. They were initiated at a Hindu temple, they were given a mantra, and they practiced Kriya yoga, doing breathing exercises twice a day. Eventually they had a son and a daughter together. Claire later said that Salinger would regularly go off alone for several weeks to write, but then return with new religious beliefs rather than a new story. He tried Sri Ramakrishna, Scientology, Christian Science, Edgar Cayce, homeopathy, acupuncture, macrobiotics, and various nutritional theories. Claire kept having to reconvert to his latest enthusiasm.

In 1957, their infant daughter Margaret was getting sick a lot and he refused to allow Claire to take her to a doctor because he was a Christian Scientist at the time. Years later Claire told her daughter that during that crisis, on a trip to New York she got so desperate she verged on murdering Margaret and killing herself. She ran away from their hotel with her baby. It took Salinger months to talk her into returning home. After that he isolated her from friends and relatives and made her, according to Margaret, a "virtual prisoner," though their son disagrees with her account. In 1966 Claire separated from Salinger and they divorced. He wrote of women, "I mean they don't seem able to love us just the way we are. They don't seem able to love us unless they can keep changing us a little bit."

Five years later at the age of 53 Salinger had an affair with a teenager for 9 months. Joyce Maynard was only 18 but already a celebrity writing for *Seventeen* and *The New York Times*. Salinger wrote her a letter warning her about fame. They exchanged many letters thereafter and Maynard moved in with Salinger in 1972 after her first year as a student at Yale. Salinger told his daughter the relationship ended because Maynard wanted children and he was too old, but according to Maynard he simply dumped her. She complained that she gave up a scholarship to Yale for him and that she found out that he had initiated relationships with other women before her by exchanging letters, including his last wife. Salinger had another affair for several years during the 1980s with the television actress Elaine Joyce. That ended when he met and then married a young nurse and quilt-maker named Colleen O'Neill, age 29. She was 40 years younger than him. But then, he always did love children.

LAWSUITS

Salinger quietly took legal action to prevent publication of some of his earliest stories. After years of obscurity he became prominent in the news again in 1986 when a biographer quoted at length from his letters and Salinger stopped publication of the book with a lawsuit. Court transcripts made public excerpts from the letters, including one he had written in bitter response to Oona O'Neill's marriage to Charlie Chaplin: "I can see them at home evenings. Chaplin squatting grey and nude, atop his chiffonier, swinging his thyroid around his head by his bamboo cane, like a dead rat. Oona in an aquamarine gown, applauding from the bathroom." In 1998 Salinger had his lawyers stop the screening of a loose film adaptation of *Franny and Zooey* made in Iran without his permission. In 2009 his lawyers blocked publication and distribution in the United States of an unauthorized sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye* written by a Swede using a pseudonym: *60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye*.

DEATH

At the age of 90 Salinger broke his hip, which in an elderly person often leads to death. To have lived so long, he must have attained peace. He recovered quite well from the injury for awhile. Then he declined. He died peacefully of natural causes at his home in New Hampshire.

Michael Hollister (2013)

