

A History of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

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What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.¹

The Catcher in the Rye (1951)

While books have undergone dramatic physical changes over the last two thousand years, there has been one constant: censorship. Some of the most controversial books throughout history are now regarded as classics; Ovid, Homer, Shakespeare, and the *Bible*, for example, have all been subject to censorship.² J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most significant books in American literature to appear since the Second World War, and considered one of the top one hundred novels of the twentieth-century.³ It also has the distinction of remaining one of the most frequently challenged books to this day. This paper will examine the history of *The Catcher in the Rye* both as a material object and in light of its larger social implications.

World War II had an impact on American literature, just as it did on every other aspect of society. The years following the war ushered in the Post-Modernist period in American writing. Writers during this period were responding to what they perceived as the threatening implications of the post-war world, in which whole populations had recently been exterminated and in which there existed the possibility of imminent nuclear destruction. The novels of this period reflected a growing sense of despair, paranoia, and irrational violence.⁴ It was in this social climate and amongst the company of such noted authors as Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, and Thomas Pynchon, that J.D. Salinger emerged.

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is the story of a young boy's transition from the world of childhood to adult society. In Holden Caulfield's eyes, childhood is idealistic

and innocent, whereas adult society is "phony." Holden is a prep school student, who leaves school in anticipation of expulsion. He then goes to New York City, where he spends the next forty-eight hours. The book chronicles his activities, and throughout his meanderings Holden ponders sex and society, as well as American values.⁵

The book struck a powerful chord with the disenchanting yet idealistic youth of the 1950s and with an adult audience also conscious of repression and conformity in the age of McCarthyism.⁶ Many readers, young and old, identified with Holden Caulfield's rebellion against the world of "phoniness" and the rejection of adult values and mores in American society.

J.D. Salinger established himself as a key writer of his time with the publication of his one and only novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, in 1951. The story was actually years in the making; Salinger had completed a ninety-page version of the novel, which was accepted for publication in the mid 1940s, but decided to withdraw it because he felt it was flawed.⁷ First published in July 1951 by Little, Brown and Company, *The Catcher in the Rye* was simultaneously published as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, which guaranteed it a wide audience. By the end of July, *The Catcher in the Rye* had gone through five reprints, and by late August had reached fourth place on the *New York Times* list of best sellers, and it would remain on the list for twenty-nine weeks.⁸ During these few months Salinger grew increasingly dissatisfied with the book's cover - specifically, he did not like the enormous close-up of his face on the book's dust-jacket.⁹ At his request, it was removed from the third and subsequent editions of his book. The novel was also on the best-seller list in *Publisher's Weekly* for five months, although it did not sell well enough to make it as one of the year's ten top-selling novels.¹⁰

Early reviews did not suggest that *The Catcher in the Rye* would become "the classic novel of its generation."¹¹ Numerous reviews were critical to ambivalent. Ernest Jones, in *The Nation*, wrote:

The skill with which all this has been worked into 277 pages is most ingenious. But as it proceeds on its insights, which are not really insights as they are so general, *The Catcher in the Rye* becomes more and more a case history of all of us. Radically this writing depends on the reader's recollection of merely similar difficulties...and though always lively in its parts, the book as a whole is predictable and boring.¹²

The Catcher in the Rye's Holden Caulfield was also being compared to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885).¹³ Both books feature teenage male protagonists who are at odds with the values of their cultures. These characters embark on journeys without really knowing where they are going and in the process learn lessons about hypocrisy in adult society. Huck travels down the Mississippi River, while Holden Caulfield flees from a prep school in Pennsylvania, takes a train to New York City, and then spends 48 hours wandering around the city. Both books are written in the first person, and in both cases, the authors masterfully capture the voices and attitudes often associated with alienated youth.¹⁴ As this paper will illustrate, in time, both books would also share the distinction of being near the top of most lists of frequently censored or challenged books in the United States.

With its paperback release *The Catcher in the Rye* reached an even larger audience. New American Library (NAL) had purchased the paperback rights in advance of publication and in April 1953, a first printing of 350,000 copies was released in a twenty-five-cent Signet edition. A box on the cover read, "This unusual book may shock you, will make you laugh, and may break your heart - but *you will never forget it.*" Signet

would go on to sell over three million copies in the next ten years. Just as with the original, hard cover edition, Salinger detested the Signet edition's book cover.¹⁵ In fact, he had requested that the paperback edition have no illustrated cover, but having no formal control over the decision, Salinger was unable to prevent Signet from selecting James Avati, a well-known book jacket artist at the time, to paint the cover for *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger's dislike of the cover would prove to be one of the reasons for his decision to seek a new paperback publisher when Signet's license on the book expired.¹⁶

Also in this period, other publishers were coming out with their own editions. Grosset and Dunlap published an edition in 1952, Modern Library in 1958, and Franklin Watts Publishers in 1967. In January of 1960, *The Catcher in the Rye* reappeared on the New York Times paperback best-seller list in fifth place.¹⁷ When Signet's license expired on the paperback edition, Bantam Books happily accepted Salinger's requirements that he get to approve the cover, and in 1964 released their paperback edition, the cover the exact colour and typeface that Salinger requested (the *J* and the *D* are set in different types). Salinger even sent them a swatch to show them what colour he wanted the book to be. To this day, Bantam still uses that cover.¹⁸

Although the book generated some controversy when it was first published, it was not until the mid-1950s that it became the focus of frequent censorship attempts. Within a few years of its publication, many literary critics had proclaimed it a modern masterpiece, and it soon had achieved the status of being one of the most frequently taught contemporary novels on US college campuses.¹⁹ These developments led some high-

school teachers to begin to use the book in their advanced English classes, "in an effort to introduce high school students to high-quality contemporary writing."²⁰

The earliest recorded censorship attempts of *The Catcher in the Rye* occurred in California in 1954. During the next several years more cases were reported, and by the end of the decade the book had been the subject of dozens of attempts, many of which were successful.²¹ The protagonist's use of profanity and references to sexuality were the basis for objections to the book. However, and this can be seen as indicative of the times, several attempts were made to ban *The Catcher in the Rye* in the 1950s on grounds that the book's foul language would somehow make students more "susceptible to Marxist indoctrination."²² While no longer accused of being linked to Marxism, *The Catcher in the Rye* remains accused of being "morally indecent to the community."²³ All of the censorship cases since the early 1960s have been tied to Holden's use of profanity and his references to sexuality.

The primary reason why *The Catcher in the Rye* is so frequently censored is because of the profanity used by Holden Caulfield. Holden often says such words as "hell," "damn," "Chrissake," and "crap." A common method used by those wanting a book censored is to count the number of objectionable words contained in the work. Most of the objections to the book have centered on its profane or vulgar language. A parent in California counted 295 times in which God's name was taken in vain; another parent in Washington counted 785 profanities, including 27 *Chrissakes*, 7 *hornys*, as well as numerous *damns*, *craps*, and *hells*.²⁴ It is ironic that Holden spends much of his time at school trying to wash obscene graffiti off the walls, because he feels younger children should not be exposed to such language.

By 1961, *The Catcher in the Rye* was appearing widely on recommended reading lists in secondary schools and becoming the subject of more and more censorship attempts.²⁵ Also in the early 1960s, several studies revealed that *The Catcher in the Rye* was the most censored title in Utah, Arizona and New York.²⁶ As is often the case, such controversy did not diminish the popularity of the book. A 1962 survey of California English professors showed *The Catcher in the Rye* to be their first choice to teach to college students.²⁷ The number of book challenges involving *The Catcher in the Rye* diminished over the 1960s and early 1970s. By the late 1970s, however, the book had once again become the target of censors.²⁸

By 1981, Little, Brown and Company had reprinted *The Catcher in the Rye* thirty-five times and Bantam's paperback edition had been reprinted fifty-two times.²⁹ During 1981, *The Catcher in the Rye* had the unusual distinction of being the most frequently censored book in the United States, and, at the same time, the second-most frequently taught novel in American public schools.³⁰ Between 1978 and 1990 there have been one or two cases every year. Since then, the number of reported cases has jumped dramatically. In a study of the most censored books in the US from 1990 to 1992, *The Catcher in the Rye* ranked as the third-most frequently censored book.³¹

By 1997 it was estimated that the total number of copies in print of *The Catcher in the Rye* was over ten million, with continued sales of nearly two hundred thousand copies per year.³² Reflecting on the most challenged books of the 1990s, the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association published its list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of the decade: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* placed fifth, and *The Catcher in the Rye* tenth.³³

Today, *The Catcher in the Rye* continues to face challenges, just as it continues to represent perhaps the most sensitive portrait of coming-of-age in America in the years following World War II.³⁴ It says something about society for there to be people still concerned about bad language in novels when there are so many greater societal ills - yet this has been a concern of censors and would-be censors for as long as writers have been putting "bad language" in books. An examination of the book's material history has revealed how popular the work remains; while an examination of the book's censorship history has revealed the social implications of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Few other books have had as great an impact on a generation--so much so that its main character, Holden Caulfield, has entered the popular mythology of American culture alongside such figures as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby and Mark Twain's Huck Finn.³⁵ A true classic, *The Catcher in the Rye* still manages to strike a chord with today's disillusioned youth, and today's censors, even fifty years after its original publication.

Notes

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- ¹ "Salinger, J. D." *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*. Ed. Elizabeth Knowles. Oxford University Press, 2002. in *Oxford Reference Online* [database online], <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t93.e1576>>; accessed 13 February 2004
- ² "Bannings and Burnings in History" *The Freedom to Read Kit 2004*; available from http://www.freedomtoread.ca/docs/2004/bannings_and_burnings.pdf; Internet; accessed 13 February 2004.
- ³ "The 100 Best English Language Novels" *The Christian Science Monitor* 23 July 1998, B6, in Lexis-Nexis [database online]; accessed 12 February 2004.
- ⁴ "Jerome David Salinger" *Contemporary Authors* [database online], Gale; accessed 13 February 2004.
- ⁵ Nicholas J. Karolides, *Banned Books: Literature Suppressed on Political Grounds* (New York: Facts on File, 1998), 213.
- ⁶ Harold Bloom, *J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1996), 10.
- ⁷ Warren French, *J.D. Salinger; Revisited* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1988), 33.
- ⁸ Pamela Hunt Steinle, *In Cold Fear: The Catcher in the Rye Censorship Controversies and Postwar American Character* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 15.
- ⁹ French, 10.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 202.
- ¹¹ French, 8.
- ¹² Ernest Jones, "Case History of All of Us," *Nation*, 1 September 1951, p. 76.
- ¹³ Bloom, 23.
- ¹⁴ M. West, "J.D. Salinger" in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*. Ed. Derek Jones, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Steinle, 15.
- ¹⁶ Davis, 141.
- ¹⁷ Steinle, 15.
- ¹⁸ Davis, 204.
- ¹⁹ West, 2131.
- ²⁰ Mary K. Chelton and Lynda Fuller Clendenning, "Rave Reviews for Popular American Fiction," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 42, no.3 (Spr 2003): 224-8.
- ²¹ West, 2131.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Karolides, 187.
- ²⁴ Herbert N. Foerstel, *Banned in the USA: A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 212.
- ²⁵ Lanette MacLeod, "The Censorship History of the Catcher in the Rye," *PNLA Quarterly* 39 (Summer 1975): 10.
- ²⁶ Foerstel, 212.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ West, 2131.
- ²⁹ Steinle, 15.
- ³⁰ Foerstel, 212.
- ³¹ West, 2131.
- ³² Steinle, 15.
- ³³ "100 most frequently challenged books," *Teacher Librarian* 28 (2000): 62.
- ³⁴ "Jerome David Salinger" *Contemporary Authors* [database online].
- ³⁵ Ibid.

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