Ducks and fish: a homage to Jerome David Salinger

Comments on his first story and his main book

May 16, 2018

1 The life of Jerome David Salinger

Jerome David Salinger had a life changing experience when he participated in the the second world war. This war made him pessimistic about the human race.

He got famous as a writer when publishing in 1948 his critically acclaimed short story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish". In the New Yorker.

I will remark on this story and also on his famous (only) novel: "The catcher in the rye". Some of the motives of "The catcher in the rye" already appear in his Bananafish story.

This short story was quite a success. Getting a story in the "New Yorker" magazine is very hard but this did not prepare him for what happened next. He published a novel called "The Catcher in the Rye". And it had an amazing success. At least among the public. But later also among the critics. This made Salinger a household name. He never wanted that and was shocked. This was like he threw a homa grenade to the world and then hide.

It is somewhat rare that a novel will have such immediate success both in the eyes of readers and later critics. Chosen frequently as one of the 100 best books ever written with the likes, of say, "Crime and Punishment" and "The enchanted Mountain" by Thomas Man (a highly difficult book to read) and "Anna Karenina". The main hero is called Holden Caulfield. It seems that more than all, the book spoke the language of those who did not finish growing yet, like adolescent readers. And to idealist adults. Like me.

The novel was widely controversial at start with the critics. A lot of cursing, it became boycott in many schools. But it has staying power, selling around 250000 copies per year in these days. Salinger did not have to work anymore. There is evidence that he never stopped writing, but the havoc made him not publish any of the books he wrote later.

Salinger hated that every aspect of his life was put under a magnifying glass. Immediately,

He touched millions, but had nothing more to tell them. They could not understand that. He touched our hearts so, why would he not talk to anyone? People wanted to talk to him, but aside of a short time after the book was published, he did not want to talk to them. I think he had no idea that ”The catcher in the rye” will be such a hit. His last interview was in 1980, albeit he lived until 2010. Thirty years without any interview. And with a few books written probably that he did not publish. Maybe he was afraid that a new book will not be as loved as ”The catcher in the rye”?

I remember a typical story of a fan of Salinger, awaiting near his house until Salinger came out and they met. Salinger accused this person as not being a true fan. He said: ”If you really cared for me you will not have been here”. And he said regarding his writing ”I would not be rushed.”

Rushed? This reminds me of the film ”Finding Forester”. This it seems is basically a film on Salinger. An important writer writes the best American book in the 20 century but does not write a second one. His name is William Forester. A black American teenager called Jamal Wallace becomes his student. Forester makes Jamal swear that he will not tell anyone that he knows ‘The important Forrester”. He says ”There will be no questions about why there was only one book”. After some guidance, it is clear that Jamal is not less than a genius than Forester. However, nobody can even imagine that there is such a genius 16 black man from the Bronx.

Forester opens to Jamal slowly but consistently. At one time, Forester starts talking on how come there was no second book. The exact question that he swore Jamal not to talk about. Forester says bitterly: ”After the book came, and they started to say what did he mean by this and what did he mean by that, I decided that one book is enough.” Jamal: but William, that was 45 years ago!!

At the end of this movie Forester luckily writes a second book. With Salinger it was not meant to be.
2 Comments on: 'A perfect day for Banana fish'

In this short story, he introduces the Glass family. He will return to this family again and again and it will turn out that the couple has many children but they are spread all over the world and hardly see each other. Its with so much suffering that it looks like the book of "Jov" of the old testament. His stories were very sad, the short ones.

Here we get the basics. The father and mother in the family are called Muriel Glass, wife of Seymour Glass. They are in vacation at Florida.

The wife gets a long-distance call from her mother. She finishes her fingernail before picking the phone up; Salinger in his usual strange way calls her "a girl who for a ringing dropped exactly nothing." She is too consumed by the way she looks.

In the talk we understand first that Seymour Glass is unstable.

Who drove to the hotel? asks the mother when she hears its Seymour she asks: Did he try any of that funny business with the trees?"

Seymour is WWII veteran and suffers from post traumatic stress disorder. Apparently, in the past, he willingly run the car into a tree.

Seymour called his wife not long ago "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948". This is a joke meaning she does not think on anything spiritual. She is consumed by looks, and buying, which will take a lion share of the rest of the phone conversation.

Seymour sent her a book of poems from Germany by "the only great poet of the century" (in his opinion. But this act means he is trying to save his wife). We are not told which poet is it but its clear it is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This poet was one of the smartest humans in history. His IQ was estimated to 220. He is hard to read though. He was also a scientist and many other things.

Seymour hates the family of his wife Muriel. And they hate him back. The mother says its a crime the Army released him from the hospital. Muriel wants her mother to stop. 'This is the first vacation I’ve had in years, and I’m not going to pack everything and come home'. A detail that worries everybody is that Seymour is truly pale. Made of glass?

The name Glass points to part of the craziness of Seymour. He is in the beach. Puts on a bathrobe saying that he doesn’t want people seeing his ”tattoo”. But he had no tattoo. without the bathrobe he feels naked or made of glass (see through). Later he blames a lady he does not know, that she looked at his feet in the elevator. He feels transparent, with no defense. He deals like a wounded animal.
As in the 'Catcher in the Rye' the only person he could talk to was a little girl. Sybil Carpenter. She meets Seymour. Later she will use the now well known joke that when she goes to see him she goes to "see more glass".

Seymour is great with the girl. Joking friendly. Then tells her the story of the 'Banana fish." He removes robe which means lower his defensive shield and lets us know that the next part is the crucial moment. 'This is a perfect day for banana fish' Seymour says and adds: Banana fish have a tendency to swim into holes filled with bananas. While perfectly normal fish before entering the holes, once inside the banana fish become ravenous and devour all the bananas they can spot. The result: they grow too fat to escape from the hole. "They lead a very tragic life," Seymour says.

Strangely, nothing more almost happens but a terrible incident. Seymour returns to the hotel. His wife is asleep. Seymour takes a gun that he has, and fires "a bullet through his right temple." He is dead. The end.

Why did he ever kill himself? Just because of what he saw in WWII? Definitely not. He kills himself as there is no hope. No future to the USA.

Seymour knows how bleak the future will be. Uncontrolled capitalism of the pigs. The banana fish is a metaphor for Wallstreet and us, that act like in Wallstreet. This story is like a hate letter to Gordon Gecko. The greed is good guy. He is talking on the postwar boom generation. They only care about money and consumption. The rich are trapped. The book "The wolf from Wallstreet" (later made into a film) explains that actually the rich are miserable. Because they can't stop. Always want more. This wolf was never happy in his Wallstreet days. And the rich want-to-be at trapped in the quest for money. German poetry for his wife and by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe? She would never be able to read him. Most of her talk with her mother is on buying things. Sybil will grow up. He does not want to see her turning into his wife. What Rousseau, said on children as being pure, but being destroyed by society will surely happen to Sybil. He can't stand watching that. What Seymour does not accept is getting caught in the hole himself. Salinger hates the consumption boom that came after WWII. How did these people can act like they care only about "getting stuff" after all he saw in WWII? All the dead? The holocaust? The Asian Holocaust?

I will end this 'greediness is sick' story by the beautiful word that Salinger described the post WWI. Of course he is a magician. I may not even understand what he says. But Seymour is an extension of Salinger. Could Salinger live in such a world? No. He became recluse. At least he did not kill himself.
There were ninety-seven New York advertising men in the hotel [...] She used the time, though. She read an article in a women’s pocket-size magazine, called ‘Sex is Fun - Or Hell.’ She washed her comb and brush. She took the spot out of the skirt of her beige suit. She moved the button on her Saks blouse. She tweeked out two freshly surfaced hairs in her mole. When the operator finally rang her room, she was sitting on the window seat and had almost finished putting lacquer on the nails of her left hand.”

There is so much beauty in the world (like the words above) but they only care about ”buying stuff”.

When nobody cares about beauty, every day, but every day, is a perfect day for banana fish.

3 ”The Catcher in the Rye”

We meet a boy that constantly talks to the readers. This makes us friends of the hero and has a lot of influence. This was used to even better affect in films especially ”A clockwork orange”. Seventeen years old Holden Caulfield. So Holden narrates and is the main protagonist. This causes identification.

Is Holden a child? A 17 years old should not a child. And he surprisingly has gray hair like an adult. Duality in life. Life is complex.

But Holden acts like a child. The book starts with Holden being kicked out of a a prestigious school called Agerstown. He constantly gets expelled from schools. He uses the word ”fuck” a lot and in general seems highly non conformist.

The gray hair and his curses that seem to make him an adult are conflicting with his childish behavior.

Two things are clear to me even if many others disagree. First fact (for me) is that Salinger loves Holden. In fact as usual, Holden represents Salinger. Second fact (for me) is that and Holden is an idealist. And Salinger was. He lies a lot, I know. But this is just a child defending against a cruel world. He lies to protect himself in a world full of phoney people. Those that are responsible to the lies are the phoney people, not him. Those who made him lie.
3.1 The beautiful talk on Allie

The purity of should of Holden is most touching when we read him speaking on his dead young brother Allie. Holden Caulfield had a young brother once. He thinks fondly and talks a lot on him., Allie Caulfield. Allie died of leukemia, and was frozen in the head of Holden as he was when he died. We shall later see that Holden likes frozen things. In fact freezing things is very important to him.

And he has a pure and touching love to Allie. Allie never grew. And as we shall see this is critical in this book.

This is how Holden describes him:

"But it wasn’t just that he (Allie) was the most intelligent member in the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody. People with red hair are supposed to get mad very easily, but Allie never did, and he had very red hair."

Holden speaking on the day that Allie died:

"I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I dont blame them. I really dont. I slept in the garage that night he died, and broke all the goddam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was broken and everything by that time, and so I couldn’t do it. It was a very stupid thing to do, I admit, but I hardly even knew I was doing it, and you didn’t know Allie.

A very telling line at the end: "You did not know Allie”. Beautiful. Like saying "You dont know what you are talking about, because you dont know how wonderful Allie was. And he deserved whatever I did for him. If you would have known him you would have agreed”.

3.2 Honesty

Idealists like Salinger and Holden care deeply on honesty. The father of Holden is a lawyer. A person that will say any lie to win a case.

This is apparent whenever Holden speaks on any subject. He is completely honest and does not hold his punches. A few examples.

1. On religion: "In the first place, I’m sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance.
They annoy the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while He was alive, they were about as much use to him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting him down. I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples. If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic and all, that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones. I like him ten times as much as the disciples, that poor bastard.”

The Disciples were phoney and Holden cant stand that.

2. The headmaster’s tell Holden that "life is a game”. His answer:

"Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right - I’ll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game.”

Basically he exposes the hypocrisy of the head master

3. Lets take a quote (that Holden probably did not like) by the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Steckel. His former teacher Mr. Antolini tells him: "The mark of an immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.”

The old old claim that when you grow up, and are wise in the ways of life, you should not be like Don Quixote. People that are idealists have it bad in this world. They are seen as the village idiots. People make fun of them, because people are generally cynical. However, I do not care if I am the village idiot. I welcome that.

Example: say that two lovers belong to enemy states or two enemy families. The old story of "Romeo and Juliet” and of "Aida”. "Aida” is an opera. It speaks of an Egyptian military commander, Radames, that falls in love with a captured girl named Aida. She is from Ethiopia and was captured by the Egyptian military. What they dont know for some time is that she is the daughter of the king of Ethiopia. Eventually Aida and Radames fall in love. But the so called greater good the love for their countries and the fact that two countries are in war, wins. This is why at the end Aida dies in Radames arms.

So the realistic people will say that two people from countries that are in war, should not fall inn love. The people that are like that are called ”realist” and ”wise in the ways of life”. No they are not. They are cowards conformists that will never do anything worth while for society, because to help society is to challenge its evil behavior. This needs bravery.
And I say, that love is much more important than all the stupid wars put together. Much more important that difference in religion. I say that you are not an adult if you think they should not fall in love. You are a coward. There is a difference between an adult and a coward. Its cowardly just to say: "they should not have fallen in love". Instead fight society and its evil ways. And I think Holden would have agreed with me.

I am not giving this example for no reason. Later Holden meets a teacher of his and they discuss "Romeo and Juliet" because its a typical example that a so called practical person (namely a coward) will say they should not fall in love if you belong to two families in war but an idealist will strongly disagree. I am with the idealist.

3.3 Holden in the land of the grownups

Holden does not like the adults he meets. Holden see grownups as "phoney". Caught in a race to achieve more and more material possessions. They are Banana fish.

Before he leaves the school he is lectured by one of his teacher Mr Spenser. I know myself that adults preach a lot. I remember it from my days as a young person. And almost always toward conformity. If I say anything to my daughters, it will be something highly non conformist. I never once told my daughter something that is not a rare opinion. Or based on the words of brave men. I taught them to doubt authority. Society is so hypocritical. They should known that. I told them that society is almost always wrong.

Before Holden leaves this last school, he gets into a fight with one of his college student. The fight is because somebody disparages something Holden wrote about Allie. This Holden cant stand.

He "catches" a train to New York. Hides the fact that he was again expelled from his parents. Takes a room in a hotel in immediately catches what he calls "perverts" from a close by room. Holden is a virgin even though he had plenty of occasion to have sex. But as we shall see, Holden is not big on "changes". If you are still a child, you will not have sex. And Holden in large part is still a child.

He tries to speak to three women in a bar, dances with them, and wants to create some human relation. And finds that they cant hold a conversation. Maybe they are like the wife of Seymour Glass. He does not want sex. He wants a human connection.

He invites a hooker so he would loose his virginity. The name of the prostitute is Sunny. When Sunny arrives to his room, Holden suspects that she is too young. And he should not
go ahead with this. His virginity is mostly due to his high respect for women. Holden can
not see Sunny as a "prostitute". She is just a woman in trouble, and grows worried about
her. And after she is not abstract, he is too respectful of her to have sex. Having sex is a
very "adult" thing. In fact its a sign that you outlived the influence of your parents. Holden,
that is so afraid to tell his parents that he got expelled again, is still under strong influence
of his parents. As in many adult situations, Holden starts to feel bad. I just want to talk
he says to Sally. Almost as usual his kindness is not met with kindness of the other party.
Sunny gets very angry by the turn of events. Holden does pay her but he seems to have
insulted her with all this "I just want to talk" thing. Sunny returns with her pimp, that hits
Holden. Two consecutive failures to make human contact with women. In college, at the
start of the book Holden gets angry with a student that he feels took advantage of a girl.
Respecting girls is key for him.

Holden has a young sister named Phoebe. At one of the only times in the book that he
seems to be happy is when he is thinking of what present should he buy for his 10-year-old
sister, Phoebe. He loves her. But no surprise: she is not an adult. The first time he is happy,
is therefore important. And this happens when he hears a boy singing "If a body catch a
body coming through the rye."

Holden calls Sally Hayes, a girl he used to date. Holden tells Sally to run away and be
adult: get married. She declines of course. He immediately insults her, but then the second
he does he regrets it. He tries to go after her and apologize. But he fails. But this is not
a surprise: getting married is a very adult thing to do. And that he cant do for the fear of
changing to a phoney person. He cant get a human connection. He gives up and gets drunk.

Holden seems to absolutely need to know throughout the novel: where do the ducks in
the lagoon at Central Park go in the winter when the lake is frozen. In the winter the lake
in central part is just frozen How do the duck cope with that? When the lake is one piece
of ice? They cant swim there anymore. For no apparent reason this seems a very important
question to him. This is the thing that comes back and back. The victims are cub drivers.
He asks them the question on the ducks whenever he rides a cab. A somewhat silly childish
question, is it not? Indeed, at the end one cab driver gets angry with him. Why should I
care about the ducks?

His questions are part of his try to engage in a human exchange in a meaningful way.
This eludes his until close to the end of the novel. But as I said, Holden like frozen things.
There is one place in NY that Holden loves. The Museum of Natural History. Frozen history
that contrasts what Holden does not want to happen, him getting older and growing up. The
Eskimos shown there will "forever" remain unchanged. His dead brother will never change.
His worry with the ducks is because of the change: the lake gets frozen and a problem is created. He wishes that either the lake will be always water or always frozen. He is not big on changes.

Another bad encounter:

Holden meets his English teacher, Mr. Antolini, whom he used to admire. But then this English teacher gives him a lecture on the need to be practical, that for Holden and for me is Latin for "selling your soul to the devil".

Then Holden goes to sleep and is very angry to wake up with Mr. Antolini making a homosexual advance towards him. Filth as he calls it. Can he get a genuine human interaction with anyone?

The summary so far is not that good. He founds adults that are dishonest, like his gay teacher, they are superficial like Sally. And are hypocritical, and pretentious like the teacher who preached to him. A character that bares some resemblance to Holden may be, in its sick way, the character of Oscar in 'Tin Drum' that decides at one time not to turn an adult. Oscar stays a dwarf. He is just too afraid to grow up. A similar girl can be found in the book "The Hotel New Hampshire". This young girl says: "Sorry but I can’t grow, and kills herself”.

There comes the time in the life of a teenager that they realize that soon they will have to stand alone. I remember how scary this was. And if the world so far has no hope, as the world of Holden, its even worse.

3.4 The only human he really loves

Finally he meets his younger sister Phoebe. And for the first time, he finds a human he can communicate with.

Phebe asks Holden: Tell me Holden, what would you really like to do when YOU GROW UP?

So Holden pictures this nice image:

'Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they’re running and they don’t look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That’s all I do all day. I’d just
be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it’s crazy, but that’s the only things I ever want to do”.

She made him tell the strange story about the “catcher in the rye”. Of course, symbolically, the cliff is growing up, becoming adult phony and unkind. Holden wants to keep the children from growing up, from becoming adults and forget their “innocence”. Freeze their situation. Catch them. When they are about to fall (become adults) he will come up from nowhere and save them. Holden has the word hold inside the name. Hold the children. And he also has the name field in his name.

Holden suddenly decides to go west and pretend that he is deaf-mute. A deaf-mute does not have to interact with people. All his failures at human connection made Holden want to cut his ties to society. This way he could avoid all this painful human contact. But his sister wants to go with him. Holden says ”no way” and Phoebe gets upset, a thing that Holden probably finds painful. Holden thinks his pure sister deserves more than that. His pure sister that also tells him so many times: ”don’t curse”.

Thus because of his sister Holden decides not to leave after all. His sister is the one who managed to convince him not to be so childish, and not to be a coward that gives up. Cutting ties with society is a coward thing to do.

When he stays he will have to face his parents again, and this is scary. But this is the honest thing to do. Confront problems you created tells him his sister.

Holden takes his sister to the Central Park Zoo. When he sees her riding a carousel, he becomes very happy. Only children, pure children, can make him happy.

Then Holden speaks to us in a strange way that maybe can explain the silence of Salinger. He describes this day (namely the entire book) as inconsequential. The book is absolutely not important? How come? Salinger says that what you can experience in life if you can just take personal responsibility, is something worth fighting for. No book or any art, Salinger thinks, is as important as reality. As life. This is a motto of the book often lost. So ”The catcher in the rye” is a good book. But if it makes you stop living, its a mistake. Books no matter how good they are are not life.

The second thing he says is that he will attend another school in September. He still does not know if he wants to study hard. Holden says something that seems almost insane: he misses two of his former classmates with whom he had a fight, and even the pimp who punched him.

Here Salinger warns against the way he and Seymour Glass and Holden act. You cant live in the past. You cant make this book into a monument and grand scale it, you are taking
the book’s name in vain. It is as if Salinger worried that this book will be misused. He tells people that if you cling to the past like Holden “Frozen” Caulfield and Seymour “suicide” Glass a dark destiny awaits you.

One of the last things that Holden says is that talking to other on people, will make you miss them. A warning to the readers. Living in the past is not the right thing. It will only cause pain.

I can fully understand why this book will be so liked by adolescents. They are more idealists then grownup. I am an idealist myself. I have no worries or shame on anything true they say about me. Just dont lie about me. "The catcher in rye" is an honest book. At no second does it lie. Are there more books like that. Maybe, but they do not talk about my problems. This is a book that talks about idealist people like me. Why will I care about some Russian family, in which the lead character kills herself at the end. Why will I care about some hospital on a mountain that represents the irrational part of the German soul. I am not German. Many people felt that the book is ”on them”. This is the source of the huge success People that called it trash in the past are now as phony as to say its a great book. ”Thanks”, but: No. The book does not need your support. Its too late now.

3.5 The evil uses of this book

Salinger probably watched with anger that this book became linked to murders: Mark David Chapman’s shooting of John Lennon. His defense in court was to read a passage from ”The catcher in the rye”. He really thought that he is ”Holden Caulfield” and he is punishing John Lennon the non conformist that replaced all these ideas with a safe and easy life. Also John was not attacking society anymore. John Hinckley, Jr. shut Ronald Reagan in 1981. Police found The Catcher in the Rye among half a dozen other books in his hotel room. The film ”Conspiracy Theory” presented a paranoid with an uncontrollable urge to buy ”The catcher in the rye”. This character says: ”No I dont like the book in particular. But every time I see the book I must have it, to feel normal again”. Since the book ”The catcher in the rye” is so strong, its possible to compare it to a brainwash book. There were rumors and (despicable) theories that ”The catcher in the rye” was used in a grad scale by the army. They brainwashed soldiers. The accusation is that this book was part of the process. They turned those soldiers to Manchurian Candidates: if you phone them and tell them the appropriate line, they will become programmed machine, whose only intent is killing the one they were programmed to kill. And according to those rumors, what was the code line that started this process? It was ”The catcher in the rye”. Thank you. How kind.
The ending of the book warns **against** this book. This shows how far is this book from all those psychopaths. Its like Kubrick (a clear idealist) rolling back the screening of "A Clockwork Orange" in England, because of many copycat cases that simulated the violence of the droogs. Because his film, that he wanted to condemn violence, failed big time. The only film to cause violence. Kubrick could not stand that. The film was allowed in England only in 2000, a year after Kubrick died.

Holden killing someone? You are confused regarding what an idealist is. Idealist people do not kill. Only cynical people kill.

For years Salinger was able to make a fortune by selling the book for film right and always answered the same, no matter how large was the prize. He told to those who wanted to make money in cinema on Holden Caulfield that "Holden would not have wanted that"