

J.D. Salinger

Jerome David Salinger, writer, died on January 28th, aged 91

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PEOPLE kept sneaking year after year to the place on the hill in Cornish, New Hampshire, but the Great American Writer was almost never seen. Ageing rebels, second-year master's students with lacquered nails, broad-shouldered phonies in Norfolk jackets, snappers from *Newsweek*, all approached the cringing, little house where he had lived, or battened down, or holed up—you, general reader, can choose the word you please—ever since a great wave of fame had broken over him in 1953, two years after he happened to write a book called "The Catcher in the Rye".

They caught a glimpse of him sometimes, with his haughty head, angular and bug-eyed, getting groceries in the village; but he gave them the slip almost always. The truth of it was that though his *book* might be on all the syllabuses, picked over by the academicians, hailed as the authentic voice of every teenager who had ever squeezed a pimple or tried, drawing himself up tall, to order a Scotch and soda, his *life* was nobody's goddammed business. If his dream was to live in the woods, with a fireplace and a typewriter and sheaves of notes hooked on the wall, almost like a deaf-mute in his dealings with the world, that was his affair.

He was not just *away* in Cornish, he was also *above*. (The italics were his own.) From above, Holden Caulfield, the hero of "Catcher", first entered his story to look down on the distant football game between Saxon Hall and Pencey Prep, all those little running figures of whom he was not one, because he was outside and expelled. The writer who truly lived for his art—who made it, as Mr Salinger did, his religion, along with Vedanta and Zen and the Tao—did not descend and did not integrate. He defended until death, or non-publication, the sanctity of his words. A writer asked to discuss his craft ought just to jump up and declaim, *de haut en bas*, the names of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Blake, Coleridge, Proust, James. And admit that after Melville there had been no *really* good American writer until—Salinger.

But that—wait—was not necessarily the name he answered to. In his short stories, a scant three dozen of them, rounding off the whole *oeuvre*, he gradually took the name and voice of Buddy Glass, a fortyish and paunchy short-story writer who had ended up in an English Department. And Glass in turn wrote obsessively, devotedly, as if of some plaster saint, about his elder brother Seymour, his Literary Ideal. Buddy was the working-writer Salinger, the man who had laboured in 1939-43 to get stuff into *Esquire* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, while all the time disdaining those slicks and lusting after the *New Yorker*—which, in 1948, took him into its embrace. But Seymour was "all real things to us: our blue-striped unicorn, our doublelensed burning glass, our consultant genius, our portable conscience...our one full poet." He would open the door, blow "three or four or five unquestionably sweet and expert notes on a cornet"—*and then disappear*.

On the cliff-edge

In time the Glass family thoroughly eclipsed the Salingers in the mind of the man in Cornish. But they were often the same. He too was "of part-Jewish, part-Irish, and conceivably part-Minotaur extraction", brought up comfortably on the upper West Side with bellhops and cab-rides to Macy's, and educated in schools like Pencey Prep. There, in Holden Caulfield mode, he failed to apply himself in almost everything except English composition; and so, although icily sardonic in conversation and convinced he would be a "superlative" writer, he never made the Ivy League. That hurt all his life.

Salinger or Glass, he lived on his nerves. After his war service he could feel his mind teeter like insecure luggage and his fingers bump together, his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s not intact. In the opinion of some lofty experts they never quite cohered again. Hence his hatred of photographs, blurbs, potted biographies and all else that might

besmirch the plainness of a book-jacket—as well as the increasing weirdness of the work, thousands upon thousands of words about Seymour which both laboured to idolise and failed to describe, culminating in 1965 in “his” letter from summer camp, “Hapworth 16, 1924” in the ever- and over-indulgent *New Yorker*.

Perhaps, said the hacks to the paparazzi as they climbed the hill again, it had all been hype; apart from a hawk-sharp ear for dialogue, and a keen, tender eye for the tricksiness of children, he had never shown half as much literary talent as talent for publicity-by-intrigue. There were said to be unpublished manuscripts in his safe; most pundits were happy to wait.

What they did not always realise, as their cars left tyre-ruts on his property, was exactly what Mr Salinger had been doing there. He said he wrote just for himself; but he was also “the most terrific liar”. As Holden Caulfield, he had famously seen himself on the edge of “some crazy cliff”, watching thousands of children at play in a big field of rye, and “What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff.” Eight years later the idea recurred as he wrote “Seymour: An Introduction”. He felt he was “removing, at least for a minute or two, all the detonators from all the bombs in this bloody world.”

Not ignoring it, then; not hiding from it; frankly, if you believed him, saving it.