

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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The Catcher in the Rye J.D. Salinger

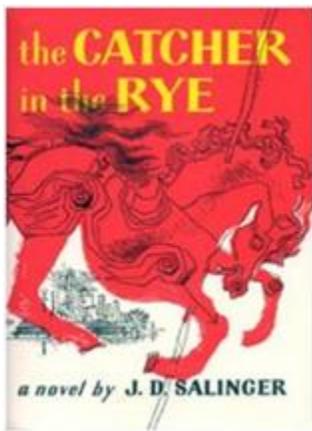
Some years ago, while living in Cleveland and serving as President of Notre Dame College, I started a book series titled ***Books That Changed the World***. My purposes, as they often are with college presidents, were several. On the most benign level, it was an addition to the College's cultural offerings, complementing its lecture series, musical, and theatrical programs. Less benign, it provided the opportunity to make new friends for the College, who, if they enjoyed the experience, might consider supporting it. Most importantly, however, it was to remind myself why I became a college professor in the first place, which was my love of learning, literature, and history.



The series ran for many years and continued after my 2014 retirement. Each year the series had a specific theme. One year, if I recall correctly, we surveyed “*Women and Men Together (or Not)*” reading, amongst others, ***The Song of Songs***, ***Anna Karenina***, ***Madame Bovary***, and James Baldwin’s ***Giovanni’s Room***. Another year our theme was “*The Quest*,” in which we traced humanity’s search for meaning from ***Gilgamesh***, the oldest known story, through a complete reading of ***The Five Books of Moses***, Hesse’s ***Siddartha***, and several others ending with Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty’s failed quest in Jack Kerouac’s ***On the Road***.

One year our theme was “*Reflections on the Experience of High School Classics After a Lifetime of Experience*,” which brings me to this week’s **Book Notes**. This is the first of several in which we’ll take a second (or third or fourth) look at some of those venerable texts we were required to read as a teenage rite of passage. In asking my younger colleagues at the Jefferson Society and readers of **Book Notes** for suggestions, I was struck by the cross-generational persistence of certain texts: ***The Scarlet Letter, To Kill a Mockingbird, Call of the Wild, Pride and Prejudice, and Hamlet*** seem to have withstood, if not the critical than the pedagogical test of time. Newer selections favored Kurt Vonnegut, in particular ***Slaughterhouse-Five, The Outsiders,*** and Camus’ ***The Stranger***.

In addition to those assigned by teachers, there were others teenagers read on their own, texts the teachers had not yet caught onto, or, if they had, did not bring into the classroom. One of the latter, in fact, inspired the entire series. Dating myself, the two books that most impacted my teenage self were Thomas Wolfe’s ***Look Homeward, Angel*** and J.D. Salinger’s ***The Catcher in the Rye***. Eugene Gant’s romantic musings consumed more than one study hall as I devoured Wolfe’s luxuriant prose. A prose style that was, perhaps, too luxurious, for I am not certain who now reads Thomas Wolfe.



The Catcher in the Rye’s Holden Caulfield, however, played the hero to many a bookish teenager. Emerging from the chrysalis of childhood through the ambiguities and angst of “teendom”, we identified with Holden’s struggle to define himself amidst a culture he thought “phony.” I know my 15-year-old-self found his faux maturity, his disdain for adult authority, and his sarcastic eloquence irresistible. For a time, he was the hero of my youth. I recall scribbling some *Holdenesque*, adolescent drivel to impress a girl. That she became a highly accomplished artist, librettist, and doyenne of the downtown New York city art scene only adds to the delayed embarrassment.

The Catcher in the Rye inspired the entire book series, because re-reading it as an adult, one’s experience of the book is entirely different than that of one’s younger self.

A friend, searching for summer reading, saw the book on a table of “Summer Reading” at Crocker Park’s Barnes and Noble. He, too, thought of Holden Caulfield as a teenage hero. Rereading the book, he reported his dismay at the ungrateful little twit’s rejection of all that his parents had provided him. For my friend George, Holden, across an arc of George’s 55 years from 17 to 72, traveled from teenage hero to spoiled and ungrateful “little shit.”

George's reaction moved me to re-read *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Although not so strong as George's, my reaction, upon this second reading, found Holden strangely immature, confused, perhaps selfish, and certainly less than inspiring. Mine and George's reaction to meeting Holden again, led me to ask, "What might my older, not necessarily wiser, self's reaction be to rereading other "teenage classics?"

Thus, was born a series in which we read (reread) *Oedipus Rex*, *The Canterbury Tales* ("The Knight's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale"), *Hamlet*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Brave New World*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The group's reactions provoked much thought and more than one "Aha" moment as we individually and then collectively saw banality where we once saw wisdom and wisdom where we once saw only a book report to write. We rediscovered that Oedipus's impetuosity gives pause to anyone who must, like Hamlet, make critical decisions with imperfect knowledge; we asked, 'did Chaucer celebrate, mock, or puzzle over the Wife of Bath's business acumen and unapologetic lasciviousness?'; we found nobility in Willy Loman's yearnings; we thought Atticus Finch perhaps too noble; and we agreed Huxley's dystopian vision does not seem so alien in a world of sedatives and 65-inch wall-mounted television screens.

Most impactful, though, was the group's reaction to Holden Caulfield. Among our group members was a husband and wife couple, both of whom were child psychiatrists. As the group cheerfully nattered on, noshing on their coffee, bagels, and the odd piece of fruit (we always met at 7:30 a.m. for breakfast "chats"), the couple sat quietly listening. As we neared the 8:30 a.m. mark, 30 minutes shy of adjournment, the wife softly said, "I think you've all missed the point. And now I know why Salinger went into seclusion."

In their view, Holden was not an earlier version of Jim Stark, the new-kid-in-school misfit played by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, much less a precursor to Marlon Brando's biker rebel Johnny in *The Wild One*, who, when asked what he was rebelling against, replied "Whatta you got?"

No, first published in serial form in 1945-46 and then as a novel in 1951, Salinger's Holden Caulfield did not seek to be a harbinger of '50s Beats, '60s Hippies, and then '70s Me-Me's leading to the '90s BoBo's in paradise we explored in last week's *Book Notes* – although for many undiscerning readers, much like my younger self, that is what he became. While authorial intention is largely irrelevant, that is not what J.D. Salinger intended. That the novel and Holden Caulfield became symbolic of teenage

rebellion in part, the couple opined, explains Salinger's retreat into 30 years of seclusion, only occasionally reappearing to challenge copyright infringements.

The Catcher in the Rye was published at almost the exact moment "teenager" as a distinct life phase first emerged. It sprang from that period in the 1930s and 1940s when, perhaps for the first time ever, the majority of young people were not working on the family farm or working to help the family pay its bills, but were in high school with time to think.

Think about what?

Time to think and to question how the world works; why it works the way it does; who am I; where do I fit; and what will I become. And, most importantly, to ask "Why?" to the answers to any or all of these questions. And "why," of course, implies "ought" and "ought" implies moral choice which, double "of course," also implies "Why not?" So, mulling and obsessing over these questions, teenagers found in Holden a kindred spirit who shared their angst, their anxiety, their unease at life's apparent superficiality, and their confusion upon discovering adult hypocrisy and life's unfairness.

But if that's all it did, then ***The Catcher in the Rye*** might well have only been that, not harbinger, but prophet of the coming youth rebellion. Which, of course, it was. But, on this third reading, I learned it was so much more – a genuine adult novel by an adult for adults.

Adult is a funny word – to some youthful ears it might sound condescending. So, let me clarify my meaning. To me, an adult is someone who understands what Joan Didion meant when she said you gain self-respect when you realize the lights don't always turn green. Or you understand what Krishna meant when he said to Arjuna "you can't stay here, you can't go back, fare forward." And, in responding to both, you do not whine but simply, as Krishna said, fare forward.

Which is what Holden does in ***The Catcher in the Rye's*** ambiguous ending. Holden tells us he'll be leaving the rest home from which he narrates his story, about which he has second thoughts – "Don't tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" – suggesting that rather than cynically dismissing everyone he has begun to recognize that he values the others in his life. In short, he begins to drop the cynical shield behind which he hid from hurt.

What hurt? The pain of discovering two of life's most fundamental truths. They may be life's two most fundamental truths. The discovery that you die and that you can't always protect the one's you love.

Which was the point the couple in my book group said we had all missed. They then proceeded, in very precise detail, sensitive to every nuance in Salinger's narrative, to argue that *The Catcher in the Rye* depicted in the most accurate, most eloquent, and most sensitive fashion a teenage boy in severe psychological distress mourning the death of his younger brother, Allie, from leukemia.

He blames himself for not having protected him.

Holden's guilt from that misperceived failure colors all his interactions with the other characters. He rejects "ole Spencer's," his history teacher's, advice that life is a game and we have no choice but to play it. Holden unconsciously intuits that no mere game can hurt this much. He gets angry with his roommate Stradlater from whose sexual pawing he wants to protect his friend Jane Gallagher. Leaving school, from which he is about to be expelled, on the train to New York, he lies to the mother of a fellow student telling her how fine a fellow her son is when in fact he is a bastard disliked by all. Throughout his subsequent misadventures during his "long day's journey into night," Holden's insecurity yet instinctive need to protect others reveals itself.

He wonders where the ducks in Central Park go in the winter; he feels sorry for the three women from out-of-town who, thinking the Edmont Hotel a big deal, are looking for celebrities; he fumbles a liaison with the prostitute Sunny; bungles a date with Sally Hayes; enjoys the Museum of Natural History because nothing ever changes; and has an awkward encounter with a former English teacher, Mr. Antolini, who Holden suspects made a pass at him.

But his need to protect, to somehow compensate for failing to protect his younger brother Allie, is most poignantly revealed in his relationship with his younger sister Phoebe. First, when he sneaks into his parent's apartment and talks with Phoebe in her bedroom and then later watching her ride the carousel in Central Park. Although six years younger than Holden, Phoebe is more mature. It is Phoebe who tells Holden he has misread Burn's poem "Comin 'Thro' the Rye."

Holden reads it as "the catcher in the rye" who catches little children as they are about to fall off a cliff. The need-to-protect metaphor couldn't be more explicit, Holden casting himself as the "catcher in the rye" catching, protecting, little children before they fall off the cliff into adulthood and then death.

Without going full-Freudian or D.H. Lawrence, the "catcher in the rye" metaphor also touches on Holden's dawning adolescent sexuality, from which he flinches and retreats as in 'almost having kinda necked' with Jane Gallagher, kidding around with Sally Hayes about what they could do, and backing out of sex with the prostitute Sunny because he was "recovering from an operation." If Holden is suffering guilt-feelings

from failing to protect his brother Allie, he also wants to protect himself and other children from adulthood symbolized by his budding sexuality – sex, the bringer of life that ends in death.

The Burns poem is overtly erotic:

“O, Jenny’s a’ weet, poor body,
Jenny’s seldom dry:
She draigl’t a’ her petticoatie,
Comin thro’ the rye!

Chorus:

Comin thro’ the rye, poor body,
Comin thro’ the rye,
She draigl’t a’ her pettiecoatie,
Comin thro’ the rye!

Gin a body meet a body
Comin thro’ the rye,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?”

Salinger would have known the poem in its original dialect with all its sexual innuendo; altering it is meant to signify to us his intent to use it as a symbol of thwarting awakening sexuality and emerging adulthood. That Holden wants to catch the bodies, the children, before they fall off the cliff into sexual maturity and adulthood is transparent.

The novel ends ambiguously. Holden tells Phoebe he is leaving home for good, that she should meet him at the museum. Phoebe arrives lugging a suitcase intent on going with Holden. When he tells her she can’t, she gets angry but follows into the park where he buys her a ticket to ride the carousel. Watching her on the carousel, Holden has an epiphany he never articulates, but, close to tears, simply watches Phoebe riding the carousel. The novel ends with Holden more or less revealing that he is writing this from a sanatorium or rest home, that he is on the mend, that he plans to go back to school in the fall and to apply himself. None of which assertions are completely convincing, but all of which hint that he realizes the lights don’t always turn green and that you can’t catch all (or any) of the children coming through the rye.

Beginning to accept that he is not responsible for Allie’s death, Holden hints at an awakening maturity not unlike that of others on the quest for life’s meaning – like Gilgamesh at the bar at the world’s edge, like Siddhartha under the Bodhi tree like

Arjuna listening to Krishna – the dawning understanding that life “is what it is” and that you can’t go back and you can’t stay here – fare forward!

Having now read *The Catcher in the Rye* three (maybe four times), my appreciation has grown from an adolescent reveling in a peer telling the adults where they can go, to a middle-aged reader appalled at the narrator’s immaturity, to an older reader seeing for the first time the depth of Salinger’s art. Adam Gopnik in a February, 2010 *New Yorker* article called it one of “the three perfect books” in American literature – the other two being *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby*. Both of which, in their own way, are also quest stories.

All three end ambiguously, the quest incomplete. Gatsby dies protecting a vision unworthy of his power to dream, but Huck and Holden, no dreamers they, each an inchoate realist, each having passed through youthful delusion, fare forward to an uncertain future knowing the journey not the brass ring is the point of it all.

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Image from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Catcher_in_the_Rye

“13 Things You Might Not Know About *The Catcher in the Rye*”
can be found [HERE](#)

In a future Book Notes, I am planning on revisiting some “high school classics” following the theme of “Reflections on the Experience of High School Classics After a Lifetime of Experience”. Please share with me which “high school classics” you were required to read and what, if any, recollections and opinions you have about them. Please email me your suggestions at roth@jeserie.org. Thank you!