

'Dramatically vivid and
psychologically astute'
New York Times Book Review

SALINGER

A BIOGRAPHY

NOW A
MAJOR
FILM

PAUL ALEXANDER



Salinger

A Biography

PAUL ALEXANDER

PICADOR

for Christopher Gines
for Lauren Alexander
for my family
and for James C. Vines III,
literary raconteur extraordinaire,
without whom this book would not exist

“Don’t you want to join us?”

I was recently asked by an acquaintance when he ran across me alone after midnight in a coffeehouse that was already almost deserted.

“No, I don’t,” I said.

FRANZ KAFKA
as quoted by Salinger in “Zooey”

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Acknowledgments

After he was prevented from publishing *A Writer's Life*, his biography of J. D. Salinger, Ian Hamilton deposited his entire Salinger research file in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University Library. Anyone can read the sizable file, which I did. As I studied the documents, I found much biographical material Hamilton had not used in writing *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, the book about the controversy that he produced when the courts blocked the publication of *A Writer's Life*. I was also helped immensely by the *New Yorker* archive at the New York Public Library, which became open to the public after Hamilton published *In Search of J. D. Salinger*. Mine is the first book to use this important archive as source material. In addition, I did research work in which I was supplied with research material by various libraries at Columbia University, New York University, and the University of Texas as well as the rare book and manuscript collection at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, the Gotham Book Mart, the Library of Congress Copyright Office, and the alumni offices at Harvard University and Yale University. In the Clerk's Office in the county courthouse in Sullivan County, New Hampshire, I found Salinger's divorce papers, which had not been studied by other biographers before. Finally, through various sources, I was able to piece together much of what was said in Salinger's deposition in *J. D. Salinger versus Random House and Ian Hamilton*—the only formal interview for which Salinger has ever sat.

As for secondary sources, I read *Advertisements for Myself* by Norman Mailer, *At Home in the World* and *Baby Love* by Joyce Maynard, *Chaplin* by David Robinson, *Charles Chaplin: My Autobiography* by Charles Chaplin, *Conversations with Capote* by Lawrence Grobel, *Dirty Little Secrets of World War II* by James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* by Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, *The Films of Susan Hayward* by Eduardo Moreno, *Genius in Disguise* by Thomas Kunkel, *Goldwyn* by A. Scott Berg, *Here at the New Yorker* by Brendan Gill, *Here But Not Here* by Lillian Ross, *In Search of J. D. Salinger* by Ian Hamilton, *J. D. Salinger* by Warren French, *J. D. Salinger* by James Lundquist, *J. D. Salinger: An Annotated Bibliography* by Jacob R. Sublette, *J. D. Salinger and the Critics* edited by William Belcher and James Lee, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* by Sylvia Plath, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Louise Bogan* by Elizabeth Frank, *Modern European History* by John Barber, *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait* edited by Henry Grunwald, *Salinger's Glass Stories as a Composite Novel* by Eberhard Alsen, *Translate This Darknet* by Claire Douglas, *Trio: The Intimate Friendship of Carol Matthau, Oona Chaplin, and Gloria Vanderbilt* by Aram Saroyan, *United States* by Gore Vidal, *What I Know So Far* by Gordon Lish, *A Writer's Life* (galley only) by Ian Hamilton.

Several magazine articles were of great value, among them "In Search of the Mysterious J. D. Salinger" by Ernest Havemann (*Life*, November 3, 1961); "J. D. Salinger" by William Maxwell (*Book-of-the-Month Club News*, July 1951); "The Private World of J. D. Salinger" by Edward Kosner (*The*

New York Post Magazine, April 30, 1961); “Sonny: An Introduction” (*Time*, September 15, 1961); “Tiny Mummies!” and “Lost in the Whichy Thicket” by Tom Wolfe (*New York*, April 1965); “What Did Last Summer” by Betty Eppes (*The Paris Review*, 1981). For their interviews, research material, or other help, I’d like to thank William Abbe, N. Wade Ackley, Paul Adao, Roberta Adao, Mark Alspach, A. Alvarez, Roger Angell, William Avery, Alex Beam, John Calvin Batchelor, A. Scott Ber, Naomi Bliven, Harold Bloom, Andreas Brown, Troy Cain, Robert Callagy, Ann Close, Kathy Constantini, Richard D. Deitzler, Elizabeth Drew, James Edgerton, Leslie Epstein, Clay Felker, Ian Frazier, Dorothy B. Ferrell, Warren French, Frances Glassmoyer, Robert Giroux, Jonathan Goldberg, Richard Gonder, Lawrence Grobel, Leila Hadley, Ian Hamilton, Lianne Hart, Edward W. Hayes, Susi Gilder Hayes, Samuel Heath, Anabel G. Heyen, Franklin Hill, Rust Hills, Phoebe Hoban, Russell Hoban, William H. Honan, A. E. Hotchner, Peter Howard, Robert Jaegers, Burnace Fitch Johnson, Richard Johnson, Elaine Joyce, Frances Kiernan, Mary D. Kierstead, Edward Kosner, Thomas Kunke Penny Landau, Robert Lathbury, Gordon Lish, Rebecca Lish, Mary Loving, Gigi Mahon, Ved Mehta, Daniel Meneker, Sylvia Miles, Gloria Murray, Norman Nelson, Ethel Nelson, Katrinka Pellechia, George Plimpton, Paige Powell, Ron Rosenbaum, Jennifer Lish Schwartz, Jonathan Schwartz, Al Silverman, Dinitia Smith, Michael Solomon, Charles Steinmetz, Roger Straus, Gay Talese, Joan Ullman, Amanda Vaill, Gus Van Sant, Daniel White, Maura Wogan, Tom Wolfe, and Ben Yagoda. For his friendship and advice I’d also like to acknowledge James Ortenzio, someone who’s always there when he’s needed.

While I worked on this book, I wrote “Talk of the Town,” an article about Lillian Ross and William Shawn, and “J. D. Salinger’s Women” for *New York*, where I’m lucky to have John Homans as my editor. It takes years to write a book, so as I’m working on one I often write for magazines. I’d like to thank my editors at the various publications I work for who have supported me while I’ve written this book—Laurie Abraham, Tom Beer, Richard Blow, Robin Cembalest, Lisa Chase, Will Dana, Jessica Dineen, Milton Esterow, Erika Fortgang, Mark Horowitz, Lisa Kennedy, Robert Love, Caroline Miller, Roberta Meyers, Nancy Novograd, and Maer Roshan. At Renaissance Books, I’d like to thank Bill Hartley and Richard O’Connor as well as Arthur Morey whose notes, insights, and suggestions were invaluable. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to Betsy Cummings for assisting me in researching Salinger’s life and work.

Preface

When J. D. Salinger created Holden Caulfield during the 1940s (he worked on some form of *The Catcher in the Rye* for ten years before it was published in 1951), he had few models to look to. As critics have pointed out, the one character comparable to Holden in earlier American literature is Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain's classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Holden is on a quest through New England, and then New York City, much as Huck is on a quest on the Mississippi River. Holden encounters the ugliness of the adult world much as Huck confronts the shocking reality of racism and bigotry. *Huckleberry Finn* is the seminal coming-of-age novel in nineteenth-century American literature; *The Catcher in the Rye* occupies a similar place in the literature published after 1950.

Salinger has become such a notable literary figure that he actually appears as a character in W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, the novel on which the picture *Field of Dreams* was based, but his importance can best be measured in the way *Catcher* has influenced books that have been written after it. *Last Summer* by Evan Hunter, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, *The Last Picture Show* by Larry McMurtry, *The Basketball Diaries* by Jim Carroll, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *Birdy* by William Wharton, *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis, *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen—these are just a few books written in the tradition of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

But Salinger's novel has had an effect on areas of American society besides literature. As the rebellious 1950s gave way to the radical 1960s, a youth culture emerged in the United States. That "youthquake," as some have called it, continued to define American popular culture during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Because of this, *Catcher* has had an impact on different parts of American culture. A host of films—*Rebel Without a Cause*, *American Graffiti*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Summer of '42*, *Stealing Home*, *Risky Business*, *Running on Empty*, *Dirty Dancing*, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, *The Graduate*, *Stand By Me*, and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* are only a few—could not have been made in the way they were if *Catcher* had not existed as a model before them. Indeed, one could argue that the entire teen-movie subgenre, which has become a staple of the film industry in Hollywood, owes a debt to Holden and *Catcher*. So does much of television's youth-oriented programs, as exemplified by series like *The Wonder Years*, *James at 15*, *My So-Called Life*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Felicity*. And how different is the angst articulated by Holden from that expressed in the music and lyrics of Green Day or Jewel or Smashing Pumpkins? Is there any area of American popular culture that's *not* been touched by Holden and what he has come to represent?

With Holden, Salinger prefigured the juvenile delinquency of the 1950s, the "drop-out" mentality of the 1960s generation, and the general disquiet among much of today's youth. With Holden, Salinger foresaw the generation gap that emerged in the 1960s and, to a certain extent, never disappeared. Holden has become, then, a lasting symbol of restless American youth. Today, Holden's nervous

breakdown at the end of the novel seems absolutely contemporary in a society whose youth are as troubled, as jaded, and yet as defiantly hopeful, as they ever have been before. Consequently, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of the contribution Salinger made to American culture when he decided to write a novel about this “crazy” neurotic boy who flunks out of prep school, sets out on a short but strange odyssey to avoid going home to confront his parents, and, as he does, learns fundamental lessons about life, loss, and self.

A Sighting

It was a beautiful afternoon in early October 1994 and I had driven up from New York City to Cornish, New Hampshire, a town which for all intents and purposes does not exist. There are no business establishments to speak of in Cornish, only a general store on the side of the road and, not too far away, a white wooden meeting house situated near a building that serves as the volunteer fire department headquarters. Indeed, in Cornish, the only element of a town that *does* exist is a scattering of houses built here and there among the rolling wooded hills. Of course, the most asked-about house of all of these, I discovered once I found it, could not be seen clearly from the dirt road that passed by the entrance to its driveway, an entrance marked by two prominently displayed NO TRESPASSING signs. The house, true to the press reports that have been published about it through the years, is of a chalet style. It is neither cramped nor ostentatious but functional, and in October 1994 it had been, for well over two decades, the home of J. D. Salinger, the great American novelist and recluse. While I sat in my car on the side of the road and looked up at the house, much of which was blocked by foliage, I had the strangest feeling. What I felt—even though I could not confirm it—was that as I was watching the house someone inside it was watching *me*.

I had been given the general directions to Salinger's house by a woman known locally as the Bridge Lady. The Bridge Lady had acquired her name because over the years she had spent inordinate amounts of time at her own instigation during the spring, summer, and fall in a makeshift information booth near the covered bridge that spans the Connecticut River to connect Cornish with Windsor, Vermont, a town that *does* exist since it has its share of stores, restaurants, public buildings, gasoline stations, and the like. The covered bridge in question is the longest one in the country, so the Bridge Lady has been able to create a sort of purpose for herself by recounting a history of the bridge for tourists who stop at her information booth. Since the Bridge Lady and her husband worked for Salinger in the early 1960s (she was the housekeeper, he the groundskeeper), she talked with me about him a bit, although she was reluctant to give me specific directions to his house. Instead she told me, somewhat vaguely, to look among the dirt roads that wind along one particular mountain. Naturally, almost all of the residents of Cornish *know* the directions to Salinger's house. Over time, countless tourists have asked about it, just as they have inquired about other local attractions, such as the covered bridge.

Once I located the house, I retraced the route and noted the directions so that I could find it again in the future. On that cool autumn day in October, I turned left coming off the covered bridge from Windsor and drove down the main road that wound along the river. On my right I passed a side road which, a sign informed me, lead to the Saint-Gaudens Historical Site. Soon, I passed a green historic marker commemorating the old Cornish Colony. The marker stood near the Blow-Me-Down Mill, a three-story stone structure with wood siding. Past the mill, at the Chase Cemetery, a small graveyard

surrounded by a white picket fence, I turned right onto a narrow asphalt road. Next I drove just over a mile, ~~passing a three-story slat-shingled mansion and then two huge red barns built among green sloping hills~~, until I turned right at a small abandoned guard house.

Going up the asphalt road, I passed Austin Farms. Just beyond the farms, the asphalt road turned into a dirt road, which then ran under a long heavy canopy created by rows of tall green trees growing on either side of the road. In time, to my left, I saw a red house that appeared to be a converted barn. Next, continuing up the road, I topped a hill, which was bordered by spacious pastures—pastures, I later learned, that belonged to J. D. Salinger. Driving up the road, I stopped at an old dilapidated barn. Finally, I looked up through the trees on the hill in front of me and I saw it—Salinger's house. Looking about, I noticed several signs displayed here and there on posts and trees. It was the same sign I would see on the two trees next to his driveway. The sign read:

POSTED
PRIVATE PROPERTY
HUNTING FISHING TRAPPING OR TRESPASSING
FOR ANY PURPOSE IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED

I had come here on this day in October to sit in my car on the side of the dirt road and look up at the house on the hill because the man who lived there had written *The Catcher in the Rye*, and because, since the publication of that book in 1951, he had lived his life in such a way as to make locating his house a noteworthy event. Why this has happened, why through the years a steady stream of admirers has made its way to Cornish, says a lot about fame and celebrity and, more specifically, the manner in which American society has come to glorify fame and celebrity in the latter part of the twentieth century. Most importantly, it also says something about the enduring power of art. For this much is true without question: If Salinger had not written a masterpiece that ranks among the best of its genre ever to be written, if he had not also written a group of stories that stand among the most original produced by any American author, few fans, including myself, would have made such an effort to find the house on the hill where he lives.

None of this was on my mind that afternoon in October 1994 as I sat in my car and looked up at his house. I only knew that I loved some of his stories and all of *The Catcher in the Rye*, that I found the Salinger myth strangely appealing, and that, because of these two facts, I had gotten in my car this morning in New York City, driven some two hundred and sixty miles to Cornish, New Hampshire, and searched Cornish's dirt roads until I found the house I knew to be his. Then, while I sat there with the car windows down, I suddenly heard the faint sound of gravel crackling under the weight of tires. Slowly the sound became louder and louder until I saw a car emerge from the thicket of trees to head down the hill and stop at the driveway's entrance. When I looked more closely, when I focused my attention on the car's driver, I saw who it was—Salinger himself. After pausing at the driveway's entrance, he pulled out onto the dirt road. It was then I could see him best. Haggard, hunched-over, hair white and thinning, he looked like a very old man. If Holden Caulfield is frozen in time, always the youthful, evanescent teenager, his creator clearly was not; it was shocking to witness Salinger in his mid-seventies. Finally, as I continued to stare, as I thought to myself that I was looking at J. D. Salinger, he accelerated the car, and, leaving as quickly as he had appeared, he was gone.

Two Biographies

In the careers of most modern and contemporary writers, a pattern of activity emerges. After the writer establishes himself, he produces his work, and periodically, about every three or four years, he releases that work by way of a publisher to the public. There are exceptions, since publishing-industry norms may or may not serve idiosyncratic writers. The author may be less prolific, as in the case of Ernest Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald, because he struggles with a piece of writing for years before he can let it go. Or he or she may write only one book, which ends up being a masterpiece, as Harper Lee did with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Or the author may die before the public comes to appreciate the full genius of his or her work, as was the case with Sylvia Plath. However, most authors, even those inspired by true genius, write and publish on a regular basis, primarily because they want to communicate with an audience. In all likelihood, that same impulse forces the writer to make himself available to his readers in the various ways writers have access to—by giving readings, for example, or answering fan mail. After all, should an author be successful, it is the readers, the people who buy the books, who allow him to enjoy the success he has achieved.

Almost all writers play by the rules of the game, which have evolved in the publishing-industry establishment—they do so, of course, because they want to stay in the good graces of the publishers, the people who make the rules—but, in a career that has spanned over half a century, J. D. Salinger has refused to comply with even the most basic of those rules. Only once—teaching a class at Sarah Lawrence—has he appeared before an audience at all. He has made phone calls to journalists and has had chance encounters with some; he has sat for a deposition or two, but he has never done a traditional interview. After the initial printings of his first book, he soon refused to allow his publisher to use a photograph of himself on the dust jacket of any of his books. He has never communicated with his readers; over the years he has even gone so far as to instruct his agents to throw away his fan mail without even bothering to show it to him.

But there's more. At one point in his career, he decided he didn't want his stories reproduced in anthologies; then he demanded that the four books he did publish between 1951 and 1963 could remain in print in paperback *only* if each edition featured the text between two plain covers and nothing else—no advertising copy on the front cover, no glowing blurbs on the back cover, no biographical information about the author anywhere, nothing resembling the trappings a publisher uses to sell and promote an author and his work. Finally, after 1965, even though he has often gone out of his way to let the public know he was continuing to write, he stopped publishing his work in either magazines or book form. By doing this, Salinger has achieved a kind of perverse celebrity: He has become a famous writer who writes but doesn't publish.

Consequently, Salinger's reputation, at least in the latter part of his life, is based not on the books he has written but on the books he allowed to be published. Of course, *The Catcher in the Rye* is his

major work. “Salinger is a writer of great charm and purposefully limited scope and a perfection within that narrow compass,” says Harold Bloom. “*The Catcher in the Rye* struck a nerve for one generation but it seems to appeal to sensitive young people in later generations as well. Its sensitivity fits the sensitivity of young people who are going to develop a consciousness and a distrust of the adult world. Probably it will survive.” Tom Wolfe agrees: “*The Catcher in the Rye* captures the mood of the adolescent who wants desperately to fit in but doesn’t want to seem as if he does, who wants to act flippantly but who, underneath that flippancy, has great sorrow.”

Certainly, the slender novel, published in 1951, afforded Salinger the career he has had. If he had not been the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Nine Stories*, published in 1953, surely would not have been as successful as it was, even though it contained three short stories—“A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor,” and “Teddy”—that are now considered by many critics to be models of the form. If he had not been the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Franny and Zooey*—two long stories previously published in the *New Yorker* that Salinger released as a book in 1961—would not have been a runaway *New York Times* best-seller, a publishing event deemed so noteworthy *Time* magazine put Salinger on its cover. If he had not been the author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*, a book of two more long *New Yorker* stories Salinger collected in 1963, would not have been a best-seller either. Then again, without question, the publication of these books increased the sales of *The Catcher in the Rye*, which had sold 3.5 million copies by 1961, 10 million copies by 1981, and 15 million copies by 1996. In late 1997, forty-five years after the paperback edition first appeared, the novel was still listed in the mid-seventies on the *USA Today* Top 100 paperback best-seller list.

All of this was helped considerably, at least from the standpoint of promotion, when in 1953 Salinger became a recluse. By cutting himself off from his audience, Salinger ensured that any contact he did make with the public merited coverage by the media. As a result, through the years he was able to see news reports about some of the most mundane events in his life—a photograph in *Time* of his going to the grocery store or an item in *Newsweek* about his showing up at the retirement party of an Army buddy. It has been argued that Salinger became famous for wanting not to be famous. However, simply because he turned into a recluse does not mean he didn’t want fame. In fact, one could argue that by taking the position he did—and keeping it—he ensured he *would* remain famous for being a recluse. In short, whether he contrived to or not, Salinger has stayed in the public eye by *withdrawing* from it.

At some point one has to ask the obvious: Why did Salinger go into seclusion and remain there? Did he want to avoid attacks by critics and colleagues, such as the one Norman Mailer made against him in his 1959 essay “Evaluations—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room,” when Mailer dismissed Salinger as being “no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school”? (That remark itself would become notorious.) Or this one from Joan Didion, which appeared in the *National Review*: “What gives [*Franny and Zooey*] its extremely potent appeal is precisely that it is self-help copy: it emerges finally as *Positive Thinking* for the upper middle classes, as *Double Your Energy and Live Without Fatigue* for Sarah Lawrence girls.” Or did something else motivate Salinger too? Did he arouse in his reading audience expectations he could not fulfill? Did he burn out? Was he never fully able to function in an adult world? Or, another theory, did he feel some drive within himself—emotional, sexual, or psychological—about which he wanted as few people as possible to know at any cost? Was there some instinct he had that was so troubling to him he was willing to alter the very way he lived his life to keep it secret?



Although he published stories during the 1940s and became internationally famous during the 1960s,

Salinger is an icon of the 1950s. The country had endured two world wars, and the legacy of those wars, represented most painfully by the fact that almost every family in the nation had been touched by them in one way or another, defined the fabric of American culture. It was no coincidence that for most of the decade the president was a former five-star general, Dwight Eisenhower. It did not help that Americans now had to debate whether or not the country should enter the conflict between North and South Korea. In the end, of course, it was decided that to stop the spread of Communism the United States should fight alongside South Korea, and the nation's resulting entrance into the Korean conflict served to promote patriotism and to create a powerful growth of conservatism.

Joseph McCarthy cashed in on the public's fear of Communism and launched a campaign that was supposed to rid the nation of the Red Menace. One group targeted by McCarthy and his supporters was American Jews; another, broader group was the creative community. The extreme positions the conservatives took demanded that to defend the sanctity of the country the government had to oppose anything that could be considered liberal or free-thinking. So, in the middle of this stifling, reactionary period there was the sudden emergence of a singer like Elvis Presley who challenged the status quo by injecting blatant sexuality into his singing and live performance. There was the similar emergence of an actor like James Dean who reinvented the Hollywood icon by infusing in his art a raw individualism and a studied sexual ambivalence.

Salinger spoke to a generation in the same way that Presley and Dean did, and he used as the vehicle for that communication a sixteen-year-old boy named Holden Caulfield. When Salinger's initial audience encountered Holden, they instantly identified with what Holden was saying: Society was full of hypocritical people who held false beliefs and stood for nothing—"phonies," to quote Holden. This theme of phoniness resonated with Salinger's readers, especially those who came to the novel later in the decade. For they could look at the figures on the national scene at the time—McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, and others—and know that what these figures were saying was not even genuine, much less true. Because Holden Caulfield so passionately articulated the phoniness represented by these men, *The Catcher in the Rye* would become a seminal document for the generation that came of age in the 1950s.



In the biography of a writer, there exists, for all practical purposes, two biographies. One consists of the writer's "actual" everyday life; the second grows out of the work he produces during his career. With a writer of any reputation, one biography cannot exist without the other, since audiences would not be interested in the writer if he had not created his body of work. Moreover, in many cases, the writer cannot necessarily divorce himself from the work he creates. The obsessions that dominate his life often present themselves as subject matter for his work. He may not write about the obsessions in absolute firsthand terms, he may filter them through the lives of his characters, but they are there nevertheless.

Naturally Salinger had his own obsessions that played themselves out in his prose. Of course, he was interested in the hypocrisy of human nature, yet he was also drawn to the urbane, affluent lifestyle of the WASP. Ordinarily, writing about this segment of society would not be unusual, since it has often been the subject of writers like John Cheever or John Updike. But Salinger, born into a half-Jewish, half-Irish, middle-class family on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, did not share the traits of the characters he created. Because of this, one must ask what exactly was behind his drive to write about the world of the WASP? Why did he not write about the community he was born into, that of the Eastern European Jews who were making new and successful lives for themselves in America? Did Salinger not wish to be a part of that Jewish subculture? Would he rather have been a part of the East Coast country-club set? Salinger's grandfather was a rabbi. Salinger's father, while culturally Jewish

seems never to have practiced Judaism. There is no evidence that J. D. ever had a bar mitzvah.

~~These issues are reflected in some of his work, though rarely addressed head-on. However, Salinger~~ had an obsession he *did* acknowledge in his own words—the lives of “very young people.” To see just how Salinger dealt with this and other obsessions, and how they played themselves out in his prose, one must look at the details of his life. In fact, in Salinger’s case, the two histories, the history of the man and the history of the work, are clearly intertwined. Obsessions that are present in the life show up in the work, and vice versa. Look at the life. It is there one can find the obsessions that manifest themselves in the work. Look at the work. It is there one can find the clues to the specifics of the life. Comparisons are difficult, but it seems true that with Salinger, his characters and stories are much more closely connected to his experiences than is usually the case with other writers.

Sonny

1

If Salinger was so consumed with the subject of youth, what was his own youth like? Was there something about it that made him unable to leave it behind?

On January 1, 1919, in the Nursery and Child's Hospital on West Sixty-first Street in New York City, Jerome David Salinger was born to parents who, because of who they were and the heritages they came from, created in him a sense of conflict about himself that was present from the very beginning of his life. His father, Sol Salinger, had been born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1888; he was not only a Jew but the son of a rabbi—a rabbi who became a doctor. One family member later stated: “[Sol's father, Simon,] was a rabbi with a congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. But though he had a wife and five children, he had wanted to become a medical doctor. He sought and received permission from his congregation to enroll in night courses in medical school while retaining his pulpit; it took many years, but he ultimately achieved his goal, gave up the rabbinate, and practiced medicine for the balance of a long and productive lifetime.”

As a young man, Sol lived in Chicago and worked at a company called J. S. Hoffman, an importer of European cheeses and meats that made and sold products under the names Hofco Family Swiss Cheese and Hofco Baby Goudas. Though he may not have been a practicing Jew, religion became a problem when he met the woman he would marry—Marie Jillich. Marie's family came from Scotland and Ireland and Marie was Christian. There is every reason to believe that the Salingers did not approve of the marriage for that reason. As a result, not long before the wedding, Marie made the most fundamental—and telling—move she could make to appease her future in-laws. She changed her name from the Catholic-sounding Marie, to the Jewish-sounding Miriam. It was a dramatic gesture, yet afterward there is no evidence that Miriam either studied or practiced Judaism.

Perhaps the Salingers' ambivalence about Miriam was still in evidence in 1912, even after Sol and Miriam had had their first child (a daughter, Doris, was born in 1911) or perhaps Sol was simply longing for a city where he could have greater financial opportunity. Whatever the reason, during 1912 Sol and Miriam moved themselves and their baby daughter from Chicago to New York. There, Sol became the general manager of J. S. Hoffman's New York operation. Jerome Schuman, a colleague, later remembered Sol: “[He] was an excellent businessman and a very good general manager. He ran a tight ship, but at times he was dominated by the chairman and president of the corporation, Harry Hoffman in Chicago, who often used Sol as a whipping boy. Nevertheless, he was markedly successful in his operation. He was also an excellent public speaker. Considering that he probably had a limited education, he was extremely articulate and used the English language well. He was intelligent and dynamic.”

By 1919, the year the Salingers had their second child, Jerome David, whom they nicknamed Sonny, Sol was doing well enough that he moved his family from their apartment at 3681 Broadway in northern Harlem to an attractive, upscale building on the corner of 113th Street and Riverside Drive in the neighborhood where Columbia University is located. Then, between 1919 and 1928, the Salingers moved three more times before they ended up in a pleasant apartment on West Eighty-second Street. It was here they would live for the next four years. During these years, Sonny was described by observers outside his family as “solemn” and “polite” and more than willing to take long walks by himself. As for school, he attended a public grammar school, where one year it was determined he had an IQ of 104, a number which tended to indicate that Sonny had little more than an average intelligence. His grades also suggested that Salinger was mediocre. He made mostly B’s the year his IQ was tested, except in arithmetic, a subject in which he did much worse. In fact, that year the only area of his schooling in which he performed worse than arithmetic was deportment, which was assessed by his teachers as “poor.”

While he was growing up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan during the 1920s, Sonny was in many ways an average boy—not at all like the sometimes troubled teenager he would soon become, when he started to resemble characters he would later create as an adult, characters such as Holden Caulfield. In his younger years, Sonny had a stable family life and was, according to family friends, unusually close to his mother, who loved her children, but who was also, to quote a family acquaintance, “overshadowed by Mr. Salinger.”

During the summer, as many city children did, Sonny went to camp. In the summer of 1930, he attended Camp Wigwam in Harrison, Maine. At age eleven, he was good at tennis and adept at making friends, but one development that took place at Camp Wigwam gave some indication as to the interests he would foster in the coming years. Based on the work he had done in the camp’s dramatic production, Sonny was voted Camp Wigwam’s “most popular actor” of 1930.

Up to this point Sonny had lived a decidedly ordinary life in New York City. “As a boy,” William Maxwell later wrote in an essay that dealt in part with Salinger’s youth, “Salinger played on the steps of public buildings that a non-native would recognize immediately and that he never knew the names of.” Macy’s and Gimbel’s, Maxwell continued, were “apotheosized” landmarks to the young Salinger—as they were to many New Yorkers. Sol moved his family to Park Avenue—another kind of landmark—in the fall of 1932. Specifically, he selected a spacious apartment at 1133 Park Avenue, a handsome building on the corner of Ninety-first Street. But this move, the last the Salingers made while Sonny was growing up, had special meaning, since it suggested to Sol, and no doubt to Miriam and Sol’s families, that Sol had truly made it in the business world. Before, the Salingers had lived on the Upper West Side. Not as bohemian as Greenwich Village, not as grungy as Hell’s Kitchen, the Upper West Side attracted actors, writers, intellectuals, artists, and the like, of different races and backgrounds. It also had a large Jewish population, making the Upper West Side more liberal than many parts of the city. Lively and varied, the neighborhood was *not*, however, an “appropriate” place to live if one had social aspirations.

For that, one chose the Upper East Side, which connoted status and wealth. As if to reinforce his desire to live a life of social rank, Sol purchased an expensive car, which the family used to drive around the city, and decided to take Sonny, then thirteen, out of public school and enroll him in an expensive private school—another mainstay of the Upper East Side elite. So Sol, the rabbi’s son who had defied his father and married a Christian, had made it. In his business he had become such a success that he now lived on one of the most famous and exclusive streets in the world. Interestingly, that street was located in a neighborhood not known for having a significant Jewish population. If Sol seemed to be rejecting his Jewishness by dating and then marrying a Christian, he was certainly abandoning it by passing over other sections of New York to live in a neighborhood synonymous with

WASPs and money—Park Avenue on the Upper East Side. Without question, Sol passed his values and preferences on to his son, who years later would choose not to write about the world of the immigrant Jew and his descendants, but instead the world of the Upper East Side WASP—the very world Sol Salinger had embraced so completely.

In the end, the relationship between the father and the son was complicated, partly because of the kind of person Sol was. “Sol’s personality was very complex,” Jerome Schuman would later write. “I believe he covered over an inferiority complex with an aura of supreme self-confidence. He was highly intelligent, extremely well organized, and had a good sense of humor. He was a man who achieved and accomplished a lot.” However, of all the areas of his life in which he attained so much there was one in which he did not achieve even a qualified success: the way he got along with his son. “The relationship of Sol Salinger and his son was one where the father exhibited great pride in the accomplishments of the son, but the relationship could not be described as a warm family relationship.”

2

In 1932, Sol Salinger set up an interview for his son at the McBurney School, an exclusive private school located on West Sixty-fourth Street. Records suggest that at that interview Sonny was anything but impressive. Awkward and ambivalent, he created the impression of being what he was—a distracted, unfocused, smart-alecky teenager who had no idea of what he wanted to do with his life. When the interviewer asked him what subjects he was interested in, Sonny offered two: drama and tropical fish. This was hardly the kind of answer that would make an interviewer open up his academically rigorous school’s doors to a potential star student. Still, Sol must have made an effort to lobby for his son, or the interviewer must have seen in Sonny something that was not readily apparent on the surface, for, despite Sonny’s generally flippant attitude at the meeting, McBurney created a place for him starting in the fall of 1932.

At McBurney, Salinger participated in several extracurricular activities. He reported for the school newspaper, managed the fencing team, and performed in two school plays, each time taking a female part. In *Mary’s Ankle*, he portrayed Mrs. Burns; in *Jonesy*, the title character’s mother. Despite his apparent interest in school activities, Sonny did not engage in his academic pursuits with any zeal or intensity. As a result, his scholastic performance was modest at best; about the only activity, scholastic or otherwise, in which he excelled was dramatics. School records reveal that while his performance in the classroom was well below school standards, his work in the school plays showed he definitely had potential as an actor. Perhaps Sonny’s failure to be engaged by his academics grew out of what one friend later described as his desire “to do unconventional things.” “For hours,” the friend reported, “no one in the family knew where he was or what he was doing. He just showed up for meals. He was a nice boy, but he was the kind of kid who, if you wanted to have a card game, wouldn’t join in.” In short, Sonny liked being alone—he seemed to crave it—and could spend more time than was normal being by himself.

There was only one problem with Sonny’s nascent desire to act. Sol made it known in no uncertain terms that he was opposed to his son going into the field; he was even opposed to Sonny performing onstage in prep school. As many fathers do, Sol wanted Sonny to go into the family business—in his case the meat-and-cheese import-export business. So far, however, Sonny’s main interests had been writing and the theatre. By the end of the spring term of 1934, Sonny had performed so badly in his classes that McBurney administrators asked him not to return in the fall. In his first year there, Sonny earned these grades: algebra, 66 (15 in a class of 18); biology, 77 (5 out of 14); English, 80 (7 out of 12); and Latin, 66 (10 out of 12). In his second year, he had not done any better: English and

journalism, 72; geometry, 68; German, 70; and Latin, F. With these grades, Sonny was simply not McBurney material.

Sol engineered one last-ditch effort to try to find a way for his son to remain at McBurney by arranging for him to take classes during the summer of 1934 at the Manhasset School. That, too, was disaster, when Sonny performed as badly there as he had at McBurney. So McBurney made its decision final. Upon Sonny's departure, a school official wrote the following note on his transcript: "Character: Rather hard-hit by [adolescence] his last year with us. Ability: plenty. Industry: did not know the word."



What Sonny needed, Sol decided, was to be toughened up a bit. With this in mind, Sol surveyed the schools in and around New York City until he found the Valley Forge Military Academy. Located on a picturesque campus in rural Pennsylvania, the school had a reputation for whipping aimless young men into shape. Here is how one student later described the school: "As for what life was like at Valley Forge, the discipline was tough. New cadets were hazed. The emphasis was on the military and sports rather than on academics. Valley Forge felt more proudly of a graduate who went to West Point than to Harvard."

Maybe Valley Forge could accomplish what Sol had not been able to and turn Sonny into a young man full of drive and ambition. Hopeful, Sol placed telephone calls to the school until he had arranged a spur-of-the-moment interview for Sonny. On that interview, Sonny was accompanied by his mother. It must have gone well, for on extremely short notice—school records suggest that the notice was perhaps as brief as two days—Sonny was accepted into and enrolled at Valley Forge, where in 1934 the fall semester started on September 22. "I feel confident that Jerome will conduct himself properly, and I am sure you will find his school spirit excellent," Sol Salinger wrote to Major Waldemar Ivan Rutan, Valley Forge's chaplain, just after Sonny's enrollment. No doubt Sol expressed this same sentiment to Sonny.

Sonny got the point: He had better shape up and develop some noticeable school spirit, or else. In very fundamental ways, during the two academic years he stayed at Valley Forge, he did change as a student and a person. One example of this change was evident even at the time. At Valley Forge, Sonny decided his name sounded too boyish, he had outgrown his. Still, he did not like the names Jerome and David, and he certainly didn't want to be called J. D., not as a nickname anyway. So he made up his mind. As his new nickname, and maybe even for his professional byline as well, he wanted to use Jerry. He told his family and friends that would be his name: Jerry—Jerry Salinger.

3

It was pitch-black as the two boys crept across the Valley Forge campus, heading for the estate of an heir to the Campbell Soup fortune that was located next to the school. This was the fall of Jerry's senior year, and for that year he had been assigned as his roommate a boy named Richard Gonder, whom he liked a great deal. Intelligent and adventuresome, Richard was just the kind of boy who would go along with Jerry on the various outings he suggested. Sometimes, early in the morning, Jerry and Richard would sneak into town to have breakfast and a hot chocolate at a local diner before they rushed back to campus in time for reveille. There were also the times they would sit around their dorm room late at night and talk on and on about Merle Oberon—for their money, *the* sexiest star in Hollywood. Jerry liked to describe her as being "devastating," "a real doll." Neither of them had a girlfriend, mostly because they were teenage boys attending an all-boys military academy, but, like so many of the other cadets, they sure could talk about starlets like Merle Oberon. Visions of Merle may

or may not have been on the minds of the boys as they sneaked across the campus that night. What was on their minds was tonight's goal. If no one was at home at the estate next door, the two planned on going swimming in the pool located on the property, something they had done in the past from time to time without ever getting caught.

If they did get caught, they would have to face Colonel Milton S. Baker, the school's founder who still served as its headmaster. An industrious entrepreneur with a natural talent for self-promotion, he presided over the academy using a strict but compassionate administrative style. For his part, Baker was also a character in his own right. "He was very pro-British," one cadet recalled. "He wore a greatcoat like the ones worn by British officers. When he changed the cadet uniform in the fall of 1936, he used British Army officers' 'stars' for cadet officer insignia on the shoulder straps. Once Baker spoke in chapel and denounced Edward VIII for giving up the throne for Mrs. Simpson. Baker's concern was that Edward was shirking his duty, which, of course, he was. Some years later, Baker was awarded the OBE [Order of the British Empire] which must have been the proudest moment of his life." Another cadet, Franklin Hill, remembers Baker: "He was impressive. He posed a good image to everyone. He was someone to be looked up to. Most students liked him but he wasn't someone you'd walk up to and say, 'Hi, Colonel. How are you?' He was a good leader."

Things had begun to go well for Jerry at Valley Forge, where, besides being a member of First Class and Company B, he joined the Glee Club, the Aviation Club, the French Club, and the Non-Commissioned Officers Club. For this year, he had even been appointed literary editor of *Crossed Sabres*, the school's yearbook. In addition to these activities, he was also a devoted member of the Mask and Spur Dramatic Club.

As it happened, nobody spotted the boys as they left the school campus and entered the adjoining estate. When they realized no one was at home, they sneaked over to the swimming pool, stripped down to their underwear, and dove into the pool's cold water. It shows just how ordinary the boys' lives were at this point—two teenage boys, swimming playfully in the waters of a pool that belonged to neither of them, hoping all the while that the owner did not happen upon them as they swam.

In the handful of times they secretly swam in the pool during Jerry's senior year, the boys were never caught. In fact, at Valley Forge, Jerry's luck seemed to have changed completely. Maybe he *did* only need some discipline to help him mature into a more responsible and productive young man. During his senior year, he even did comparatively well in his academic classes. His final grades for that year were English, 88; French, 88; German, 76; history, 79; and dramatics, 88—certainly a much better showing than the performance he had turned in at McBurney. He seemed brighter, in general, in this environment. At Valley Forge his IQ was tested at 115, which was significantly higher than the 104 he had scored at McBurney.

As an outgrowth of his drama course, Jerry appeared in R. C. Sheriff's *Journey's End*, playing the part of Young Raleigh. However, at Valley Forge, Jerry began to experiment with another creative activity. "At night," William Maxwell later reported, "in bed, under the covers, with the aid of a flashlight, [Salinger] began writing stories." Over the coming months, Salinger's interest in writing became so strong he could no longer confine his writing to late-night episodes lit by flashlight. Instead, he started working on stories whenever and wherever he could.

Sol Salinger must have been proud of his son on that beautiful June day in 1936 when he sat at the school's graduation and watched Colonel Baker hand his son a diploma from Valley Forge. Sol also must have felt some sense of pride when he flipped through Jerry's yearbook. Next to his son's picture, an attractive black-and-white shot in which he looked youthful and handsome, this caption appeared: "Jerome David Salinger, Corporal B Company, January 1, 1919, New York, New York. Activities: Private, '34; Intramural Athletics; Mask and Spur, '34 and '35; Glee Club, '34 and '35; Plebe Club, '35; Aviation Club; French Club; Non-Commissioned Officers Club; Literary Editor, 1935."

Crossed Sabres.” Then, in a section called Class Prophecy, the editors predicted Salinger’s future: “Jerry Salinger, writing four-act melodramas for the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra.” Finally, the yearbook contained an untitled poem about Valley Forge written by Salinger—a three-stanza, songlike piece meant to commemorate Salinger’s last day at the academy by reflecting back on the previous two years. The poem is flagrantly sentimental but full of the kind of reflections that suggest Salinger had genuinely enjoyed his experience at the school.



Without a doubt, Salinger made a lasting impression on his senior-year roommate. “Jerry’s conversation was frequently laced with sarcasm about others and the silly routines we had to obey and follow at school,” Richard Gonder says. “The school in those days was run on a strictly military basis—up at six, endless formations, marching from one activity to another, meals and classes at set hours and taps at ten. Jerry did everything he could do not to earn a cadet promotion, which he considered childish and absurd. His favorite expression for someone he did not care for was, ‘John, you really are a prince of a guy.’ What he meant by this, of course, was ‘John, you really are an SOB.’ Jerry and I hated the cool military aspects of the school. Everything was done in a row and at fifteen you don’t want to do things in a row, but Jerry’s father felt he needed to go to a military academy, so that’s where he was. Jerry was the delight of the English teacher, but he got only passing marks in his other subjects. He had a great sense of humor and was more sophisticated than the rest of us. He would read the letters he sent home to his mother, whom he was very close to, and we were all astonished. He was very slight in build because he hadn’t shot up yet, and he was worldly as far as his mind was concerned. He was a rather nice-looking guy. I liked him immensely. I enjoyed his wit and humor. He was so sure of himself as far as his writing went. He knew he was good.”

The Young Folks

1

Coming from a relatively obscure military academy where he had turned in a no-better-than-mediocre academic performance, Jerry did not have available to him an unlimited range of colleges to which he could apply. In fact, as the spring semester passed, Salinger's plans became more uncertain. Those plans were finalized in June 1936 when Jerry applied to and was accepted by New York University's Washington Square College. In the fall he took a standard freshman schedule, but he maintained the level of academic performance he had established for himself prior to Valley Forge. To say that his attendance at NYU was not productive would be an understatement; it verged on being a waste of time. Unfulfilled and unmotivated, he concluded there was little reason for him to continue at the college, so, by the late summer or early fall of 1937, he decided to take his father up on his suggestion at least for the immediate future. He would learn the import-export trade. In order to study that business firsthand, Sol wanted Jerry to go to Europe, specifically to Austria and Poland.

He traveled to Europe in the fall of 1937. While he seems to have gone to both Paris and London, he spent most of his time at the beginning of his trip in Vienna, where he improved his French and German, two languages he had studied in prep school. He may have been able to work on his language skills, but as for learning his father's business, he delved into it little, if at all. William Maxwell later wrote about Salinger's grand tour: "He . . . learned some German and a good deal about people, if not the exporting business." Soon, though, Jerry had no choice but to do what he had come to Europe to do. "I was supposed to apprentice myself to the Polish ham business," Salinger wrote Ernest Hemingway (whom he would one day meet) about his European experience. "They finally dragged me off to Bydgoszcz for a couple of months, where I slaughtered pigs, wagoned through the snow with the pig slaughtermaster." This was an event so disturbing to Salinger that years later he still complained about it to friends like Maxwell. "Eventually he got to Poland," Maxwell wrote, "and for a brief while went out with a man at four o'clock in the morning and bought and sold pigs. Though he hated it, there is no experience, agreeable or otherwise, that isn't valuable to a writer of fiction." Just how that experience was valuable to Salinger is not clear; how it was valuable to him as a person is. Because he detested the episode as much as he did, he knew once and for all he could not ever—*ever*—go into his father's line of work.

Regardless of how Salinger employed his European experience as source material, he did use the months he spent in Vienna and Poland to write story after story. In fact, Salinger was turning out fiction at a steady pace, and he continued to write even after he started to send off his stories to magazines for possible publication. He "learned, as well as this can ever be learned," Maxwell wrote "how not to mind when the manuscripts come back."

At the end of his months in Europe, Jerry returned to New York, where he moved back into his room in his parents' apartment on Park Avenue. From his conversations with friends, a few letters, and some elements of his stories, it seems that this episode in Vienna had been a happy time for him. His memories included a girl he had met there. As he would say years later in a letter to Hemingway, one memory he would always hold with him was the afternoon he and this young girl went ice skating—he would never forget kneeling down to help her on with her skates—such a simple but poignant image. At eighteen, he was about the same age she was. What is telling about his life, however, is that as Salinger grew older, even when he was well into his middle age, the ideal object of his affection would always be about the same age as the young girl in Vienna. In many ways, this simple fact would turn out to be one of the defining qualities of Salinger's life and work.



When Jerry returned to America, he brought with him more than just memories of a young girl in Vienna. He also had an immediate awareness of the events in Europe that would soon prove to be historic. The political situation in key countries in Europe had been unstable. In Spain, following the abdication of King Alfonso XIII in 1931, the country was in political turmoil, which only became worse in 1936 when General Francisco Franco mounted a Fascist coup. The resulting Spanish Civil War raged until Franco's forces destroyed those of the government in 1939. Benito Mussolini and his Fascist regime had been in control of Italy since the latter part of 1922 when, in the wake of the Fascists' March on Rome, Mussolini was named premier. However, the country that was in the most intense period of transition was Germany, primarily because of the political ascent of Adolf Hitler. After becoming chancellor in January 1933, Hitler solidified his support until he was able to establish in September 1935 the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws, which essentially started an undeclared war on the Jews. It was obvious Hitler planned on waging war on more than the Jews after he annexed Austria in March 1938 with little or no resistance from the Austrian people. That aggressive policy would continue in 1939 when in August Germany and the Soviet Union signed a pact agreeing to a partition of Poland. Once Germany began that annexation in September, the ensuing resistance by the Polish people sparked the beginning of what became World War II.

Salinger had been in Europe, in the pivotal countries of Austria and Poland no less, at the very time these dramatic developments were taking place. They had an effect on him then—the grandson of a rabbi, he must have felt particularly disturbed by Hitler's assault on the Jews—but that was nothing compared to what would happen to him as a result of the United States entering World War II later in 1941.



In the spring of 1938, as he considered what to do next with his life, Jerry decided to try college once again. This presented a new problem. With his modest high-school background and his less-than-stellar performance at New York University, a school he either could not or would not return to, he had to find a college that would accept him. Obviously, any school with an outstanding reputation, and virtually all of them with only adequate or minor reputations, would reject his application. So, in early 1938, as he began searching for yet another academic institution to attend, he found Ursinus College, a relatively unknown rural school sponsored by the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Just why Salinger became interested in Ursinus is not clear; perhaps it came down to nothing more than location—Collegeville, Pennsylvania, a small town two hours by car from Philadelphia, in the same vicinity of the Valley Forge Military Academy, a school about which Jerry had pleasant memories. Anyway, how could a student like Jerry resist going to the only college in the country with a sycamore tree growing in one of the end zones of its football field? That detail alone was too good

pass up. Ultimately it all worked out. Jerry applied, Ursinus accepted him, and he started there in the fall of 1939.



Early one evening, not too deep into the fall semester, Jerry sat on the bed in the third-floor dormitory room to which he had been assigned without a roommate and spoke, in animated, energetic language, to the group of half a dozen fellow students who had gathered in his room. Tonight Jerry was telling the boys, as he had done on previous occasions, stories about his experiences in Europe. In the claustrophobic dorm room, with its impersonal, industrial feel, Jerry crafted his stories about his voyage over to Europe, his adventures in Paris, and the disturbing events he witnessed on his pre-dawn pig-slaughtering expeditions in Poland. With undeniable storytelling skills, he made his travels sound romantic, which in turn made *him* seem worldly and exotic. Most of the boys had never dreamed of going to Europe. Not only had Jerry dreamed about it, he had done it. This—and the way he told his stories—set him apart from the other boys in the room.

“He wasn’t what I’d call social, but he was an interesting person,” says Richard Deitzler, one of the boys who listened to Jerry’s stories about Europe. “He was a perfectly normal, attractive young man—an ordinary student. The thing that surprised us, of course, was the way he could tell stories.” Other students had a different view of Salinger. “He had few friends,” says Anabel Heyen, a Ursinus coed. “He felt he had come down from New York and didn’t really fit in. When I saw him around campus, he was very standoffish. It was hard to have a conversation with him. He was almost a recluse,” Salinger’s uneasiness about going to Ursinus may have contributed to his being, as he had been in the past, lackadaisical about his academic performance. At Ursinus, he wasn’t failing his classes; he was merely drifting through them from one day to the next.

As he struggled with academics, Salinger joined the writing staff of the *Ursinus Weekly*, the college newspaper. Initially he served as the drama critic, and in that capacity he reviewed three plays, including J. B. Priestley’s *Time and the Conways* and Turner Bullock’s *Lady of Letters*. In his notices he achieved a balanced, professional tone, producing pieces that were unusually skilled for a college freshman. His second job was more whimsical, for the editors allowed him to write a regular column called “The Skipped Diploma.” Using the subtitle “Musing of a Social Soph,” Salinger, who signed his column “JDS” (apparently not in any serious attempt to protect his identity since he signed his name to his drama reviews), mused on timely subjects that were interesting to him—a movie he had just seen, a book he had recently read, or a train ride that might have left a lasting impression on him. Salinger may have been young, but “The Skipped Diploma” showed talent and perception. The columns were often witty and funny, employing a kind of Ivy League tongue-in-cheek humor uncommon among Ursinus students. From start to finish, the columns were well-written; Salinger’s sentences were thought out and crafted, the result of studious rewriting. Moreover, occasionally an excerpt was startling in its content, such as a passage he included in the column dated October 17, 1938:

Lovelorn Department: Question—I go with a boy who is so very confusing. Last Wednesday night I refused to kiss him goodnight and he became very angry. For nearly ten minutes he screamed at the top of his voice. Then suddenly he hit me full on the mouth with his fist. Yet, he says he loves me. What am I to think? Answer—Remember, dearie. No one is perfect. Love is strange and beautiful. Ardor is to be admired. Have you tried kissing him?

“The Skipped Diploma” appeared in the *Ursinus Weekly* only during October, November, and December because, as the semester progressed, Salinger became less and less engaged by his

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