

Books

With Love & 20-20 Vision

Monday, Jul. 16, 1951

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE (277 pp.)—J. D. Salinger—Little, Brown (\$3).

"Some of my best friends are children," says Jerome David Salinger, 32. "In fact, all of my best friends are children." And Salinger has written short stories about his best friends with love, brilliance and 20-20 vision. In his tough-tender first novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (a Book-of-the-Month Club midsummer choice), he charts the miseries and ecstasies of an adolescent rebel, and deals out some of the most acidly humorous deadpan satire since the late great Ring Lardner.

Some Cheap Hotel. A lanky, crew-cut 16, well-born Holden Caulfield is sure all the world is out of step but him. His code is the survival of the flippest, and he talks a lingo as forthright and gamy, in its way, as a soldier's. Flunking four subjects out of five, he has just been fired from his fourth school.

Afraid to go home ahead of his bad news, he checks in at a cheap New York hotel; in the next 48 hours, he tries on a man-about-town role several sizes too large for him. Getting sickly drunk at a bar, he slithers away in a Walter Mitty mood, pretending: "Rocky's mob got me ... I kept putting my hand under my jacket, on my stomach and all, to keep the blood from dripping all over the place. I didn't want anybody to know I was even wounded . . . Boy, was I drunk."

Some Crazy Cliff. When the seedy night elevator man proposes sending a young prostitute to his room, bravado makes him play along. Besides: "I worry about that stuff sometimes. I read this book once . . . that had this very sophisticated, suave, sexy guy in it . . . and all he did in his spare time was beat women off with a club ... He said, in this one part, that a woman's body is like a violin and all, and that it takes a terrific musician to play it right. It was a very corny book—I realize that—but I couldn't get that violin stuff out of my mind anyway." His enthusiasm for that kind of fiddling practice fades in hopeless embarrassment as soon as the tart snakes out of her dress.

Scolded by testy cab drivers, seared by his best girl's refusal to elope with him, and surrounded by an adult world of "phonies," he loses control of his tight-lipped histrionics. He sneaks home for a midnight chat with his perky ten-year-old sister, breaks down and cries on her bed. In a moving moment, he tells her what he would really like to do and be: "I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy . . ."

For U.S. readers, the prize catch in *The Catcher in the Rye* may well be Novelist Salinger himself. He can understand an adolescent mind without displaying one.

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