



# The Catcher in the Rye

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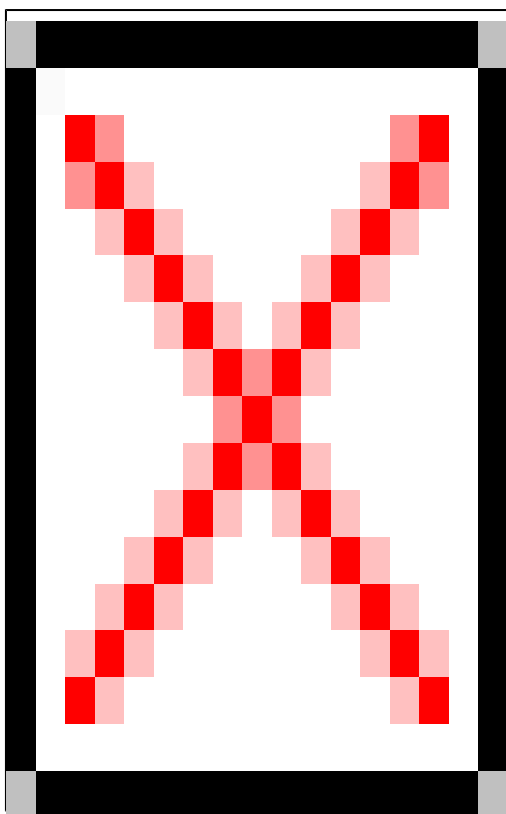
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**Clive Barnes** assesses the influence of Salinger's classic novel.



Post-war adolescent alienation was never so well depicted as in J D Salinger's best selling **The Catcher in the Rye**. Its hero, rebellious 16-year-old Holden Caulfield, has flunked school and must go home to tell his parents. But in the meantime he spends a weekend in New York where he finds everything 'phony'. Salinger died in January this year aged 91. How did his pioneering creation influence later teen fiction? **Clive Barnes** discusses.

In the recent obituaries of there were few acknowledgements of the part that **The Catcher in the Rye** has played in the shaping of writing for young adults in the last 50 years or so. That's perhaps not surprising, given that **Catcher** was published in 1951 and it was not for another 20 years that something like the voice of Holden Caulfield, Salinger's 16-year-old protagonist, appeared in books that were intended for young people.

**Catcher**, of course, was not published for teenagers, but was quickly adopted by them. What was so different about it? Well, partly it's there in the very first words - direct, colloquial, off-hand; and deliberately provocative: 'If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood

was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it. In the first place, that stuff bores me??

### **Use of the vernacular**

Holden's words belong to their own time and place: New York in the 1940s. The slang is now dated and mild. 'Goddam' and 'sonovabitch' are Holden's favourite curses; people are 'morons'; and places or events are 'crummy'. But the form of address, conversational and confiding, as if it were spoken rather than written, has been a template for many writers for young adults, and even those for children, who, avoiding conventional forms of literary expression and prescribed social behaviour, want to capture the way that young people think and talk and the particular moment they live in.

With Holden it expresses a specific personality, the kind of 'crazy, mixed up kid' that was to brood his way through popular culture for the next 30 years or so: outwardly dismissive, antagonistic, even violent at times, darkly humorous, troubled, lonely, vulnerable, and disturbed by hypocrisy and unfairness: think James Dean. And that influence remains strong. Even feisty Tracy Beaker, telling her own story in her own way, owes something to Holden.

If **Catcher** set the voice and sometimes the attitude of many protagonists of subsequent fiction for young adults, it could only suggest the semi-autonomous adolescent world which is another characteristic of later writing for young people. Holden is a loner, and he is part of a privileged New York set. Expelled from his private college, and playing truant in New York, he spends his time decrying the phoniness of adult life while trying, largely unsuccessfully, to get drunk and pick up girls in classy adult bars and night clubs.

It's in the films and music of the 1950s and 1960s that the sense of a separate (and almost classless) teenage world began to emerge, finally arriving in books for young adults with S E Hinton's **The Outsiders** (1967). Hinton's tale of teenage gang warfare in a mid-American city, told by one of the Greasers from the wrong side of the tracks, owes something to both **Catcher** and films like **Rebel Without a Cause** and **West Side Story**.

### **Adolescence as a subject**

Nevertheless, it was Salinger who first alerted writers to the potential of adolescence as a subject worthy of literary consideration. For Robert Cormier, maybe the grimmest of writers for young people, Salinger's take on adolescence as a time of leaving the protected circle of childhood and having to come to your own terms with life's confusing, and often painful, realities, was a 'door-opener': 'It made me see that adolescence could be something dramatic? a lacerating time.'

Hinton and Cormier were two of the most prominent of a group of writers in the United States who addressed themselves specifically to young adults in the 1970s and 1980s, and sought to deal frankly with the way that young people lived their lives. It took Britain another 20 years or so to pick up on Salinger's legacy, with writers like Melvin Burgess, Keith Gray and Kevin Brooks. And both in the States and Britain some aspects remained difficult to tackle.

Sex is the cause of a lot of Holden's anxiety. His unsettling encounter with a young prostitute and her pimp was shocking to readers at the time, but Holden's deeper confusion, fuelling his frustration and anger, is how he should behave towards girls now that sex is a possibility. Important as this subject was and remains to teenagers, it was not until 30 years after **Catcher**'s publication, that writers for young people felt able to grasp that particular nettle, and its treatment remains controversial, witness the reaction to some of Burgess's recent work.

So, it's fair to say that Salinger was a trailblazer for writers for young adults, but perhaps a particular kind of trailblazer. It's not too difficult to find updated versions of Holden Caulfield still appearing in books for young people. I reviewed an American example\* for **BfK** a few issues ago. But, setting aside the more distant influences like Tracy Beaker, they seem to be mostly male. Any candidates for a female Holden Caulfield?

**Clive Barnes** has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

\* **Sprout** by Dale Peck (Bloomsbury)

**The Catcher in the Rye** by J D Salinger is published in paperback by Penguin at £8.99.

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