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## Holden, 50, Still Catches

By FRED BRATMAN

**T**his month my fictional friend, Holden Caulfield, turns 50. For me it is an important birthday to celebrate, and yet I do not know precisely which day it falls on.

The protagonist of J. D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" first came to life as an installment in the now-defunct Collier's magazine in December 1945, and the entire story was published in book form six years later. In the story Holden is 16 years old and since it was first published 34 years ago, he would be 50 years old this month. He is old enough to be my father; yet, I have always thought myself his equal or elder.

The first time I read "Catcher" I was 16 years old. That was eight years ago, and since then I have made it a point to find my tattered copy with its folded-over pages and re-read it each year. I always wonder whether it will have the same impact as it did the first time.

Then, I was simply dazzled. I thought that the book had been written especially for me. I was in public high school, and, like Holden, flunking several of my academic courses. Just as Mr. Spencer tried to straighten Holden out, I had a teacher who tried his very best to get me to stick my nose in my books. I could not run away to New York City, as Holden did, for I was already there. But my mind drifted throughout my high school days.

The affinity that Holden evoked I am sure was not limited to me. No doubt many of the 10 million or so people who have also bought a copy since it first appeared feel the same way.

No matter where I am or what I am doing, Holden becomes my personal guide for a few hours on our annual trip. Geographically, Holden does not venture to Sumatra or to Patagonia. Instead he stays within a short commuter train ride of New York City. Yet, I always feel that I am visiting places that I have never seen before.

Holden has also been a personal savior of sorts. Once I was on a train as it crawled from Delhi to an outpost near the Nepalese border. I was ill. My stomach had not yet properly adjusted to the culinary delights of India. I gulped down a handful of tablets that I hoped would serve as a peacemaker between the warring factions in my stomach. But the only relief I experienced came from my crumpled copy of Salinger's novel. Holding my stomach with one hand and "Catcher" with the other I followed my fictional friend through his escapades and decided that his problems were far more interesting than mine. My moans of abdominal pain were intermingled with laughs.

I often thought that Holden and I saw the world from the identical perspective, that his world was my world. However, this was not accurate. Holden had created his own world which I was only privileged to visit. But it was ultimately his world.

Holden has a keen eye that sees the hypocrisy of what not only springs from the mouth of adults but also from his school chums. Early on in the book for instance, Holden's roommate, Stradlater, asks Holden to write a descriptive composition for him because he is too busy with his Saturday night date. He warns Holden: "Don't stick all the commas and stuff in the right place. Holden doesn't say anything but knows that good writing is not simply about commas.

Holden has a special meaning for me because I realized that I was not unique in feeling restless. Holden felt the same way. He became my friend because we thought alike.

Realizing that Holden would be 50 years old this month, I had this thought: Where is Holden today?

J. D. Salinger lives a quiet life in New Hampshire, but did Holden get killed during the Korean War? Did he once drink too much and drive his car into a wall? Of course he could still be alive. Maybe he became a writer like his older brother. Or did he attend law school and now works for a Wall Street firm?

Maybe none of these things happened to Holden. Multitudes of possible variations often come to mind, but finally I must reject them. None of them would completely satisfy Holden's character.

I refuse to imagine my fictional friend in a gray pin-striped suit with a leather attaché case reading the morning newspaper as the 7:09 from Armonk heads toward New York. On the other hand, I cannot picture Holden as a fast-talking Hollywood screenwriter.

For me, Holden will always remain a teenager who sees people for what they really are, and can laugh at his own problems.

Happy birthday, Holden.

*Fred Bratman, admissions co-ordinator of Columbia University's Graduate School*

*of Journalism, still wonders where the ducks of the Central Park pond go for the winter.*

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