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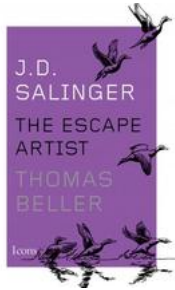
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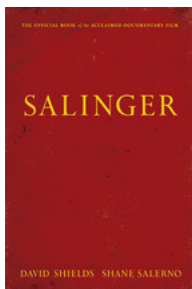
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THE SALINGER RIDDLE

ROSS POSNOCK

J. D. SALINGER: THE
ESCAPE ARTIST
Thomas Beller

New Harvest, 2014

[BUY](#)SALINGER
David Shields and
Shane SalernoSimon and Schuster,
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November 1, 2014 — “You wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it,” says Holden Caulfield of books that “really knock [him] out.” This is one of the most quoted lines from one of the most famous American novels of the 20th century, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has sold well over 65 million copies worldwide. With their enthusiastic assumption that the novel you love was written by a lovable person—that art and life are continuous—Holden’s words point to the promise of intimacy that is often said to result from the unique bond Salinger establishes with his readers. “I’d ask him if he’ll be *our* catcher, our catcher in the rye,” replied a suburban Boston high school kid in the ’90s when asked why she wanted to go with some classmates to find Salinger in Cornish, New Hampshire.

A similar impulse inspires Thomas Beller to take a “pilgrimage,” documented in *J. D. Salinger: The Escape Artist*, to visit places where Salinger lived and soak up the “positive energy.” Standing in the Park Avenue apartment where Salinger spent his childhood, Beller remarks that Salinger’s fans are convinced that his “voice”—its “real presence and meaning”—is “directed, in some way, at them. This is part of the Salinger genius—even when his audience became, at least for a while, enormous, the work spoke directly to each individual.”

After 63 years Holden’s words have become poignant, and hauntingly ironic. Everyone knows that Salinger was a notorious recluse, renouncing public life in 1953. But we have also discovered he was a misanthrope, and would have quickly hung up had a reader called to speak with the creator of Holden Caulfield. Now that the private side of his withdrawal has come to light, the array of eccentricities and bad behaviors found there has come to dominate our attention. Initiating the shift were two memoirs in 1999 and 2000: the first by a former lover, Joyce Maynard, and the second by his daughter, Margaret. Each depicted an often cruel and distant man. In their wake came several biographies, the most recent of which is 2013’s oral biography *Salinger*, a nastily inflected version of these earlier laments, by David Shields and Shane Salerno (accessorized by a television documentary produced by Salerno). Unremittingly snide and censorious, they seem to have appropriated the pain that these two women suffered through direct experience.

From these accumulated grievances a portrait of Salinger in New Hampshire emerges: except to a handful of old army buddies and editors of the *New Yorker*, the writer was grumpy and self-absorbed, a hypocrite and misogynist. He was obsessed with purity, preaching detachment and spiritual fastidiousness while chasing women often less than half his age, blind to the destruction inflicted on his family by his own egomania and selfishness.

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He insisted on spending most of his time writing in a small cabin in the woods, literally detached from his family, often ignoring them. He reserved his loyalty and love for the fictional Glass family. Yet more

perverse was his refusal to publish after 1965, dedicating those labors to posterity

and locking his manuscripts in a vault. More Glass stories and a war novel are among the works evidently slated for publication, perhaps starting in 2015.

After such knowledge what forgiveness? One might reach for consolation in a line from Auden's elegy to Henry James: "There are many whose works / Are in better taste than their lives." Auden's implied distinction acknowledges how misplaced the reader's yearning, even assumption, is, that Salinger the private person is at one with his characters, who are full of tenderness, love, and solicitude for each other. "Whatever he may be, he is not going to be your catcher in real life. Get what you can from his writings, his stories," warns his daughter, Margaret. But our need to ignore the distinction and see art and life as coextensive testifies to the powerful spell of Salinger's imagination.

Salinger, in sum, presents a fascinating, complicated, even bizarre American cultural conundrum: despite a half century of silence he still arouses passions, be they loyal (Beller), sorrowful (Joyce Maynard and Margaret Salinger), hateful (Shields and Salerno), or violent (both John Hinckley and Mark David Chapman loved *The Catcher in the Rye*, a point to which we will return). And all the while his first novel stirs new generations of adolescents, drawn by Holden's mix of sweetness and obscenity, by this lost boy and intrepid romantic who also possesses a "built-in, shock-proof crap detector," to borrow a phrase from Hemingway, a warm admirer. Yet Salinger's fiction after *Catcher* seems virtually invisible by comparison: *Framny and Zoey*, *Raise High the Roofbeam*, *Carpenters*, *Seymour: An Introduction*, and "Hapworth 16, 1924," his last publication.

Thus the strangest feature of Salinger's current standing is the void where his literary reputation should be. Casebooks on *Catcher* proliferate but there is precious little beyond that. Of the two major scholarly journals of American literature, *American Literary History* and *American Literature*, one has yet to publish a single article on him and the other has published only two in 60 years.

Filling the critical gap are the assassins, so suggest Beller and Shields. "By exiling everyone else he left himself with the crazy people," remarks Beller. According to Shields we should understand the crazies as offering powerful readings of Salinger: "*The Catcher in the Rye* reemerges in the 1980s, misinterpreted as an assassination manual ... The assassinations and attempted assassinations are not a coincidence; they constitute frighteningly clairvoyant readings of *Catcher*—the assassins intuiting the underlying postwar anger and violence in the book." Absurd as the remark is, at least it reminds us of the oddities that mark Salinger's current critical standing. With the assassins in jail, ominously named fan sites like "Dead Caulfields" solemnly tend the sacred flame.

The result is that Salinger's literary achievement is scandalously underappreciated, his considerable intellectual distinction smothered by clichés: the Glasses as drowning in cuteness, sainthood, and hothouse self-regard. (Janet Malcolm's persuasive 2001 dissent, "Justice to J. D. Salinger," is an exception to the rule.)¹ By the early '60s, the die was cast—in 1961, Irving Howe called him "the priest of an underground cult." The next year, Mary McCarthy accused him of depicting the Glass family as a "closed circuit" of narcissism. Whether an in-group or "cult," the point was to mark off a fanatical readership of "well-scrubbed" apolitical rich kids, too self-involved to rebel or conquer, merely "bright, 'cool,' estranged."²

This critique from the left doubtless helped to sink Salinger's reputation among academics in succeeding decades. More interested in literary sociology, Howe largely overlooked Salinger as a novelist of ideas.

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Those ideas are embedded in the exuberant conversational fencing of his hyper-reflective, self-mocking characters as they interrogate the possibility of spiritual life for the urban intellectual in a secular world.

Because Salinger's inquiry centers on the mystic, unbalanced Seymour Glass, the most "profuse verbalizer" in a family stocked with them, Salinger bids farewell to

the tightly disciplined short story form and improvises a more capacious model. He practiced an art of renunciation, both at the biographical level, where he was guided by the otherworldly Eastern teachings that also preoccupy his characters, and, most tellingly, in the aesthetic sense, where he made renunciation a compositional resource. He did so by abandoning the reigning laconic template (perfected by Hemingway) for a reflexive and discursive style.

Before concluding with a bit more about this formal achievement, I will survey the carnage of Salinger's reputation. "Carnage" is not inappropriate. He served three years on or near the front lines in some of the deadliest campaigns of the Second World War. Rising from private to staff sergeant in the 12th Infantry Regiment, Salinger was part of the D-Day landing at Utah Beach, fought in the Battle of the Bulge and the horrific debacle of the Hurtgen Forest. In winter combat he survived in foxholes filled with icy water, and in the spring of 1945 he was among the first to "liberate" Dachau and other Nazi death camps, later remarking to his daughter: "You never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose entirely, no matter how long you live." In July '45 he spent time in a hospital in Nuremberg, exhausted and, he said, "despondent." Upon being honorably discharged, Salinger had never missed a day of service.

He became a husband, father, lover—charming, brilliant, and handsome—but also harsh, and impossible to please or live with. Psychically scarred by his ordeal, he never truly left the battlefield, according to his daughter: "For the entire time I lived with my father I saw no going back, no discernible return from soldier to civilian." The war "was the point of reference that defined everything else in relation to it." And she adds: "There is a quality, among those who have suffered, of not taking things for granted the way the rest of us do. As long as I've known him, my father has never taken being warm and dry and not being shot at for granted."

Typical of his book's search-and-destroy mentality, Shields strips the compassion from Margaret Salinger's remark, comparing her father's creation of the Glass family to "pulling an immense blanket over himself: from now on he will keep himself warm by the heat of this impossibly idealized, suicidal, genius alternative family. This will become his mission: to disappear into the Glasses." The shivering Salinger, declares Shields, had PTSD, a diagnosis plausibly made by earlier biographers. Less plausible is the artistic disaster that Shields insists followed *Catcher*: "Suffering from PTSD, and searching for meaning and God, he made religion his art." Salinger "was no longer a novelist per se," instead "writing 'wisdom literature'—metaphysical uplift ... 'translation' and popularization" became his task. The verdict is ringing and simple: "The war broke him as a man and made him a great artist; religion offered him postwar spiritual solace and killed his art."

This leaves one wondering: just *when* was Salinger great? Presumably, only in *Catcher*; the rest is just a means of cheering himself up. With his typical portentous certitude, Shields concludes the book: "He came to revile the world, so he disappeared into Vedanta. The pain was severe and profound, and he couldn't fully face it or alleviate it. Desperate for cures, he destroyed himself: withdrawal, silence, inward collapse. The wounds undid him, and he went under." If only Salinger had been more balanced and sane in his life and art, is the incessant moralizing undertow; so eager are Shields and Salerno to correct their wayward subject that the latter praises "Franny" for having "the balance about right: 80 percent story and character, 20 percent religion and lecture."

SALINGER PRACTICED AN ART OF RENUNCIATION, BOTH AT THE BIOGRAPHICAL LEVEL, AND IN THE AESTHETIC SENSE.

To this jaw-dropping account of aesthetic creation by the numbers it is hard to know how to respond. Yet, as Adam Gopnik pointed out in the *New Yorker*, despite its tone-deafness to art and its procrustean arraignment of the subject, *Salinger* is not

worthless. "If you want to grasp why silence is so appealing to artists whose audience has grown too loud ... if you want to understand why the young J. D.

Salinger fled New York publishing, fanatic readers, eager biographers, disingenuous interpreters, character assassination in the guise of ‘scholarship,’ and the literary world generally, you need only open this book.”³

Perhaps the basic problem that afflicts *Salinger* is being blissfully, blindly, at cross-purposes. On the one hand it is committed to the literal, the historical record—when Salinger’s war experiences are described we get more than enough pictures of heaps of piled-up naked corpses from the death camps—and on the other hand impatient with the *merely* literal. All must be grist for the insatiable thesis. Shields even turns Salinger’s Sunday ritual, in old age, of attending a Vermont church supper to have a roast beef dinner, arriving early and sitting alone with his wife, into a ploy, yet one more expression of the man’s inveterate hypocrisy: “They went to the suppers, but Salinger kept himself closed off at them. Approach. Avoid. Attract attention. Spurn it.”

The determination not to be taken in by appearances is a Puritan and Platonic habit of mind, and it wreaks havoc with the enterprise of biography. No wonder Shields’s zeal for allegory transforms Hinckley and Chapman into literary critics. Even on this point, Shields is not quite coherent: as noted above, he says that *Catcher* was “misinterpreted” as a manual for killing even as he dubs the assassinations “clairvoyant readings.” Like coherence, the literal is a casualty of allegory: assassinations become “readings,” characters become their creator—doomed Seymour *is* Salinger—and war atrocities somehow become portable. “In Cornish, Salinger surrounded himself with the dense, tall evergreens, the cold, dark winters, and the isolating terrain of Hurtgen, but now from a commanding position.” No pain, no disaster, no church supper, is off-limits. Most deliriously vulgar: “The bullet that entered Seymour’s brain in 1949 [when Seymour Glass shoots himself at the end of “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”] kept travelling through American history, all the way to John Lennon, Ronald Reagan and beyond. *Catcher* is so saturated with war damage that sociopaths can see it, as if with X-ray glasses.”

This comic-book rendition of history aside, the real mystery regarding Salinger and the war is the relative *absence* of physical violence in his work. Seymour’s death is an anomaly. Holden does express homicidal fantasies toward various people he dislikes, but he also says of the habits of those he loves, “That kills me,” which is hardly a death wish. Seymour’s siblings, especially Buddy and Zooney, do messily and angrily grieve over Seymour, and the Glasses mock professors, psychiatrists, and other know-it-alls, but their ridicule is far from the desire “to maim or kill all his critics” that Shields claims is ubiquitous.

Arriving after *Salinger* and providing merciful contrast, Beller’s book is lucky in its timing. *The Escape Artist* presents a fan’s notes; its tone is casual and low-key. An admired novelist, Beller here tries his hand at an impressionistic biography/memoir reminiscent of Geoff Dyer’s treatment of D. H. Lawrence in *Out of Sheer Rage*. A native New Yorker, like Salinger, Beller has a sense of kinship with his subject, which he explores by retracing some of Salinger’s boyhood haunts. Yet these nostalgic excursions are less interesting than the new angles Beller finds. He is enlightening on the subtle work of Salinger’s unsung *New Yorker* editor Gus Loblano and on the *Time* magazine 1961 cover story on Salinger. Beller finds seeds of the media’s later obsession in the *Time* article, which begins with a report of Cornish neighbors finding unbearable his “keeping to himself.” These neighbors, notes Beller, “had to scale a fence and trespass on his property while he was away. He hadn’t invited them into his home and his life, so they were forced to break in ... Their actions personify *Time*’s neurotic relationship with Salinger. It would be a template for years to come.”

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“What goaded *Time*,” Beller acutely observes, was the “vexing feeling that there was something there that couldn’t be explained,” the search for a “hidden riddle” also captivated Salinger’s readers. Would that Beller had engaged that riddle at

greater length. Instead, he tends to raise rather than pursue questions, and the result is that *The Escape Artist* is less consequential than it might have been.

Like Shields, but less sweepingly, Beller disapproves of “the role of Zen Buddhism” in Salinger’s life and work. He is disappointed on reading Salinger’s recently released letters to his spiritual guide Swami Nikhilananda: “Absent are the absurd, bizarre digressions and impersonations” that enliven his other letters. Ironically, this epistolary constriction precisely inverts Zen’s actual aesthetic effect on Salinger’s fiction. The Glass stories after “Bananafish” are distinguished by openness and digression, since their animating formal and emotional premise is that Seymour’s “character lends itself to no legitimate sort of narrative compactness,” as writer and narrator Buddy Glass tells us at the start of *Seymour: An Introduction*. Neither are Buddy’s feelings “compact”—he is grieving and unsettled but also “ecstatically happy,” by which he means he is in tune with the Zen edict abolishing closure and hierarchy for access to the divine of this world. Salinger turns this openness into Buddy’s compositional principle of digression and deferral, qualities that also characterize his own ambivalence about finishing a portrait of Seymour. Writing inside this Zen indifference to all goals save the abolition of desire, Salinger brings us into the mind of a character in the act of struggling—comically and earnestly—toward the “pure consciousness” of satori, a realm of enlightenment immune to contingency.

All this is so much nonsense to David Shields, who calls Salinger’s art “perfect” in the sense of “airless” and “claustrophobic,” leaving the “reader no room to breathe,” and who neatly parcels out “Salinger’s best tendencies (his devotion to literary art)” and his “worst tendencies (toward recusal, toward isolation, renunciation, purity).” This misses the spiritual bridge Salinger built between art and renunciation. Buddhism didn’t kill his work; it helped him abandon the rigidity of the Hemingway / *New Yorker* aesthetic. The manic dissonant monologue *Seymour* is a working-through of grief that anticipates the choice made by Zen adept Roland Barthes (in *The Neutral*) “to live according to nuance.”⁴ This alertness to the delicate and fragile imbues Salinger’s novel with the wayward energy of improvisatory immediacy. His voice still leaps off the page, which, after all, is what counts.

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- 1 “Justice to J. D. Salinger,” *New York Review of Books*, June 21, 2001.
- 2 Irving Howe, “More Reflections in the Glass Mirror,” *New York Times Book Review*, April 7, 1963.

- 3 Adam Gopnick, “Who Was J.D. Salinger?,” the *New Yorker*, September 5, 2013.
- 4 *The Neutral*, (Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 11.

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1 APOLOGUES

Nov 4, 10:36 p.m.

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Forget about the man, he had every right to be a recluse. The problem is his trajectory as a writer. He wasn't even great in "Catcher." If Holden had possessed Hemingway's first-rate crap detector, it would have gone off in his own presence. I read it at the right age, and couldn't respond to that much "sensibility." (I'm trying to be kind about fecklessness, self-pity, and preciousness.) Some of the stories are beautiful, some of "Franny and Zooey." He does small children wonderfully. He has an ear for dialogue. He had talent. But having gotten off a boffo ending to "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," he then wrote himself into an absolutely impossible corner: you can't explain that particular suicide as the act of a fully realized Zen adept. With "Hapworth 16, 1924," he trips the light fantastic, and not in a good way. It's not only awful in itself, it's the cause of awfulness in other works, casting a backward shadow over the whole Glass family saga -- and it doesn't bear thinking about what would have followed. Salinger lost his way and there is no good reason to imagine that he found it again. The dismal biographical details should be ignored as gossip, but they don't do anything to give us confidence in the post-Hapworth writer. Salinger fans would do well to hope that nothing more will ever be published, because they are going to be bitterly disappointed.