

# Phoneyes and the dash man

*The hypnotic voice of J.D. Salinger*

by Jane Goodall

**H**olden Caulfield is a garrulous bore. Seymour Glass is a phoney. Franny and Zooey are spoiled brats. And J.D. Salinger is a media tart. All these things are partly true. To take the last first: there is surely a ring of truth about Imre Saluszinsky's recent spoof obituary in which Jay Leno and David Letterman are quoted expressing their sadness at the loss of a favourite regular guest who was always ready to front up and sparkle as he promoted an endless succession of *Catcher in the Rye* merchandise. Salinger, who died on January 27, aged ninety-one, may not have done such things, but at least one of his alter egos might.

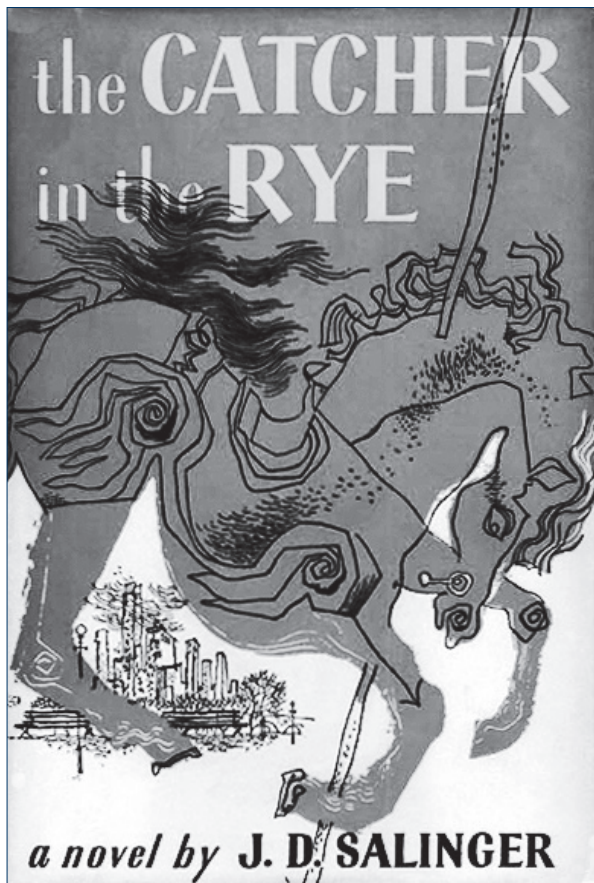
We should bear in mind that Buddy Glass, his primary narrative persona, belongs to a vaudeville family whose members are variously given to performing before whatever assembled company may be available. They will sing, they will dance and, more than anything, they will talk, at length and with exhausting virtuosity. As children, they talked publicly on a radio show where, in response to random questions, they would offer precocious commentary. Words pour out of them in intense one-on-one conversations, but also in letters, down telephone lines, across the pages of diaries (they always seem to be reading each other's diaries) or in messages scrawled with soap across the bathroom mirror. The Glass family bathrooms are hubs of communication. I am sure that if you visited one a couple of hours after any of the residents had been there, it would throb with psychical energy from the exchanges it had witnessed.

First, though, an apology. As any Salinger reader will have already detected, I have contracted the Salinger virus. There is no quick-acting cure for that, and there are times when its spread reaches pandemic levels. You only have to read a few pages of one of his books to be imprinted. The guy starts finishing your sentences for you – or rather, preventing you from finishing them in your own good time. He inserts *parentheses* all over the place, so that it takes ages to even get to a full *stop*. As for all those italics and annoying little repeat phrases that work as some kind of self-reinforcement process he can't seem to let go, don't get me started, buddy. Don't even get me *started*.

The problem (or one of the problems) with Salinger's influence is that it amounts to something like possession. The writing gets into you as a voice in the head, and once it's taken up residence, who knows how long it will sit there, even after it has gone quiet, directing thought traffic and influencing judgements. If the sales figures are anything to go by, Holden Caulfield, the voice of *The Catcher in the Rye*, has talked his way through some sixty-five million heads since the book was first published in 1951. Most unfortunately, he has been found talking intimately to some of the perpetrators of high-school massacres in the not-too-distant past.

It makes me wonder if there isn't something quite dangerous about Salinger and his work. As the popularity of crime fiction demonstrates, we readers like to flirt with danger, but the question is, what kind of dangers are we up for? In the larger scale of things, I don't think *The Catcher in the Rye* is all that dangerous; when it comes to provoking psychotic episodes in teenagers, it would not stack up against the competition from satanic rock, horror movies or murderous computer games. Nor is it really in the principal danger zone of Salinger's writing: *Catcher* lies some way off the seismic epicentre, which is occupied by an alter ego of an entirely different order. Not all Salinger's readers have met him. In fact, only a small percentage of those who have had live-in relationships with Holden Caulfield would even know who he is.

Seymour Glass requires an introduction. This is something Salinger was acutely aware of, but it was a daunting task that he kept delaying, preferring to stage Seymour's first appearance at a Florida beach resort, where he returns to his hotel room and shoots himself in the head. It is 19 March 1948 (Salinger is meticulous about the chronology), and he is thirty-one. The story, entitled 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish', was first published in the *New Yorker* at the end of January 1948, thus curiously predicting the event. There is a sense in which the suicide itself serves as an introduction. In the lead-up to it, Seymour is shown sunbathing, swimming in the sea, and making up stories about bananafish to amuse a little girl larking about nearby. Current readers will be instantly on the alert for Humbert Humbert-like propensities, but nothing in the subsequent narratives



gives any reliable ground for suspicion. Rather, this is an adult suffering from a terminal kind of innocence. He is missing several skins as a human being. His receptors are heightened, so that everything that happens around him is amplified, though the amplification is not sensory. It is an amplification of spirit. Life, in its moment-by-moment unfolding, is too alive to be tolerated beyond the three and a bit decades through which this strange presence manages to negotiate a path. Which is what makes him dangerous, not least of all to the writer who is trying to channel him.

Seymour is Gifted – a wise child, a seer. Posthumously, first through his influence over his six siblings and subsequently through the mediation of his brother Buddy, who becomes his chronicler, Seymour assumes the status of a guru. For the writer of the story, such a protagonist carries serious risks. How do you convey the workings of an extraordinary consciousness? How do you envisage the physical human being who is its carrier? Every narrative about such a figure is, from a purely technical point of view, the equivalent of a tightrope walk, and when the stakes are this high, it's like crossing Niagara Falls.

Buddy, with his vaudeville heritage, may have learned a few lessons from the aerial maestro Charles Blondin, who took to crossing the Niagara with a wheelbarrow from which he would take out a little stove to cook an

omelette, right there in the middle of the highwire. The Seymour stories are dressed in the trivia of domestic life, which are made to serve the purpose of expressing at one remove the potentially blinding insights that work their way to realisation in the human subjects of the story. What other writer could have you on tenterhooks as he itemises the contents of a bathroom cupboard, as if at any minute something is going to jump out at you that will signal a change of life course in which you, as reader, may be personally implicated?

Salinger, who was surely fifty per cent actor himself, has an almost uncanny ear for the cadences of ordinary talk, and for the dramaturgical shapes of everyday human interaction, but his handling of the insight stuff is necessarily erratic. When he slips, it's a bad experience. The balance goes, and he's hanging by a thread looking clumsy, desperate and, above all, foolhardy. He is at his most sure-footed in *Franny and Zooey* (1961), which brings Seymour's two youngest siblings centre-stage, seven years after his death. Having dropped out of college to concentrate on an existential crisis, Franny returns to the family apartment where her mother hired painters. The problem of an hysterical, anorexic daughter bunkered down on the couch acquires urgency from the presence of a group of men in overalls, waiting to gain access to the living room. Franny's brother Zooey, in a protracted bathroom scene scripted like a masterpiece of television sitcom, has to be persuaded to talk to her. Charged with the task of tackling someone who has decided to take up the Way of the Pilgrim, in accordance with the instructions of a little-known devotional work she carries about in her handbag, Zooey has to come up with another kind of script at short notice. What is he going to say?

This is not just his problem, but also that of the writer, who has got himself into quite a situation. Most people whose trade is the printed word just wouldn't consider going there at all. If you wish to pen a book for the modern reader on Tantric meditation or the way of the Tao, there are ways of going about it, and there are precedents in fiction for taking a character to the point of some kind of enlightenment, but what Salinger attempts is a cross between the two. However deftly he manages his narrative personae, it's always going to look as if he's setting himself up as the wise guy. And if he does that, how is he to live up to it?

No wonder this author went bush. According to the various reports that leaked out after his retreat in 1953 to the small town of Cornish, in New Hampshire, Salinger had more than his share of personality problems, and no sustainable credentials as a guru. Does this mean he was a phoney? Does it also mean that Seymour's a phoney, and that there's really no more to Franny and Zooey than middle-class self-obsession fed through some higher order gift of the gab? That may be part of the truth, but if it were the whole truth, it would be a tale not worth the telling. Salinger may look

like a phoney, but I suspect he wasn't a real one. The same applies to Seymour, and all the other members of the Glass family. For one thing, phoneys don't keep calling their own bluff in front of witnesses, itemising their strategies of fakery and declaring their pretensions. Throughout his writing, Salinger exhibits a virtuoso consciousness of posturing in all its forms.

The inescapability of pretentiousness is a strand of tragicomedy that he plays across many different registers. In his funniest, most tersely written short story, 'De Daumier Smith's Blue Period', the narrator is a nineteen-year-old boy – a self-portrait of the author, of course – who bears 'an uncanny physical resemblance to El Greco'. His acutely self-conscious vanity is part of a general superiority complex and is a side effect of precocious talent. Finding an advertisement for art teachers from a correspondence school in Montreal called *Les Amis des Deux Maîtres*, he decides to pull a stunt and writes a letter in good French, presenting himself as the nephew of Honoré de Daumier, recently returned from the south of France. He signs it Jean de Daumier-Smith, and dines out with his friends on the joke. Duly contracted (by return post), he travels to Montreal, meets the proprietors of the school – an elderly Japanese couple – and, with a frenetic determination that would impress Basil Fawlty, proceeds to maintain and elaborate his pretence no matter what contortions it gets him into. Of course, it transpires that the school itself is a fraud, and the proprietors are later exposed as phoneys. When the

chips are down and all the phoneys unmasked, what's left? Don't we all play roles in the world? If Salinger's venture might cynically be labelled *Zen and the Art of Being a Phoney*, all I can say is that there's nothing else like it in literature. Buddy Glass disclaims the influence of anything so obvious as *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and I'm not sure what we should make of the place he's aiming at when he tries to hit the mark, but the peripheral vision gives off an uncanny glow.

The four slim Salinger volumes that sit on my shelf – dog-eared from frequent contact – take up no more space than the average popular fiction book. Salinger called himself 'a dash man', quintessentially a short story writer, but I'm not so sure about that. *The Catcher in the Rye* is an overblown short story, but the Glass family saga is something else. The dash is a breathless narrative momentum that keeps finding sources of renewal. An intricate chronology betrays long-term planning, and there is a fierce complexity in the way episodes are produced quite out of historical sequence, but with thematically potent continuity. My bet is that there's plenty more of it to come (there are reports of many complete, unpublished works). Who knows, it might emerge as one of the great novels of the twenty-first century. ■

**Jane Goodall's** essay 'Footprints' won the 2009 Calibre Prize. She is the author of *Performance and Evolution in the Age of Darwin* (2002) and *Stage Presence* (2008).

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## Storm over Port Phillip

*After the painting by Rick Amor*

Wait. Sometimes the waiting seems interminable  
But that is the trick with water. The dark  
Gathers up your apprehension and you seek  
Some other way of confronting, if you are able,  
The idea of storm. It is not possible  
To think of wind and rain without every black  
Possibility of destruction. The bleak  
Sea ensures that. This always was fate's timetable.

Sometimes the storm passes out to sea,  
The real ocean, and you are left with ragged clouds  
And perhaps scuffed sand. There are no words  
For either relief or regret. You have to be  
Content with failure. The posts of the old pier  
Have withstood storms and hot dry winds before.

**Thomas Shapcott**