

# RETURN TO SENDER: THE IMPACT OF J.D. SALINGER ON MY LIFE (Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

Today, after a particularly harrowing experience in my geology lab class, I came home to find a familiar wrinkly manila envelope waiting for me in front of my door. Excited, as always, to receive mail, I rushed over to pick it up only to have the excitement evaporate as a sinking feeling replaced it. The first thing I saw was the black crayon. The dark, almost angry marks, made by what seems to be a very shaky hand, felt like a slap to my face. The returner, as if in a fit of anger, had stamped the words “**REFUSED. Return To Sender**” all over the front of the envelope, hinting at a personal assumption that the sender would fail to notice that her package was refused and might attempt to send another one. Similarly, just in case the mailman didn’t know which one was the return address, the returner drew a shaky circle around one of the stamps, and an arrow pointing to my name. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The worst was the black scribbles, like thick metal prison bars, brutally flung over the “to” address written in my neatest handwriting:

*To: Mr. J.D. Salinger  
RR3, Box 176  
Cornish, NH  
93745 USA.*

I’m not really sure why I felt so hurt. Everything I’ve ever read about Salinger and his personal life suggested a kind of cruel, almost careless attitude toward other people’s feelings, especially when his own comfort was being threatened. In her memoir, *Dream Catcher*, Peggy Salinger described her father as someone who “never once inconvenienced [himself] for [his] children. [He’s] never interrupted [his] precious work. [He’s] always done exactly what [he] wanted, when [he] wanted (Peggy Salinger 416). Three years ago, when I first read Peggy’s memoir, I was at the height of my J.D. Salinger idolatry and I felt that her insight into him hardly seemed like the man I imagined to have created Holden Caulfield; the Holden Caulfield—sensitive and perceptive— with whom I went through puberty, took with me to college, hunted for in the dusty bookstores of Saigon that one summer I forgot to pack books. Though Holden isn’t my favorite Salinger character nor *Catcher* my favorite Salinger work, the telling of a depressed teen’s plight remains the story dearest to my heart, perhaps because I had read it precisely at the point in my life when I needed it most. And to read Peggy’s horror stories about the man behind Holden made me feel like, to be a bit melodramatic, my whole relationship with Holden, and in a way, Salinger, was a complete lie.

I, like most people, first met Holden Caulfield in a sophomore English high school class. Our group had the unfortunate luck of having the least popular teacher among the staff that year, Ms. Ave was a twenty-eight year old woman, who looked closer to thirty-eight. She had lifeless, shoulder-length brown hair and tiny spectacles that would constantly slide down her oily nose, exposing beady, marble-like eyes that were quick to catch students passing notes. Ben Cooper, a mischievous, curly-haired boy in our sixth period class dubbed her “the Cool-Aid” because of a billowy, rather unflattering red dress she often wore that made her look like the big jug of red Cool-Aid that crashed through walls in the commercials. And the whispers of this name among the students induced endless fits of muffled giggles that infuriated her because she didn’t understand what was going on.

Ms. Ave’s idea of teaching literature was limited to forcing her own interpretations of the text onto us. Everyone hated her; everyone except me. I credited her with introducing me to Salinger. Most of the titles we read that year I have forgotten, but *Catcher* stood out from the rest. For the first time, a fictional character was looking straight into the camera and talking directly to me. I didn’t know writing could be done like that, intimate and conversational. And I felt that “Salinger’s deceptively straight-forward sentences [sang] to me; the searching observations, not unlike the kind I had when I was bored or daydreaming, felt familiar” (Steinke *With Love and Squalor* 20). I think my favorite book before *Catcher* was Dostoevski’s *Crime and Punishment*. And that was only because Dostoevski was my mom’s favorite writer and I grew up listening to her talk about him like he was some great uncle who died just before I was born. But Salinger’s writing made Pencey Prep feel like a place I visited a long time ago and now I’m sitting in my living room, cozied up in my blanked, reminiscing with Holden, an old friend who also remembers what it was like there. Salinger, unlike my mom’s Dostoevski, was my very own discovery.

The idea of writing to Salinger was always on my mental “to do” list, especially after Kurt Vonnegut’s death. But I kept putting it off, suddenly deciding that I had much more important, time sensitive things to do—alphabetize my Disney movie collection, sew a patchy sweater composed of old shirts for my pregnant chihuahua named Dog, watch all the clips of the *Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* ever uploaded onto YouTube, peeling off the dried ketchup and mustard around their respective squirt holes. In other words, I was a pansy. The ideas I had for the letter to Salinger, my literary idol, sounded so clever and charming in my mind that to put them onto paper would be to risk their potential greatness. So like a coward, I continued to postpone writing the letter.

But last summer, after a spring season full of sharp back pains, I finally got an X-ray and was told that I had scoliosis; surgery was probably needed. As I was leaving the office, the doctor, a young man in his thirties, awkwardly patted me on the back and said, “good luck.” Something about the way he said it and its echoes in my mind reminded me of *Catcher in the Rye*. Unable to remember what it was, I decided to reread *Catcher* from cover to cover for the very first time since Ms. Ave’s class seven years ago. I didn’t have to wait long because sixteen pages into the book, just after Holden finished saying good-bye

to his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, who yelled something very similar to “good luck,” Holden said:

*I'm pretty sure he yelled "Good luck!" at me. I hope not. I hope to hell not. I'd never yell "Good luck!" at anybody. It sounds terrible, when you really think about it.* (Salinger 16)

I probably thought Holden was just being too sensitive when I first read this passage as a fifteen year old girl. But now, being on the receiving end of that statement, I realized that I understood exactly what Holden meant. The term “good luck” just seems so futile, almost hopeless, when you’re facing something that’s bigger than yourself. I had just been informed that I had a condition that could potentially cause my spine to crush my heart; it’s a shock. I don’t want to hear that the outcome of everything depends on something as notoriously flakey as luck. And while any normal person would tell me to get over it and that it’s just “something people say,” Salinger notices little things like that. He notices the effect that certain words and details have on people. And in that moment, because my very first thought after hearing the news was of Salinger, I felt very close to him. I made up my mind to write to him.

In my letter, I tried to follow Betty Eppes’ lead, one of the few people who ever got an interview from him. She wrote,

I told him I wasn’t a girl who had come to usurp any of his privacy; I was a woman who supported herself through writing and would very much like to see him. I wanted to know if he was still writing. I told him I was a novelist. I told him writing was so hard. (Eppes 31)

She wrote this note telling him where she’d be the next day and at what time. Eppes never really expected him to show up, knowing full well that he had turned away many journalists and fans before her. But he did show up, seeming “*just as nervous as [she] was. His hands shook...it was obvious that he didn’t want to be there*” (Eppes 34). He said he didn’t know why he was there and that her letter had been very brief (Eppes 34). I learned that brevity was an advantage, it left him curious. So I mentally cut down the amount of dramatic ramblings about my life and how his characters have always reached me right when I was on the brink of depression and pulled me back, blah blah. I tend to over exaggerate and I knew he’d probably catch on to that.

I reread Eppes’ letter, noting that she ended it simply with “*writing was so hard*” perhaps hitting Salinger’s sympathetic nerve. It has been suggested that Salinger’s “*retreat from the limelight [was] the product of a thin skin*” and that “[Salinger] *was just concerned that he could never match that early achievement*” (Schnakenberg 250). I used to refuse to believe that that was true. I told myself that Salinger’s refusal of publicity was a special rarity in a time when the likes of Paris Hilton and Spiedi run rampant. But now, having had my own writing—my own literary children, regardless of how scrawny and weak they were—be torn apart and brutally rejected, I started to question my idea of Salinger’s “special rarity.” I wouldn’t blame him if his retreat from the public eye *was* the result of a thin skin. A critic noted that “*the worst [Salinger’s characters] can say about our society is that they are too sensitive to live in it*” (Kazin 109). Salinger clearly bases his characters on different facets of himself, which means, if the critic’s observation is correct, Salinger himself is too sensitive to live in our world.

Keeping all of that in mind, I wrote my letter, trying to encapsulate all of the anxiety, fear, and humbleness that I thought he might appreciate, and at the same time, hoping that my letter would be “*extremely squalid and moving*” (Treadway 44). The result, after much frustration of not being able to pen my feelings exactly the way I felt them, was this:

Dear Mr. Salinger,

You have been my favorite writer since I first met Holden when I was fifteen. Now, seven years later—freshly twenty-two and fully equipped with all of your (published) writing—I’m venturing into the real world armed with a degree in English. And in celebration of that, I thought I’d share one of my stories with you, on the off chance that you would be interested to read it.

And I end this letter with a quote from Buddy’s letter to Zooey, “*In any case, for what little it’s worth, please count on my affection and support, at whatever distance.*” (Salinger 69)

Your ever faithful reader,

--Au-Co Tran

It was difficult for me to keep my letter brief because, trained as an English major to always “Expand! Expand!” and have “more detail!” it was a bit hard for me to keep from showing off everything I had learned, especially to my idol. And I sent my story to him telling myself that one word of rejection from J.D. Salinger would mean so much more to me than pages and pages of complimentary letters from everyone else. But in the very, *very* back of my mind, the little confidence that I had about my writing kept whispering in my ear, “*Just do it, Au-Co. You’ve read so much of his writing, maybe some of it has seeped into your own writing. Maybe he’ll read it and something will click. Maybe he’ll want to take you under his literary wing. Maybe he’ll write back and the two of you could be best friends. Maybe, maybe.*” And so I sent it.

The story that I sent unconsciously mirrors a lot of what is thought to be Salinger’s best short story, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” Salinger’s story is about a young man, Seymour Glass, who spends the day on a beach in Florida with a six-year-old girl talking about wax, olives and bananafish, a “*very ordinary-looking fish*” that “*swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas*” becoming so fat that they can’t get out of the hole (Salinger 16). Meanwhile, Seymour’s wife, in their hotel room having a phone conversation with her mother in New York, “*makes it abundantly clear in the hilariously accurate cadences and substance of her conversation why her husband finds it more natural to talk to a four year old girl on the beach than to her*” (Kazin 116). However, the lightheartedness of the start of the story ends in sudden tragedy when Seymour returns to his hotel room, sits down next to his sleeping wife, and shoots himself in the head.

This story is demonstrates the sensitivity of Salinger’s characters. The bananafish is, perhaps, a symbol for Salinger’s disdain for other writers who happily bask in the light of the public eye, not knowing when to quit. And Seymour, who is suggested to be Salinger’s most beloved character, represents Salinger himself. Seymour is intellectually brilliant, understanding, and the epitome of Salinger’s notion of human perfection. His suicide guarantees that he stays perfect because he, like Salinger, quit while he’s ahead. And this is

true, as far as the rest of the Glass stories are concerned. “Bananafish” remains the only story in which Seymour appears, the rest of the Glass stories revolve around the family’s discussion and remembrances of Seymour, which are always full of awe and reverence.

My story, “Cookies Crumbs and M&M’s,” functions on a far more basic level, with little symbolism as far as I can tell. My story follows Vy, a shy young girl who spends all of her days cooped up in her apartment, cutting out news clippings she finds interesting and rearranging her bookshelves. Vy is obsessive compulsive. Everything in her apartment has to be in perfect order. When a long time college friend, D, comes to visit her, she goes through a minor panic attack as she watches him drop cookie crumbs on her newly vacuumed carpet. After Vy accidentally insults D, he leaves. Alone, Vy rushes to clean up her apartment and to put everything back in order. But before she could get her vacuum cleaner out, her doorbell rings and it is her neighbor, who is called in to work unexpectedly. He asks Vy to babysit his little sister, Judy, while he’s gone. She reluctantly agrees. The story ends with Vy and Judy connecting over a green M&M.

Vy and Seymour are very similar in that they are both sensitive and have difficulties connecting to other adults. But while Seymour’s connection with the little girl makes him realize just how much he is unable to live in the real world, Vy’s connection with Judy helps her realize that it’s not too bad if life gets messy sometimes. If I allow myself to be so bold as to compare Salinger’s writing to mine, I’d say that how we each chose to end our story shows our personality. Granted, where we were in our lives when we wrote our respective stories does have some influence. Salinger wrote “Bananafish” when he was twenty-nine years old. He had returned from World War II and was still struggling with being half Jewish during an era when it was acceptable to be openly racist against Jews. I wrote my story when I was nineteen. The hardest thing I had been through at that point was having my dad up and leaving us one day. But if we fast forwarded the age to three years later, to the point I’m at right now, I’d have a lot more to add to that short list: dealing with Wells Fargo almost foreclosing our house, rushing my grandma to the ER, discovering I have scoliosis, having people look down on us and learning to stand up for myself and my family. Sure, it’s not war, but it’s a lot for a twenty-two year old. Even so, if I had to write “Cookie Crumbs” all over again, I’d end it in the same exact way I did three years ago. Because now, when I encounter obstacles and hostility, I just repeat one of my favorite lines from William Saroyan’s novel, *The Human Comedy*, over and over in my mind like a prayer, “*Let me find one man uncorrupted by the world so that I may be uncorrupted, so that I may believe and live*” (Saroyan 153-154). I feel sad thinking that Salinger can’t, or refuses to, believe in that optimism. The young Salinger’s writing has evoked so much warmth and understanding for myself, and I’m sure for many others, but the older Salinger, who (I assume) scribbled out his address on letters of devoted readers in angry black crayons and almost obsessively stamped “**REFUSED. Return to Sender,**” just seems jaded and completely devoid of all faith in his fellow humankind.

In what was probably the best analysis of Salinger’s writing that I’ve ever read, Thomas Beller observed in his essay, “*The Salinger Weather,*” that

Salinger's writing is like "*a certain kind of weather. It's an atmosphere which, once encountered, permeates everything else...it can be sunny and upbeat. The thing is, it's private, it's deeply personal*" (Beller 134-145). I'm sure everyone who has read Salinger's writing felt some kind of intimacy with the reclusive writer, some kind of understanding that they can't find anywhere else. I wonder if he knows just how many adolescents, intellectuals, students connect to him through his writing, not to mention John Hinckley and Mark Chapman who shot Ronald Reagan and John Lennon respectively.

When I decided I was going to grow up to be a writer, I imagined a life of romantic squalor and envisioned the difference I was going to make. I wanted to change the world, make it a more beautiful place, fix all of society's problems, all through my writing. I was willing to "*risk excess on behalf of [my] obsessions*" knowing that that is what "*distinguishes artists from entertainers, and what makes some artists adventurers on behalf of us all*" (Updike 125). And I believed that I could do it, too. I knew that it was going to be hard work, but I didn't care because the thought of making a difference, no matter how small, was enough to keep me going. Beller wrote that "*people don't get instructions about how to live from writers, exactly, but sometimes there is something about a writer's voice and worldview that has a clarifying effect on your own self-perception*" (Beller 137). And for a while, Salinger seems to adhere to that belief. In *Franny and Zooey*, Zooey exclaims:

"*God damn it,*" he said, "*there are nice things in this world—and I mean nice things. We're all such morons to get so sidetracked. Always, always, always referring every goddam thing that happens right back to our lousy little egos.*" (Salinger 152).

This sudden declaration almost feels like Salinger's own perception of the world. There are moments in his writing when it seems that he is suddenly remembers just how wonderful the world is. And that is the "*heart of Salinger's appeal: he makes things so human, but not mundane; or rather he makes the mundane wonderful, and so the magic trick is that in the Salinger Weather life seems incredibly worth living*" (Beller 149).

I am graduating from college soon, which means I will become a real adult. Some part of me is sad because I know that I am outgrowing Salinger. I've been developing "*this nervous feeling that to live in the Salinger weather means to harbor the opinion that grown-up life is corrupt and not worth living*" (Beller 139). But I refuse to believe that the world is capable of turning ugly and that there is ever a point when life becomes not worth living.

So, Mr. Salinger, you may have returned my letter and my story, but I am certain that you are no moron and that you still see the "nice things in this world." And even though you will never read this, I just want quote your fellow writer, William Saroyan, who wrote, "*You've got to know people real well to know whether they're great or not. A lot of people are great that nobody ever things are great*" (Saroyan 238). Through your writing, I feel that I know you really well, Mr. Salinger. I know that you are a great person, even if you yourself might not see it. And that is what I am returning to you. You, the sender.

[]