

Catcher in the Rye

By J.D. Salinger

Published: 1951

The Book:

Catcher in the Rye has been nominated as one of the best 100 American novels written. It sells more than 250,000 copies each year. Recently, a first edition copy of the book sold for \$19,000. Naturally, it is a collectible book; even early paperback editions sell for up to \$100.00.

In 1960, a teacher was fired, and later reinstated, for assigning the novel in class. Between 1961 and 1982, *The Catcher in the Rye* was the most censored book in high schools and libraries in the United States. In 1981, it was both the most censored book and the second most taught book in public schools in the United States. According to the American Library Association, *The Catcher in the Rye* was the 13th most frequently challenged book from 1990–2000. It was one of the 10 most challenged books in 2005, and came off the list in 2006.

About J.D. Salinger:

Jerome David "J. D." Salinger (born January 1, 1919) is an American author, best known for his 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, as well as his reclusive nature. He has not published an original work since 1965 and has not been interviewed since 1980.

Raised in Manhattan, New York, Salinger began writing short stories while in secondary school, and published several stories in the early 1940s before serving in World War II. In 1948 he published the critically-acclaimed story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" in *The New Yorker* magazine, which became home to much of his subsequent work. In 1951 Salinger released his first novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, an immediate popular success. His depiction of adolescent alienation and loss of innocence in the protagonist Holden Caulfield was influential, especially among adolescent readers. The novel remains widely read, selling around 250,000 copies a year.

The success of *The Catcher in the Rye* led to public attention and scrutiny; Salinger became reclusive, publishing new work less frequently. He followed *Catcher* with a short story collection: *Nine Stories* (1953), another novel: *Franny and Zooey* (1961), and another collection of short stories: *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963). His last published work, a novella entitled "Hapworth 16, 1924" appeared in *The New Yorker* on June 19, 1965.

Afterwards, Salinger struggled with unwanted attention, including a legal battle in the 1980s with biographer Ian Hamilton and the release in the late 1990s of memoirs written by two people close to him: Joyce Maynard an ex-lover; and Margaret Salinger, his daughter. In 1996, a small publisher announced a deal with Salinger to publish "Hapworth 16, 1924" in book form, but amid the ensuing publicity, the release was indefinitely delayed.

For most of his life, Salinger was a recluse and rarely granted interviews. He had sufficient income from book royalties to disengage from the world of commerce and publishing and did so. He spent most of his free time studying and practicing Eastern religions, promoting macrobiotic diets, and corresponding with young women. He lives in Vermont.

Ideas for Discussion:

Interpret the novel's metaphoric title 'The Catcher in the Rye'. Who is he and what is his role?

Ideas : The **catcher in the rye** is **Holden**. The field of tall rye borders a cliff that marks the boundary between childhood and adulthood.

Because the rye is tall, the children who play there cannot see the cliff. Holden would like to see himself as the 'catcher' who prevents the children from falling down to the adult world, which is full of ugliness and hypocrisy.

He has made that journey alone, and suffers from the pain of that fall and wishes to protect other children from the same fate.

He has a great admiration for children due to their innocence and honesty, two traits that are missing in his adult world.

Holden was forced to make the transition due to his burgeoning sexuality.

Many of the most stressful encounters, which Holden has with the adult world, the blow-up with the prostitute Sunny, and the argument with his date Sally, for instance, are occasioned by his sexuality.

Holden always sees the worst in people. Choose characters from the book and indicate how Holden views them in a negative fashion.

Ideas : D.B. Caulfield – Holden considers his brother as having sold-out to Hollywood rather than pursuing a promising career in short **story writing**. He feels that his brother is leading a phony life, and not realizing his full potential.

Ward Stradlater – Holden considers him to be vain and a boorish womanizer with questionably hygiene habits, e.g. his dirty razor. He also feels him to be very self-centered. Perhaps because he is dating Holden's ex girlfriend this may tarnish his view of Stradlater.

Sally Hayes – Holden sees her to be a shallow, hypocrite lacking in feelings for others. He was only attracted to her good looks and the fact that she was a socialite attending a well-established girls' school. He considers that her main motivation is to be attractive and popular, at which she is very successful.

Robert Ackley – Holden shows signs of caring for his fellow student of Pencey Prep due to Ackley's insecurity, but he finds fault in his terrible dental hygiene and acne problems. He sees through the elaborate lies, which Ackley makes up regarding his sexual conquests.

Remember that the views given about the other characters in the book are from a narrator's perspective, which is cynical and pessimistic.

Although the narrator never actually refers to his own psychological breakdown directly, it is clear he is suffering from the onset of a nervous breakdown by the bizarre events, which take place during his story. Give examples of these episodes in chronological order.

Ideas : Loss of fencing team's equipment on subway.

Agreeing to write an essay for Stradlater on a highly personal topic.

Yelling abuse at fellow students on leaving the dorm for the final time.

Making up absurd lies concerning a fellow student and his own health.

Wearing a strange hat.

Talking aloud to his deceased brother.

Suggesting running away with Sally.

These are just a few of the many indicators regarding Holden's impending breakdown.

Many of the events in 'Catcher in the Rye' are similar to Salinger's early life. Please give examples.

Ideas : Both Holden and **Salinger** moved from Prep school to Prep school.

Both were threatened with attending Military School.

Both knew an older Columbian student.

The **novel** combines details of Salinger's early life with the post war world in which it was written. This story was published in 1951

Salinger is famous for being reclusive, and Holden had problems in relating to adults thereby leaving him isolated from his peers.

Both have become icons.

Comment on Holden's narration of the events concerning his breakdown.

Ideas : A narrator of a story would normally be expected to provide accurate information concerning the events and characters in the book. In this respect, clearly Holden fails because we obtain a warped view of the characters and the locations described in the book. It is from this aspect that we actually obtain a very good insight into Holden's state of mind. Therefore, the lack of accuracy regarding the characters does not in fact affect the quality of the story, but rather enhances it, thus making it appealing to the reader. We do, however, obtain a good impression regarding Holden's younger siblings, which are viewed on as having no adverse characteristics.

Again, would this be totally accurate? In conclusion, therefore, the adults in the tale are all bad to a lesser or greater degree, and the children are all good.

Cast of Characters

Holden Caulfield is the protagonist and narrator of the story. Holden is seventeen when he tells the story, but was sixteen years old when the events took place. Though intelligent and sensitive, Holden narrates in a cynical and jaded voice. His bitterness is a form of self-protection from the hypocrisy and ugliness of the world around him. He uses many different methods to block himself from the people who surround him.

D.B. Caulfield is Holden's older brother and lives in Hollywood. Holden professes to despise cinema for he believes it exemplifies his concept of "phoniness," but throughout the book he offers thoughtful and in-depth commentaries on films he has seen. Holden is narrating the novel at a hospital near Hollywood (while the story takes place across the country) since he says that D.B. visits him every weekend.

Allie Caulfield was Holden's younger brother, who died of leukemia when Holden was thirteen. Even though Allie was younger than Holden, Holden idolized him. Holden provides a detailed description of the baseball mitt that Allie had covered in poems. Holden even prays to his deceased brother for safety. The night of Allie's death, Holden smashed all the windows in the family garage with his bare fists, permanently injuring his right hand after trying to smash the windows of the car.

Jane Gallagher is a girl with whom Holden spent a lot of time one summer, when their families stayed in neighboring summer houses in Maine. Holden frequently stated that Jane always "kept her kings in the back row" whenever she played checkers (representing her virginity) and asked his roommate if she still did that. He likes to remember Jane as a sensitive, innocent girl. When she turns out to be his roommate's date, he is deeply bothered, as his roommate is well-known for his "Lothario" reputation. Jane is the only non-relative that Holden speaks well of in the novel without criticism.

Ward Stradlater is Holden's roommate at Pencey Prep. It is clear that Holden dislikes him, referring to him as a "moron" and a "bastard." He also attacks Stradlater when he refuses to answer any of his questions about his date with Jane Gallagher. Stradlater easily overcomes Holden, and leaves him with a badly bloodied nose.

Robert Ackley Holden's dorm neighbor at Pencey Prep. Ackley is a pimply, insecure boy with terrible dental hygiene. He is incredibly obnoxious and socially inept, which annoys and disgusts Holden. Holden refers to him as "Ackley kid"

Mr. Spencer was Holden's history teacher at Pencey Prep. In the beginning of the book he lectures Holden for his academic slack and tries to put some sense in his head, a speech which Holden ignores.

Sally Hayes is a very attractive girl whom Holden has known and dated for a long time. Though Sally is well read, Holden claims that she is stupid and superficial, although it is difficult to tell whether this judgment is cynical or merely stems from Holden's ambivalence about being sexually attracted to her.

Phoebe Caulfield is Holden's younger sister. She is in the fourth grade at the time Holden leaves Pencey Prep. In some ways, she can be even more mature than him, even criticizing him for childishness, although she clearly idolizes Holden. Holden also idolizes her, in a way. She is the only character who seems to understand her brother's disturbed personality. Near the end of the book, Phoebe wants to run away with Holden to the west. It is at this point that Holden decides not to go away.

Sunny is a prostitute about the same age as Holden whom Holden hires through the hotel elevator man. She is one of a number of women with whom Holden clumsily attempts to connect. His sexual timorousness leads him to try to strike up a meaningful discussion with her, but she clearly shows no interest.

Carl Luce is student at Columbia who was Holden's student adviser. Luce is three years older than Holden and has a great deal of sexual experience. Though Holden tries to get him to talk about sex at their meeting, Carl suggests Holden get psychoanalysis. It is now known to the readers that Luce is the one who suggested psychoanalysis to Holden, who is narrating the novel at a hospital.

James Castle A previous student at Elkton Hills, a school Holden went to, who had committed suicide by jumping out of a window. Mr. Antolini was the only individual to walk right up to James' corpse on the ground.

Mr. Antolini is Holden's former teacher whom Holden turns to for guidance and support. Mr. Antolini warns Holden that he is riding for a horrible fall, and advises him that he is being immature for his enthusiasm to "die nobly for his cause" and that he should instead "live humbly" for it. Although written very ambiguously, Mr. Antolini (in Holden's view) makes a pass at Holden. Holden himself later questions if that is actually what it seemed to him at the time.