

Education

Rye on the Rocks

Monday, May 9, 1960

After scanning a single page of J. D. Salinger's 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye*, the most avidly admired novel on modern American campuses, Tulsa's School Superintendent Charles C. Mason had one comment: "Shocking!" Mason was jarred when eight angry parents shoved the book under his nose and bitterly complained that English Teacher Beatrice Levin had assigned it to their 16-year-olds at Edison High School. The parents were not taken with Novelist Salinger's 16-year-old hero, a sensitive boy named Holden Caulfield who goes underground for 48 hours in Manhattan to escape insensitive grownups. The book, said they, had "filth on nearly every page." One four-letter word in particular made it "not fit to read." Their demand: fire the teacher.

The wife of an industrial physicist, Teacher Levin is the mother of three sons (aged 6, 10, 12) and a sometime novelist who contributes frequent book reviews to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. A University of Wisconsin graduate, she began teaching in Tulsa this year. As a supplement to the regular reading list, e.g., *Canterbury Tales*, she supplied paperback editions of *Catcher* because it seemed to her "a beautiful and moving story." It was not required reading.

When the irate parents hit Tulsa's newspapers, bookstores sold out all copies of *Catcher* the first day. More important, the *Tulsa Tribune* school editor failed to find one Edison High student opposed to Teacher Levin (adult citizens were about equally divided). Said Student Barbara Miller, 16: "I've learned a great deal from Mrs. Levin. Our whole fourth-period class is behind her 100%." Added Teacher Levin's husband: "What do they want high school students to read—*Peter Rabbit*?" That was not the way Superintendent Mason viewed it. But after commiserating with the complaining parents, Mason left Teacher Levin's fate to Edison's Principal Hiram Alexander, who said fretfully: "We all make mistakes. She's really a good teacher." Last week, after long mulling, Alexander issued a split decision—remove the book, retain Teacher Levin. Said he warily: "I can't forget the incident. But I will not dismiss her."

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