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Aw, the World's a Crumby Place

By JAMES STERN

This girl Helga, she kills me. She reads just about everything I bring into the house, and a lot of crumby stuff besides. She's crazy about kids. I mean stories about kids. But Hel, she says there's hardly a writer alive can write about children. Only these English guys Richard Hughes and Walter de la Mare, she says. The rest is all corny. It depresses her. That's another thing. She can sniff a corny guy or a phony book quick as a dog smells a rat. This phoniness, it gives old Hel a pain if you want to know the truth. That's why she came hollering to me one day, her hair falling over her face and all, and said I had to read some damn story in The New Yorker. Who's the author? I said. Salinger. She told me, J. D. Salinger. Who's he? I asked. How should I know, she said, just you read it.

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

By J. D. Salinger.

"For Esme--with Love and Squalor" was this story's crumby title. But *boy*, was that a story. About a G. I. or something and a couple of English kids in the last war. Hel, I said when I was through, just you wait till this guy writes a novel. Novel, my elbow, she said. This Salinger, he won't write no crumby novel. He's a short story guy.-- Girls, they kill me. They really do.

But I was right, if you want to know the truth. You should've seen old Hel hit the ceiling when I told her this Salinger, he has not only written a novel, it's a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, too. For crying out loud, she said, what's it about? About this Holden Caulfield, I told her, about the time he ran away to New York from this Pencey Prep School in Agerstown, Pa. Why'd he run away, asked old Hel. Because it was a terrible school, I told her, no matter how you looked at it. And there were no girls. What, said old Hel. Well, only this old Selma Thumer, I said, the headmaster's daughter. But this Holden, he liked her because "she didn't give you a lot of horse-manure about what a great guy her father was."

Then Hel asked what this Holden's father was like, so I told her if she wanted to know the truth Holden didn't want to go into all that David Copperfield-kind of business. It bored him and anyway his "parents would have [had] about two hemorrhages apiece if [he] told anything personal about them." You see, this Holden,

I said, he just can't find anybody decent in the lousy world and he's in some sort of crumby Californian home full of psychiatrists.


That damn near killed Hel. Psychiatrists, she howled. That's right, I said, this one psychiatrist guy keeps asking Holden if he's going to apply himself when he goes back to school. (He's already been kicked out of about six.) And Holden, he says how the hell does *he* know. "I *think* I am," he says, "but how do I know. I swear it's a stupid question."

That's the way it sounds to me, Hel said, and away she went with this crazy book. "The Catcher in the Rye." What did I tell ya, she said next day. This Salinger, he's a short story guy. And he knows how to write about kids. This book though, it's too long. Gets kind of monotonous. And he should've cut out a lot about these jerks and all at that crumby school. They depress me. They really do. Salinger, he's best with real children. I mean young ones like old Phoebe, his kid sister. She's a personality. Holden and little old Phoebe, Hel said, they kill me. This last part about her and Holden and this Mr. Antolini, the only guy Holden ever thought he could trust, who ever took any interest in him, and who turned out queer--that's terrific. I swear it is.

You needn't swear, He, I said. Know what? This Holden, he's just like you. He finds the whole world's full of people say one thing and mean another and he doesn't like it; and he hates movies and phony slobs and snobs and crumby books and war. Boy, how he hates war. Just like you, Hel, I said. But old Hel, she was already reading this crazy "Catcher" book all over again. That's always a good sign with Hel.

Mr. Stern is the author of "The Man Who Was Loved," a recent collection of short stories.

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