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J.D. SALINGER

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J. D. SALINGER is reputed to live behind a six-foot fence. He refuses to be interviewed, and generally keeps quiet about himself. He seems afraid that journalists and publicity men might sell an image of him to the public which he'd be tempted to try and live up or live down to in his life and writings.

Already, with even this brief glimpse of Salinger's private life, we approach the central problem of his fiction. How, if you have any sensitivity or discrimination, do you live in a society, which, to use the recurrent Salinger words, is just so *goddam phoney*? In his fiction, he goes on to a further, more important question: how do you live with the people who are passive victims of phoniness, without knowing it?

Salinger was born in New York City, the setting for most of his fiction, in 1913. Like several of his leading characters, he was with the American army in Europe during the war. He has a wife and two children and leaves them daily at 8.30 a.m., taking a packed lunch to a concrete hut at the bottom of his garden, where he works till 5 p.m.

In spite of his solid and regular writing, his published output has been relatively small. But no book since the war has had such an impact on American youth as his one full-scale novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. In it, Salinger seems both to have captured a teenager's view of the adult world, and, in seventeen-year-old Holden Caulfield, the narrator, to have portrayed someone with whom a great many teenagers passionately wish to identify themselves. But it's an adult's book, too, piercing in its satire, but inspiring as well, because of Holden's many positive qualities. It's also very very funny.

Holden is so obsessed by the phoniness around him that he can't see any reason at all for working hard and passing school exams. He turns down his young sister's suggestion that he should train as a lawyer.

'Lawyers are all right, I guess—but it doesn't appeal to me,' I said. 'I mean they're all right if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't *do* that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink

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martinis and look like a hot-shot. And besides. Even if you did go around saving guys' lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really *wanted* to save guys' lives, or you did it because what you *really* wanted to do was be be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren't being a phoney? The trouble is, you *wouldn't*."

The only job that comes up to Holden's exacting ideals is that of "the catcher in the rye", who stands guard near a rye-field where children are playing, to stop them falling over a cliff-edge.

Although Holden shows us the difficulties that face the sensitive and discriminating, he doesn't himself overcome them, and, at the end of the novel, he's being treated by a psychiatrist. Various members of the Glass family, which provides the characters for much of Salinger's later writing, take up the problem where Holden left it. Seymour Glass, the genius of the family, enlarges on the idea that has dawned on Holden on his very last page, that even phoney people are human and potentially lovable. His marriage to a girl who is as at home as anyone could be in the world of Hollywood films and bingo-playing psychiatrists, is finally disastrous, but the account of the wedding in *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, is delightful, hilarious, and also moving. In "Franny", another long short-story, Seymour's younger sister has a nervous breakdown for reasons similar to those of Holden Caulfield. In *Zooey*, her brother of that name talks her out of it, drawing on the wisdom Seymour has passed on to him.

For *Esmé—with Love and Squalor*, a collection of short stories, illustrates the whole breadth of Salinger's achievement. There's Salinger the master of vivid, convincing, and often devastating dialogue; there's the satiric Salinger who, in one short paragraph that opens "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", can expose with deadly accuracy the triviality of a life surrendered to the journalists and the advertising-men; there's the Salinger of "Down at the Dinghy", with his profound and poignant understanding of the child mind; there's the moral Salinger, for whom the problem he deals with becomes finally not psychological or sociological but religious, yet in a way as down to earth as the orthopaedic appliances shop-window in which his character De Daumier-Smith has the vision that reconciles him to ordinary life and ordinary people; and, in all these, there's the subtly but belly-achingly funny Salinger, irresistibly present in every story in this and every other of his volumes.