

## “Appallingly funny”

In the *New Statesman* of 18 August 1951, Jocelyn Brooke reviewed four new American novels, one of which was “*The Catcher in the Rye*”. After considering “*The Preacher and the Slave*”, Wallace Stegner’s “novelised biography” of an American labour leader, Brooke turned to Salinger

*The Catcher in the Rye* has nothing of the newsreel about it: “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 . . .”

Nor, at first, did I – but after a few pages I found even the Copperfield crap hard to resist. The narrator is a boy of 17, naïf, would-be tough, rather hysterical; he goes straight to the point, with something of the ferocious directness of (if such a thing were conceivable) an Americanised Denton Welch. This is an odd, tragic and at times appallingly funny book, with a taste of its own. ●



Cornish, New Hampshire, September 1961. A rare glimpse of Salinger in the grounds of his country home

### APPRECIATION

## To have and to Holden

Leo Robson explains how fans’ devotion to Salinger’s cult anti-hero is misplaced

As things stand, at the time of the author’s death aged 91, a J D Salinger bookshelf is a paltry, lonely-looking thing – four slim volumes, the whole amounting to fewer than 1,000 pages. Salinger stopped publishing in 1965, around the same time he stopped giving interviews and appearing in public, though it is generally believed that he continued writing. When I spoke to the novelist Colm Tóibín, he identified the questions that most readers are now asking: “Did he leave behind a body of serious, finished work? Or scraps? Or half-written notes to himself?” Tóibín, for his part, is pessimistic but not without hope: “My guess is that he left nothing much that is worth reading, but I would love to be wrong.”

For the moment, we are left with that barely covered shelf, which contains some terrific things, characterised by Salinger’s minute observations about his characters’ speech, thought

and behaviour – stories such as “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and “Just Before the War with the Eskimos”, both from *Nine Stories* (1953), and “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters”, which was published in its own volume with “Seymour: an Introduction” (1963).

Seymour is Seymour Glass, the troubled young man recently returned from an army hospital who kills himself on his honeymoon in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”. He is one of the seven Glass children – utterly brilliant but at odds with the world – about whom Salinger wrote repeatedly. Salinger himself is evident in shell-shocked Seymour, with his genius complex and taste for eastern mysticism, as well as in his younger brother, Buddy, the narrator of “Seymour: an Introduction”, who claimed to be the author of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” and *The Catcher in the Rye* – Salinger’s greatest accomplishment and only novel, in which we receive a fleeting portrait of the four Caulfield children, each of them remarkable in his or her own way.

The success of *The Catcher in the Rye*, or perhaps the particular kind of success, has been damaging to the book’s reputation. It ought to be recognised as a masterwork of irony and ambiguity; instead, it has been treated as a manifesto for mischief and murder. Holden Caulfield has been released from Salinger’s questioning authorship. The obituaries have reintroduced Salinger, but only to perform a

conflation of author and narrator, ransacking Holden’s monologue for prophecies of Salinger’s later seclusion.

But *The Catcher in the Rye* does not valorise Holden’s disaffection – the frequency of words such as “phoney” is not intended to suggest that everything in the adult world is a sham, merely that Holden thinks it is. He is unable to derive pleasure from music or education or movies or social interaction, and the death of his younger brother Allie has played some role in this. The dream of being the catcher in the rye – preventing children from leaping off the cliff into adulthood – is the stuff of fantasy, as even Holden realises: “I know it’s crazy, but it’s the only thing I’d really like to be. I know it’s crazy.”

The book is not especially subtle in expressing its suspicion and criticism of Holden, which makes it all the more disappointing, in literary terms, that he has become a hero to readers young and psychologically unhinged. It constitutes a triumph of the reader’s desire to agree with the text, or to make the text agree with them. The experience of writing *The Catcher in the Rye* liberated Salinger from being Holden Caulfield, but the book’s success seems to have undone that process. If a work of literature can provoke such hysteria and misapprehension, perhaps Holden was right all along. ●

Leo Robson is the *New Statesman*’s lead fiction reviewer. Read more by him at:

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