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Cherished and Cursed: Toward a Social History of *The Catcher in the Rye*

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

THE plot is brief: in 1949 or perhaps 1950, over the course of three days during the Christmas season, a sixteen-year-old takes a picaresque journey to his New York City home from the third private school to expel him. The narrator recounts his experiences and opinions from a sanitarium in California. A heavy smoker, Holden Caulfield claims to be already six feet, two inches tall and to have wisps of grey hair; and he wonders what happens to the ducks when the ponds freeze in winter. The novel was published on 16 July 1951, sold for \$3.00, and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Within two weeks, it had been reprinted five times, the next month three more times—though by the third edition the jacket photograph of the author had quietly disappeared. His book stayed on the best-seller list for thirty weeks, though never above fourth place.¹

Costing 75¢, the Bantam paperback edition appeared in 1964. By 1981, when the same edition went for \$2.50, sales still held steady, between twenty and thirty thousand copies per month, about a quarter of a million copies annually. In paperback the novel sold over three million copies between 1953 and 1964, climbed even higher by the 1980s, and continues to attract about as many buyers as it did in 1951. The durability of

The author appreciates the invitation of Professors Marc Lee Raphael and Robert A. Gross to present an early version of this essay at the College of William & Mary, and also thanks Professors Paul Boyer and John D. Ibson for their assistance.

¹Adam Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," *Esquire*, December 1981, p. 57; Jack Salzman, ed., intro. to *New Essays on "The Catcher in the Rye"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 6, 7.

its appeal is astonishing. *The Catcher in the Rye* has gone through over seventy printings and has spread into thirty languages. Three decades after it first appeared, a mint copy of the first edition was already fetching about \$200.²

Critical and academic interest has been less consistent; and how J. D. Salinger's only novel achieved acclaim is still a bit mystifying. After its first impact came neglect: following the book reviews, only three critical pieces appeared in the first five years. In the next four years, at least seventy essays on *The Catcher in the Rye* were published in American and British magazines. Salinger's biographer explained why: "A feature of the youthquake was, of course, that students could now tell their teachers what to read." Ian Hamilton also notes that by the mid-1950s the novel had "become the book all brooding adolescents had to buy, [and on campuses] the indispensable manual from which cool styles of disaffection could be borrowed."³ No American writer over the past half-century has entranced serious young readers more than Salinger, whose novel about the flight from Pencey Prep may lag behind only *Of Mice and Men* on public-school required reading lists.⁴ And his fiction has inspired other writers as well; the late Harold Brodkey, for example, considered it "the most influential body of work in English prose by anyone since Hemingway."⁵

One explanation for why *The Catcher in the Rye* has enjoyed such a sustained readership came over two decades after the novel was first published—from a middle-aged Holden Caulfield himself, as imagined by journalist Stefan Kanfer: "The new audience is never very different from the old Holden.

²Salzman, intro. to *New Essays*, pp. 6, 19 n. 16; Ian Hamilton, *In Search of J. D. Salinger* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 136; Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," pp. 56, 57; [Jack Skow,] "Invisible Man," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), p. 4.

³David J. Burrows, "Allie and Phoebe" (1969), reprinted in *Holden Caulfield*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), p. 80; Hamilton, *In Search of Salinger*, pp. 155–56.

⁴Salzman, intro. to *New Essays*, p. 22 n. 46; [Skow,] "Invisible Man," p. 4; Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," p. 57.

⁵Quoted by Nadine Brozan, "J. D. Salinger Receives an Apology for an Award," *New York Times*, 27 April 1991, p. 26.

They may not know the words, but they can hum along with the malady. My distress is theirs. They, too, long for the role of adolescent savior. They, too, are aware of the imminent death in life. As far as the sexual explosion is concerned, I suspect a lot of what you've heard is just noise." Sex "still remains a mystery to the adolescent. I have no cure, only consolation: someone has passed this way before." Objections to schlock and vulgarity and physical decline, and preferences for the pastoral over the machine continue to resonate, "Holden" suspects;⁶ and so long as the United States continues to operate very much this side of paradise, a reluctance to inherit what the grown-ups have bequeathed is bound to enlist sympathy. The fantasy of withdrawal and retreat to the countryside ("Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there . . . [are] beautiful as hell up there. It really is.") is not only a commonplace yearning but also advice Holden's creator elected to take by moving to Cornish, New Hampshire.⁷

But it should be conceded that generally it's the grown-ups who are in charge, and many of them have wanted to ban the widely beloved novel. Why *The Catcher in the Rye* has been censored (and censured) as well as cherished is a curiosity worth examining for its own sake. But how so transparently charming a novel can also exercise a peculiar allure and even emit disturbing danger signals may serve as an entrée into post-war American culture as well.

Bad Boys, Bad Readers

One weird episode inspired by *The Catcher in the Rye* involves Jerry Lewis. He tried to buy the movie rights, which were not for sale, and to play the lead. One problem was that the director did not read the book until the 1960s, when he was already well into his thirties. Playing the protagonist would have been a stretch, but *le roi de crazy* felt some affinity for Salinger (whom Lewis never met): "He's nuts also." Curiously Holden

⁶Stefan Kanfer, "Holden Today: Still in the Rye," *Time*, 7 February 1972, pp. 50–51.

⁷J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 171. Subsequent page references, enclosed in parentheses in text, are to this edition.

himself mentions the word “crazy” and its cognates (like “mad,” “madman,” and “insane”) over fifty times, more than the reverberant “phony.”⁸

Indeed the history of this novel cannot be disentangled from the way the mentally unbalanced have read it. In one instance the reader is himself fictional: the protagonist of John Fowles’s first book, which captures the unnerving character of Salinger’s only novel as an index of taste, perhaps of moral taste. In the second section of *The Collector*, told from the viewpoint of the victim, the kidnapped Miranda Grey recounts in her diary that she asks her captor, lepidopterist Frederick Clegg, whether he reads “proper books—real books.” When he admits that “light novels are more my line,” she recommends *The Catcher in the Rye* instead: “I’ve almost finished it. Do you know I’ve read it twice and I’m five years younger than you are?” Sullenly he promises to read it. Later she notices him doing so, “several times . . . look[ing] to see how many pages more he had to read. He reads it only to show me how hard he is trying.” After the duty has been discharged, over a week later, the collector admits: “I don’t see much point in it.” When Miranda counters, “You realize this is one of the most brilliant studies of adolescence ever written?” he responds that Holden “sounds a mess to me.”

“Of course he’s a mess. But he realizes he’s a mess, he tries to express what he feels, he’s a human being for all his faults. Don’t you even feel sorry for him?”

“I don’t like the way he talks.”

“I don’t like the way you talk,” she replies. “But I don’t treat you as below any serious notice or sympathy.”

Clegg acknowledges: “I suppose it’s very clever. To write like that and all.”

“I gave you that book to read because I thought you would feel identified with him. You’re a Holden Caulfield. He doesn’t fit anywhere and you don’t.”

⁸Shawn Levy, *King of Comedy: The Life and Art of Jerry Lewis* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), p. 271; Peter Shaw, “Love and Death in *Catcher in the Rye*,” in *New Essays*, p. 100.

"I don't wonder, the way he goes on. He doesn't try to fit."

Miranda insists: "He tries to construct some sort of reality in his life, some sort of decency."

"It's not realistic. Going to a posh school and his parents having money. He wouldn't behave like that. In my opinion."

She has the final word (at least in her diary): "You get on the back of everything vital, everything trying to be honest and free, and you bear it down."

Modern art, she realizes, embarrasses and fascinates Clegg; it "shocks him" and stirs "guilty ideas in him" because he sees it as "all vaguely immoral." For the mass audience at which William Wyler's 1965 film adaptation was aimed, Clegg's aesthetic world is made less repellent and more conventional, and the conversation about *The Catcher in the Rye* is abbreviated.⁹

In a more class-conscious society than is the United States, Fowles's loner finds something repugnant about the recklessness of the privileged protagonist. In a more violent society than England, types like Frederick Clegg might identify with Holden Caulfield's alienation from "normal" people so thoroughly that they become assassins. To be sure, *The Catcher in the Rye* is bereft of violence; and no novel seems less likely to activate the impulse to "lock and load." But this book nevertheless has exercised an eerie allure for asocial young men who, glomming on to Holden's estrangement, yield to the terrifying temptations of murder. "Lacking a sense of who he is," such a person "shops among artifacts of our culture—books, movies, TV programs, song lyrics, newspaper clippings—to fashion a character." Instead of authentic individuality, Priscilla Johnson McMillan has written, "all that is left is a collection of cultural shards—the bits and pieces of popular culture, torn from their contexts."¹⁰

In December 1980, with a copy of Salinger's novel in his pocket, Mark David Chapman murdered John Lennon. Before the police arrived, the assassin began reading the novel to him-

⁹John Fowles, *The Collector* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), pp. 156–57, 192, 219–20, 246; John Simon, *Private Screenings* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 165.

¹⁰Priscilla Johnson McMillan, "An Assassin's Portrait," *New Republic*, 12 July 1982, pp. 16–18.

self and, when he was sentenced, read aloud the passage that begins with "anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids" and ends with "I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (pp. 224–25). Daniel M. Stashower has speculated ingeniously that Chapman wanted the former Beatle's innocence to be preserved in the only way possible—by death (the fate of Holden's revered brother Allie). Of course it could be argued that the assassin was not a conscientious reader, since Holden realizes on the carousel that children have to be left alone, that they cannot be saved from themselves: "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off" (pp. 273–74). No older catcher should try to intervene.¹¹

Nor was Chapman the only Beatles fan to reify happiness as a warm gun. John Hinckley, Jr., described himself in his high school days as "a rebel without a cause" and was shocked to hear that Lennon had been murdered. A year later Hinckley himself tried to kill President Reagan. In Hinckley's hotel room, police found, along with a 1981 John Lennon color calendar, Salinger's novel among a half-dozen paperbacks. Noting the "gruesome congruences between these loners," Richard Schickel wondered whether Chapman and Hinckley could "really believe their disaffections were similar to Holden Caulfield's."¹²

One stab at an answer would be provided in John Guare's play *Six Degrees of Separation*, which opened in New York in 1990 and which he adapted for Fred Schepisi's film three years later. An imposter calling himself Paul insinuates himself into a well-heeled family; he is a perfect stranger (or appears to be).

¹¹Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," p. 58; Daniel M. Stashower, "On First Looking into Chapman's Holden: Speculations on a Murder," *American Scholar* 52 (Summer 1983): 373–77; Jack Jones, *Let Me Take You Down: Inside the Mind of Mark David Chapman, the Man Who Killed John Lennon* (New York: Villard Books, 1992), pp. 7, 22, 174–79, 184; Warren French, *J. D. Salinger, Revisited* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), pp. 17, 48.

¹²Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), p. 280; Lincoln Caplan, *The Insanity Defense and the Trial of John W. Hinckley, Jr.* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), pp. 42–43.

Pretending to be a Harvard undergraduate who has just been mugged, posing as the son of actor Sidney Poitier, Paul claims that his thesis is devoted to Salinger's novel and its odd connections to criminal loners:

A substitute teacher out on Long Island was dropped from his job for fighting with a student. A few weeks later, the teacher returned to the classroom, shot the student unsuccessfully, held the class hostage and then shot himself. Successfully. This fact caught my eye: last sentence. *Times*. A neighbor described him as a nice boy. Always reading *Catcher in the Rye*.

Paul then mentions "the nitwit—Chapman" and insists that "the reading of that book would be his defense" for having killed Lennon. Hinckley, too, had "said if you want my defense all you have to do is read *Catcher in the Rye*. It seemed to be time to read it again." Paul reads it as a "manifesto of hate" against phonies,

a touching story, comic because the boy wants to do so much and can't do anything. Hates all phoniness and only lies to others. Wants everyone to like him, is only hateful, and is completely self-involved. In other words, a pretty accurate picture of a male adolescent. And what alarms me about the book—not the book so much as the aura about it—is this: The book is primarily about paralysis. The boy can't function. And at the end, before he can run away and start a new life, it starts to rain and he folds. . . . But the aura around this book of Salinger's—which perhaps should be read by everyone *but* young men—is this: It mirrors like a fun house mirror and amplifies like a distorted speaker one of the great tragedies of our times—the death of the imagination, [which] now stands as a synonym for something outside ourselves.

A smooth liar, Paul later admits (or claims) that a Groton commencement address delivered a couple of years earlier was the source of his insights.¹³

¹³John Guare, *Six Degrees of Separation* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 31–35, 107.

Beloved and Banned

Holden has thus been born to trouble—yet another reminder that, in the opinion of long queues of literary critics, you can't know about him without your having read a book by Mr. Mark Twain called *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which told the truth mainly about the intensity of the yearning for authenticity and innocence that marks the picaresque quest. Huck and Holden share the fate of being both beloved *and* banned; such reactions were not unrelated. When the Concord (Massachusetts) public library proscribed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* soon after its publication, the author gloated that not even his *Innocents Abroad* had sold more copies more quickly; and “those idiots in Concord” “have given us a rattling tip-top puff which will go into every paper in the country. . . . That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure.”¹⁴

Salinger's novel does not appear to have been kept off the shelves in Concord but did cause enough of a stir to make the short list of the most banned books in school libraries, curricula, and public libraries.¹⁵ In 1973 the *American School Board Journal* called this monster best-seller “the most widely censored book in the United States.”¹⁶ It was noted nearly a decade later that *The Catcher in the Rye* “had the dubious distinction of being at once the most frequently censored book across the nation and the second-most frequently taught novel in public high schools.”¹⁷ Anne Levinson, the assistant director of the Office of Intellectual Freedom in Chicago, called *The Catcher in the Rye* probably “a perennial No. 1 on the censorship hit list,”

¹⁴Quoted by Justin Kaplan, in *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), pp. 268–69.

¹⁵Frank Trippett, “The Growing Battle of the Books,” *Time*, 19 January 1981, p. 85; Mary Jordan, “Reports of Censorship in U.S. Schools Up 50%,” *International Herald Tribune*, 4 September 1992, p. 5.

¹⁶Quoted by Salzman, in intro. to *New Essays*, p. 15.

¹⁷Quoted in Salzman, intro. to *New Essays*, p. 15; Pamela Steinkle, “‘If a Body Catch a Body’: The *Catcher in the Rye* Censorship Debate as Expression of Nuclear Culture,” in *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America*, ed. Ronald Edsforth and Larry Bennett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 127; L. B. Woods, *A Decade of Censorship in America: The Threat to Classrooms and Libraries, 1966–1975* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979), p. 82.

narrowly ahead of *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* and perhaps of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* as well.¹⁸ No postwar American novel has been subjected to more—and more intense—efforts to prevent the young from reading it.

Some examples: The National Organization for Decent Literature declared it objectionable by 1956. Five years later a teacher in a San Jose, California, high school who had included the novel on the twelfth-grade supplementary reading list was transferred and the novel dropped. *The Catcher in the Rye* was excised from the list of approved books in Kershaw County, South Carolina, after the sheriff of Camden declared part of the novel obscene.¹⁹ In 1978 the novel was banned in the high schools of Issaquah, Washington, in the wake of a campaign led by a diligent citizen who tabulated 785 “profanities” and charged that including Holden in the syllabus was “part of an overall Communist plot in which a lot of people are used and may not even be aware of it.”²⁰ Three school board members in Issaquah not only voted in favor of banning *The Catcher in the Rye* but also against renewing the contract of the school superintendent who had explicitly sanctioned the right of English teachers to assign the book. The board members were recalled, however. A school board member also confiscated a copy of Salinger's novel from a high school library in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1973. Several high school teachers have been fired or forced to resign for having assigned *The Catcher in the Rye*.²¹

California was the site of two well-reported incidents. The first erupted in 1962 in Temple City, near Pasadena, at a Board of Education meeting. Salinger's book had been assigned as supplementary reading for the eleventh grade. A parent objected, in the main, to the “crude, profane and obscene” lan-

¹⁸Quoted by Seth Mydans, in “In a Small Town, a Battle Over a Book,” *New York Times*, 3 September 1989, p. 22; Woods, *Decade of Censorship*, p. 150.

¹⁹“*Catcher in the News*,” *Esquire*, December 1981, p. 58; Salzman, intro. to *New Essays*, p. 14.

²⁰Quoted by Edward B. Jenkinson, in *Censors in the Classroom: The Mind Benders* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), p. 35.

²¹Jenkinson, *Censors in the Classroom*, pp. 35, 156; Jack R. Sublette, *J. D. Salinger: An Annotated Bibliography, 1938–1981* (New York: Garland, 1984), pp. 160, 162, 164–67.

guage. For good measure, though, the book was also condemned for its literary assault on patriotism, "home life, [the] teaching profession, religion and so forth." Another vigilant parent, imploring the President of the United States summarily to fire anyone writing such a book, had obviously confused the reclusive novelist with John F. Kennedy's amiable press secretary, Pierre Salinger.²²

The Catcher in the Rye was also banned from the supplementary reading list of Boron High School, located on the edge of the Mojave Desert. The proscription had an interesting effect. Salinger "has gained a new readership among townspeople," the *New York Times* reported, "and Helen Nelson, the local librarian, has a waiting list of fifteen people for the book that she says has been sitting on the shelf all these years pretty much unnoticed." The campaign against the book had been fueled by its profanity, which aroused the most heated objections. Vickie Swindler, the parent of a fourteen-year-old girl, was startled to see three "goddamns" on page 32. She recalled phoning the school and demanding to know: "How the hell [*sic*] did this teacher [Shelley Keller-Gage] get this book?" Locals who sympathized with the censors offered a curious interpretation of their motives, which they compared to Holden's dream of becoming a catcher in the rye to keep innocence intact; the protagonist and the parents trying to muzzle him shared a desire to exempt children from the vulgarity and corruption of the adult world. Yet, as Mrs. Keller-Gage noted, "Things are not innocent any more, and I think we've got to help them [i.e., children] deal with that, to make responsible choices, to be responsible citizens." Parents were "wanting to preserve the innocence of the children" in vain. The *Times* reported that she offered an alternative assignment for pupils whose parents were opposed to *The Catcher in the Rye*: Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*.²³

When the ban took effect in the new term, Mrs. Keller-Gage put her three dozen copies of Salinger's novel "on a top shelf of

²²Marvin Laser and Norman Fruman, "Not Suitable for Temple City," in *Studies in J. D. Salinger: Reviews, Essays, and Critiques*, ed. Laser and Fruman (New York: Odyssey Press, 1963), pp. 124-29.

²³Mydans, "Small Town," p. 3.

her classroom closet, inside a tightly taped cardboard box." Raise high the bookshelf, censors. In place of *The Catcher in the Rye*, she announced, she would assign another Bradbury novel, *Fahrenheit 451*,²⁴ the title referring to the presumed "temperature at which book-paper catches fire, and burns." This dystopian novel about book-burning was published in 1953, though a shorter version, entitled "The Fireman," had appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction* in 1950. Both versions were too early to allude to Salinger's novel, which is neither shown nor recited in François Truffaut's 1966 film adaptation (though one item visibly consumed is an issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*).

Efforts at suppression were not confined to secondary schools. A prominent Houston attorney, "whose daughter had been assigned the novel in an English class at the University of Texas, threatened to remove the girl from the University," *Harper's* reported. "The aggrieved father sent copies [of the novel] to the governor, the chancellor of the university, and a number of state officials. The state senator from Houston threatened to read passages from the book on the senate floor to show the sort of thing they teach in Austin. The lawyer-father said Salinger used language 'no sane person would use' and accused the university of 'corrupting the moral fibers [*sic*] of our youth.'" He conceded that the novel "is not a hard-core Communist-type book, but it encourages a lessening of spiritual values which in turn leads to communism."²⁵

In making appointments to the department of English at the University of Montana, Leslie A. Fiedler recalled that "the only unforgivable thing in the university or the state was to be 'controversial.'" He nevertheless "began to make offers to young instructors who had quarreled with their administrators, or had asked their students to read *Catcher in the Rye*, or had themselves written poetry containing dirty words, or were flagrantly Jewish or simply Black." The narrator of a recent academic novel, *Mustang Sally*, recalls that "the chairman of the department has asked us all to use our best judgment in avoiding con-

²⁴Mydans, "Small Town," p. 3.

²⁵Willie Morris, "Houston's Superpatriots," *Harper's*, October 1961, p. 50; Laser and Fruman, "Community Critics . . . and Censors," in *Studies in Salinger*, p. 123.

frontation with the evangelicals . . . such as the group who staged a 'pray-in' at the Greensburg High School library because *The Catcher in the Rye* was on the shelves. It has since been removed, along with the principal." No wonder, then, that one columnist, though writing for the newspaper of record, whimsically claimed to "lose count of the number of times the book has been challenged or banned."²⁶

Such animosity had become a predictable feature of the far right by the 1980s, when an outfit named Educational Research Analysts, financed by Richard Viguerie, a leading fundraiser for right-wing organizations, was formed to examine nearly every textbook considered for adoption anywhere in the nation. "The group has assembled a list of 67 categories under which a book may be banned. Category 43 ('Trash') included *The Catcher in the Rye*," the *New Republic* reported. Perhaps Salinger should have counted his blessings, since the eclectic Category 44 consisted of the "works of questionable writers" like Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, and Ogden Nash.²⁷

It is more surprising that moral objections surfaced in the pages of *Ramparts*, the brashest of the magazines to give a radical tincture to the 1960s. The monthly had begun under Roman Catholic auspices, however; and though Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was deemed a work of depravity on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, Salinger was accorded the same treatment as Genet, Proust, Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence: omission.²⁸ But individual Catholics could still get incensed over *The Catcher in the Rye*, as the new editor of *Ramparts*, Warren Hinckle, discovered one evening. He was having a conversation with the new fiction editor, Helen Keating, who was married to the magazine's new publisher. Hinckle recalled:

²⁶Leslie A. Fiedler, *Being Busted* (New York: Stein & Day, 1969), pp. 59, 60; Edward Allen, *Mustang Sally* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 20–21; Anna Quindlen, "Don't Read This," *New York Times*, 1 October 1994, sec. 4, p. 23.

²⁷Timothy Noah, "Censors Right and Left," *New Republic*, 28 February 1981, p. 12.

²⁸Robert J. Clements, "Forbidden Books and Christian Reunion," *Columbia University Forum* (Summer 1963): 28; conversation with Jonas Barciauskas, librarian for theology, Boston College, 28 October 1996.

A great debate somehow began over the rather precious subject of J. D. Salinger. The setting was vaguely Inquisitional. . . . They all listened attentively as [Edward] Keating, suddenly a fiery prosecutor, denounced Salinger for moral turpitude. Keating expressed similar opinions about the degeneracy of writers such as Tennessee Williams and Henry Miller: corruption, moral decay, the erosion of the classic values of Western Civilization, et cetera, ad infinitum. His special contempt for Salinger seemed to have something to do with the fact that he had found his oldest son reading a paperback book by the man.

Keating became enraged enough to make "the hyperbolic assertion, which he later retracted, that if he were President, he would put J. D. Salinger in jail! I asked why. 'Because he's dirty,' Ed said. I barely recalled something in *The Catcher in the Rye* about Holden Caulfield in the back seat unhooking a girl's bra," Hinckle recalled. Despite the lyric, "If a body catch a body," in fact few popular novels are so fully exempt from the leer of the sensualist; and even though Holden claims to be "probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw," he admits it's only "in my *mind*" (p. 81).

In any case, Hinckle was baffled by Keating's tirade and "unleashed a more impassioned defense of Salinger than I normally would have felt impelled to make of a voguish writer whose mortal sin was his Ivy League slickness." The chief consequence of the argument was Keating's discovery of a "bomb," by which he meant "a hot story. The 'bomb' which exploded in the first issue of *Ramparts* was the idea of a symposium on J. D. Salinger"—with Hinckle for the defense and Keating and a friend of his for the prosecution. That friend, Robert O. Bowen, complained in the inaugural issue in 1962 that Salinger was not only anti-Catholic but somehow also "pro-Jewish and pro-Negro." Bowen accused the novelist of being so subversive that he was "vehemently anti-Army" (though Salinger had landed on Utah Beach on D-Day), "even anti-America," a writer who subscribed to "the sick line transmitted by Mort Sahl" and other "cosmopolitan think people." Though Bowen was vague in identifying the sinister campaigns this impenetrably private novelist was managing to wage, alignments with the Anti-

Defamation League and “other Jewish pressure groups” were duly noted, and Salinger’s sympathy for “Negro chauvinism” was denounced. “Let those of us who are Christian and who love life lay this book aside as the weapon of an enemy,” Bowen advised.²⁹ Such was the level of literary analysis at the birth of *Ramparts*.

The Catcher in the Rye has even taken on an iconic significance precisely because it is reviled as well as revered. What if the Third Reich had won the Second World War by defeating Britain? one novelist has wondered. Set in 1964, *Fatherland* imagines a past in which Salinger is among four foreign authors listed as objectionable to the Greater Reich. Those writers, banned by the authorities, are esteemed by younger Germans “rebelling against their parents. Questioning the state. Listening to American radio stations. Circulating their crudely printed copies of proscribed books. . . . Chiefly, they protested against the war—the seemingly endless struggle against the American-backed Soviet guerrillas.” But forget about a history that never happened. One of the two regimes that *had* supplanted the defeated Reich was the German Democratic Republic, whose censors were wary of American cultural imports. In the 1960s, Kurt Hager served as the leading ideologist on the Central Committee of the East German regime. Resisting publication of a translation of Salinger’s novel, Hager feared that its protagonist might captivate Communist youth. Though a translation did eventually appear and proved popular among young readers in the GDR, Hager refused to give up the fight. Appropriate role models were “winners,” he insisted, like the regime’s Olympic athletes, not “losers” like Holden Caulfield.³⁰

Yet anti-anti-Communism could make use of the novel too. Its reputation for inciting censorious anxiety had become so great by 1990 that in the film *Guilty by Suspicion*, a terrified screenwriter is shown burning his books in his driveway a few hours after testifying before a rump session of the House Un-

²⁹Warren Hinckle, *If You Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), pp. 41–42, 44–45; Robert O. Bowen, “The Salinger Syndrome: Charity Against Whom?” *Ramparts*, May 1962, pp. 52–60.

³⁰Robert Harris, *Fatherland* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p. 17; Robert Darnton, *Berlin Journal, 1989–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 205.

American Activities Committee. Shocked at this bonfire of the humanities, director David Merrill (Robert De Niro) categorizes what goes up in flames as “all good books”—though the only titles he cites are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. The decision of writer-director Irwin Winkler to include Salinger’s novel, however, is historically (if not canonically) implausible. When the film opens in September 1951, Merrill is shown returning from two months in France; a hot-off-the-press copy of the best-seller must therefore have been rushed to him in Paris if he could pronounce on the merits of the book on his first evening back in Los Angeles.

The attacks on *The Catcher in the Rye* gathered a momentum of their own and “show no signs of tapering off,” one student of book-banning concluded in 1979. The novel became so notorious for igniting controversy “that many censors freely admit they have never read it, but are relying on the reputation the book has garnered.”³¹ Anne Levinson added: “Usually the complaints have to do with blasphemy or what people feel is irreligious. Or they say they find the language generally offensive or vulgar, or there is a sort of general ‘family values’ kind of complaint, that the book undermines parental authority, that the portrayal of Holden Caulfield is not a good role model for teenagers.” It was judged suitable for Chelsea Clinton, however. In 1993 the First Lady gave her daughter a copy to read while vacationing on Martha’s Vineyard. The *Boston Globe* used the occasion to editorialize against persistent censorship, since “Salinger’s novel of a 1950s coming of age still ranks among the works most frequently challenged by parents seeking to sanitize their children’s school reading.”³²

Assigning Meaning to Growing Up Absurd

Few American novels of the postwar era have elicited as much scholarly and critical attention as *The Catcher in the Rye*, and therefore little that is fresh can still be proposed about so closely analyzed a text. But the social context within which the

³¹Woods, *Decade of Censorship*, pp. 149–50.

³²Quoted by Mydans, in “Small Town,” p. 22; “Censorship’s Coming of Age,” *Boston Globe*, 3 September 1993, p. 14.

novel has generated such anxiety remains open to interpretation. If anything new can be said about this book, its status within the cross-hairs of censors offers the greatest promise. What needs further consideration is not why this novel is so endearing but why it has inspired campaigns to ban it. Literary critics have tended to expose the uncanny artistry by which Salinger made Holden Caulfield into the loved one but have been far less curious about the intensity of the desire to muffle him. It is nevertheless possible to isolate several explanations for the power of this novel to affect—and disturb—readers outside of departments of English.

The “culture wars” of the last third of the twentieth century are fundamentally debates about the 1960s. That decade marked the end of what historian Tom Engelhardt has labeled “victory culture,” indeed the end of “the American Way of Life,” phrased in the singular. The 1960s constituted a *cæsura* in the formation of national self-definition, nor has confidence in *e pluribus unum* been entirely restored. At first glance it might seem surprising for *The Catcher in the Rye* to have contributed in some small fashion to fragmentation. Nevertheless such a case, however tentative, has been advanced. Since nothing in history is created *ex nihilo*, at least part of the 1960s, it has been argued, must have sprung from at least part of the 1950s.

Literary critics Carol and Richard Ohmann, for example, concede that the young narrator lacks the will to try to change society. They nevertheless contend that his creator recorded “a serious critical mimesis of bourgeois life in the Eastern United States, ca. 1950—of snobbery, privilege, class injury, culture as a badge of superiority, sexual exploitation, education subordinated to status, warped social feeling, competitiveness, stunted human possibility, the list could go on.” They praise Salinger’s acuity “in imagining these hurtful things, though not in explaining them”—or in hinting how they might be corrected. *The Catcher in the Rye* thus “mirrors a contradiction of bourgeois society” and of “advanced capitalism,” which promises many good things but frustrates their acquisition and equitable distribution. In this manner readers are encouraged at least to con-

ceive of the urgent *need* for change, even if they're not able to reconfigure Holden's musings into a manual for enacting it.³³

That moment would have to await the crisis of the Vietnam War, which "converted Salinger's novel into a catalyst for revolt, converting anomie into objectified anger," John Seelye has argued. *The Catcher in the Rye* became "a threshold text to the decade of the sixties, ten years after it appeared at the start of the fifties, [when it was] a minority text stating a minor view." In the axial shift to the left that occurred in the 1960s, the sensibility of a prep school drop-out could be re-charged and politicized: "*Catcher* likewise supplied not only the rationale for the antiwar, anti-regimentation movements of the sixties and seventies but provided the anti-ideological basis for many of the actual novels about Vietnam."³⁴

The 1960s mavericks ("the highly sensitive, the tormented") who would brand social injustice as itself obscene were, according to Charles Reich, real-life versions of what Holden had groped toward becoming. Salinger's protagonist may be too young, or too rich, to bestir himself outward. But he was "a fictional version of the first young precursors of Consciousness III. Perhaps there was always a bit of Consciousness III in every teenager, but normally it quickly vanished. Holden sees through the established world: they are phonies and he is merciless in his honesty. But what was someone like Holden to do? A subculture of 'beats' grew up, and a beatnik world flourished briefly, but for most people it represented only another dead end," Reich commented. "Other Holdens might reject the legal profession and try teaching literature or writing instead, letting their hair grow a little bit longer as well. But they remained separated individuals, usually ones from affluent but unhappy, tortured family backgrounds, and their differences with society were paid for by isolation." In making America more green, Holden was portrayed as an avatar of "subterranean awareness."³⁵

³³Carol and Richard Ohmann, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (Autumn 1976): 34-36.

³⁴John Seelye, "Holden in the Museum," in *New Essays*, pp. 24, 32.

³⁵Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 222-23.

Daniel Isaacson also reads the novel as seeding later revolt. The narrator of E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, published exactly two decades after *The Catcher in the Rye*, even echoes Holden in self-consciously repudiating Dickens's contribution to Con II: "Let's see, what other David Copperfield kind of crap" should he tell you? But the personal quickly becomes political, when Daniel insists that "the Trustees of Ohio State were right in 1956 when they canned the English instructor for assigning *Catcher in the Rye* to his freshman class. They knew there is no qualitative difference between the kid who thinks it's funny to fart in chapel, and Che Guevara. They knew then Holden Caulfield would found SDS."³⁶

Of course Daniel thinks of himself as an outcast and is eager to re-establish and legitimate his radical lineage, and so his assumption that the trustees might have been shrewd enough to foresee guerrillas in the mist must be treated with skepticism. But consider Tom Hayden, a founder of Students for a Democratic Society (and in the 1950s a parishioner of Father Charles Coughlin in Royal Oak, Michigan). As a teenager Hayden had considered Salinger's protagonist (along with novelist Jack Kerouac and actor James Dean) an "alternative cultural model." "The life crises they personified spawned . . . political activism," which some who had been adolescents in the 1950s found liberating. Hayden remembers being touched not only by Holden's assault on the "phonies" and conformists but by his "caring side," his sympathy for "underdogs and innocents." The very "attempt to be gentle and humane . . . makes Holden a loser in the 'game' of life. Unable to be the kind of man required by prep schools and corporations," Salinger's protagonist could find no exit within American society. Undefiant and confused, Holden nevertheless served as "the first image of middle-class youth growing up absurd," which Hayden would situate at the psychological center of the Port Huron Statement.³⁷

³⁶E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 95.

³⁷Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 8-9, 17-18.

The dynamism inherent in youthful revolt, one historian has claimed, can best be defined as “a mystique . . . that fused elements of Marlon Brando’s role in *The Wild One*, James Dean’s portrayal in *Rebel without a Cause*, J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, the rebels of *Blackboard Jungle*, and the driving energy and aggressive sexuality of the new heroes of rock ‘n’ roll into a single image. The mystique emphasized a hunger for authenticity and sensitivity.” But something is askew here, for Holden is too young to have felt the Dionysian effects of rock ‘n’ roll, which erupted about three years after he left Pencey Prep. A “sex maniac” only in his head, he hardly represents “aggressive sexuality” either. *The Wild One*, *Rebel without a Cause*, and *Blackboard Jungle* are “god-dam movies,” which Holden professes to hate, because “they can ruin you. I’m not kidding” (p. 136). His own tastes are emphatically literary, ranging from *The Great Gatsby* and *Out of Africa* to Thomas Hardy and Ring Lardner. Even if the bland official ethos of the 1950s ultimately failed to repress the rambunctious energies the popular arts were about to unleash, Roland Marchand understands that the “mystique” he has identified would not be easily radicalized. Indeed, it could be tamed. Conservative consolidation was a more predictable outcome: “If the problems of a society are embedded in its social structure and are insulated from change by layers of ideological tradition, popular culture is an unlikely source of remedy. It is far more likely to serve needs for diversion and transitory compensation . . . [and] solace.”³⁸ Such dynamism could not be politicized.

The deeper flaw with interpreting *The Catcher in the Rye* as a harbinger of revolt is the aura of passivity that pervades the novel. Alienation does not always lead to, and can remain the antonym of, action. Salinger’s own sensibility was definitively pre- (or anti-) Sixties. His “conviction that our inner lives

³⁸Roland Marchand, “Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion: American Popular Culture, 1945–1960,” in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions, 1945–1960*, ed. Robert H. Bremner and Gary W. Reichard (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), pp. 179, 181–82.

greatly matter," John Updike observed in 1961, "peculiarly qualifies him to sing of an America, where, for most of us, there seems little to do but to feel. Introversion, perhaps, has been forced upon history" rather than the other way around. Therefore "an age of nuance, of ambiguous gestures and psychological jockeying" could account for the popularity of Salinger's work.³⁹

Describing Holden as "a misfit in society because he refuses to adjust" and because he lacks the self-discipline to cultivate privacy, one young literary critic of the fifties was struck by "the quixotic futility" of the protagonist's "outrage" at all the planet's obscenities, by his isolation. Holden seems to have sat for psychologist Kenneth Keniston's portrait of uncommitted youth: those who have the most to live for but find no one to look up to; those who are the most economically and socially advantaged but feel the deepest pangs of alienation.⁴⁰ Jack Newfield ('60) was a charter member of SDS but remembers Hunter College as mired in an apathy "no public question seemed to touch." His fellow students "were bereft of passions, of dreams, of gods. . . . And their *Zeitgeist*—J. D. Salinger—stood for a total withdrawal from reality into the womb of childhood, innocence, and mystical Zen." Holden's creator, evidently, had captured the spirit of the Silent Generation.⁴¹

It may not be accidental that David Riesman, whose most famous book was a veritable touchstone of social analysis in the era, assigned *The Catcher in the Rye* in his Harvard sociology course on Character and Social Structure in the United States. He did so "perhaps," a *Time* reporter speculated, "because every campus has its lonely crowd of imitation Holdens." Indeed, Holden demonstrates the characteristics of anomie,

³⁹John Updike, "Franny and Zooey," in *Salinger: A Portrait*, pp. 58–59.

⁴⁰Paul Levine, "J. D. Salinger: The Development of a Misfit Hero," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 4 (October 1958): 97, reprinted in *If You Really Want to Know: A Catcher Casebook*, ed. Malcolm M. Marsden (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1963), p. 48; and "The Fiction of the Fifties: Alienation and Beyond," in *America in the Fifties*, ed. Anne R. Claus (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1978), pp. 46–49; Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), pp. 7–8.

⁴¹Jack Newfield, *A Prophetic Minority* (New York: Signet, 1967), pp. 28–29.

which is associated with “ruleless” and “ungoverned” conduct, that Riesman had described in *The Lonely Crowd*; the anomic are “virtually synonymous with [the] maladjusted.” Though Salinger’s narrator does not quite exhibit “the lack of emotion and emptiness of expression” by which “the ambulatory patients of modern culture” can be recognized, he does display a “vehement hatred of institutional confines” that was bound to make his peers (if not his psychoanalyst) uneasy.⁴² One reviewer, in true Fifties fashion, even blamed Holden himself for his loneliness, “because he has shut himself away from the normal activities of boyhood, games, the outdoors, friendship.”⁴³ It is true that Holden hates schools like Pencey Prep, where “you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques” (p. 170). But Holden remains confined to his era, unable to connect the dots from those cliques to a larger society that might merit some rearrangement. Nor does the novel expand the reader’s horizons beyond those of the narrator; it does not get from pathos to indignation.

For *The Catcher in the Rye* is utterly apolitical—unlike its only rival in arousing the ire of conservative parents. Steinbeck’s fiction directs the attention of susceptible young readers to exploitation of the weak and the abuse of power. But a serious critique of capitalism would not be found in Salinger’s text even if a full field investigation were ordered. Certainly Holden’s fantasy of secluding himself in a cabin in the woods is scarcely a prescription for social activism: “I’d pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they’d have to write it on a piece

⁴²[Skow,] “Invisible Man,” in *Salinger: A Portrait*, p. 5; David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, abr. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), pp. 278–82; French, *Salinger, Revisited*, pp. 57–58; James Lundquist, *J. D. Salinger* (New York: Ungar, 1979), pp. 65–67.

⁴³T. Morris Longstreth, “New Novels in the News,” in *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 July 1951, p. 7, reprinted in *If You Really Want to Know*, p. 6.

of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life" (pp. 257-58). Such passages will hardly alarm those wishing to repudiate or erase the 1960s, which is why *The Catcher in the Rye* does not belong to the history of dissidence.

Growing Up Absurd (1960) sports a title and a perspective that Holden might have appreciated, but Paul Goodman does not mention the novel. Published at the end of the tumultuous, unpredictable decade, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (which *Newsweek* dubbed "the best guide yet published to the meaning . . . of youthful dissent") likewise fails to mention Salinger, though Holden certainly personifies (or anticipates) "the ethos of disaffiliation that is fiercely obnoxious to the adult society." In 1962 the editor of a collection of critical essays on Salinger—the future editor-in-chief of *Time*—found American campuses innocent of activism: "'Student riots' are a familiar and significant factor in European politics. The phenomenon has no equivalent in the United States."⁴⁴ That generalization would soon be falsified. But it should be noted that authors who have fathomed how the 1950s became the 1960s (like Morris Dickstein, Fred Inglis, Maurice Isserman, James Miller) ignore the impact of Salinger's novel.

Because any reading of the novel as a prefiguration of the 1960s is ultimately so unpersuasive, an over-reaction has set in. Alan Nadel, for example, has fashioned Holden into a Cold Warrior, junior division. "Donning his red hunting hat, he attempts to become the good Red-hunter, ferreting out the phonies and the subversives, but in so doing he emulates the bad Red-hunters," Nadel has written. "Uncovering duplicity was the theme of the day," he adds, so that "in thinking constantly about who or what was phony, Caulfield was doing no more than following the instructions of J. Edgar Hoover, the California Board of Regents, *The Nation* [*sic*], the Smith Act,

⁴⁴Robert A. Gross, review of *Making of a Counter Culture*, in *Newsweek*, 15 September 1969, p. 98; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1969), p. 174n; Grunwald, intro. to *Salinger: A Portrait*, p. xxx.

and the Hollywood Ten. . . . Each citizen was potentially both the threat and the threatened." After all, hadn't Gary Cooper, testifying before HUAC, defined Communism as something that was not "on the level"? Nadel equates Caulfield's "disdain for Hollywood" with HUAC's, nor could the young prostitute's mention of Melvyn Douglas have been accidental—since Congressman Richard Nixon had run against Helen Gahagan Douglas, and her husband was himself "a prominent Hollywood liberal." Nadel concludes that "the solution to Caulfield's dilemma becomes renouncing speech itself." Having named names, he realizes: "I sort of *miss* everybody I told about. . . . It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything," he advises; that is, don't be an informer. "If you do, you start missing everybody" (pp. 276–77). The narrator "spoke for the cold war HUAC witness," Nadel argued, "expressing existential angst over the nature and meaning of his 'testimony.'"⁴⁵ Such an interpretation is far-fetched: Holden is no more interested in politics than his creator, and he's considerably less interested in sanctioning conformity than were the Red-hunters.

Citizens who abhor the 1960s commonly deplore one of its most prominent legacies: the fragmentation into "identity politics," the loss of civic cohesion. Those worrying over this sin also will not find it in Salinger's book, which promotes no class consciousness, racial consciousness, or ethnic consciousness of any sort. Sol Salinger had strayed so far from Judaism that he became an importer of hams and cheeses;⁴⁶ and his son left no recognizably Jewish imprint on his fiction. Nor does his novel evoke the special plight of young women and girls. That omission would be rectified about two generations later, when Eve Horowitz's first novel appeared. Her young narrator and protagonist is not only female but emphatically Jewish, and she longs to meet her own Holden Caulfield. Jane Singer recalls: "I

⁴⁵Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 71, 75, 79, 86, 181; "Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry," in *Thirty Years of Treason*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 149.

⁴⁶"The Complete J. D. Salinger," *Esquire*, December 1981, p. 58; Hamilton, *In Search of Salinger*, pp. 13–14.

hadn't known any males who were as depressed as I was in high school, except for maybe Holden Caulfield, and I didn't really know him." As she's packing to leave Cleveland for Oberlin College, she muses, "besides clothes and shampoo and *The Catcher in the Rye*, I couldn't think of anything else to bring."⁴⁷ In her account of growing up female, Horowitz may have wanted to correct the imbalance David Riesman identified in 1961, when, attempting to explain the United States to a Japanese audience, he had commented on the inscrutable popularity of Salinger's novel: "Boys are frustrated because they aren't cowboys, and girls are frustrated because they aren't boys." The sociologist noted that "women have been the audience for American fiction and for movies. There are no girls' stories comparable to *Catcher in the Rye*. Yet girls can adapt themselves and identify with such a book, while a boy can't so easily identify with a girl."⁴⁸ In the literary marketplace, Riesman speculated, readers aren't turned off or away if the central characters are male but only if they are female. How many Boy Scouts and Explorer Scouts have been moved by reading *The Bell Jar*?

The Curse of Culture

Another way to understand the power of Salinger's novel to generate controversy is to recognize its vulnerability to moralistic criticism. From wherever the source—call it Puritanism, or puritanism, or Victorianism—there persists a tradition of imposing religious standards upon art or of rejecting works of the imagination because they violate conventional ethical codes. According to this legacy, books are neither good nor bad without "for you" being added as a criterion of judgment. This entwining of the aesthetic and the moralistic was obvious as prize committees struggled with the terms of Joseph Pulitzer's instructions that the novels to be honored in his name "shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life." But until

⁴⁷Eve Horowitz, *Plain Jane* (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 52, 200, 230.

⁴⁸David Riesman and Evelyn Thompson Riesman, *Conversations in Japan: Modernization, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), p. 171.

1927, the novels selected more accurately conveyed “the wholesome atmosphere of American life.”⁴⁹ That eliminated Dreiser. Had the subtle revision of Pulitzer’s own intentions not been overturned, virtually all great writers would have been categorically excluded. Nabokov comes quickly to mind. His most famous novel was given to the good family man Adolf Eichmann, then imprisoned in Israel, but was returned after two days with an indignant rejection: “*Das ist aber ein sehr unerfreuliches Buch*”—quite an unwholesome book. *Lolita* is narrated from the viewpoint of an adult, a pervert whose ornate vocabulary made the novel unintelligible to young readers, and so censors passed it by to target *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is a measure of Salinger’s stature among other writers that, though famously dismissive of many literary giants, Nabokov wrote privately of his fellow *New Yorker* contributor: “I do admire him very much.”⁵⁰

But the reviewer for *The Christian Science Monitor* did not: *The Catcher in the Rye* “is not fit for children to read”; its central character is “preposterous, profane, and pathetic beyond belief.” Too many young readers might even want to emulate Holden, “as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intention.”⁵¹ Here was an early sign of trouble. Nor was respectability enhanced by the novel’s first appearance in paperback, for it was offered as pulp fiction, a genre that beckoned with promises of illicit pleasure. The common 1950s practice of issuing serious books in pulp meant that “dozens of classic novels appeared in packages that were cartoonish, sordid or merely absurd.” The aim of such marketing, Julie Lasky has suggested, was to grab “the attention of impulse shoppers in drugstores and bus depots; slogans jammed across the four-inch

⁴⁹John Hohenberg, *The Pulitzer Prizes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 19, 55–56.

⁵⁰Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 49; Vladimir Nabokov to John Leonard, 29 September 1971, in Nabokov’s *Selected Letters, 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 492.

⁵¹Longstreth, “New Novels,” pp. 5–6.

width of paperbound covers compressed the nuances of prizewinning authors into exaggerated come-ons." The 1953 paperback edition of Salinger's novel, for example, assured buyers that "this unusual book may shock you . . . but you will never forget it." The illustration on the cover depicted a prostitute standing near Holden and may have served as the only means by which some citizens judged the book. The cover so offended the author that it contributed to his move to Bantam when his contract with Signet expired. By then, the pulping of classics had largely ended in the wake of hearings by the House of Representatives' Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials. But the availability of such cheap editions of books ranging from the serious to the lurid drew the curiosity of censors as well as bargain-hunters. The vulnerability of Salinger's novel testified to the aptness of Walter Lippmann's generalization that censorship "is actually applied in proportion to the vividness, the directness, and the intelligibility of the medium which circulates the subversive idea." Movie screens, he wrote in 1927, therefore tend to be more censored than the stage, which is more censored than newspapers and magazines. But "the novel is even freer than the press today because it is an even denser medium of expression."⁵² At least that was the case until the paperback revolution facilitated the expansion of the syllabus.

Of course, the paperback revolution was not the only cultural shift affecting the reception of the novel. The career of *The Catcher in the Rye* is virtually synchronous with the Cold War, and Holden Caulfield takes a stand of sorts: he calls himself "a pacifist" (p. 59). For men slightly older than Holden in 1949–50, military conscription was more or less universal, yet he predicts that "it'd drive me crazy if I had to be in the Army. . . . I swear if there's ever another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad. I wouldn't object." Indeed he goes further: "I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit

⁵²Julie Lasky, "Savage Puritans Ripped Her Bodice," *New York Times Book Review*, 12 November 1995, p. 67; Walter Lippmann, "The Nature of the Battle over Censorship" (1927), in *Men of Destiny* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970), pp. 100–102.

right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will" (pp. 182, 183). Barely a decade later, Stanley Kubrick's pitch-black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) would confront nuclear terror by showing Major "King" Kong (Slim Pickens) doing precisely what Holden vows he will step forward to do. With such images in mind, one interpreter has thus boldly claimed that "the fear of nuclear holocaust, not the fear of four-letter words[,] sparked controversy about *The Catcher in the Rye*."⁵³

Salinger's novel may thus also be about history veering out of control, about the abyss into which parents could no longer prevent their offspring from staring, about the impotence to which a can-do people was unaccustomed. "The lack of faith in the American character expressed in the *Catcher* controversies," Professor Pamela Steinle has argued, "is rooted not in doubts about the strength of adolescent Americans' character but in recognition of the powerlessness of American adults—as parents, professionals and community leaders—to provide a genuine sense of the future for the adolescents in their charge." According to Steinle, the novel indicts "adult apathy and complicity in the construction of a social reality in which the American character cannot develop in any meaningful sense beyond adolescence." Nor does the novel warrant any hope that the condition can be remedied. The story is, after all, told from a sanitarium in California—a grim terminus given the common belief that the West offers a second chance. No wonder, then, that John Seelye, who ended his own revised version of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with Huck's bleakest pessimism ("I didn't much care if the goddamn sun never come up again"), could read Salinger's book "as a lengthy suicide note with a blank space at the end to sign your name."⁵⁴

The advantage of Steinle's argument is that she situates the controversy over *The Catcher in the Rye* where it actually took place, which is less in the pages of *Ramparts* than at school board meetings. In such settings, the novel was branded by par-

⁵³Steinle, "If a Body," p. 136.

⁵⁴Steinle, "If a Body," p. 136; Seelye, "Holden in the Museum," p. 29, and *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 339.

ents as a threat to their control and heralded by teachers as a measure of their professional autonomy and authority. But the disadvantage of Steinle's view is the scarcity of direct evidence that nuclear fears fueled the debate. Neither those who condemned *The Catcher in the Rye* nor its defenders made the specter of atomic catastrophe pivotal. Neither the moral nor the literary disputes were ventilated in such terms. Compared to Holden's far more pronounced resistance to maturation, compared to more immediate targets of his scorn, the Bomb hardly registered as a concern among objections to the novel.

But if "the essence of censorship," according to Lippmann, is "not to suppress subversive ideas as such, but to withhold them from those who are young or unprivileged or otherwise undependable,"⁵⁵ then Steinle's emphasis upon parental assertion of authority is not misplaced. In a more class-conscious society, the Old Bailey prosecutor of the publisher of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* could ask in his opening address to the jury, in 1960: "Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?"⁵⁶ But in the United States, overt conflicts are more likely to take generational form; and the first of Lippmann's categories deserves to be highlighted. Some of the books that have aroused the greatest ire place children at the center, like Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, and of course *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; and despite the aura of "cuteness" hovering over Salinger's work, it emitted danger by striking at the most vulnerable spot in the hearts of parents. Nor could it have escaped the attention of alert readers that Holden's emotional affiliations are horizontal rather than vertical. His father, a corporate lawyer, is absent from the scene; and his mother is present only as a voice speaking from a dark room. The only relative whom the reader meets is Phoebe, the younger sister (and a mini-Holden).⁵⁷

⁵⁵Lippmann, "Nature of the Battle over Censorship," p. 99.

⁵⁶Quoted by Charles Rembar, in *The End of Obscenity* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 156.

⁵⁷The absenteeism of Holden's parents is noted perceptively by Jonathan Baumbach, in *The Landscape of Nightmare* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 65.

The contributor's note Salinger submitted to *Harper's* in 1946 was his credo: "I almost always write about very young people";⁵⁸ and the directness with which he spoke to them had much to do with his appeal—and with the anxiety that his literary intervention provoked in the internecine battle between generations. The effectiveness of his empathy posed a challenge to parents who invoked their right to be custodians of the curriculum, and the "legions of decency" may have sensed "a unique seductive power" which Salinger's biographer claims *The Catcher in the Rye* exudes. Even if the less sensitive or eccentric of its young readers might not try to assume Holden's persona, at least teenagers could imitate his lingo. A book that elicits such proprietary interest—succeeding cohorts believing in a special access to Salinger's meaning—was bound to arouse some suspicion that conventional authority was being outflanked.⁵⁹ Salinger's adroit fidelity to the feelings and experiences of his protagonist was what made the novel so tempting a target. Perhaps *The Catcher in the Rye* has been banned precisely because it is so cherished; because it is so easily loved, some citizens love to hate it.

Steinle has closely examined the local controversies that erupted over the book in Alabama, Virginia, New Mexico, and California as well as the debates conducted in such publications as the *PTA Magazine* and the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* of the American Library Association. She discovered a "division . . . over whether to prepare adolescents for or to protect them from adult disillusionment. . . . In the postwar period . . . recognition of the increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social experience has become unavoidable, and it is precisely this cultural dissonance that is highlighted by Salinger's novel."⁶⁰ Its literary value got lost in the assertion of family values, in a campaign that must

⁵⁸Quoted by Sanford Pinsker, in *Bearing the Bad News: Contemporary American Literature and Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), p. 29.

⁵⁹Hamilton, *In Search of Salinger*, p. 4; Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," p. 56.

⁶⁰Steinle, "If a Body," p. 131.

be classified as reactionary. "They say it describes reality," a parent in Boron, California, announced. "I say let's back up from reality. Let's go backwards. Let's go back to when we didn't have an immoral society."⁶¹ When so idyllic a state existed was not specified, but what is evident is the element of anti-intellectualism that the struggle against permissiveness entailed. Here some of the parents were joined by Leonard Hall, the school superintendent of Bay County, Florida, who warned in 1987 against assigning books that were not state-approved because, he sagely opined, reading "is where you get ideas from."⁶²

Attempts at vindication were occasionally made on the same playing field that censors themselves chose. Though Holden labels himself "sort of an atheist" (p. 130), he could be praised as a saint, if admittedly a picaresque one. One educator discerned in the protagonist a diamond in the rough: "He befriends the friendless. He respects those who are humble, loyal, and kind. He demonstrates a strong love for his family" (or for Phoebe anyway). Besides enacting such New Testament teachings, "he abhors hypocrisy. He values sex that comes from caring for another person and rejects its sordidness. And, finally, he wants to be a responsible member of society, to guide and protect those younger than he."⁶³ But a character witness is not the same as a literary critic, and such conflation seems to have gained little traction when the right of English teachers to make up reading lists was contested. If Holden's defense rested on a sanitized version of his character, then the implication was that assigned books with less morally meritorious protagonists might be subject to parental veto. Such a defense also assumed that disgruntled parents were themselves exegetes who had simply misread a text, that community conflicts could be resolved by more sub-

⁶¹Quoted by Nat Hentoff, in *Free Speech for Me—But Not for Thee: How the American Left and Right Relentlessly Censor Each Other* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 374–75.

⁶²Quoted by Joan DelFattore, in *What Johnny Shouldn't Read: Textbook Censorship in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 109.

⁶³June Edwards, "Censorship in the Schools: What's Moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*?" *English Journal* 72 (April 1983): 42.

tle interpretations. There is no reason to believe, however, that the towns where the novel was banned or challenged overlapped with maps of misreading. But such communities *were* places where parents tried to gain control of the curriculum, which is why *The Catcher in the Rye* would still have been proscribed even had it been re-read as a book of virtues.

For the objections that were most frequently raised were directed at the novelist's apparent desire to capture profuse adolescent profanity in the worst way. In the *Catholic World*, reviewer Riley Hughes disliked the narrator's "excessive use of amateur swearing and coarse language," which made his character simply "monotonous."⁶⁴ According to one angry parent's tabulation, 237 instances of "goddamn," 58 uses of the synonym for a person of illegitimate birth, 31 "Chrissakes," and one incident of flatulence constituted what was wrong with Salinger's book. Though blasphemy is not a crime, *The Catcher in the Rye* "uses the Lord's name in vain two hundred times," an opponent in Boron asserted—"enough [times] to ban it right there."⁶⁵ The statistics are admittedly not consistent. But it is incontestable that the text contains six examples of "fuck" or "fuck you," though here Holden is actually allied with the censorious parents, since he does not swear with this four-letter word himself but instead tries to efface it from walls. He's indignant that children should be subjected to such graffiti. Upon seeing the word even in the Egyptian tomb room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, however, Holden achieves a melancholy and mature insight that such offenses to dignity cannot really be expunged from the world: "You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (p. 264).⁶⁶

What happened to *The Catcher in the Rye* wasn't always nice and peaceful because it took a linguistic turn. Though historians

⁶⁴Quoted by Salzman, in intro. to *New Essays*, pp. 5–6; Edward P. J. Corbett, "Raise High the Barriers, Censors," *America*, 7 January 1961, pp. 441–42, reprinted in *If You Really Want to Know*, pp. 68–70.

⁶⁵Riley Hughes, "New Novels," *Catholic World*, November 1951, p. 154, reprinted in *Holden Caulfield*, p. 8; Moss, "Catcher Comes of Age," p. 56; Steinle, "If a Body," p. 129; Quindlen, "Don't Read This," p. 23; Hentoff, *Free Speech for Me*, pp. 374–75.

⁶⁶French, *Salinger, Revisited*, p. 42.

are fond of defining virtually every era as one of transition, it does make sense to locate the publication of Salinger's novel on the cusp of change. The novel benefited from the loosening of tongues that the Second World War sanctioned, yet the profanity in which Holden indulges still looked conspicuous before the 1960s. Salinger thus helped to accelerate the trend toward greater freedom for writers but found himself the target of those offended by the adolescent vernacular still rarely enough recorded in print. During the Second World War, the Production Code had been slightly relaxed for *We Are the Marines*. This 1943 *March of Time* documentary was permitted to use mild expletives like "damn" "under stress of battle conditions." Professor Thomas Doherty adds that, "in the most ridiculed example of the Code's tender ears, Noel Coward's *In Which We Serve* (1942), a British import, was held up from American release for seventeen words: ten 'damns,' two 'hells,' two 'Gods,' two 'bastards,' and one 'lousy.'"

Only three years before publication of Salinger's novel, homophonic language was inserted into Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* at the suggestion of his cousin, Charles Rembar. A crackerjack First Amendment attorney who would later represent such clients as Fanny Hill and Constance Chatterley, Rembar proposed the substitution of *fug* (as in "Fug you. Fug the goddam gun") partly because the president of the house publishing the novel feared his own mother's reaction. The U.S. Information Agency was nevertheless unpersuaded and banned Mailer's book from its overseas libraries. As late as 1952, the revised edition of *Webster's Unabridged* offered a simple but opaque definition of masturbation as "onanism; self-pollution."⁶⁷ The next year President Eisenhower delivered a celebrated plea at Dartmouth College: "Don't join the book-burners. . . . Don't be afraid to go into your library and read every book." His amendment is less cited—"as long as that doc-

⁶⁷Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 54, 56; Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Empire Books, 1982), pp. 90-93; Rembar, *End of Obscenity*, p. 17n; Noel Perrin, *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 251.

ument does not offend our own ideas of decency." Though the war in which Mailer and Salinger fought allowed some indecorous terms to go public, the 1960 Presidential debates included the spectacle of Nixon seeking to trump another ex-sailor by promising the electorate—after Harry Truman's salty lapses—to continue Ike's restoration of "decency and, frankly, good language" in the White House.⁶⁸

In this particular war of words, Salinger was conscripted into a cause for which he was no more suited than any other. If he was affiliated with any institution at all, it was the *New Yorker*, which initially published most of his *Nine Stories* as well as the substance of his two subsequent books. In that magazine even the mildest profanity was strictly forbidden, and editorial prudishness would have spiked publication of excerpts from the final version of what became his most admired work. It may be plausible, as one scholar circling the text has noted, that "the radical nature of Salinger's portrayal of disappointment with American society, so much like Twain's in *Huck Finn*, was probably as much of the reason that *Catcher* (like *Huck*) was banned from schools and colleges as were the few curse words around which the battle was publicly fought."⁶⁹ But such ideological objections to Salinger's novel were rarely raised, much less articulated with any cogency; and therefore no historian of the reception of this book should minimize the salience of those "few curse words."

Could *The Catcher in the Rye* have avoided the turbulent pool into which it was so often sucked? Could the novel have been rescued from primitive detractors and retained an even more secure status in the public school curriculum? One compromise was never considered. It is the solution that Noah Webster commonly applied to dictionaries and spelling books,

⁶⁸Quoted by Rembar, in *End of Obscenity*, p. 7; Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), p. 123; "The Third Debate," 13 October 1960, in *The Great Debates: Background, Perspective, Effects*, ed. Sidney Kraus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 397.

⁶⁹Gerald Rosen, "A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*," *American Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1977): 548, 557–58.

that Emerson recommended to Whitman for *Leaves of Grass*, and that Lewis Carroll intended to enact with a volume entitled *The Girl's Own Shakespeare*: expurgation. Had Holden's lingo been sanitized in accordance with the legacy of Dr. Thomas Bowdler, the moral (or moralistic) resistance to Salinger's novel would have evaporated. Bowdlerization constitutes what its leading student has called "literary slum clearance," but it also cordons off the censors. Of course Holden would not have been Holden with expletives deleted. The guileless integrity of his language makes him so memorable and therefore the novel so distinctive. Richard Watson Gilder had inflicted the kindest cuts of all on Huck's talk,⁷⁰ but by the 1950s no expurgators survived to spare Holden from the animosity he incurred. Such an explanation may be too obvious and all, if you really want to know. It's so simple it kills me, for Chrissake. But I really believe it's the best explanation. I really do.

⁷⁰Perrin, *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*, pp. 8, 105, 163, 167–72, 212, 220.

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