The Catcher in the Rye

By J. D. Salinger

Reviewed for The Book Club by Pat Goss

April 2, 2010

The first things you probably want to know are where J. D. Salinger and I were born, how our parents were occupied and all before they had us, all that David Copperfield crap, why he wrote this book, why I read it, and why it has sold sixty million copies. I guess I have to go into that since I chose this book for the club, although I wonder if blowing it out my ass about books written by dead guys, even guys who have not been dead very long, is about the phoniest thing I do.

Well, I was in American history class in the eleventh grade. They had this bright idea that smart kids could get cooties or something if they were in classes with dumb kids, so they had different levels of classes for the stuff they thought was important, like English and math and science. They didn’t think history was important, so they threw us all together in the same classes and made the classes really big. What was crazy was that old Mrs. Evans, who taught American history, was about the best teacher I ever had. Anyway, I sat in front of Milton Gosvenor because we started out being seated alphabetically, and Milton sat behind me just like he did in homeroom for three years. Old Milton’s family did not have much money, and he did not have the best clothes, and his and his brother Billy worked in the cafeteria, where my Aunt Mildred was the dietitian. Mrs. Evans knew we would not do any homework during the Christmas holidays so the day school let out for Christmas, she told us that our only assignment was to come back to school after Christmas with two sharpened pencils. I went to the Boys’ Club to play basketball almost every day during the holidays, and Milton was always there. I think he lived within walking distance. When he saw me the first time, he asked if I had done my history homework. I told him I would. The next day he asked me if I had done my homework, and when I told him I would, he pulled two sharpened pencils out of his pocket. That just about killed me.

Milton got an award at the senior honors assembly for never missing a day of school in twelve years. When he walked across the stage, he waved at everybody and was just as happy as the football players who got special letters for winning the state championship and the ones who got all the phony academic awards. Milton never looked that healthy, so he probably came to school sick a lot. He was just about the first person in our class to die, except Kathy Gault, who had had diabetes all along and never told anyone, and this really pretty girl I really never knew whose boy friend beat her up and she died and my two friends who were killed in Vietnam.

The girl who sat in front of me was Merilee Orsini, who was a senior. We really did not have to sit in alphabetical order once old Mrs. Evans got to know everybody, but Milton was comfortable sitting behind me because of homeroom and all. Merilee sat in front on me because she liked me for some reason, even though I didn’t live in Lakewood or Park Hill, where she did. One of those neighborhoods. She was one of the few seniors in the class, and I think she thought it was beneath her to sit in front of most of the juniors in the class, except me, for some reason. But she was not a phony at all. She was not really pretty but she was okay. I was sort of a sex
maniac then, so being okay was great. She wore pretty short shirts and penny loafers without hose or socks. She moved away after she graduated. Some of her family is still here, and I ran into her at a Shipley’s donut store on Easter Sunday about fifteen years ago. She is the administrator of some nursing homes in Louisville, Kentucky. One day in history class she handed me this book and said, “Read this. Your sorta remind me of this guy.”

That was the first of at least a dozen paperback copies of The Catcher in the Rye that I have owned or had given to me over the intervening forty-five years. The faux Salinger introduction is finished, and the review begins.

Holden is the narrator. He tells us he is going to tell us about this madman stuff that happened to him the previous Christmas before he got run down and had to come out here (California) and take it easy. He also tells us he had tests for t.b.

On the Saturday before Christmas break is to begin the following Wednesday, Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year-old student at Pencey Prep who has been told not to come back after Christmas because he is flunking every subject except English, begins a two-day journey and takes us along. He is the manager of the fencing team, but he manages to lose the team’s foils on a subway in New York City. He visits his elderly history teacher, who is concerned enough about this failing student to want to try to say something helpful. He goes back to the dorm, where we meet Ackley, a mess who lives in an adjoining room, and Holden’s roommate Stradlater, a handsome guy who is a basketball star and who has a date with Jane Gallagher, a girl Holden knows from a summer spent next door to her family in Maine. Stradlater does not know her first name. He asks Holden to write a composition for him. Holden writes one about his dead brothers Allie’s baseball glove, which Holden has, in which Allie had written poems. Ackley and Mal Brossard and Holden go into town and eat hamburgers and play pinball. Holden and Stradlater scuffle because Stradlater does not like the composition and because Holden suspects he gave Jane the business and because he probably did not give her Holden’s regards.

Holden decides to leave for New York that night after he cannot make a connection with Ackley. He walks to the train station. On the train he meets the mother of a classmate, asks her to have a drink with him (the club car is closed), and tells her a story about what a great guy her dopey son is and that Holden is going home early to have an inconsequential brain tumor removed in about two minutes.

Holden takes a cab from Penn Station. He gives his home address and then has to ask the driver to take him to the Edmont Hotel, which requires a turn through Central Park. We know Holden is worried about where the ducks go when the pond in the park freezes, and he asks the cab driver about them and also asks him to have a drink with him. He goes to the bar at the Edmont, calls Faith Cavendish but cannot get her to come out, dances with three girls from Seattle and buys them drinks, goes downtown to Ernie’s, a jazz club his brother D. B. had taken him to, runs into an old girl friend of D. B.’s and her date, walks back to the Edmont, has the elevator operator, Maurice, send up a prostitute, with whom Holden only talks, and gets mugged by the elevator operator for an extra $5. Holden has told us what a sexy guy he is several times, but when he writes about the prostitute, he confessed to being a virgin. On the cab ride to Ernie’s, he asks the cabbie about the ducks. The cabbie is a fish expert.
Sunday morning he makes a date with Sally Hayes to go to a matinee, takes his bags to Grand Central, eats a hearty breakfast with some nuns, gives them some money, goes to Central Park to try to find his sister Phoebe, goes to the Biltmore to meet Sally under the clock, goes with her to a play with the Lunts, meets a phony friend of hers, goes ice-skating at Radio City with her at her suggestion, suggests to her that she take off with him, and then insults her.

He has been trying to call Jane Gallagher and tries again unsuccessfully. He calls a very smart guy he went to school with, Carl Luce, they agree to have a drink later, and he goes to a movie at Radio City. He and Luce insult one another, but even I could see that Luce was an ass. I’m not kidding. But he begs Luce not to go because he is lonesome. He gets drunk in the bar. He sober up a little and walks through Central Park to check on the ducks and to get home. He drops an breaks a record he has bought for Phoebe, “Little Shirley Beans.” He visits with Phoebe, who is furious with him for flunking out of another school. He goes to the apartment of Mr. Antolini and his wife. Mr. Antolini was his English teacher at one of his schools and now teaches at N. Y. U. Mr. Antolini has a seemingly appropriate conversation with him while Mr. Antolini gets drunk, offers some Polonius-like advice, and either does or does not make a pass at Holden.

The sun is coming up when Holden escapes the Antolinis’. He takes the subway to Grand Central, sleeps in the waiting room, and starts walking north. He tries to eat but cannot. As he walks, he notices how bad he feels. He leaves a note for Phoebe that he has decided to leave town that day on his sojourn to the West and asks her to meet him at the art museum so he can give back the money she gave him. She is late, and he helps two kids find the mummies and tells them about Egyptian mummification, a discourse that did not impress Mr. Spencer much. Phoebe shows up with her bags to accompany Holden on his trip. They argue when he tells her she cannot go, but he is able to convince her to go to the carousel at the zoo. He watches her ride, gets soaked when it rains and feels so damned happy watching her that he wants to cry.

We flash forward to what the critic Louis Menand has convinced me is a tuberculosis sanitorium in California, where D. B. visits. He didn’t know what to say when D. B. asked him how he felt about what had happened. He is sorry he told so many people – we readers, I suppose – what happened. But he misses almost everybody he told us about. He thinks telling the story made him miss them.

I have a few thoughts about Holden, and Salinger, and the book.

Salinger remarkably captures the voice of an intelligent, literary adolescent, but I think it is an oral voice. Making the narration flow so effortlessly is a great accomplishment. How did Salinger manage it? He used a number of repeated phrases that worked for different reasons. Holden assures us, and perhaps himself, of the accuracy or seriousness of his observations by saying “I’m not kidding…” or “it really was …” or “I have to admit …” Things Holden likes kill him. He tells us that Carl Luce had the largest vocabulary of any boy at Whooton. He wants to be sure we believe him, so he add, “They gave us a test.” He uses the wrong case of pronouns, using “I” for the objective case, and he uses odd word order at times: “I and Robert Tichener and Paul Campbell were chucking a football around …” Mr. Antolini tells Holden he does not want him
to grow up to be a person who hates people who make the case error we have heard Holden make throughout the book, Salinger’s little joke. And Holden exaggerates for effect at adolescents do.

When I read this book the first two or three times, I think I made the common mistake of seeing Holden as a perceptive, sensitive teen-ager driven over the edge by phony, insensitive, uncaring people and not seeing the other things going on. Holden is perceptive and sensitive, but there are other things as work. He has flunked out of another school, and his parents and Phoebe and D. B. will be disappointed or mad. The fantasy trips he pitches to Sally Hayes and Phoebe are plots to escape meeting the reality of his failure as much as to escape a phony world. He is still grieving the death of Allie, as his writing the composition about Allie’s glove demonstrates. He is lonely. He tries unsuccessfully to make connections with Ackley, Stradlater, cab drivers, a prostitute, three girls from Seattle, two nuns, Carl Luce, and Mr. Antolini. The connection he makes with Phoebe brings him in from the storm – or the rain – almost literally. He is depressed, and his behavior – not sleeping, not eating, drinking, and his frenetic activity – add to the depression. He almost cries when he leaves Pencey, and he is at the point of crying while he watches Phoebe in the carousel. Sally and Carl tell him he is talking too loud, and then Sally tells him he is whispering. We see him losing control. And he is physically ill. As I mentioned, Louis Menand, in his New Yorker article on the fiftieth anniversary of the book argued, convincingly to me, that the end of the book finds Holden in a tuberculosis sanitorium, not a mental hospital.

Holden is not a dummy. He has flunked out of several schools, but Mr. Antolini and Stradlater and the English teacher at Pencey all recognize his gifts as a writer. He talks unaffectedly and knowledgably to us and to other characters in the book about Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, The Great Gatsby, A Farewell to Arms, The Return of the Native, Grendel, Beowulf, and Ring Lardner. He knows Lunt and Fontanne and has seen Laurence Olivier in Hamlet. And is there no one in this room who does not agree with Holden that Mercutio is the best character in Romeo and Juliet.

Although this book is not just about Holden’s encounters with the phonies and posers in the world, it is about those encounters. What he says and does is perceptive and funny. And he also appreciates the humor of things he observes, beginning with his schoolmate’s cutting wind during a speech by the mortuary king. He tells one of the Seattle girls that she just missed seeing Gary Cooper, and she goes back to her friends and tells them she saw Gary Cooper. Sally’s fakey friend, D. B.’s girl friend’s handcrusher date, and the man who takes all the life out of the Rockettes’ dancing by describing it as “precision” are types we have met. Holden’s observations on the fly are too numerous to mention. Have you seen or heard a performance that was so studied and self-assured that it was lifeless, as Salinger describes Ernie’s playing the piano, the show the Lunts were in (though he gives them credit), and Olivier’s Hamlet?

Finally, for me, Holden’s recounting of sad and poignant events and circumstances are the essence of the boy – his concern for the ducks in winter, his schoolmate who committed suicide after being harassed and while wearing a sweater that he had borrowed from Holden, his roommate who had cheap luggage, the sort-of-poor family he followed down the street, hearing the boy sing “If a body catch a body coming through the rye,” his wanting to be the catcher in the rye who saves kids from going over the cliff, his almost always pointing out some redeeming
trait or talent of a person he has skewered, his wanting D. B. to keep writing terrific stories and not be a prostitute in Hollywood, his grief over the death of Allie, his delight in everything about Phoebe, and his missing everybody he has just written about.

Jerome David Salinger was born New Year’s Day, 1919. He had an older sister, Doris, who was for many years a buyer in the dress department at Bloomingdale’s. She died in 2001. Their father, Sol, was Jewish and in the food importing business. Sol’s father was a rabbi. J. D. and Doris’s mother was Marie Jillisch, who was of Irish descent but was born in Scotland. Mr. Salinger prospered, and the family moved from Harlem to West 82nd Street and then to Park Avenue.

J. D. was a poor, or at least uninterested student. He flunked out of the progressive McBurney School after two years and then went to Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania, a model for Pencey. He was the manager of the fencing team and the literary editor of the school yearbook.

He attended NYU for a brief period, less than a semester, and then in 1937 accompanied his father on a business trip to Europe to see if he would be interested in the family business. He was not. He attended Ursinus College in Pennsylvania for a term or so. He took a night class in writing at Columbia taught by Whit Burnett. He sold stories to Story, Esquire, Collier’s, and the Saturday Evening Post. In 1941 he sold “Slight Rebellion off Madison,” with Sally Hayes and Holden, to The New Yorker, but it did not publish the story until 1946.

He was drafted and served in the counter-intelligence corps of the Fourth Infantry Division. He landed on Utah Beach on D-Day and saw action at the Battle of the Bulge. His unit sustained high casualties throughout the fighting after D-Day. He was hospitalized for battle fatigue in 1945. He wrote a letter to Ernest Hemingway from that hospital, in Nurnberg, in 1946. They apparently had met earlier in the war. He did not want a psychiatric discharge and stayed in the army after he left the hospital and served until he got an honorable discharge.

He returned to New York and continued writing. He was something of a ladies’ man. In 1953 he met Claire Douglas, the daughter of an English art critic, when she was a nineteen-year-old student at Radcliffe, and they married two years later. They had a daughter, Margaret, born in 1955, and a son, Matthew, born in 1960. They divorced in 1966. Margaret wrote a memoir that was very critical of Salinger, but Matthew defended him. He had retreated from New York to a ninety-acre wooded hillside in Cornish, New Hampshire, in 1953 and lived there until his death. In the 1980s he married Colleen O’Neill, a nurse and the director of the Cornish town fair.

I am indebted to George Ackerman for guiding me to the Valley News, a weekly newspaper in the valley where Cornish is located. Articles about Salinger’s life in the valley were published in the newspaper. The residents of the town engaged in an unorganized but effective plan to protect his privacy. They directed folks looking for Salinger on wild goose chases. He was not quite the recluse we thought he was. He chatted with the UPS delivery man. He went to movies at Dartmouth, went to the library at Hanover, swam in Lake Runnemede, and attended Christmas parties thrown by the mother of special prosecutor Archibald Cox. He
shopped for food in Windsor, did his banking and picked up his mail there, and had coffee at a café. Until last year he was a regular at the Hartland Congregational Church’s roast beef suppers. He arrived early for the first seating and brought back issues of the New York Times to read while he waited. He tipped the floor staff generously.

He loaned money to a dairy farmer who did not have money to dig a new well. He bought milk from the farmer and learned that he often ran out of water in the summer, so Salinger loaned him money to dig a well so he would not have to haul water from town.

A young girl was in a bad accident that confined her to a distant hospital for two months. Her parents were poor and could not visit often. One day Salinger brought the girl’s boy friend’s mother for a visit and brought the young patient a chocolate frappe.

He was rude to a young woman who came to his house to announce an exhibit at a local museum; he called later to apologize, and they talked for twenty-five minutes.

A friend of Matthew Salinger went to sleepovers at the Salinger house and did not realize until years later that Salinger was anyone more than his friend’s quiet father who wore blue jeans.


The Catcher in the Rye was on The New York Times best seller list for twenty-nine weeks and peaked at number 4. Nine Stories made it to number 9. The other two collections went to number 1.