



# Salinger

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Based on eight years of exhaustive research and exclusive interviews with more than 200 people—and published in coordination with the international theatrical release of a major documentary film from the Weinstein Company—Salinger is a global cultural event: the definitive biography of one of the most beloved and mysterious figures of the twentieth century.

For more than fifty years, the ever elusive author of *The Catcher in the Rye* has been the subject of a relentless stream of newspaper and magazine articles as well as several biographies. Yet all of these attempts have been hampered by a fundamental lack of access and by the persistent recycling of inaccurate information. Salinger remains, astonishingly, an enigma. The complex and contradictory human being behind the myth has never been revealed.

No longer.

In the eight years since Salinger was begun, and especially in the three years since Salinger's death, the authors interviewed on five continents more than 200 people, many of whom had previously refused to go on the record about their relationship with Salinger. This oral biography offers direct eyewitness accounts from Salinger's World War II brothers-in-arms, his family members, his close friends, his lovers, his classmates, his neighbors, his editors, his publishers, his *New Yorker* colleagues, and people with whom he had relationships that were secret even to his own family. Shields and Salerno illuminate most brightly the last fifty-six years of Salinger's life: a period that, until now, had remained completely dark to biographers. Provided unprecedented access to never-before-published photographs (more than 100 throughout the book), diaries, letters, legal records, and secret documents, readers will feel they have, for the first time, gotten beyond Salinger's meticulously built-up wall. The result is the definitive portrait of one of the most fascinating figures of the twentieth century.

## Salinger Details

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# From Reader Review Salinger for online ebook

## Steve Lively says

As a long-time Salinger fan, I am glad to have finally read through this thorough biography. Regardless of one's opinion of the man, his work, or both, I believe Salerno and Shields present the clearest possible picture of the cryptic and reclusive author. The chronology speaks heavily to the author's apparent battle of PTSD, but it also details some stunning personal-relationship items of which I was unaware. It's terrifically exciting to think that new material is coming as early as this year, but I'm learned since I became a fan not to hold my breath.

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## Roger K. Miller says

The biography has received indifferent to lousy reviews but I found it compulsively readable. It is not a conventional biography, more like a series of conversations with people who knew him. It has made me think much less of him and of his writing, except for "Catcher in the Rye." I think it probably helps to be male, especially an adolescent, to like that novel, but there must be a lot of female readers among the 65 million copies sold worldwide. Indeed, some of the importunate fanatics who used to lurk around Salinger's N.H. house were girls and women (whom, in a way, he preyed upon, esp. nubile girls). "Catcher" seems to strike a chord in the youthful breast about what a crappy world this is. This biography says "Catcher" is actually a metaphor for Salinger's horrible experiences in the Army in World War II. The novel transfers all the war trauma, anger, fear, anxiety, disgust, horror, etc., that he experienced into the truculent rebellion of a Salinger-like teenager. I never thought of it that way before, but it makes a lot of sense. Salinger really had several VERY VERY BAD months in combat. He was in the first wave on D-Day on Utah Beach right through to liberating a German death camp almost a year later. His strange reclusive existence for 50 years is well described as well as his prickly sense of privacy. There are dozens of fascinating anecdotes, one of my favorites being about the only film that was made from one of his writings, "My Foolish Heart," in 1949, based on Salinger's short story "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut." The movie, which I have seen, is almost nothing like the story. That angered Salinger so much that he never sold another work to Hollywood, though he had many, many offers. This bio Salinger turned down offers of as much as 10 million dollars for the rights to "Catcher in the Rye." He died a few years back and I imagine that eventually his son and daughter will sell the rights. Too bad, because if there is one American novel that is not translatable to the screen it is "Catcher in the Rye."

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## Moira Russell says

- yes, I bought this book
- yes, I am reading this book
- yes, I know this makes me a terrible person
- this book really isn't as horrible an act of Great Cultural Desecration as everyone is saying it is (did they not read the Alexander biography?)

- that cover design should win an award

- presumably the one named "Shitty Book, Gorgeous Cover" that the *Twilight* series cover designer already got

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## **Adam says**

Big problems here. The structure is oral history, but the speakers' relationships to Salinger aren't identified, though they are (re)arranged in chronological order of Salinger's life, so for example you can get an ex-lover (seemingly) in conversation with an unconnected war historian. There's a lot of 'in a letter to a friend, Salinger admitted Holden was based on his youth' -type stuff, but who is the friend & where is the letter? This stuff isn't sourced. Also the authors themselves break in to the oral narrative with these armchair psychology interludes that are often just tabloidy. They're nothing.

This book actually isn't very different than the previous bios, which it attacks in its opening pages. Shields & Salerno may (MAY) have more information than anyone else, but they haven't done anything useful or interesting with it.

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## **Kressel Housman says**

Once you get used to the collage style of this book, it turns out to be a page-turning narrative and an exhaustively-researched biography. It includes everything you'd expect in a biography of Salinger – a discussion of his work and critical and popular reactions to it, his famed reclusiveness – but it also covers parts of his life I knew nothing about, such as his service in World War II, the PTSD that informed his work, and his affairs with much younger women. The suicide of fictional Seymour Glass makes so much more sense when you understand Salinger's own war experiences, which including liberating the concentration camp Dachau. Even more mind-blowing is that he was working on *The Catcher in the Rye* in the midst of the war. Knowing that put the classic into a whole new light for me. Holden Caulfield's rage against phoniness was about something much bigger than the awkwardness of coming of age.

The entire book was excellent, but for me, the most gripping sections were about Joyce Maynard, one of Salinger's young lovers, and the assassins who used *The Catcher in the Rye* as "inspiration" for their crimes, most notably Mark David Chapman, assassin of John Lennon. But I would be remiss if I did not explain the collage style that I opened with. Author David Shields introduced it in his previous book, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. He contends that literature, just like any other art, builds on what came before it, so he quotes whole cloth from many different sources and pieces them altogether into one big collage. It looks something like this:

MARGARET SALINGER: My Dad told me, "You never forget the smell of burnt flesh."

PAUL FITZGERALD (army buddy of Salinger's): Jerry was a really great guy, but the war took a toll on all of us.

WILLIAM SHIRER (historian): quote from his book illustrating the experience of soldiers in World War II

J.D. SALINGER: quote from one of his stories about the hells of war

DAVID SHIELDS: makes his own observation

When I first began the book, I thought David Shields and his co-author Shane Salerno had interviewed all the people being quoted, but when I saw the name William L. Shirer, having read *Reality Hunger*, I understood it was a direct quote from a written source. In the standard style, such a thing would be footnoted, but Shields opposes the standard style. Legally, however, he is required to cite all sources, so the endnotes to this book are quite extensive – about 150 pages long. The thickness of this book is bound to intimidate, so I hope knowing that takes away some of the fear.

Every fan of *The Catcher in the Rye* – and there are millions of them – should read this book. Familiarity with Salinger's other published work is also essential, but there isn't much of it, so that shouldn't take long. It's not the most flattering portrait – Salinger was definitely a flawed human being – but he was also one of the 20th century's most influential and talented writers who lived an interesting, if checkered, life.

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### **TrumanCoyote says**

Wow, what a disappointment. This makes the third biography of Salinger that I've slogged through, and they've all been quite staggeringly lame (well, in fairness, the Alexander one was merely lame, but Hamilton's stunk on ice; and now this thing...yikes!). Even though I generally make it a policy to only rate/comment on books that I've read in their entirety, I admittedly skimmed (or skipped) large portions of this one. But I still feel the need to rag on this opus...or "global cultural event." lol

Say what you will, Messrs Barnum & Bailey...er, Shields & Salerno are definitely masters of hype. Of course, I might be willing to ascribe that trait to their publisher rather than them, except for the way that they both carry on and cavort throughout the book. A tome which is (for so the cover informs me) the "OFFICIAL BOOK OF THE ACCLAIMED DOCUMENTARY FILM" (a film that rates a 5.7 the last time I checked on imdb.com...apparently acclaim just ain't what it used to be).

Certainly this looks at the outset like it will be an oral biography. But it isn't. Definitely not. The two best oral biogs that I've seen--the ones on Chris Farley and Belushi--feature accounts and opinions from people who actually knew those two guys. Of course, they were both larger-than-life (not to mention larger-than-average) people who lived crazy lives out in public surrounded by a lot of other crazy people as well who were all dying to talk about them. How was such a format likely to fit a subject like Salinger, who of course was the antithesis of an SNL comedian? Very, very badly indeed.

So anyway, the two guys in charge of this project cheat. They bring in a whole host of people who never knew Salinger at all, and who presumably scarcely realized that this was what they would someday be quoted for. So we start out right away in the midst of The Longest Day, hearing from people like Stephen Ambrose about all the hell that Salinger must've been going through. Oh yeah, and FDR even checks in at one point! lol ("Hey Frank, what'd you think of Pearl Harbor?" "Well, I'd have to say that it was a day that will live in infamy." "Can we quote you on that?" "Yeah, sure thing."). This is what apparently gave Salinger his "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," to use the anachronistic phrase which keeps popping up (though I prefer the term "battle fatigue").

Shields and Salerno have a disconcerting habit throughout of quoting themselves when really they are only providing background information. Such comments should've doubtless appeared unattributed (and in italics). They are also both much given to making Unnecessary Stentorian Pronouncements in the midst of things, and love Simplistic Aphorisms as well. Things like, "WWII destroyed the man but made him a great artist; religion provided the comfort he needed as a man but killed his art." Good grief.

Then too there were the annoying and tiresome armchair-psychiatrist snatches (as I said in my review of the Alexander book: "Another guy who can't let the poor old recluse alone (or give him the right to be a recluse) but has to impart other motives to it....The main problem of course is--once again--I can't just read about the life, I've got to listen to some idiot blare his opinions at me"). Oh yeah, and of course the many CliffNotes excerpts (which reach their nadir in the section regarding Nine Stories). It's stuff like that that makes me realize why Salinger became a hermit. Jeez, I practically felt like leaving the book on the seat and running out of the subway myself after wading through that crap! (except that it was a library book, and I didn't want to be fined).

And that Michael Clarkson guy cracked me up. Somebody who sold his story to the New York Times...with the idea that he was helping people (like some Selfless Soul). lol What a bozo.

Still, I did not give this whole mess one star, because there were some worthwhile things to be found amongst the wrack. The photos were cool to see (especially fun was the one of a mustachioed JD in fatigues, cigarette in hand and slyly smiling, looking up for a moment from his work on *Catcher*), and the many excerpts from his letters, postcards, etc., were interesting. I also enjoyed the quotes from the kids of Cornish...and seeing that Salinger (at least at that point) was fun and energetic and laughed a lot. Not so much reclusive as simply wanting to get away from New Yorker know-it-alls (and who wouldn't?). Best of all I thought were the reminiscences of Jean Miller. Oh yes, and--surprisingly--the chapter (by "SHANE") regarding *Catcher* was quite readable and good.

So you probably could've concocted a worthy book out of this melange, by organizing it into chapters (with a large photo section in the middle). Include sections excerpting the Salinger letters, along with reminiscences of those who actually knew him, Fitzgerald and Miller and Maynard (although personally I found Joyce a bit princess-y). Something along the lines of H G Wells: Interviews & Recollections (edited by J R Hammond). That would make for a couple hundred pages of considerable interest...instead of 600+ pages of unsupervised sprawl.

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## Lucy.Goosey says

Fall of an Idol.

I waited with joyful anticipation for this book, to know more about an author whose primary published work had been an influential book in my early life. I read this book with increasing distaste. Aside from the format, which I thought was a little sloppy and could have been worked to create a functional narrative, the person that 'Salinger' uncovers is a person who had enough to hide that you do not wonder that he guarded his privacy so meanly. If I was that much of a hypocrite, with a distasteful penchant for 14-18 year old virgins, I would also guard my private life, possibly to avoid criminal conviction.

Salinger emerges as a sexist and sexually exploitative man, who grows from a damaged but focused young man to a damaged and lecherous older man who can not accept his own or any one else's character failings.

His final marriage seems to work only because he is dependent and in need of care, and so must hold back his caustic cruelty so as to not drive his carer away.

The man who emerges is one who spits on the publishing world, but it was the publishing world that gave him the financial freedom to say that publication is a perversion and destruction of the artist. He eschews 'gold and woman' but has plenty of gold to prop him up, and judging by the intimate revelations of the types of relationships he had, he had plenty of woman as well. Not that he appears to have been able to give much man to any woman. His sexual exploitation of a naive 18 year old girl was particularly sad, he paid so little attention to her physical arousal that she was totally frigid. This didn't stop him repeatedly exploiting her for oral sex in scenarios that were tantamount to rape. Her story was so evocatively related that I had to stop reading for 24 hours because I felt sick that this man who held himself out as a wise man to her could so callously use her and then discard her.

This was a man I had admired. If you want to hold on to your vision of Salinger as Holden Caulfield grown old, don't read this. Salinger comes across as a selfish, mean-spirited bigot who embodied everything he himself said he hated - wealth, pretension, exploitation, phoniness.

I remember that *Catcher in the Rye* was written by a young man, bursting with artistic impulse. I remember that the writer and the word are not the same. Who Salinger became was a horrible old prick. He started as a young man who didn't know what to do with his feelings. But he couldn't forgive himself for his failings and became instead a stony idol, fixed, unmoving and cut off from the very feelings that gave him the ability to write *Catcher*.

I do not look forward to the promised publications from 2015 onward - who wants to read the works of an old man with no feeling for others, and only for himself?

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## **Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says**

Maybe this will trend ; a book=bio accompanied by a simultaneous film=doc release. There's good reason for it ; some things come across better as picture, like pictures. And recently people have been dying of whom plenty of filmic material exists ; some will have their bio's written. So I'm saying, despite my long=standing irrational aversion to (and simultaneous immersion in) filmic media, there seems to be material reason to do this kind of thing.

What I learned? That Holden shot, not only the Pope, but Reagan too. And probably some other folks. Seriously. It's what happens when a reader id's too much with a narrator. In this case, a narrator all too full of himself who thinks no one else can cut it, quite. They're all phoney. And so, some nut=job reader of course swallows this whole thing about how undesirable phoney people are and goes out and like shoots a Pope and a Reagan. I don't know if the extreme=right lean of either target had anything to do with it. But books in certain hands can be dangerous. [although maybe it was that Beatle Lennon and not the Pope ; same thing.... but this is what happens when I want to write what I want to write rather than writing, you know, after a bit of research because, there's that thing right there on wikipedia which says *Several shootings have been associated with Salinger's novel, including Robert John Bardo's shooting of Rebecca Schaeffer and John Hinckley, Jr.'s assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan. After the killing of John Lennon, Mark David Chapman was arrested with a copy of the book that he had purchased that same day, inside of which he had written: "To Holden Caulfield, From Holden Caulfield, This is my statement"*. I guess I don't know Rebecca Schaeffer, but damn! that sucks what happened. ....and then that wiki blurb points me to a Salon article,

When books kill. ]

Here's Steve Taylor's song about what the Pope did after he was shot ::

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsvA-...>

Here's Suicidal Tendencies' song about shooting Reagan ::

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLcnF...>

There's probably something somewhere about people having fantasies of shooting Holden.

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## **Melinda says**

"Ingenious novel or biography? Hard to tell...."

Wow, am I glad I got the flu and was too uncomfortable to sleep and had to spend 2 days in bed. This book is GENIUS...the narration is perfection (sometimes multiple casts don't work for me, but this one is done brilliantly) and I have always wanted to know more about the man who wrote *Catcher in the Rye*, as it has so much significance. I know there is a documentary (that I hope will not be overlooked in favor of *Anchorman*, *Spiderman 10* or some such drivel) coming out this fall and I wanted to read the book first, as the only book of JD Salinger's I have read is "*Catcher*". Now, I want to read everything...and this book suggests that there are 5 completed manuscripts that are going to start being released in 2015. These books are currently in the custody of his son. JD just did not want any more publicity in his lifetime.

He reminds me of a male version of Harper Lee, only he had more than one book in him.

It is an amazing blend of narrative, insights, real letters (never before published) and voices of those who loved the beloved writer who just wanted to be left in peace, but made pilgrimages to his house anyway, just to be blessed or given direction or were his lovers. Mr. Salinger kept saying "I am a fiction writer...I have nothing to offer you" to the many pilgrims. He participated in D Day and lived through WWII....which is an amazing feat in it's self.... But he was obviously shell shocked (or what we would call today PTSD) and just wanted to live a peaceful life and write. He never wanted our adoration.

We get to hear from his first true love, Oona O'Neill, the saucy daughter of playwright Eugene O'Neill, who married Charlie Chaplain over JD and had 8 kids and flaunted their sexuality in JD's face. (that happens early on in the book, and I shall not reveal more)

We get to hear from the few fans who were able to break through his impenetrable wall-o-silence life and exchanged letters with him or published articles about the reclusive author.

Probably most of the facts could be looked up on Wikipedia, but then you miss the chance of listening to one of the greatest books ever recorded!

Five stars isn't enough for this wonderful audiobook.... I would need a whole constellation of stars to do it right...



BRAVO! This is the best book I have heard in a very long time. Totally captivating. But I have to wonder.... is it a novel (as listed here and other places) or a clever biography. You choose. I could not find the audio book in this section of Amazon, but they have it at Audible. I also could not find it here, in audio version, on Goodreads.

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### **Rebekah Welch says**

I've been a Salinger fan since college and have read the other bios about him. I also have read Joyce Maynard's and Margaret Salinger's memoirs. I'm really enjoying this so far especially as it includes information about other figures like Oona O'Neill and Earnest Hemingway. The start of the book focuses heavily on his fighting in WWII, which was well done. I understand this is the transcript of the new documentary and I'm enjoying the delivery of content, which is cut up with one figure after another commenting on Salinger and different subject matter. I have seen the documentary and the content does come across much better in book form. I will always be a defender of Salinger's desire to be alone. There's nothing wrong with being a private person. That said, I don't think Salinger was a good person. For me he is a dark figure. I practically feel guilty by association when reading some content about him. That said, I'm not comfortable with the overall thesis of this book and it seems to me the author at times demonizes him. But Salinger is a complicated figure so there's likely no way around this.

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### **Nicholas says**

First off, the book isn't really 700 pages, about 130 are footnotes, citations and character charts, coupled with the pictures and formatting this book is not a chore to read at all. I like how the biography inserted his own quotes and thought regarding Salinger. For me reading this book, elevated *The Catcher in the Rye*. Read it and then watch the documentary. Worth the time and effort.

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### **Andrew Cripe says**

After you read it, you have to decide what version of JD Salinger you'll believe in, because there are literally hundreds of accounts and interviews in this book, all about different perspectives of the somewhat elusive person. I say "somewhat" because he really wasn't that reclusive; if anything, he should be better acknowledged as a failed recluse. What made him strange wasn't his hiding, but the hiding of his literature. Think of it this way: when Thomas Pynchon passes away, we'll never get a book like this. We know where he lives, but that's about it. He didn't leave a breadcrumb-trail of scandals, perversities, and pissed off lovers in his wake. Salinger did.

This is a portrait of a man destroyed by the war and personal failures, and pieces of him limping along for the rest of his life. He had a period where he wrote powerful, amazing literature, and he drowned his abilities to produce more of it in isolation. He burned his bridges to family, talent, and heaven, all in equal measure. He became a sentient series of inconsistencies and contradictions. He was a genius, and he was a hypocrite. He was a masterful writer, and he was a misogynist. He was a father, and he was a terrible father. He was Holden Caulfield, forever frozen in narcissistic tendencies and never learning how to grow up or move on. He sought guidance in quackery. He sought fulfillment in incomprehensibility. He sought love in children

and scorned them for growing up. He smashed every proverbial mirror that would remind him of what he was: Jerome David Salinger, not Holden, not Seymour Glass, not anybody but himself.

But what's to be believed? Some of it I trust (I believe everything Joyce Maynard had to say on the matter), some of it I don't (Mary McCarthy's reviews/intellectual assassination attempts). Some of it is strikingly written--Shields and Salerno are both fans of the man's work, but they aren't blinded by it either. They gathered everything they could and presented it to us. The reader gives the final verdict. Ultimately, it changed how I feel and interpret *Catcher in the Rye*. I believe it is an incredible look at the experience of knowing and loving a genius until everything falls apart.

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## **Cyn says**

Comprehensive, more than I probably needed or wanted to know about Salinger to be honest. Written documentary style, would have flowed better and been more concise if they'd reworked it, but still easy to read despite jumping back and forth.

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## **Laura Walsh says**

Never having been blown away by the so-called Great American Classic novel, 'Catcher in the Rye', I have always been extremely curious about it's author. Certainly I had heard bits and pieces about his reclusive behavior, his later refusal to publish any more of his works although he supposedly wrote feverishly every day for years and years, etc. I thought maybe if I learned more about the man, I might better understand or appreciate, 'Catcher'. This biography has been described as a "companion to the documentary film of the same name", and alot of the book reads just like that, short sections with the 'narrator's' name, followed their comments. At times reading these short snippets was annoying, and although very entertaining and informative about the title subject, it was tough to get into a good reading rhythm and truly get lost in the book. I thought a more narrative approach would have made the book more enjoyable to get through, but further into this book, there were longer passages, more in depth stories of encounters, and overall I came away with a positive opinion of the book....the book, not necessarily, the person I was reading about! I went back and reread 'Catcher' after finishing the bio, and even with alot more background knowledge of the author, still feel the same about the novel.

A very intersting section of this book dealt with how two modern day assassins, Mark David Chapmen and John Hinckley, both said they were 'inspired' to do their infamous deeds, after reading the book. If Salinger's time in the military during WWII, witnessing atrocities in the European theatre,(both in battle and in liberating a concentration camp!) weren't enough to have an effect on his mental state, surely knowing his signature character was in part a reason for one beloved musical icon to be killed, and a sitting president to be the target of a failed assassination attempt, could very well have pushed him into retreating from the world.

At the end of this book, we learn that Salinger's estate will begin to release some of his writings beginning in 2015. Will there be another seminal character created? Further adventures of both the Caulfields and the Glasses? Time will tell. I certainly have my curiosity piqued to pleasantly anticipate 'new' material from him.

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## Max Nemtsov says

[illegible]

### Elaine says

Based on interviews conducted over many years, of people who knew Salinger, this is a very enlightening biography. Before reading it I knew next to nothing about him, other than that he was the author of an iconic book that has become a classic. Not everything I read here casts Salinger in a positive light. He was definitely a flawed and tortured soul but he was also very talented and brilliant, and had lived quite an extraordinary life and had some horrific experiences in WWII. Salinger published his very last bit of writing in 1965 and in the next 45 years of his life he became a recluse and refused to have anything else published. It is believed however that he did not stop writing and that there are completed manuscripts relating to the Glass family of his short stories and the Caulfields.....Holden Caulfield's family. It has been alleged that these writings/novels will be published in the next 5 years. It would be very exciting to have these works of Salingers printed. I for one would definitely be interested in reading them.

## Matt Picchietti says

I hated the format of this book. I only made it through 92 pages before announcing an official time of death. I returned the book. It's the first time I've ever done that. I'm even more pissed because, despite the obnoxious layout, there was good information, but I did not have the patience to fight my way through that literary mess that is being sold for 37.50. Brutal.

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## Sandra says

734 páginas. Lo miraba y pensaba: "¿De verdad Salinger tuvo una vida tan interesante? ¿Tan rica? Leíste El Guardián tarde, cuando ya no era adolescente y, hasta cierto momento de la historia, te decepcionó bastante. Después toda tu percepción cambió. ¿Pero la vida del autor da para tantas páginas?"

Obviamente sabía poco de Salinger y de su obra. No sabía que había estado en la II Guerra Mundial, ni lo que ocurrió allí, nada de su aislamiento, de su obsesión por la intimidad y por las mujeres jóvenes.

Desconocía sus otros relatos, sus otras palabras.

El formato documental de Salinger es lo que más me gusta. Declaraciones en orden cronológico de amigos, no amigos, familiares, conocidos y desconocidos. Siempre me sorprenderá el empeño del mundo por ir detrás de Salinger pese a que él no quería. Nunca entenderé la manía de querer meterse en la cama de un escritor que lo único que ha hecho ha sido ofrecer un libro al mundo.

La mejor parte, la más conmovedora, es la experiencia de Salinger en la II Guerra Mundial. Hasta que publicó El guardián entre el centeno. Después es todo cuesta abajo.

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## Jim says

A deeply sad book.

It begins with an enormously sympathetic portrait of Salinger during WWII. Though he was not an infantryman, he was attached to Fourth Division, which suffered some of the worst casualties in the war. He arrived on Utah Beach on D-Day, fought in the flooded hedgerows of Normandy, endured the strange hell of the Hurtgen Forest and survived the Battle of the Bulge. Salinger was an NCO in the Counter Intelligence Corps and not directly involved in combat. He had freedom to move around, gathering intel, making arrests, interrogating prisoners and civilians. He wasn't on the firing line, but a fox hole is a fox hole. The worst thing he saw came at the very end of the war when he and his CIC cronies went into Kaufering Lager IV, a sub-camp of Dachau, where the sick from neighboring camps were interred. Before the Nazis fled the scene, they herded all the prisoners into barracks and torched them. Those that couldn't move on their own were butchered. Unimaginable horror. Salinger wasn't prepared for this. No one was.

"You walked through a beautiful, manicured German village, and at the end of the road was this camp that looked like hell piled with corpses. For a soldier like Salinger walking into a camp, there was a stillness to it and a craziness to it. You were caught off guard. You weren't psyched for battle. These weren't liberations in the sense of busting down the gates or anything like that. The war was over; you could let down your guard a little. These soldiers basically walked into these horrific situations. Unguarded and unsuspecting, they were walking into an open place. This was like opening up, and falling into, a graveyard."

Salinger wasn't some grunt who walked in and did what he was told and got the hell out. He was a CIC guy. His job was to understand what happened and why, and then pass that information along. He couldn't ignore the madness. He had to get to the bottom of it, and how the hell do you do that? How do you process the insanity of Kaufering IV? It's no wonder that he ended up having a breakdown shortly afterwards.

There's a part of me that feels that Salinger ought to get a pass for having enduring what he did in the service of his country. As a veteran of the military and the son of a combat veteran, I know that experiences like these change a person forever. They constitute a clear delineation in the arc of one's personal narrative: before one became intimate with death and after. Two different people. Salinger would confide more than once, "You never forget the smell of burning bodies." As far as I'm concerned, I understand Salinger's desire to retreat to his redoubt in the woods of Cornish. Leave the man alone.

But Salinger didn't retreat. He didn't hole up and hide out. He simply moved his operations to a remote location and continued to engage the world with varying degrees of contempt and disdain. Over time his communication became broadcasts: the messages came out on his terms according to his schedule. In wartime, that's called propaganda. His most consistent message was, "No." Unless you happened to be a very young girl of a certain type. Then the message was quite different. The message was "Come to me." Some of the girls came. Some of the girls stayed, at least for a little while. When they left (or were asked to leave) Salinger would find a new girl. Even though Salinger kept getting older and the girls stayed the same age. In spite of his so-called renunciation of literary fame, there's no question he used it to gain access to these young women. It's creepy. It's reprehensible. But most of all it's sad.

Shields and Salerno offer lots of opinions about this that I won't get into here. The biography is an oral history, a composite of hundreds of voices. It's an interesting approach, and a very effective one. Life is long. Let the military people comment on Salinger's wartime years, the publishing people speak about Salinger the writer, etc. Shields and Salerno craft the message they want by shaping and directing the conversation. It's manipulative, but good art usually is. It makes sense that the book is paired with a documentary because the book reads like one. There's a lot of overlap in the book, which is partly by design. What's more compelling than two people making the same point, especially if it's controversial? But the conclusions Shields and Salerno draw get repeated over and over again, and there comes a point where the repetitions weaken the case because they're handled as a fact. My least favorite sections of the book are the two chapters where first Shields and then Salerno abandon the oral history format and explore their own theories. It's like editing a story collection and putting your own novella in the middle.

The story of Salinger as an artist has no end. It's been interrupted and an examination of his life helps us understand why that is so, but it doesn't change the terms of that interruption. If Salinger's decision not to publish is like a suicide, then Shields and Salerno's massive biography is the note. A suicide note can illuminate, but it never explains. Until we get our hands on the material Salinger was working on all those years in his alpine enclave, the story is incomplete. But thanks to this book, when that day comes I'll greet it with far less fanfare.

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