

A wry look at the 'Catcher'

In the winning entry from the first Connell Guides Essay Competition for young people, Susanna Crawford explains how she fell out of love with archetypal teen rebel Holden Caulfield

It all started five years ago. Jolyon Connell, founder of seven-day news digest *The Week* – tried to help his daughter Flora with her A-level English text for *The Tempest*, and was astonished by the lack of accessible, up-to-date guides that would help him (and Flora) understand the finer points of the play. Ever the entrepreneur, he spotted an opportunity. Adapting the principles of *The Week* to English texts, he commissioned experts in various literary fields to write guides to books, poems and plays on the main English syllabuses. The first 18 Connell Guides were launched last September, another six this year; 250 schools have since subscribed to them; they are available for parents and students through the website or Amazon. To promote the guides, and the art of the essay generally, Connell set up a writing competition, which more than 200 A- and AS-level students entered.

The first prize is, says Connell, “probably the most

generous available for a children’s essay”, at £1,000. This spring the novelist William Boyd chose the winner. “The standard of the shortlisted entries was high – thoughtful, intelligent, cogently argued,” he says. “They should all be congratulated. Given this high standard, I decided that what I was looking for, to make one piece stand out apart from the others, was not earnestness but wit – or, to put it another way, a form of manifest self-confidence. If you can write wittily as well as intelligently, you have a real future as a writer in whatever medium you choose. Wit and intelligence were present in abundance in the piece I’ve chosen as the winner – Susanna Crawford from Dalriada School in Northern Ireland – but also marked out the work of runners-up Amy Gough and Benjamin Gibbons.”

Here is an abridged version of the winning entry.

Kylie O'Brien

The Catcher in the Rye by Susanna Crawford

Before I mention the title of the book I intend to write about, I need to issue a warning. Here it is. Warning: shockingly clichéd choice of book coming up, prepare an eye roll and a hefty sigh; there will be hundreds of other kids writing about it. I almost chose to discard it for that reason alone. But I chose not to discard it; I chose to embrace my inner teenage angst!

what I believe is the true influence of this classic. The book I have chosen to write about is (drum roll) *The Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger. My choice of novel may be clichéd, but I have a feeling my experience with the book and my lasting impression of it are unique. This book has been a big part of the past four years of my life and I will be quoting from old diary entries to help you picture the effect it has had on me. So here we are, about to be plunged into the past.

The year is 2009. I am a 13-year-old girl with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a passion for Sixties pop music. My friends think I'm weird, but I try hard to fit in; sometimes I even succeed. It is in December of this year that I receive my first copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Wrapped in brown paper, it arrives at my house along with a postcard of Marc Chagall's stained glass. The postcard says: “Dear Susie, this was written ages ago (1945?!), but is one of the great books. Enjoy Love Dad”

when Holden (what kind of a is that?) talks about Jane and they hold hands.” I realise that in-depth review of the book can convey an initial passion for the text. But I am 13.

For a while, it even seems to me like Dad has got it wrong about *The Catcher in the Rye*. I feel a little bit of a let-down, though there is no plot: boy leaves school, red hunting cap, boy leaves school, train journey and compulsive lying, boy goes on, boy visits ex-teacher, there's snow, carousel, the end. For whatever reason (probably because it's a classic and, therefore, so very grown-up and impressive) I read the book again. And again.

As 2009 becomes 2010, I make a fatal discovery: depressing Eighties pop music. I have a Morrissey shrine in my room, misunderstood and isolated friend (and superior to) all my friends. “I have nothing in common with those people,” writes a 13-year-old me. “We're on completely different

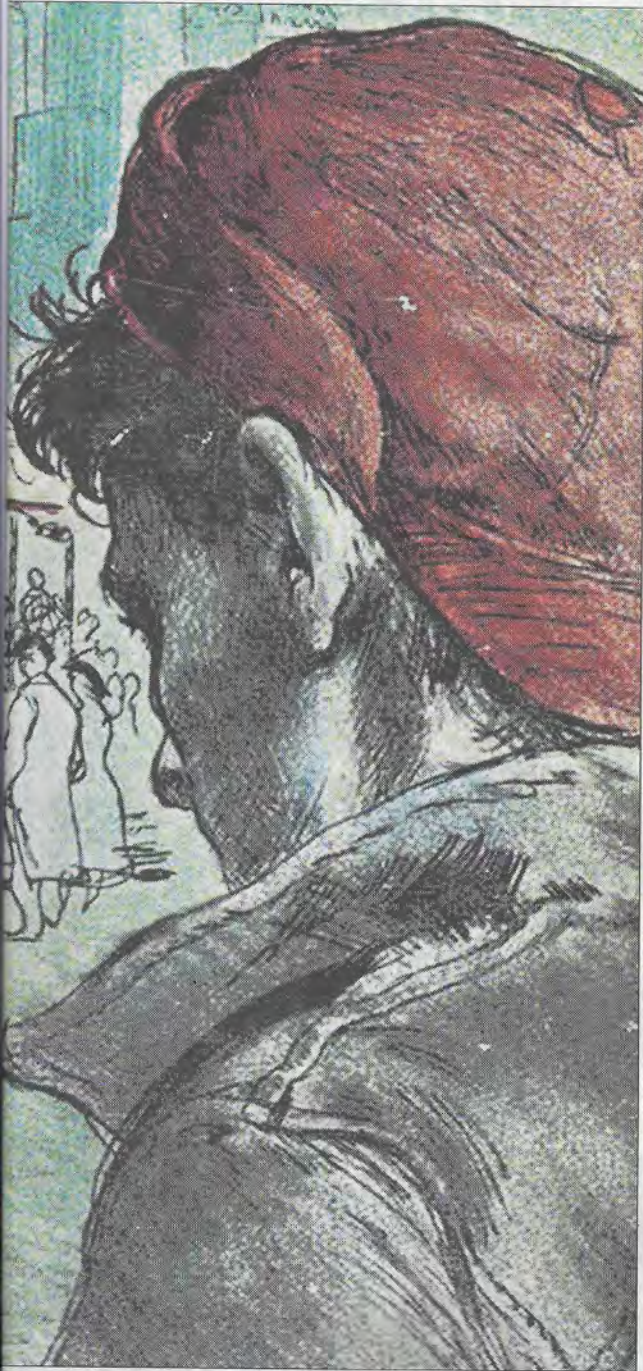


ANDREW CROWLEY



Food & drink

Majestic wines I



Boy's own: *The Catcher in the Rye* is a classic study of teenage angst; left, judge William Boyd

they're stupid, I just think we're wired differently." It's at this point that I begin to love *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden Caulfield becomes my go-to companion. I read *Catcher* every Sunday. Yes, once a week for a year. You think I'm exaggerating, but I swear I'm not. I carry a copy everywhere in case of emergencies. Again, you won't take that seriously, but you should.

"What kind of a pretentious wannabe carries a Penguin Classic with her at all times?" I hear you cry. Fourteen-year-old me, that's who. As part of a series in my 2010 diary, titled "Reasons to be happy", I write: "Holden Caulfield and the knowledge that there are other kids out there who feel just like me." (And that's what *Catcher* was for me: a way to feel less alone, a sign that not everyone on earth was a moron, and that one day I'd meet people who I actually liked. Until I met them in real life, Holden would fill the gap. And he did. And for this I have to thank him - he has filled that gap for a lot of angst-y 14-year-olds.)

2011, Holden is still one of my role models. My obsession with depressing pop music lives on, and I am still completely romanticising the stereotype of the melancholic, misunderstood and mysterious teenager. I write Salinger quotations on lavatory doors in school: "People never notice anything." (I was wrong, as it happens; people did notice my vandalism - some were kind enough to Instagram it with the caption "#deep"). I was furious that the hallowed words of Holden Caulfield could be undermined and put on social media by people who'd never read the book.

I become more and more grandiose, pompous and self-important. I don't care about school enough to do any work (if Holden was too good for school, so was I), and I grow even more isolated from my peers. Fifteen-year-old Susie has a gold diary, and in it she writes: "Do I have to pretend to be some stupid, giggling 15-year-old with no thoughts or mind of my own? It's like someone has poured a bag of sawdust in their thinking machines and now they can only think in a stunted, jerky manner. What if I never meet *anyone* I can be myself around?!"

It is not until until the summer of 2012 that I have my epiphany. I discover Kurt Vonnegut (light of my life, future *Mastermind* specialist subject, flawless king of science fiction), and he changes everything. Vonnegut's protagonists find themselves in similar situations to Holden: out of place, sad, sickened. But Vonnegut doesn't romanticise the sadness, and he doesn't depict depressed heroes/heroines as being above other people.

Vonnegut's best-known character (the equivalent of Salinger's Holden), Billy Pilgrim from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, has seen unspeakably horrible things - the firebombing of Dresden during World War II - but he doesn't indulge in self-pity. He gets up every day and goes to work and kisses his wife and treats his children well and doesn't cry all the time.

He is, in other words, the polar opposite of Holden Caulfield, who selfishly shuts down and hurts everyone around him. Any sane human would realise that there are people starving to death in the same city where Holden is wasting his parents' cash on alcohol and prostitutes. In short, *The Catcher in the Rye* has made a bigger impact on my life than anything else because it has shown me exactly how not to act.

Fourteen-year-old Susie once wrote in her diary: "I wonder why Jane doesn't love Holden back?"

The answer is simple: he is a spoilt brat.

For more information on the competition or the Connell Guides

I carry a copy of the book everywhere in case of emergencies!

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