

# Summary Edition: The Catcher in the Rye and J.D. Salinger

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The Catcher in the Rye and J.D. Salinger  
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by Jonathan Coupland

“And I hate to tell you,” he said, “but I think that once you have a fair idea where you want to go, your first move will be to apply yourself in school. You’ll have to. You’re a student – whether the idea appeals to you or not. You’re in love with knowledge. And I think you’ll find, once you get past all the Mr. Vineses you’re going to start getting closer and closer – that is, if you want to, and if you look for it and wait for it – to the kind of information that will be very, very dear to your heart. Among other things, you’ll find that you’re not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You’re by no means alone on that score, you’ll be excited and stimulated to know. 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. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It’s a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn’t education. It’s history. It’s poetry.”

The Catcher in the Rye was published in 1951. What lies behind the remarkable popularity of this book and who was JD Salinger? Holden Caulfield is a teenage boy at a private school called Pencey Prep. He is about to be expelled for flunking his examinations but can't face the prospect of telling his parents just yet. “What’s the matter with you, boy?” old Spencer said. He said it pretty tough, too, for him. “How many subjects did you carry this term?” “Five Sir” “Five. Any how many are you failing in?” “Four”. I moved my ass a little bit on the bed. It was the hardest bed I ever sat on. “I passed English all right,” I said “because I had all that Beowulf and Lord Randal My Son stuff when I was at the Whooton School. I mean I didn’t have to do any work in English at all hardly, except write compositions once in a while.” He wasn’t even listening. He hardly ever listened to you when you said something. “I flunked you in History because you knew absolutely nothing.” “I know that, sir. Boy, I know it. You couldn’t help it.” “Absolutely nothing”, he said over again. So he decides to leave before the end of term and go to New York for a few days to decompress. This is the heart of the novel. Holden in New York where he has something close to a nervous breakdown. Caulfield narrates the story to us - quite obviously from an institution of some sort where he is recovering from his trials and tribulations. “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They’re quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They’re nice and all -- I’m not saying that -- but they’re also touchy as hell. Besides, I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy.”

How can a novel divide readers so much? It seems with The Catcher in the Rye there is no middle-ground. You either regard the novel to be deeply important or you don't see what all the fuss is about. One thing you can't accuse The Catcher in the Rye of being though is just another book. The novel aims for a stratified approach to its themes and doesn't signpost them in the fashion that some lesser works do when dealing with young angst

and themes of alienation and innocence. Holden has two salient problems that float most heavily over proceedings. The first is that he can't seem to make any connection to the adult world despite the fact that he is heading there himself very soon. He finds the conventions of society tedious and restrictive. The worm-casts thing though is his keen sense of superficiality. Holden regards practically everyone he meets to be fake. Phonies. The world is full of actors pretending to be human beings. The only place where this attribute is not in wide supply amongst the human race is children. This is part of the reason why Holden is so touched by the innocence of children and values it more than anything. They have yet to be tarnished, damaged or confused by the adult world and have a sincerity that is hard to find anywhere else. More than anything Holden would somehow like to hold onto what innocence he does have left but he knows it will be impossible. It's a dream or fantasy. Like the Eskimos frozen in time at the museum he loves to visit. They stay the same while everyone else changes. "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty, skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you." Life at Pencey is vivid too and authentically conveyed by the author. "They don't do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably came to Pencey that way." There is a jauntian subtext to *The Catcher in the Rye* that underscores the more emotional currents that wash through the narrative. Caulfield's epiphany is a characteristic fantasy. He has trouble living in the real world to the extent that sometimes he just wishes it would leave him alone and he could escape altogether. "You know what I'd like to be?" I said. "You know what I'd like to be. I mean if I had my goddam choice?" "What? Stop swearing." "You know that song 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye'? I'd like--" "It's 'If a body meet a body coming through the rye!'" old Phoebe said. "It's a poem. By Robert Burns." "I know it's a poem by Robert Burns." She was right, though. It is "If a body meet a body coming through the rye." I didn't know it then, though. "I thought it was 'If a body catch a body,' " I said. "Anyway, 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, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy." Old Phoebe didn't say anything for a long time. Then, when she said something, all she said was, "Daddy's going to kill you." Jerome David Salinger was born in 1919 to a fairly wealthy family who were in the potted meat business. He was sent to some posh schools but wasn't much of a student himself. His experience of life at a military academy formed the basis of the private school Holden Caulfield attends in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger could be a rather sarcastic character in real life and was a bit snooty in his younger days by all accounts. He had a very blunt and witty turn of phrase which he used in his books. One important source for his cynicism is Oona O'Neill, the daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill. The young Salinger wanted to marry the 17-year-old O'Neill (who was a noted beauty at the time and looked like a Rocketeer era Jennifer Connelly) but while he was away during the war she married a 53-year-old Charlie Chaplin instead. Salinger was absolutely furious and loathed Chaplin for it. A letter he wrote at the time (which only came to light in 1987) expressed Salinger's bitterness at the whole affair. 'I can see them at home evenings. Chaplin squatting grey and nude, atop his chiffonier, swinging his thyroid around his head by his bamboo cane, like a dead rat. Oona in an aquamarine gown, applauding madly from the bathroom.' Holden Caulfield's distaste for Hollywood and actors is said to come directly from Salinger losing O'Neill (later to become Lady Chaplin) to silver haired megastar and rascal Chaplin. Salinger's war service is cited as the most important influence on his body of work. His regiment was almost wiped out at Normandy and he was a witness to the horror of the concentration camp at Dachau.

He survived the carnage of a bloody battle in a Belgian forest and apparently spent VE Day alone with a revolver in his hand according to biographer Kenneth Slawenski. The superficial and fake nature of the world as Holden Caulfield sees it stems - according to the author here - from Salinger's shattering war time experiences. The book says Salinger wrote a lot during the war and even had early pages of *The Catcher in the Rye* during his service in Europe. *The Catcher in the Rye* took a long time to finish but was published in 1951 and eventually became an incredibly famous novel. The book became a cult amongst students and counter culture types in particular but Salinger recoiled at the attention. He hated profiles or photographs of himself and ended up buying a farmhouse in New Hampshire completely in the middle of nowhere and deep in the woods. He lived there for the rest of his life, even building a little cabin deeper in the woods where he could go to write in peace away from his family. Although he only died in 2010, JD Salinger did not publish anything after 1965 and declined all interviews, preferring to live in enigmatic isolation. Despite his seclusion and refusal to publish anything, Salinger still wrote each day ('There is a marvellous peace in not publishing, I just write for myself and my own pleasure') of his life and there is speculation that he might have left as many as 15 unpublished novels when he died. Salinger would sometimes disappear to this cabin for 16 hours at a time, furiously writing stories and novels, very few of which would ever see the light of day. Salinger hated the idea of the ego of the writer and being famous and retreated ever further from it. In a way it helped him to maintain his cult status although it was perhaps a form of ego itself to shun everything and set himself apart from the world and the usual conventions of his profession. He even shunned a number of offers to turn his books into films after an adaption of *Uncle Wiggily* in Connecticut in 1949 didn't meet with his approval. Countless people wrote to Salinger asking to make a *Catcher in the Rye* film but he always turned down their proposals. Perhaps the most far out offer Salinger got was from animator Ralph Bakshi of *Fritz the Cat* and *Lord of the Rings* fame. Bakshi wrote to Salinger saying he wanted to make a *Catcher in the Rye* film where Holden would be played by a live actor recounting what happened to him and then Holden's night in New York would be conveyed through animation. It won't come as a tremendous surprise to know that Salinger politely turned down Bakshi's idea.

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Explore the unique world of *The Catcher in the Rye* and JD Salinger

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