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Book Review

***The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger. New York: Back Bay Books, 2001 [1951]. 288 pp. \$13.99**

I first read the *Catcher in the Rye* at least 35 years ago when I was about 19 or 20 years old. I haven't touched it since. I decided to reread it recently when I heard about a documentary film to be released soon by Shane Salerno about J. D. Salinger, who died on January 27, 2010. When I was young, I read all of Salinger's major published books in addition to *The Catcher in the Rye: Franny and Zooey, Raise High the Roof Beam Carpenters/Seymour, an Introduction*, and the *Nine Stories*. I thought I would write a review to illustrate the difference in how I see the book now versus when I first read it as a young person. It is still a great book, masterfully written, creating a vivid, convincing portrait of the 16-year-old Holden Caulfield, the rather lost, alienated, protagonist. I see Holden differently today and much less sympathetically than when I was younger. Today, I see him as a rather unattractive asshole. When I was younger, I was more sympathetic to his rebellion and his nonconformity. I could relate to his lack of direction, his alienation, and his loneliness. I saw him as a young person struggling to find his way, much like myself. But now, I see how he was undermining his own best efforts and the opportunities that were presented to him, how his outlook that too readily zeroed in on the negative aspects of human relations prevented him from solving his problems. He rails against phonies throughout the book, but he is a big phony himself, often conning people, such as Mrs. Morrow on the train (chapter 8). He occasionally lies and even tells us at the beginning of chapter 3, "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life." He often tries to pass himself off as something he is not, such as an adult. He is hypercritical, readily seeing flaws in others, but he often misses the ways in which people are reaching out to him. He doesn't see the longings, strivings, conflicts, struggles, and complex predicaments of people's lives. Holden is lonely and depressed, but he often sabotages his own efforts to reach out and connect with others in a positive way. He seems to prefer estrangement to connection.

Today, I see his condition due in large part to the absence of an involved father, who failed to connect with him in a sympathetic, empathic, supportive relationship. But his alienation extends beyond his own father to most, if not all, adult males. There is a cultural and historical dimension to Holden's problems that I would like to lift out and elaborate. The distance

between Holden and his father is obviously personal and particular to their own circumstances, but Holden is also an iconic figure that represents a generation of young American males who grew up after World War II. His struggles and conflicts capture to a greater or lesser degree the struggles and conflicts faced by millions of young American men in the middle and upper-middle classes during the last half of the twentieth century. It is not an accident that this book continues to sell over 250,000 copies per year in this country alone and it is one of the bestselling books of all time. It has also been one of the most frequently banned and challenged books in American schools and libraries from its publication to the present, with the complaints coming most often from parents. Holden bears an ugly message that many parents do not want to hear. He is the outcome of their failures to emotionally engage with their male children and offer a positive, workable vision for life. Holden represents a common predicament of the American male: confused and conflicted about sex, lacking emotional bonds and intimacy with his fellow males, condemned to live in competition and antagonism toward his peers. His struggles with attachment and differentiation are exacerbated by his lack of good role models in adult males that he can look up to and emulate.

The *Catcher in the Rye*—and, thus, Holden's coming of age—was written during the height of America's legal and cultural war on male-male sex between about 1935 and 1961. During these years, arrests for sodomy dramatically increased, with the majority of cases involving minors, two thirds of whom were boys (Eskridge, 2008, pp. 85–108). One also has to keep in mind that, by 1920, prostitution had been made illegal nearly everywhere in the United States, where prior to that time it had been legal and quite open almost everywhere. It was only in 1933 that the misguided experiment with Prohibition was repealed. By the middle of the twentieth century, most sex in America had been forced into the closet. Even masturbation was despised and thought to be the source of many physical and psychological ills. The only officially endorsed sexual behavior was monogamous heterosexual marriage. The impact that this had on the intimate life of the family was to desexualize the image and ideal of the father. We got *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *My Three Sons*, *Father Knows Best*, and such like: fathers who were never nude, never had erections, never had affairs, never had casual sex either with females or males. Fathers had their penises removed from public acknowledgment. The other side of these fathers, which was not shown on television, was Willie Loman, from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Willie Loman and Holden Caulfield represent the crisis of the middle-class American male in the mid-twentieth century, brought about by 80 years of steady social and legal constriction of male sexuality, with particular emphasis on male-male sex. The impact that this had on the development of boys has an unmatched exemplar in Holden Caulfield. Men, afraid to expose their sexuality to their own children, withdrew from

them and allowed them to drift. Young males, especially, suffered from the lack of intimate connection to adult males who could nurture and guide their growth into manhood. This can be seen very clearly in the case of Holden Caulfield. Holden's relationship with his own father is distant and fraught with misunderstanding and hostility. "Daddy will kill you," his sister, Phoebe, repeatedly tells him when she finds out he has flunked out of school. This is a subtext operating in the background throughout the entire book. The circumstance of the book is set up by a war of independence between Holden and (mainly) his father, although this fundamental issue is not discussed directly.

Holden's parents do not appear very much in his thoughts or in the events of the story. He tells us from the outset that they are touchy about him revealing anything personal about them to the public and, thus, they are mostly excluded from the narrative. But their weight on his life is evident in the conditions in which we find him. His father is a corporate lawyer. He is not around much. The family is affluent. Holden has plenty of money. His life is physically secure. But emotionally it is a wasteland. He has flunked out of, or quit, a string of expensive prep schools—most likely in protest rather than because of any intellectual deficiency. He is alienated, depressed, directionless, confused, and angry. Holden is in rebellion against the expectations of his parents who apparently have very little inkling of his inner reality. He is struggling to define himself by differentiation, that is, by rejecting what is being forced on him by parents who do not understand him and are not emotionally connected to him.

Holden reaches out unsuccessfully to several adult male figures in the course of the book: Spencer, Luce, and Antolini. He shows an active sexual interest in Carl Luce, the older student advisor he had at Whooton (chapter 19), but it is defensively and anxiously expressed, taking the form of pointed, intrusive questions about Luce's sex life. Luce quickly sees that Holden's intention is to annoy him rather than seduce him and he dismisses Holden as immature. Were Holden not hemmed in by anxiety and internalized prohibitions against same-sex attraction, the relationship with Luce might have had an opportunity to develop and been of benefit to both Holden and Luce. Holden's anxiety about being a "flit," and about expressing or even *feeling* sexual attraction to another male, is something he has absorbed from the surrounding culture. It was not simply his parents who communicated this message to him. True, once it became absorbed and internalized, it became part of his own personal psychic landscape, but the point is that this could be different. Same-sex attractions need not be despised and prohibited to the point where they cannot be subjectively felt or outwardly expressed. Were that to be different in the cultural atmosphere, Holden's opportunities for intimate contact would be different, his attitude toward other males would be different, and his internal psychic balance would be different. In other words, a more positive cultural orientation

toward male-male sex would render *The Catcher in the Rye* obsolete; it would lose its relevance. The *Catcher in the Rye* could not have been written in any other century in any other place than mid-twentieth century America. It perfectly captures the internal turmoil of the young American male coming of age in a culture that is utterly hostile to his sexual needs and desires.

By contrast, Mr. Antolini, his former teacher at Whooton, is able to establish a nurturing, paternal connection with Holden, and with it, he brings an erotic interest (chapter 24). Mr. Antolini helps Holden make up a bed on his couch where he lets him spend the night. During the night, Holden awakens to find Mr. Antolini sitting on the floor beside him stroking his head as he sleeps. Although some disagree, from my point of view this is almost certainly a sexual overture, but very gently expressed. Holden, however, reacts with near panic. He gets up, hurriedly dresses and leaves rather unceremoniously. He is very upset by the sexual pass, but when he calms down and takes stock of the relationship, he concludes that Mr. Antolini was a favorable influence and behaved well toward him aside from the sexual overture (chapter 25). He even had second thoughts about his rejection of Mr. Antolini's sexual move. Holden's inability to respond favorably to Mr. Antolini's advance forced him to cut himself off from the only constructive relationship with an adult male that he had available to him. If Holden had responded differently on that couch, he might have formed a strong, nurturing relationship with an adult male that would have greatly strengthened and stabilized his life.

This novel was originally published in 1951. Same-sex relations were still a felony in every state, they were grounds for dismissal from many jobs, and considerable effort was spent trying to expose them and root them out. Holden's reaction to this overture, even more than his anxious, indirect approach to Carl Luce, illustrates the extent to which Holden has absorbed the hostility of his culture toward same-sex attractions, particularly this pederastic form between an older man and a much younger boy, which has been a major avenue of male socialization from time immemorial. If Holden had grown up in a culture that accepted and encouraged such relationships as commonplace and growth enhancing for young males, he might have reacted very differently to this advance. In fact, if he had grown up in such a culture, he would not be in the position of being so completely alienated and disenfranchised from his society in the first place. The persecution of homosexuality and the emotional alienation of fathers from their children, which is in large part the result of the criminalization of male desire and the de-eroticization of the child, has resulted in a generation of males who fail in their relatedness to their families and to each other. The continuing popularity of *The Catcher in the Rye* and the reactive hostility against it testifies to this.

Holden's 10-year-old sister, Phoebe, represents the brightest ray of hope in his life. He finds in her a genuine emotional resonance, and his attachment

to her has pedophilic overtones, although they are implicit rather than explicit. He sneaks into her bedroom early in the morning while she is still asleep (chapter 21). He notes the articles of her clothing that she discarded before getting into bed. It is never stated what she *is* wearing, which could be pajamas or very little. When she is awakened by him she greets him joyfully crying out his name, "Holden!" and throws her arms around his neck in a welcoming hug. He kisses her "sort of." It is not clear if this "sort of" refers to the awkward character of the kiss or to Holden's nervousness in relating it. Kisses can be quite varied in character and Holden is not forthcoming about what this kiss was like, but he does say that Phoebe was sometimes "too affectionate." What did he mean by that? At one point he pinches her on her butt, which she is sticking out at him (provocatively?). They dance together, four numbers, which leaves him breathless. At the end of their encounter as he is about to leave, she offers to let him sleep with her. The erotic hints are quite strong, but never overt. In fact Phoebe seems more in touch with them than Holden.

She confronts him with his pervasive negativity and asks him if there is anyone or anything that he likes. He cannot come up with an immediate answer for her, although in his private thoughts he ruminates on James Castle, a classmate at Elkton Hills, an earlier school Holden had attended, who resisted a bullying incident to the point of suicide instead of submitting. Holden's identification with Castle is strong. Castle falls right before Caulfield in the class roster, an accidental fact that underlines their closeness in identity as well as in temperament. Holden sees himself doing the same thing that Castle did, stubbornly resisting the pressure of bullying even to the point of suicide. In Holden's case, it is the bullying of his parents' wishes and their agenda for his life. Castle's suicide is a metaphorical representation of one alternative which Holden is keeping in reserve. But the response to Phoebe's question that Holden finally comes up with is more affirmative and gives the title to the book. Holden sees himself as one who catches the children playing in the field of rye before they go over the cliff. Castle had no one to catch him; he ended up going over the cliff. Mr. Antolini arrived to pick him up after he fell, but was too late. Holden sees his stubborn resistance to the bullying of his parents' expectations—"Daddy's gonna kill you!"—as setting the example for the lost children being pushed over the cliff by parents forcing their lives in directions they do not want to go.

Fantasies of rescue betray ambivalence. It is the hostile element that the person is struggling to suppress. The original hostile motive is stopped short by the overriding intervention of rescue. The person sees the object of their fantasy in some sort of threatening circumstance to which they then heroically step in and save them. It is a fantasy of grandiosity; it shows a need for love and admiration which the fantasizer must compel from the object through their immersion in some sort of dire scenario from which the fantasizer extracts them with great spectacle. It implies that the rescuer is

not freely and generously loved by the desired person, but must perform arduous feats of heroism in order to earn it.

In the psychoanalytic literature, these fantasies originate in early traumatic losses and disappointments. Feelings of hurt and anger and wishes to retaliate against the disappointing object result and give shape to the fantasy. In Holden's case, he experienced the death of his younger brother Allie several years prior to whom he remained deeply attached. It is possible, although not evident, that this loss gave some of the impetus to the *Catcher in the Rye* fantasy.

Esman (1987) gives a very nice summary of the development of this concept in psychoanalytic understanding from Freud's (1910) first use of it in, *A special type of object choice made by men*. Freud's original formulation applied to men who saw themselves in the role of rescuing "fallen women" from moral depravity. Freud saw it as an oedipal striving where the woman unconsciously represents the mother who is sexually possessed by the father (a whore to the father's depraved desires). The rescuer seeks to transform this whorish representation of the woman into a chaste maternal one that he could then possess. This classic scenario fits Holden rather nicely. It represents to a tee his feelings about Jane Gallagher and his roommate Stradlater (chapters 3 and 4). Holden had had a sexually innocent romance with Jane the previous summer but he remained preoccupied with her (chapter 11). Stradlater, however, whom Holden perceives to be sexually sophisticated and active, takes Jane out on a date and even borrows Holden's coat to wear for the occasion. Further, he even begs Holden to write an English paper for him that is due the following day, which he will not have time to write because he will be out late with Jane. (Holden does it, but not very satisfactorily.) Holden is practically obsessed with the possibility that Stradlater had sex with his beloved Jane. Later that night, upon his return, Holden questions Stradlater aggressively about the date and ends up getting into a fist fight with him, which he loses (chapter 6). Holden's fighting to save Jane from the moral degradation of Stradlater is exactly the form of this fantasy in Freud's 1910 paper. But, besides its obvious oedipal character, there are narcissistic aspects to this fantasy as well. The rescuer's fantasy of helping places the object in the position of desperately needing the rescuer's intervention which then wins love and admiration from the one rescued. There is grandiosity, superiority, degradation of the object, hostility toward the object countermanded by the salvific intervention, and a strong need for attention, recognition, and glory.

Esman (1987) points out how Freud's original formulation of the rescuer fantasy as applied to the "fallen woman" has itself fallen into disuse—although Holden Caulfield was still applying it very much in this vein. This is due to the fact that today we are much less disposed to sit women on the pedestal of sexual purity than at the turn of the twentieth century. However, many men still choose women they can rescue in a wide variety of ways and women often see men as rescuers from any number of difficulties and

miseries. The Rolling Stones released a song called *Emotional Rescue* in 1980 that was very popular and a perfect illustration of this. A variant of the classic formulation can be seen in the recent film *Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (2009), and in recent years some conservative Christian groups have held "Father-Daughter Purity Balls" where fathers dance with their teenage daughters until late into the night after pledging to protect their virginity at all costs (Gibbs, 2008). So the rescuer fantasy is very much alive in human relations, even though its form has changed from what Freud saw a hundred years ago. It is pervasive in our society from the microlevel of interpersonal relations to the macro level of social movements to save animals, children, the rainforests, and the planet, to religions that offer salvation to a fallen human race. It is not hard to see the hostile element in this fantasy, although it is usually displaced away from the primary object, that is, the one who is rescued. The easiest, clearest example is the fantasy of salvation that underpins the Christian religion. God, out of love, sends his son, Jesus, to die for us, to save us. From what? From our own sin and depravity, and also from God's condemnation. God at once condemns us to damnation for our sin and yet loves us enough to want to save us from his own wrath. It is the classic rescue fantasy writ large. The ambivalence is clearly evident. The original hostility is counteracted by an overriding love that prevents its culmination.

A similar dynamic can be seen in the current American cultural obsession with saving children from sexual corruption and depravity. It is a fantasy that has widespread resonance. The hostility is displaced from the children themselves on to those perceived as the victimizer: the "predator," the "child molester," the "abuser," faceless demons reduced to cartoon characters whose one dimensionality satisfies the role into which they have been cast. The evidence for the ambivalence here is the anxiety and obsessive nature of this need for protection, the blindness and extreme degree of the hatred evoked, and the fact that the harm from which the alleged victim is being protected from cannot be articulated. The focus is on punishing the perceived offender rather than understanding the emotional realities of the relationship.

The rescuer fantasy can serve as a constructive basis for living in people with complementary needs. Many people build constructive marriages, careers, and socially beneficial organizations around it. Constructive social utility does not, however, negate the ambivalence and narcissism inherent in this psychological dynamic.

The Catcher in the Rye ends with Holden going home to face his parents and apparently enroll in still another school the following autumn. The question is: Will it be the same Holden going to school in the year beyond the completion of the book? There seems to be some division of opinion on whether Holden showed any positive growth over the course of this novel. Supposedly, many school teachers liked the book because it illustrated to teens that the turmoil and alienation of adolescence is a passing phase that will yield to a more favorable adulthood. However, many critics have also

maintained that Holden did not show any growth from the beginning to the end of the novel and he ends the book in basically the same position as when he started. I tend to see the book as marginally optimistic.

A telling indication of this is his reaction to several instances of the "fuck you" graffiti in his sister's school and his rage at this and his attempts and to obliterate it (chapter 25). "Fuck you" scrawled on a wall in a public place is not a sexual invitation. It is sexualized hostility. It represents undifferentiated rage directed at anyone and everyone and, also, interestingly, a desire to be noticed and taken account of. But it is a message to the world that Holden no longer wishes to project. It repels him and fills him with revulsion. This is another playing out of the rescuer fantasy within himself. There is the "fuck you" side of Holden which he is attempting to squelch and blot out from his consciousness. But it keeps reappearing. He cannot extinguish it entirely. He finally concludes that it will likely be with him to his grave and even appear on his tombstone. So he will always be catching children who are going over the cliff. He will always *need to see them* in that scenario. There will always be that hostile impulse that needs to be counteracted. Although hostility and contempt toward the world will remain a part of his makeup, his repudiation of it represented by the "catcher" fantasy indicates a change had taken place and a positive trend in his emergent identity was being consolidated, along with a recognition of the fact that he would never expunge all of the negative messages from the world, or from within himself. I regard this as growth, however modest.

There are additionally two relationships in Holden's life that are transformative—his younger sister, Phoebe, and Mr. Antolini, his former teacher at Whooton. These relationships were there before Holden met with this crisis, but he turns to them with acknowledged need and finds in them a spirit of good will and support. Although he rejects Antolini's sexual advance initially, he seems to reconsider and appears to offer the possibility of handling it differently. He also turns down Phoebe's offer to sleep with him, but this very young girl is getting older and more sophisticated, and she does succeed in dissuading him from his firm plan to run away and head West. These two relationships, despite their deficiencies, offer Holden some moderating restraint as well as a continuing source of emotional resonance and nurturing guidance. Holden is not out of the woods yet, and we cannot conclude that his life will grow more positive from the experiences related in this narrative. Optimism means good reason for hope, and I think that can be discerned, but it is not to be equated with success or achievement. I do not think Holden has achieved very much by the end of this book. The novel is tentatively optimistic, but there is no happy ending. We'll have to wait and see what happens in the sequel. Maybe Salinger has been writing sequels and hiding them away in his basement for the last 50 years.

Part of the greatness of *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it lays out the various alternatives for an angry, alienated teenager without opting for any

one of them. Suicide is very much on the table for Holden, but he doesn't carry through with it—unlike his classmate, James Castle. He does reach out to several adult males: Spencer, Luce, and Antolini, but none of these initiatives succeed. Homosexuality is one possibility that is rejected, although that doorway seems to be left open perhaps just a crack. The transitory, superficiality of commercial sex is another possibility that is rejected (chapter 13). Marriage and family with a girl he really likes, such as Jane Gallagher, is another possibility that so far flounders. Withdrawal in the form of moving to a faraway place and embarking on a very different kind of life far removed from what he has hitherto known is another strong possibility that was deterred by Phoebe's love and affection. Pedophilia, which amounts to another kind of withdrawal, a renunciation of the phony adult world for a world of idealized innocence and naturalness of childhood, is a strong contender for the organizing force in his emotional life. Holden toys with all of these possibilities, but never pursues any of them with decisiveness. By the end of the book, the pedophilic option seems to be his strongest inclination represented by his identification as the Catcher, but Holden remains a person very much in flux. As he puts it on the last page, "How do you know what you are going to do until you do it? It's a stupid question." But Holden Caulfield, with all of his turmoil and uncertainty, remains a continuing reminder of the high price America pays in its young males for absent, uninvolved fathers, desexualizing childhood, and for despising physical and emotional intimacy between males.

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