

Lost in the Rye

If you really want to know about the book, first you'll want the title and the plotline, and then some information on the author, and my emotional response, and all that literary crap.

Defining the plot of *Catcher in the Rye* is like trying to untangle a bowl of spaghetti - there's really no point because you're just going to digest it all the same. The novel follows sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield as he navigates through New York City after being expelled from another prep school. He's pretty blasé about the matter, even though the adults in his life feel differently. His parents aren't yet aware of the expulsion, so Holden decides he should lay low in a hotel for a couple of days until he's supposed to arrive home for winter break. What happens in that time is nothing more than the directionless wanderings of an angst-fueled teenage boy - visiting museums, dancing in bars with strangers, getting scammed by prostitutes. You know, the usual New York itinerary.

Catcher in the Rye initially seems to be about nothing, but the closer one gets to the story, the deeper its meaning becomes. Salinger presents the harrowing struggle of growing up, recognizing the flawed reality of the adult world and the naive magic lost with childhood. Holden is caught between an emotional Scylla and Charybdis, lusting for the freedoms of adulthood while mourning the safety of youth. Going to either will kill his spirit, so he spends three days floating between the two. Holden's internal narrative reflects a conflicting reversion and growth within his character - something we are all guilty of.

It is crucial to recognize that the book is not fueled by its plot but rather by the voice of its narrator. Holden has one of the most profound voices I have ever encountered in literature. JD Salinger has achieved something most writers only dream of, a unique natural flowing stream of

consciousness. The text reads like an internal monologue. Riddled with slang and repetition, it has a vernacular style. For example, in one of his many deliberations about girls, Caulfield thinks:

“I was about half in love with her by the time we sat down. That’s the thing about girls. Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall half in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are. Girls. Jesus Christ. They can drive you crazy. They really can.”

Holden’s emotional impulse is humorous and relatable. Likewise, JD Salinger’s perspective on infatuation has guided me (or maybe misguided me) throughout many “half in-love” encounters and forced me to recognize the fleeting passion.

Some do not enjoy the book on their first read because it is so casual, losing purpose in paragraphs and finding it again pages later. The discombobulated format can become overwhelming to the analytical reader and leave one lost in the ramblings of a hopeless boy, but the tempo of his thoughts ties everything together.

The true magic of this novel comes with rereading. Over the years, I have picked this book up, and with each reunion, I blaze through the text more effortlessly than before. It is because Holden’s voice has become familiar. His sardonic tone found its place in my mind, and the thoughts flow as naturally as my own. He is often unapologetically childish, making obvious mistakes and playing pretend in scenarios he shouldn’t.

“But I’m crazy, I swear to God I am. About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of started pretending I had a bullet in my guys.” Sixty pages later, Holden continues playing his game of pretending. “When I was really drunk, I started that stupid business with the bullet in my guts

again. I was concealing the fact that I was a wounded son of a bitch.” As a kid, I made up alternate universes and played out plots that were of no relevance to reality because that is part of the joy of childhood: unfettered imagination. These fabricated adventures fade with adulthood, but Holden grasps them with drunken fervor.

Beyond his fantasies, Holden has a knack for exaggeration. “You can hit my father over the head with a chair, and he won’t wake up, but my mother, all you have to do to my mother is cough somewhere in Siberia, and she’ll hear you.” This is a trademark Holden hyperbole. He constantly utilizes exaggeration as both a form of argument and humor. Even though the thought is absurd, it is a truth any reader can relate to their parents. Salinger finds universality in the unrealistic.

Life is morally murky, but no one tells you that upfront. No teacher is handing out guidebooks on coping with adolescence and adulthood, but JD Salinger does his best. He sees tragedy and addresses it - tragedy you may not even be aware of but experienced its effects on you.

“The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole with their pretty antlers and their pretty skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving the same blanket. Nobody’d be different. The only thing that would be different would be you.”

With age, I realize how poignant of a message it is within the novel. Like a child swimming against a riptide, Holden struggles in the inescapable current of time. He yearns for the familiarity of yesterday and eternal youth, but he only finds this immortality in the museum. Over the years, I have found my “museums,” places I can return to that never seem to change despite the rest of my life, and I feel great comfort in the illusion of permanence.

This novel has immortalized adolescence for me. I first read it in my junior year of high school. I was sixteen, and I was angsty as hell, just like Holden. Over the next four years, I dropped out of school, navigated large cities without my parents’ knowledge, went to bars alone, and played pretend with a thousand identities and ridiculous scenarios, just like Holden. I even got shaken down for cash in Amsterdam by a prostitute I did not sleep with.

Catcher in the Rye is a piece of my soul printed and preserved within the highlighted pages of a weathered hardback, sitting on my shelf waiting to reemerge. Holden reminds us how it feels to be lost in yourself, constantly forced to give up from childhood schemas and traditions lost in the transition of time. He also gives us an opportunity to say goodbye to things we didn’t know we were leaving because, like Holden says, “I don’t care if it’s a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to know I’m leaving it. If you don’t, you feel even worse.”