

Nine Stories and the Death of the Storyteller

Roland Kelts

J. D. Salinger's *Nine Stories* is a collection bookended by death and violence and uncontrollable rage. The opening story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," ends with the suicide of its mystically troubled male protagonist, Seymour, in the presence of his newlywed wife, via a shotgun blast to the head. Its closer, "Teddy," finishes with the eponymous child prodigy very possibly plunging his 10-year-old body into an empty swimming pool—in front of his shrieking younger sister.

None of this startled me when I first encountered these stories twenty-some years ago.

I read *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's only published full-fledged novel, when I was fourteen years old. Its first-person voice, turning back on itself with self-contradictory clauses and emitting just enough irreverence to be edgy while remaining respectable, felt like my own voice, amplified and sharpened, as it has for so many American adolescents. I was stunned by the copyright date (1951! How could an old man know so much about me?), but I had also read enough by then to know that some artistic sleight-of-hand was at work in every good book, and *Catcher*, I felt, was a dangerously good one.

There were half-parallels I pointed to in my mind to convince me of *Catcher*'s personal relevance: I hadn't grown up in New York City, okay, but I was born there and idolized it. And because I grew up in the northeast not far from the city, I recognized the novel's mise-en-scène: the freezing winter weather, the prep school campus (my parents raised me in numerous academic towns in New England, often only blocks away from stern brick enclaves), and those haughty, neurotic adults and pompous, self-regarding pedagogues who counseled or infuriated the narrator, Holden Caulfield. Plus, my father was a jazz musician, fan and record collector. Holden's offhand disquisitions in a Village bar on real music (art) versus showmanship (entertainment) rang intimately true to me: I'd heard my father point this out to me during numerous listening sessions.

But most important to me was Holden's younger sister, Phoebe. I, too, had a younger sister. She was younger in years than Phoebe, but not by very much, and I cared for her, and about her, more than a teenage boy usually wants to admit. I picked her up from the babysitter's every day after school when my parents were at work, brewed bowls of instant ramen for the two of us, and took her up to my room as I furiously practiced drumming while

she danced around to loud music. It didn't matter if I had band rehearsal, or soccer practice, or if some flirtatious female classmate invited me to hang out at McDonald's. My sister mattered more.

Near the end of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden and Phoebe meet on the steps of the Natural History Museum in midtown Manhattan. Holden is about to run away, to leave his misery behind and launch off into the American frontier, the myth of the virgin American West, which had already died by then. Phoebe is supposed to bring him a suitcase of his necessities, but the suitcase she brings is too big—because it contains her necessities, too.

And in my understanding of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the only reason the novel was being narrated at all by a living soul, its story being told by a young man in a rehabilitation center—a boy who had ultimately *survived*, in other words, rather than succumbing to his honest, intelligent, incontestable gripes about the crushingly hypocritical world he is about to enter as a man—was that his younger sister, Phoebe, refused to let him go alone. She made him stay and survive because she finally made him feel, genuinely, needed.

##

I was never a book collector as a kid, and I'm still not one. I prefer to read, ruminate, and consign the physical product—the book itself—to the earthly, the corners of the rooms I must inhabit to survive, savoring only the living memory of what the writer did to my head. If you are, at least partly, what you read, who needs the paper product on which the work has been mass-produced?

My parents were academics, he an American scientist, she a Japanese linguist, and they had books and magazines everywhere, strewn around the living room. I loved what books could give me, and I loved shoving them into the hands of my friends, but I didn't want them weighing me down like so much concrete on a convict's feet.

But after I read *Catcher*, I wanted to have a shelf of Salinger books in my bedroom—an honorary place for the author who had suggested to me, however inadvertently over the decades, a reason to live.

The next book I grabbed was *Nine Stories*. None of the nine features Holden's youthful first-person urban dialect. As a reader accustomed to the blunt repetition of the *Hardy Boys* series and the confabulations of Dickens, this struck me first: J.D. Salinger might be entertaining, but he was not an entertainer.

I marveled first at the way this third-person voice in the opening paragraphs of

“Bananafish,” an entirely new register of sound and rhythm from the same *Catcher* author, could be so meticulously detailed, authoritative and detached—while also recognizable. I felt intuitively that this was the same soul who animated Holden Caulfield, but now he was describing the minutiae of a Honeymoon suite in a Florida hotel. There were exactly “ninety-seven New York advertising men” in the very same hotel. The woman in question had a “Saks blouse” and squeezed out precisely “two freshly surfaced hairs” from a mole. The article she was reading wasn’t just an article. It was called, specifically: “Sex Is Fun—or Hell.”

In short, this felt like the same author itemizing “all that David Copperfield kind of crap,” the bedrock details of the 19th Century novel, that Holden blithely dismisses in the first few lines of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Had I been betrayed?

“Bananafish” runs 15 pages in the paperback edition of *Nine Stories*, but it reads like it were five pages long. When I arrive at the closing lines—“...looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple”—I am jolted back to Holden in an instant.

This was indeed the same author, and here was a protagonist who hadn’t survived, who didn’t have a Phoebe, but merely a Muriel (Seymour’s material-obsessed wife), and nothing and no one else to save him.

At fifteen, I skipped to the last story in the book, as I still do when I read story collections, wanting to know how an author and his editors and now agents will want to shape what has become an ungainly product in the publishing industry: a collection of stories, written at different times about different worlds and published previously elsewhere by a writer with a vision hoping to pay rent.

In this case, my strategy worked magic. “Teddy” is very much a bookend to “Bananafish,” and a revealing one. Both stories feature hyper-intelligent young men who find childhood to be a kind of Zen period of openness and authenticity. Both begin with richly voiced hyper-detailed settings which lull the reader into complacency, to close on acts of brutality that suggest death as the only refuge for the truly sensitive, the awesomely aware.

But I didn’t think of this when I was fifteen, and I don’t actually feel this way now, re-reading the books for this essay.

Salinger has been praised for his dialogues, which are theatrical, smart, and, like Woody Allen’s and Martin Scorsese’s, brilliantly unreal. He has been criticized in equal parts for a fawning adoration of his characters—for presenting Franny and Zooey, two Ivy League whiners, as models of American spiritual yearning, for example, or even for being too easy on Holden, who is, after all, a frustrated, and somewhat childish, kid—and for being a nihilist.

Per usual, the criticism sheds more light on the critics than it does the artist who inspired them. Salinger was writing amid an America coming of age even before it knew how to do so, and his stories, read today, feel heartbreakingly earnest. His characters smoke mindlessly (good for them!), indulging in the passions of a rich life, but are spiritually aimless. They are “shell-shocked,” as the cliché goes, by war, but it was a war that we have long left behind—and we have new wars now, none of which have left us the wiser.

Yet I suspect that my initial attraction to Salinger still abides today. He presents your brother, your sister, your wife—in ways you’d rather not acknowledge, but that you know are true.

In short: he does what we ask of fiction writers. To tell us the *truth*.

##

The sixth story of *Nine Stories* is a masterpiece. “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” defies categorization.

I read it under the sun at my parents’ home in New Hampshire, 1985 or so. I had no context. I only knew that the beginning was voiced in my beloved writer’s first-person perspective, but that he sounded tired, and alert, all at once.

It starts with an account of an American preparing for war. He details all the absurdities of preparation (as if preparing to die has any worth at all), then recounts, in vivid, archaic prose, his encounter with Esmé.

This was the point when I began to realize that J. D. Salinger was a playwright, a master of spoken language, who could lull you into spaces you didn’t want to inhabit, and then shoot you in the head. This taught me that true punk, true rebellion, was soft-toned, delicate and smart.

“Esmé” features two characters, and then characters named Corporal Z and X, and then nameless, but never featureless, characters trapped in the awful stupidity of civilized violence.

Civilized violence is a phrase Holden would appreciate, I suspect.

“Esmé” devolves or evolves into an epistolary story, a story of letters, fast scribbling in coded language that nevertheless expresses desperate, yearning meanings. Read it now and you will be reminded of email and text messages, of our inability to express ourselves in anything but the most mundane language, over topics that are yet most important to us, and to them.

It now seems to me that *Nine Stories* took Salinger into a zone of unforgiving frankness: once he left behind the clarity and directness of the first person, of Holden Caulfield's necessary quirks, he became the authoritarian third-person narrator, the overlord in a world he never wanted to own.

"Esmé" closes with one of the most famous last lines in modern American literature: "You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *always* stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his fac—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact."

The Esmé in the title is a young girl, the narrator a shell-shocked middle-aged man. He is looking to her to provide some reason to survive in a world gone horribly wrong.

When you read these stories today, as I have just done, you cannot avoid the divorce at the heart of them: the divorce between who we are and what we are made to be, what we want and what we need, and, ultimately, violence and true retribution.

Salinger is brilliantly theatrical, and dated—but only inasmuch as we forget how much we need to speak to one another, to carry suitcases too big for our own selves, and to bear burdens that are bigger than our rages.