



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on January 29, 2010

## J.D. Salinger, Dead at 91

J.D. Salinger is dead, if you care to know. That's the way the reclusive author might have written his own obituary. Since moving, in 1953, to a 90-acre leafy hillside in rural New Hampshire, Salinger has assiduously avoided even glancing contact with the larger world outside his hermitage.



While a student at Ursinus College in Collegetown, Pennsylvania, Salinger amused and annoyed his fellow students by traipsing about campus proclaiming that he would be the author of the next Great American Novel.

That his *Catcher in the Rye* was such a book is indisputable. There is scarcely a man born in the last 50 years or so that didn't pass through a Holden Caulfield phase. Salinger's Caulfield was the proto-typical angst-ridden youth who felt set adrift in a sea of nonsense perturbed only by whitecaps of false illusion. Nothing mattered and nobody got it. That was the Caulfield view of the world and it is shared, if only momentarily, by so many young people who see the confusion of the adult world through lenses not yet ground properly.

In the book that made Salinger a star and a secluded man-myth within a few years, Caulfield is restless young man from a well-to-do family that bristles at the "phoniness" and idiocy of the manicured lawns and ivy-gripped bell towers of Pencey Prep, a university prep school from which he is expelled. Caulfield is the both protagonist and narrator, and his clipped analysis of the universe in which he fancies himself nothing more intimate than an observer reads like a lettered flurry of fat-fisted punches.

Although *Catcher in the Rye* is financially speaking Salinger's most notable success (and to be fair, it is that work that made his name memorable), there are other equally impressive works of art in the Salinger oeuvre. There was *Nine Stories*, a collection of short stories published in 1953, and it is described as an example of Salinger's skill in capturing the "pitch perfect dialogue" of common speech. There was in these tales a cadence and modulation the written imitation of which is mastered by but a few authors.

This inimitable typesetting of tonality was displayed in his stories about the Glass Family, a barely fictional family consisting of two retired vaudeville performers and their seven precocious children: Seymour, Buddy, Boo Boo, Walt, Waker, Zooey, and Franny. Salinger continued relating the history of the Glass clan, producing in all a seven-story progeny that provided a pastiche of family life, with particular attention on Seymour, the troubled eldest child.

These other, perhaps less profitable parts of the Salinger canon, were of immeasurable influence on the work of other American authors, Philip Roth and John Updike, to name but two of the most recognizable devotees. Updike is quoted in the [New York Times](#) as admiring the "open-ended Zen quality they [the *Nine Stories*] have, the way they don't snap shut."

There was another side to J.D. Salinger, an almost heroic side that is disregarded in the perpetuation of



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the mythologizing of the reclusive author. In the Spring of 1942, just a few months after the *New Yorker* accepted for publication a short story by Salinger wherein was found the genesis of Holden Caulfield, Salinger was drafted into the Army and assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and landed on Utah Beach as part of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. Later, Salinger fought at the Battle of the Bulge and volunteered to stay in the Army and use his language skill to assist in the “de-nazification” of Germany. After joyfully exchanging the glitz of Manhattan for the camouflage of Cornish, New Hampshire, Salinger was rarely seen and never gave interviews. Actually, he did give one illustrative interview. In the fall of 1953, Salinger reportedly consented to be interviewed by a local high-school student for publication in the school’s newspaper. When the article’s tone didn’t appeal to Salinger, he reacted by banishing the cub reporter and erecting a six-and-a-half foot privacy fence around his compound.

Salinger surfaced occasionally, most often to litigate or be litigated. In 1974, he periscopeed just long enough to shore up the walls around his privacy by denouncing the proposed publication of an unauthorized collection of stories. In 1988 and again in 2000, there were ruptures in the shroud of enigma in which the author was enveloped, as memoirs were published by a former lover and a child that described a tyrannical and troubled man with more in common with Howard Hughes than Mark Twain. Not surprisingly, this accumulation of notoriety only augmented the legend of Salinger.

Now that J.D. Salinger has passed away, the fervor for finding a hidden cache of unpublished work is flowing. There are heard here and there rumors of a safe stocked with pages of prose. Alternatively, there are those Salingerologists who maintain that it is more in keeping with the pathos of their idol to have written sheaths of brilliant stories only to later throw them onto the fire, proof that he needed the approbation of no one and that the evidence of his now ashy prolificacy was only the medium of exorcising the poetic demons that prodded his muse.

Jerome David Salinger is survived by a son, Matthew; a daughter, Margaret; and three grandsons.

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