

*The
Connell Short Guide
to
J.D. Salinger's*

The Catcher in the Rye

*by
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Introduction

At first glance, it's hard to understand why people are still outraged by *The Catcher in the Rye* – how is a novel written in 1951 still banned in some places, and barred from the school syllabus in many others?

Other than a bit of swearing, there's nothing all that outrageous about J.D. Salinger's first and only novel. Holden Caulfield, a lonely, angsty under-achiever, is expelled from yet another prep school, so he packs up his bags a couple of days before the Christmas holidays and leaves for a “madman” weekend in New York. He drinks scotch in piano bars, checks up on the ducks in Central Park, has a run-in with a prostitute, goes on a date, takes in a few movies and sneaks back home to visit his younger sister, Phoebe. Then he gets sick and is sent off to an unidentified institution.

Yet since its first publication in 1951 this short novel has been reprinted hundreds of times, sparked passionate debate and even been blamed for several murders. Why? What makes it so special?

Introducing a series of essays on the book, Harold Bloom asks: “Does *The Catcher in the Rye* promise to be of permanent eminence, or will it eventually be seen as an idealistic period-piece, which I think will be the fate of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,

works as popular as *Catcher* continues to be?”

The novelist William Faulkner, says Bloom, “remarked that Holden’s dilemma was his inability to find and accept an authentic mentor, a teacher or guide who could arouse his trust”. It’s a very American dilemma, and Holden “speaks for our scepticism, and for our need”. Whether or not he will go on doing so in the years to come, however, is very much an open question.

A summary of the plot

Holden, aged 16, is either in a hospital or a mental institution. We don’t know. But he has decided to tell us about the “madman” weekend in New York that led to him getting ill, and he starts with the Saturday before his boarding school, Pencey Prep, broke up for Christmas.

Holden has just been expelled – for the fourth time – and his favourite teacher, Mr Spencer, hedges his disappointment by justifying giving him a failing grade. Holden writes him off as a “phony” – he’s the first of many adults Holden takes against during the book.

Later on that same evening Holden sees his conventional, good-looking room-mate, Ward Stradlater, return late from a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl Holden met two summers before. Holden is infuriated by Stradlater’s casual attitude

towards Jane; they have a fight; Holden ends up beaten up and bloody on the floor. He decides to sell his typewriter and make for New York City, even though he’s supposed to be at school until Wednesday.

On the train Holden meets the mother of a boy he thinks of as “the biggest bastard” at the school, but he lies and says that he is popular, admired and respected. It’s the first in a series of incidents that show how he can’t resist making things up.

Once in New York, Holden heads for the Edmont Hotel. On the way, he asks the cab driver where the ducks in Central Park go during the winter, but doesn’t get an answer. It’s a question he’ll keep asking throughout the book – and hints at the naivety, innocence and sense of wonder underlying all the destructive things he does.

Holden gets himself a room and watches the “perverts” in the opposite wing – a man cross-dressing and a couple squirting water out of their mouths at each other. Holden confesses that he’s “probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw”, and decides to call up Faith Cavendish, a girl he’s been told might be willing to sleep with him. She offers to meet Holden the next day but he panics and makes up an excuse to get out of it.

After flirting with three older women in the hotel bar, Holden takes a cab to Ernie’s jazz club in Greenwich Village. There he runs into an ex-girlfriend of his older brother, who asks if he wants

to join her and her date. Holden makes up another excuse and heads back to his hotel, resenting her for “ruining” his night.

But he’s not sure what he wants. At his hotel, the elevator operator, Maurice, asks if he’d like to hire a prostitute for five dollars. Holden agrees. A young woman, Sunny, soon arrives at his door, but he can’t bring himself to sleep with her. He pays her five dollars anyway, and asks if she’ll agree to sit and talk instead.

She storms out and comes back with Maurice, who beats Holden up until he pays them an extra five dollars. After they leave, Holden is distraught – he even thinks about jumping out of the window, but decides against it.

The next day he meets two nuns at breakfast, and gives them ten dollars. After buying the record “Little Shirley Beans” for his little sister, he goes on a date with a girl named Sally Hayes. The two kiss on their way to the theatre, but Holden gets jealous when Sally starts talking to an old friend after the show. They go ice-skating at Radio City, where Sally asks if Holden will come over for Christmas Eve. He says he will, and asks Sally to run away with him to the country. She refuses, saying “we’re both practically children” and tells Holden they both need to do some growing up first. Holden calls her a “pain in the ass”.

After leaving the rink Holden arranges to see an old classmate, Carl Luce. They meet for a drink

and Holden tries to get Luce to tell him about his sex life. Luce gets annoyed and leaves while Holden gets drunk and calls Sally, saying he wants to see her on Christmas Eve, despite everything. Then he breaks down and wanders Central Park, trying to find the ducks, and accidentally shatters his little sister’s record along the way.

He’s cold and worries he’ll die of pneumonia, which makes him think of his younger brother, Allie, who died of leukaemia. He sneaks home and finds that his parents are out – so he explains what’s been going on to his little sister Phoebe. She’s angry with him for hating everyone and everything, and asks him what he wants to do with himself. He says he’d like to be like “the catcher in the rye” from Robert Burns’s poem, and stand out in a field of rye and catch children before they fall off the edge of a cliff.

Holden ends up visiting another teacher, Mr Antolini, who’s offered him a place to stay. Mr Antolini gives Holden advice, and warns him that he’s “riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall”. Holden wakes later that night to find Mr Antolini stroking him on the head. Holden worries he’s doing something “perverted”, makes an excuse and leaves the apartment. He ends up sleeping on a bench at Grand Central Station. “It wasn’t too nice,” he says, “Don’t ever try it. I mean it. It’ll depress you.”

He decides to strike out for the West, and leaves

a note at his sister's school letting her know he's leaving and wants to see her one last time. When they meet, Holden's surprised to find that she's brought a suitcase and wants to go with him. The two fight and angrily walk through the park, but they make up when they reach the carousel. Holden buys her a ticket and watches her ride, and feels "so damn happy all of a sudden". He stands in the rain, crying, and his story comes to an end.

He says he doesn't want to get into how he went home and got "sick", but he does say he's getting ready for a new school in the fall. The novel ends with a little advice: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody."

Holden's voice

The aspect of *The Catcher in the Rye* that critics praise above all else is its voice – the distinctive tone of its precocious, angst-ridden narrator, Holden Caulfield. A teenage narrator who swears freely and rants about whatever comes into his head was unheard of when the book was published in 1951. It is still rare now. The biographer and literary critic Ian Hamilton says that reading the novel taught him that "literature can speak for you, not just to you"; he is one of many who consider Holden Caulfield to be the voice of a generation.

J.D. Salinger immediately establishes how different his central character is to a typical narrator: Holden starts his story by telling us that he won't be following any of the literary conventions we might expect:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them.

By having his narrator assert, right away, that his story will be very different from the "crap" written by canonical authors like Charles Dickens, Salinger shakes up our expectations. Holden maintains he's not making up a story – he's expressing something that's deeply personal and honest.

And it is the sincerity of Holden's voice that has swayed successive generations of readers. More persuasive than anything he says is the way he says it – Salinger not only mimics the slang and speech patterns of a young man from the 1950s, he also

mimics the way Holden's thoughts move and the vocal tics he relies on.

Brian Way, a critic for the *New Left Review*, notes how Holden's voice balances "the blend of penetration and immaturity in judgment which is the mark of the intelligent adolescent" with the "school-boyish crudities of overstatement". The way Holden mixes flashes of insight with absurd, off-hand statements makes reading *The Catcher in the Rye* feel as if you're having a conversation with a real-life teenager – albeit one whose slang is a little dated.

The use of words like "crap" and "hell" add to this impression, and, while early reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* were largely positive, some critics were taken aback by the "formidably excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language", as Riley Hughes put it in *Catholic World*. For many readers at the time, it was shocking to read a book in which the narrator swore as frequently as Holden does – and there were worries that his voice would be a bad influence on younger readers.

It wasn't until 1955, four years after its publication, that anyone attempted to censor the book, but after that instances of censorship grew along with the book's popularity, particularly after it began to appear on school reading lists. Between 1966 and 1975 it was banned in schools more often than any other book in the United States, largely

because of the coarse language it contains.*

Holden's swearing, though, reflects his character – it's meant to show how angry he is, how different from the conventional, well-mannered young men he's surrounded by at prep school. From the way he dresses in a bright red hunting cap to the poverty of his language, he's very much an outsider, and he knows it.

Holden tells his readers he has "a lousy vocabulary", and, ironically, is as concerned with the way swearing influences children as his strongest censors. The word "fuck" appears six times in the novel, but Holden never uses it himself. Instead, he sees it scrawled on the walls of his little sister's school, and it infuriates him. He tells the reader:

It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant... I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it.

It's almost as if he's pre-empting his own critics.

Holden's cursing is a means of emphasising his alienation from mainstream society, and is only one small aspect of Salinger's extensive

*It continues to appear on the American Library Association's list of most frequently challenged books taught in school to this day - and was the sixth most challenged book in the United States as recently as 2009.

FIVE FACTS ABOUT *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

1.
Since its first publication, more than 65 million copies of *The Catcher in the Rye* have been sold. Around 250,000 copies of the book are sold each year, which translates as almost 685 per day.
2.
Holden Caulfield's appearance is based on Freddie Bartholomew, the boy who falls off the boat in *Captains Courageous* (1937) starring Spencer Tracey.
3.
Holden uses the word "phony" 35 times in the book, as well as "crazy" 77 times and "goddam" 245 times.
4.
Mark David Chapman, the man who shot John Lennon, was reading a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* when he was arrested.
5.
The 2013 documentary *Salinger* claimed that the reclusive author had penned a sequel to *The Catcher in the Rye*, to be published after his death.

Opposite: Freddie Bartholomew in a promotional photo for Captains Courageous gives a clue as to what Holden looks like



reproduction of the slang of the day. The vocabulary in the book ranges from Holden's favourite adjectives – “Goddam,” “phony” and “lousy” – to descriptions of people doing “everything backasswards”, the values of Pencey Prep being “strictly for the birds” and anything and everything being punctuated with an “and all”.

David Lodge, writing in the *New York Times*, has praised Salinger's reproduction of the vocabulary of his day, saying that there is something magical and musical about it. He describes the elegance of Holden's voice with the Russians literary term *skaz**: “a nice word with echoes of jazz and scat in it, which uses the repetitions and redundancies of ordinary speech to produce an effect of sincerity and authenticity – and humor”. The way Holden repeats himself, contradicts himself and occasionally runs on and on allows Salinger to expose in detail the way his character's mind works – and make him feel authentic and true to life.

In a letter he wrote in 1957, Salinger acknowledged that the importance of the first person viewpoint in *The Catcher in the Rye* meant there could never be a movie of the novel:

For me, the weight of the book is in the narrator's voice, the non-stop peculiarities of it, his personal, extremely discriminating attitude to his reader-listener, his asides about gasoline rainbows in street puddles, his philosophy or way of looking at cowhide suitcases and empty toothpaste cartons – in a word, his thoughts. He can't legitimately be separated from the first-person technique.

The Catcher in the Rye, Salinger suggests, isn't about events that can be filmed. It's about the thoughts and character of one teenage boy – something that could never be reproduced in a movie theatre.

It took Salinger a long time to find the right way of telling his tale, however. Ten years before *The Catcher in the Rye* was published, he sold “Slight Rebellion Off Madison” to the *New Yorker*. The

*The word is used for any narrative that is defined by its emphasis on oral speech - especially those that use dialect and slang to create a particular character. John Mullan uses it to describe *Catcher* as well as Martin Amis's *Money* and DBC Pierre's *Vernon God Little*.

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