

Time Essay

Holden Today: Still in the Rye

By STEFAN KANFER

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In the summer of 1951, a modest 277-page book was published. Its author: the little-known short-story writer J.D. Salinger. Its narrator: Holden Caulfield, a 16-year-old whose picaresque journey took him from Pencey Prep (the third private school from which he had been dismissed) to his home in New York City three days later. The *Catcher in the Rye* became a prodigious bestseller, transfiguring the emotional landscape, the mores and insights of an entire generation. It gave Salinger an abrupt prominence throughout America, Europe, Asia and Africa, and triggered what Critic George Steiner resentfully labeled "the Salinger industry"—a furious parsing of the author's fragile corpus.

But as Salinger's last story, *Hapworth*, noted, quoting Proust: "A cathedral, a wave in a storm, a dancer's leap never turn out to be as high as we had hoped." The tide has gone out; the factories of the Salinger industry have experienced vast layoffs; the author himself has not communicated with his readers for seven years. And Holden Caulfield—has his voice been muted by his creator's silence? What happens to a prodigy two decades after his debut, when he is pushing 40? An admirer can only hazard a guess:

IF you really want to hear about it, with the stylistic tics and all, the what-ever-happened-to-Soames-Forsyte kind of crap, you'll have to look elsewhere. When I was a cynosure I spake as a cynosure, and when I grew up I gave the vocabulary to the parodists. Actuarially speaking, a generation has grown since I first appeared. Gazing at that boy with the red hunting cap on the old *Signet* paperback, I wonder: What would he think of me today? But then that gray-and-white snapshot in your high school yearbook—what is that youth to you? Would you have anything to say to each other now?

Anyway, when we last left me, I was in a California institution for the emotionally disturbed. In ascending order I was suffering from 1) underweight, 2) pneumonia, 3) debilitation, and 4) terminal sanctity. The first three were cured handily. My brother D.B. kept driving over from Hollywood with sandwiches and books; the books were supposed to cure No. 4. Perhaps they did.

Maybe you were one of those who felt that after all the maundering I would wind up exactly like my father—that all along I was a conformist manqué. You were right. Boy, were you right! For a while. A long while. At first I bought the whole shot. My head got straight; I went to Columbia—after I said I would never go to any of those phony Ivy schools—and even tried a year of law school. I wore a Tattersall vest. I even wore a hat, for God's sake. Not a red hunting cap, I mean a hat. A whaddyacall it. A fedora. My father used to rate me like a New York pollution inspector: good, acceptable, unhealthy. I became a Good Boy.

It shouldn't surprise you. In those days I was always being compared to Huckleberry Finn. You know how he ended? According to Mark Twain, as a "justice of the peace in a remote village in Montana, and was a good citizen and greatly respected." If you get slipped a Finn like that, what can you reasonably expect of me?

I married right out of college. Old Sally Hayes, of course. Even though I said, "I didn't even like her much," I also admitted, "I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her. I swear to God I'm crazy. I admit it." We horsed around in an apartment in the East Village that had a fireplace and what she called "tons of charm." My father got me a job in a public

relations company. I built images, including my own, and took to preceding all my sentences with "Actually."

You remember Mr. Antolini talking to me? Just before I went to sleep and woke up with him touching my hair and making me jump about a thousand feet? He said: "I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall ... It may be the kind where at the age of 30 you sit in some bar hating everybody who comes in looking as if he might have played football in college. Then again, you may pick up just enough education to hate people who say, 'It's a secret between he and I.' Or you may end up in some business office, throwing paper clips at the nearest stenographer." I chose all three. I hated jocks, grimaced at grocery stores with signs selling APPLE'S, and I threw paper clips at stenographers. Then I threw myself. The old Caulfield Charm. I couldn't believe what was happening to me. But then I could never believe what happened to me—in life or in lit.

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Of all the lorn, adolescent souls kicking around the bestseller list, why did *7* make the existential leap to Required Reading? I was writing a mad letter, not a petition. How did it acquire so many signers? I mean not just kids, but critics. Because I think they felt, as I did, that uncertainty was the American state of mind. Old Gertrude Stein on her deathbed sighed, "What is the answer?" And topped it with "What is the question?" You could go to literary distinction with that kind of exit line, and in a sense, that is where Salinger took me.

In a senescent epoch, even the young are senile. America in the '50s was undergoing adolescence. Again. I was its sudden, unbidden spokesyouth. But surely there have been free alterations since 1951. Nonfiction is in the bucket seat and drives mankind. By now I should be a literary footnote. But no: the paperback sold more than 3,000,000 copies between 1953 and 1964. And even more between then and now. How do you figure that? I mean, those glancing insights, those adolescent knight-errandries, aren't they old news? Haven't our tastes altered 180 degrees?

Probably not. Inside every man (all right, and every woman) there is a poet who died young. The youth who read me grow younger each day. You had to read *The Catcher in the Rye* at Andover, for instance. And the new audience is never very different from the old Holden. They may not know the words, but they can hum along with the malady. My distress is theirs. They, too, long for the role of adolescent savior. They, too, are aware of the imminent death in life. As far as the sexual explosion is concerned, I suspect a lot of what you've heard is just noise. "Sex is something I really don't understand too hot," I said. It still remains a mystery to the adolescent. I have no cure, only consolation: someone has passed this way before.

Yet there is something more important, more durable about *The Catcher in the Rye*. In the interstices of the memoir were seedling predictions, just waiting for the rain. And it came, it came. Take my love/hate for movies. Wouldn't you know that College English would run a piece, without irony, suggesting that my name, "one suspects"—one maybe, two never—"is an amalgam of the last names of Movie Stars William Holden and Joan Caulfield." Yeah, well . . . And yet my obsessive cinematic fantasies were really everyone's hang-up with nostalgia, camp and collective memory. Remember me camping it up with my roommate Stradlater: "I'm the goddam Governor's son ... He doesn't want me to be a tap dancer. He wants me to go to Oxford. But it's in my goddam blood, tap-dancing." Movies made all of us. That's why we don't know how to really feel about them. Half the time I'm still crazy about them; the other half I'm very grateful Salinger never sold me to Hollywood. (Can't you see the movie of *Catcher*, with Warren Beatty, probably, all cut up inside, haunted-looking because the director wouldn't let him eat for two days before filming?)

As for my deep animus toward "athletic bastards who stick together," see Bouton, Meggyesy, et al. And as for my hatred of those teachers who overinstruct but undernourish, yelling "digression!" in Oral Expression every time a student gets interesting, the romantic critiques of Kozol and Herndon have left me winded.

My distaste for mechanization, my preference for the four-footed over the four-wheeled ("A horse is at least human, for God's sake")—well, that has become a contagion by now. As has that yearning for Thoreauesque communal living in New England: "We'll stay in these cabin camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out . . . We could live somewhere with a brook and all and ... I could chop all our own wood in the wintertime and all."

Obsession with vulgarity and physical decay? Look around. The bookstores, the grind houses. That's not even sex, it's cold cuts. And the shlock stores are shlockier. I saw a brass statue of a guy rolling a stone up a hill. Underneath it was a label: "That's life." The myth of Sisyphus became a piece of shoddy merch.

And yet . . . and yet . . . Somehow, I have a feeling all things have not deteriorated. Some unexpected people have awakened to the voices of their children, who have turned out to be—surprise!—the holders of moral strength. Innocence is no longer suspect. Sally Hayes called me a sacrilegious atheist because I thought Jesus would have puked at the Radio City Music Hall Christmas stage show. I said, "The thing Jesus really would've liked would be the guy that plays the kettle drums in the orchestra." Well, maybe that humanizing is behind some of the Jesus Revolution. Anyway, he would have liked the drummer at Superstar. Not the show, though. And I see I'm not the only one to wonder about the ducks in Central Park. Now they're worried about species I never even heard of.

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Antolini once advised me: "Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to." I wanted to. I read Wilhelm Stekel, who authored my favorite vaudeville bill, Wandering Mania, Dipsomania, Pyromania and Other Allied Impulsive Acts. And I read George Orwell, who let me know that I was not the first adolescent to be obsessed with excrement (he compared his Pencey to a "tightrope over a cesspool"). I read Albert Camus' Notebooks and stumbled on a paragraph that illumined, I think, the Salinger myth: "I withdrew from the world not because I had enemies, but because I had friends. Not because they did me an ill turn, as is customary, but because they thought me better than I am. It was a lie I could not endure."

Among the lies I could not endure was me. My wife Sally shared my sentiments, and one day, when I committed my ultimate indiscretion (other husbands bring home lipstick on their collars; I brought home my secretary), I found the apartment empty. No books, no furniture, no Sally. No future.

That initiated my second suicidal period, during which I came into the office at 11, canceled my account at Brooks Brothers, and began dressing in Sweet-Orr corduroys. I once called my employer at midnight with two questions that had long intrigued me: "What is a runcible spoon?" and "Do you think Geppetto was a good father?" My employer told me that he was weary of my Rare, Quixotic Gestures. So, frankly, was I.

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I tried total withdrawal in Europe, but the Europeans put me in my place, which was America. As Zooey Glass said, "I was born here. I went to school here. I've been run over here ... I have no business in Europe." I lived in New England for a while, a la Salinger. But unless you're a writer or a turtleback painter or something, you want somebody to talk

to. Or else you feel like calling up dead authors all the time.

My father induced me to emerge from my shell by coercing a client to sign me on as an assistant golf pro. I was once good enough, remember, to appear in a golf movie (but I didn't). It worked for two years. Then one day I listened to the guys I was instructing. One of them was saying "cost per thousand"; the other was saying "taxfree municipals." Both of them said "actually" a lot. I realized that I was working in a conference room with Zoysia grass. Few sights have been as beautiful as my five iron arcing over the Hudson and settling among the carp and the effluents.

I returned to New York and began again, this time with a girl who reminded me of old Jane Gallagher. She had the same kind of muckle-mouth, and when she played checkers she kept all her kings in the back row too. She taught remedial reading to kids and remedial living to me. We have two daughters, Esme and Phoebe. I know the rustle of little souls tossing in beds, and I no longer have to press my ear to the wire fence at the schoolyard to hear great dialogues of children who wonder, too, about Geppetto. Besides, I am at the schoolyard all day. Having tried a series of futile desk jobs, I realized I was not built to dwell in modules. The school at which I teach used to be as snobbish and phony as Pencey or Whooton. But one day they remembered where they were—93rd Street—and changed. I teach writing and history and Oral Expression, and the kids and I digress all day long.

There I stand in the rye of the inner city, with my arms open. The pay is lousy and the hours are long and the demands are unending. At night the streets are dangerous; during the day the air is dirty. It is a hassle getting to and from anywhere. We are all well. I push the stone up the hill and down it falls. Holden S. Caulfield. Holden Sisyphus Caulfield. Camus, that nightingale who thought he was an owl, was right. At the end of The Myth of Sisyphus, he says, watching the old boy toil up and down forever, "We must imagine him happy." Happy. That kills me. It really does.

• Stefan Kanfer

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