



## **Salinger: A Biography**

*Paul Alexander*

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In researching *Salinger: A Biography*, journalist and biographer Paul Alexander conducted over forty interviews with major literary figures including George Plimpton, Gay Talese, Ian Hamilton, Harold Bloom, Roger Angell, A. Scott Berg, Robert Giroux, Ved Mehta, Gordon Lish, and Tom Wolfe. Alexander's research also took him to newly available archives at Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia universities, NYU, and the New York Public Library. Response from critics has been overwhelming.

## Salinger: A Biography Details

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# From Reader Review Salinger: A Biography for online ebook

## Reid says

This "author" makes two ridiculous highly cynical accusations that even contradict each other, first that Salinger was only feigning to be a recluse and contrived to get the spotlight back on himself repeatedly in order to remain famous, and secondly, that he "sought and protected his privacy because he had a penchant for young women that he did not want to reveal to the public..." Both accusations seem patently absurd, and disingenuous since there's so much evidence to the contrary in the same book. How cynical must one be to come up with those two theories, especially both at once?

Also, he totally misunderstands the story, Teddy, and I don't see how because it's chock full of foreshadowing which he apparently completely overlooked, or probably he never even read the story. He concludes that "Teddy, the picture of (ten year old) innocence is capable of (view spoiler)It's so obvious I had to put it in writing just to dispute his fairly absurd and unfair conclusion. I also disagree with the conclusion he makes about The Laughing Man story, but I won't go on about it.

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## Lauren says

The author spends a whole page in the second chapter explaining to the reader that sometimes, a writer's actual life creeps into his work. Ummm... yeah. Pretty sure we all know that. And it doesn't get better from there. While there were some interesting facts, I wish I had gone online to find them instead of having to put up with this writing style.

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## Paige Murphy says

I feel guilty having read this book. Salinger was a fierce recluse and a window into his life feels wrong. The author states things Salinger hated, then did the opposite. Salinger didn't want his picture on covers- this book has two! Salinger lived purposely in a secluded home, the author gives directions to that home. Salinger sued a man for trying to publish a biography- this guy does it. I'm interested in Salinger like everyone else, but he wanted to remain a mystery. We should let him.

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## Shans O'Rourke-Hudson says

Granted, it must be very difficult to write a biography about one of the most famous recluses in all of literature. However, it almost seemed as if Alexander were trying to complete a requisite number of pages, seeing as how he repeats his theories and ideas a million times. (Just like Holden!) This book didn't really tell me much that I couldn't find on wikipedia, but I still read the whole thing.

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## **Alec Julien says**

It's a little bit ironic (if there is such a thing as small irony) that the person to tackle the biography of one of the greatest writers ever turns out to be a mediocre writer himself. Sad, really. Salinger deserves better.

That said, there is plenty of interesting material here: references and summaries of Salinger's non-book-published stories, bits of history I hadn't known about, etc. But it's just not very well cobbled together, and on top of my aesthetic complaints, there's way too much amateur psychoanalysis perpetrated by Alexander. According to him, Salinger is pretty much a closeted pedophile whose stories are transparently about a limited array of actual experiences. I wish Alexander had just stuck to the facts.

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## **Joelle Diderich says**

Well researched but poorly written, this biography had the unfortunate effect of putting me off Salinger, one of my early literary heroes, for good. If Paul Alexander feels any sympathy or admiration for his subject, it does not come across in this pedestrian effort.

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## **M. D. Hudson says**

Paul Alexander, Salinger, a Biography

So there I am, walking out of the library (where I am employed) and there on the special bargain discount discard rack, Paul Alexander's bio. of J. D. Salinger. It was only a quarter, but I felt sleazy about it.

This is a pretty inept little book, but it was not a hatchet-job for the most part, and the writing of it did not involve stalking Salinger to make him squeal (which made me feel a little less guilty about picking it up), although there is a melodramatic bit at the beginning of Alexander gazing at Salinger's house from his car. The book is not by any means a scholarly biography and it can be gulped down in fairly short order, and so, as a way to scoop up some biographical information on J. D. Salinger, it is not a bad way to go.

Unfortunately, outside the bare recounting of facts, Alexander can be counted on to be banal: "Perhaps because he was trying to make a new life for himself, Salinger did things he had never done before" (p. 114). On page 186: "Serious and aloof, Salinger was so wrapped up in his life, he was usually unable to step back and laugh at himself, or at others." Likewise, Alexander's attempts at psychological analysis can be tiresome. He keeps worrying that ancient bone about Salinger's penchant for younger-looking-than-they-really-are young women and the question as to whether he was a pedophile. Salinger wasn't, so far as anybody can tell (and journalists tried like hell to find a "closet full of little girls" back in the 60s). Salinger's peccadilloes and predilections are somewhat seedy and sometimes a little creepy, but nothing outright scandalous ever happened. When he first went into seclusion he did hang out a lot with the local high school kids around Windsor, VT – throwing parties, hanging out at the diner, etc. This is pretty weird, but soon after he married a young (but age of consent) woman who bore him two children. The marriage failed and she left him, suffering from neglect and isolation since as he got older, all Salinger wanted to do was write. The divorce was messy, as they tended to be back then, but by all accounts (including his children's, mostly) Salinger seemed to be a devoted father. In later years he watched for pretty young actresses on TV and would write them fan letters, arrange meetings – this dating strategy landed him a relationship of a few years duration

with an actress from “Mr. Merlin” (which struck me as being such a sad, funny fact). That this woman was 36 years old and apparently un-scarred or resentful after her relationship with Salinger makes things a whole lot less creepy. And there was that awful Joyce Maynard affair, but Maynard emerged unscathed (despite all her protests to the contrary) and went on to exact humiliating revenge on him.

Perhaps not his most attractive trait, Salinger’s sporadic forays into the sexual jungle were at worst a literary version of rock stars trolling through the groupies. And Salinger hardly took full advantage of his fame. There are third-rate writer-professors who cut a far wider swath through their undergrads than anything Salinger ever did (see Sebastian Matthews’ memoir of his father, the poet William Matthews and his 1970s poetry workshop seraglios). Given his enormous literary status, Salinger could have been a real monster, possessing perhaps the biggest groupie base – male and female – in the world. But he didn’t and Alexander doesn’t give Salinger any credit for self-restraint. Again and again Alexander returns to a teenage incident in Vienna with a girl at an ice skating rink as if it were the key to Salinger’s obsessions with inappropriately young women (Fraulein Rosebud). Humbert Humbert references, I am sorry to say, slink out of the shadows. Sometimes Alexander indulges in outright prudery. Here is Alexander on the canonical Salinger short story, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”:

“Just as disturbing, though, is an element in the story Salinger may not even have intended to be disturbing. This has to do with Seymour’s apparent fascination with Sybil (the little girl). Throughout the story, Seymour’s behavior toward Sybil comes dangerously close to being inappropriate; then Seymour actually crosses the line by saying that contemplating Sybil’s friend Sharon makes him mix “memory and desire.” (p. 126)

Well, this is just dimwitted. To set the record straight, there is nothing remotely inappropriate going on here. In the context of the story, Seymour is teasing Sybil with the fact Sharon was hanging around him the night before (keep in mind, these little girls are about 5 or 6 years old). Seymour is gently correcting Sybil’s obnoxious, greedy insistence on having Seymour all to herself. Seymour’s quip about “memory and desire” is a riff on T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” and the whole thing is couched in such affectionate, good-natured irony that I find it hard to believe how anybody could consider it “inappropriate.” The fact that elsewhere in the story Seymour kisses the bottom of Sybil’s naked foot would probably land him in jail now, but even that incident is so innocent and free of sexual context that I only bring it up because, well, because you know how it goes these days.

Pretty much by accident, what Alexander’s book does reveal that beyond being a writer, there doesn’t appear to be much about Salinger to report. He was an average student with average-to-bad grades. He loved his Mom, his Dad intimidated him. He liked girls. He kinda liked sports. Didn’t like office work. He was a little touchy, quick to feel slighted. He was for a while a snazzy dresser and a nightclub-goer. It wasn’t until he got turned on to writing that Salinger really lit up. This need for writing to basically fill out the suit may be why he became a recluse writing things he had no intention of publishing 15 hours a day. Most talented people become what they do and are not usually comfortable merely existing. Sometimes what they do becomes an all-consuming obsession. Back in the old days this used to be called genius...

Well, if not a genius, the difference between Salinger and the rest of us was his formidable talent (which he worked like hell to develop). Say what you want, but Salinger is a freaking gorgeous writer. One of the things I most admire about Alexander’s book is that he does not go along with one of the biggest critical complaints about Salinger: that he failed to “develop” as a writer. This was, as Alexander notes, the same thing they said about Fitzgerald and once you’ve written “The Great Gatsby” just what in the hell are you supposed to “develop” into? I couldn’t agree more. As Oscar Wilde once said, only mediocrities “develop.” Unfortunately, as shrewd as he is on Salinger’s unique gifts as a writer, Alexander tries again and again to

prove his theory that Salinger was working a con job on an unsuspecting public, that by staying a recluse, he was fuelling book sales and therefore his income, without having to publish any new material. This is poppycock. No author can sell as many books as Salinger did through “manipulating his image” and certainly not over the course of decades the way Salinger did. But Alexander can’t let this little conspiracy theory of his go and it pops up in angry little boluses throughout the book.

Although Alexander does a competent job of recounting the publication history of Salinger’s works, with all the publishers’ squabbles and disappointments such things entail, when it comes to the actual work, he can be rather obtuse (see Seymour and Sybil above). There is a quite funny bit on page 224-225 where Alexander takes great umbrage at Salinger’s dedication/introduction to “Seymour: An Introduction and Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenter.” Alexander sees it as being deceptive and presumptuous and insulting (“What exactly did (Salinger) mean by ‘mixed company’?”). As far as I can tell, these bits of late Salinger are nothing but the self-conscious and rather ponderously ironic wit of an increasingly withdrawn and cynical writer who had been thoroughly steeped in mid-20th century Manhattan literary culture. Much of the time it seems Alexander just simply fails to understand both the texts and their cultural contexts.

Perhaps a minor point, but Salinger’s World War II experiences were rendered by Alexander with remarkable ineptitude. His background research was sketchy and the specific descriptions unintentionally hilarious to this reader. On page 95 we are told that on D-Day “Salinger’s regiment boarded an amphibian trooper mover that would take them across the English Channel.” “Amphibian” as an adjective is in the dictionary, but I have never heard it used in this context – it sounds as if the Allies’ launched a secret convoy of gargantuan troop-hauling frogs spawned to defeat the Nazi menace. The word I’m looking for is “amphibious” and it just proves my theory that there is no such thing in the world anymore as an editor. Even if you think “amphibian” is okay to use here, the rest of the passage is blundered, since in World War II, troops were loaded onto regular ships, taken close to the Normandy beaches, then loaded onto small landing craft (not called “troop movers,” amphibian or otherwise) for the short, harrowing journey to shore. On this very same page, Alexander tells us that during the crossing “In the sky overhead, anti-artillery shells were exploding.” First off, unless you are a cosmonaut, where else is the sky if not overhead? And what in the world is an “anti-artillery shell” and why were they exploding in the air where, as far as I know, no artillery can be deployed? Furthermore, Alexander tells us Salinger landed at Utah Beach about four hours into the invasion – I’m no expert, but I think most German coastal resistance of any description had been knocked out by then. Alexander, apparently basing his D-Day research on watching the movie “Saving Private Ryan,” tells us Salinger and his comrades “rushed out into the cold water, heading for the beach. On shore, they found cover. Digging in, they started to fire back at the enemy.” This describes the first wave at Omaha Beach, but not four hours later at Utah Beach. I imagine Salinger landed without encountering much by way of opposition and marched on up the beach without firing a shot. He was an army intelligence guy, sent to interrogate German prisoners and French civilians; he wasn’t there to knock out pillboxes. Later on, Salinger undoubtedly underwent terrifying combat experiences – Hurtgen Forest is perhaps one of the worst European engagement for US troops. These later experiences in Europe seem to be rendered without Alexander’s level of blunders on D-Day, but these sections would have been improved with a few choice quotes from first-hand accounts of Hurtgen and the Bulge rather than relying on Alexander’s sketchily generic descriptions of how awful it was. For instance, I’ve read (elsewhere) that one of the most terrifying aspects of Hurtgen Forest was the way pine trees were weaponized – I’m not kidding – German artillery shells were set to explode in the air. These explosions would splinter the trees, sending chunks of wood hurtling down on the Americans in their foxholes. This made it virtually impossible for the GI’s to take cover. Such details do make a difference, I think.

Despite its considerable flaws, Alexander’s book is worth reading, if you want a quick fix for your Salinger curiosity without quite sinking to the tabloid level. Alexander’s complaints about Salinger’s character are

clumsy but rarely vicious. He puts Salinger's publishing history in perspective in a basic chronological way that I found useful, despite Alexander's lack of cultural feel for mid-century A-list publishing milieu in New York City. I learned some things that I'm glad I did and a few I wish I hadn't (that Salinger checked out the babes of "Mr. Merlin" on TV in the 1980s). This being said, when I consulted Wikipedia, I found Salinger's biography there to be both more informative and better written. For instance, Wikipedia is much more specific about Salinger's on-going searches for religious experiences; Alexander makes it sound as if he became a Zen Buddhist and food nut and that was that. Wikipedia quotes sources indicating that Salinger's religious strivings were much more complex and wide-ranging. Plus, thanks to Wikipedia, I discovered that Salinger's son Matt, an actor, made his big screen debut in the movie "Revenge of the Nerds," and that, my friends, is priceless cultural knowledge.

Until I encountered the quote in Alexander's book, I'd never heard Norman Mailer's remark that Salinger was "no more than the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school." This idea that Salinger was basically an infantile man who appealed to the great infantile mass of "sensitive" Americans who don't want to ever grow up sticks to Salinger's works. Many of Salinger's contemporary reviewers noticed it, and some of them attacked it with vigor (Mary McCarthy was especially shrill). The older I get, the more I tend to see their point – and some of Salinger's appeal has indeed faded for me now. I was quite beguiled by Salinger in my youth: for a long time I desperately wanted to be one of the obscurer members of the Glass family (one of the twins, perhaps), or that one guy who really understood Franny. Recently rereading "Seymour: An Introduction" and the end of "Zooey" I found myself unable to return to these old states of bliss and yearning. However, looking over the ruins of the supposedly adult Norman Mailer or Mary McCarthy or John Updike and their literary legacies, I find it hard to fault Salinger too much for his preoccupations. Which is to say I'm still not resigned to trading in infantile Seymour Glass for echt-adult Rabbit Angstrom or that awful Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit or antique advertisements for myself.

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## **Adam Sidsworth says**

To write a biography about a famous recluse would be a challenge, and this book, published in 1999, was released about a decade before the eccentric author's death. Many of the people who had been involved with Salinger during his writing career were deceased by the time Alexander penned his biography, and thanks to a court case related to a previously written unpublished Salinger biography, Alexander was unable to recreate any of the archived Salinger-penned letters and correspondence to any degree. Nor were any of Salinger's vast collection of short fiction produced, no doubt to avoid the wrath of the (then) still-living Salinger. So that could make the biography go one of two ways: you've either read Salinger's work and the biography adds to the mystery or you know nothing about him and this book does nothing for you.

Because Alexander was limited to access to Salinger, he was limited to guess at Salinger's psychology or motivations. Salinger was an enigma: he was most likely traumatized by experiences in the Second World War, making him worthy of our sympathy. But then again, Salinger was most likely a ephrophile, stealing the innocence of countless young girls.

Yet this book is an ultimately interesting read on a literary giant who will most likely remain the enigma in death that he was in life.

As an afterthought, it's too bad this book wasn't better copy edited. If a publishing house releases a biography

on a well-known author, they have an obligation to make sure the book follows good grammar and punctuation. Just saying.

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## **Venky says**

The man who gifted the literary world "Holden Caulfield" also ensured that he remained obdurately inaccessible to the public throughout his life. While Holden Caulfield and "The Catcher In The Rye" do not seem to have any obstacles in gaining and regaining popularity, their creator seemingly seems to have gone out of his way to avoid being popular, unrelenting in his pursuit of shunning the arc lights of fame.

In this searching portrait of J.D.Salinger, one of the most influential, albeit reclusive authors of our time, Paul Alexander seeks to unravel the mystery shrouding the escape from life attitude of one of America's most loved literary giants. The outcome of such a difficult and complex endeavor is a set of plausible and searing notions that astonish and stun the reader. Getting into Salinger's head can be an extremely daunting task. Many have attempted only to fall by the way side, accumulating scorn and contempt in the process.

Alexander, displaying great subtlety and tact, proposes working around the hurdle rather than take it head on. Was Salinger's attempt at being reclusive an ulterior but genius master stroke at acquiring popularity? The means of getting at the very objective which Salinger outwardly seem to detest? Was his escaping to the quaint town of Cornish, a signaling act of building an insatiable curiosity surrounding his life amongst his fans? Or was Salinger plagued by a sexual tension as evidenced in his prepubescent as well as teen heroines ranging from Esme to Louis and from Franny to Phoebe Caulfield? Salinger's own romantic trysts with women significantly younger to him in age seems to edify this belief.

Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo were also reclusive. But unlike Salinger, they were absolutely lost to the searching examination of the public, whereas J.D.Salinger chose to make isolated and rare appearances, many of which were those extensively covered by the media. Salinger's love-hate relationship with his publishers and his absolute revulsion for the publishing world (which he deemed 'devious') also set him apart from the rest of his contemporaries.

The man is now physically lost to the world. Salinger died in the year 2010 choosing to leave a great part of his life swathed in mystery. However he will continue to live for ever and mesmerise us all through the thoughts, deeds and words of Holden Caulfield.

J.D.Salinger - The real Catcher In The Rye.

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## **TrumanCoyote says**

Not as bad as Hamilton's book--but still pretty goddamn lame. 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. And the young-girl crap became as tiresome as the unconsciously-seeking-publicity stuff. The first part of it (through the war) was better than the rest...but his comments about the stories were often just buffoonish. Dismissing "The Laughing Man," and his sensitive-soul remarks about "Down In the Dinghy"--his bleak simplification of "Uncle Wiggily"--and excuse me, but wasn't the point of "Teddy" that he fell into the empty pool (not that he pushed his sister in)?! Like he presaged in conversation earlier in the story, and which would account for her



"sustained" scream (hard to hold a note when you're hitting concrete). 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. Also, looks like he might've had some trouble holding his pen--to judge from sentences like: "By inventing Holden Caulfield, Salinger had entered an arena where he would be able to produce significant fiction" or "She was attractive in a 'pretty' sort of way." (And no pictures!--a further lameness.)

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## **Harold Walters says**

Not bad. "The Catcher in the Rye" is one of my all-time favourite novels...but I'm done with Salinger now...that's enough time spent reading about a man who didn't want to be read about.

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## **J.P. says**

As of now, this is probably the best available biography of J.D. Salinger. Paul Alexander does something that I didn't think was possible---he presents an admirable and yet even-handed portrait of a man who went out of his way to be unknowable.

True, Alexander renders a picture of a signal literary artist. He gives us in-depth analysis of Salinger's four published books, plus tantalizing explication of the stories Salinger chose to let languish in yellowing copies of the magazines in which they first appeared. He takes you right through Salinger's writing career, from his first efforts published by Whit Burnett in *STORY* magazine in the 1940s to his last-minute abandonment of the book publication of "Hapworth 16, 1924" in the late 1990s. You'll walk away with a new appreciation for Salinger's work and a desire to reread---like I am now---all his available work.

Beyond this, Alexander provides a fair treatment of the man himself. He shows us a vain and even combative eccentric who seemed to turn his back on a world which refused to live up to his impossibly high standards. He shows us a religious seeker who denied himself all the spoils our society has to offer in favor of spiritual rewards. We're shown someone who, repulsed by our celebrity-obsessed culture, chose a life of obscurity and the practice of literary art for art's sake. And Alexander also drops in a few juicy tidbits like, for example, the time Salinger was booted off the "Dynasty" TV set for paying an unannounced visit to his penpal, actress Catherine Oxenberg. Yes, really.

So until Alexander updates it or until Salinger's widow spills her guts, this is the place to start if you want to learn more about this great American author and individualist. Now, excuse me, I have to go finish *NINE STORIES*.

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## **Mia Brown says**

If I could give this book zero stars, I would. This is the worst biography I've ever "read" (I couldn't finish it, it was that bad). Alexander should be ashamed of himself.

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## **Hardy says**

This is a peek into the life of the author of *Catcher in the Rye*. I found it profoundly interesting.

But it makes me sad to see all these negative reviews. Of course they are all wrong, and I am right.

(1) You can't complain about the author was intruding into the life of a reclusive person. You are tacitly consenting to that behaviour when you read the book.

(2) The reader should recognize that the author based the book mostly on public information and only a handful of interviews. As a result, the book is quite short. I read it in in one rainy Sunday.

(3) The reader should realize that the author is also a writer. Since he is a human, it is possible that the author is jealous of Salinger's success. This becomes more apparent as the book progresses, and manifests in the scolding conclusion.

"Art is the lie which allows us to see the truth". No book is perfect. But this book succeeds in giving the reader a feel for the true person behind the famous novel.

Salinger was the indifferent child of an ambitious father who lived in New York. Salinger recognized his talent as a writer as a teenager, but had trouble making a living from it, which irked his father. He fell in love with a young lady, but their relationship was severed when Salinger joined the army for WW2. He later read in the newspapers that she married Charlie Chaplin, who was over 50 years older than the teenage girl.

Salinger eventually served in WW2 where he fought from D-Day to Germany. But he was disgusted with the horrors of war. He saw tactical and bureaucratic mistakes causing the deaths of thousands of his friends. Some days he saw 200 people die. At the end of the war, he went to see a psychiatrist, but the book does not reveal what was discussed.

After the war, he became a successful short story writer for magazines like *The New Yorker*. In 1950, he published *Catcher in the Rye*. With its success, he moved to a reclusive town in New Hampshire and generally avoided publicity, with a few exceptions. He never published another novel.

This book argues that Salinger cultivated an image of reclusively but was actually toying with the media to ensure he always stayed in the public consciousness.

The book suggests that Salinger became resentful as he got older. It argues that he wasn't that good of a writer, he just had one very good story inside of him. There are other authors, such as Harper Lee, who only published one novel. Nonetheless, Salinger was addicted to writing, and spent countless hours punching away at a keyboard, writing only for himself.

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## **Kimberly says**

Salinger is notoriously secretive--that's an understatement, really. Having been a recluse since shortly after *Catcher in the Rye* was published, very few people have seen or heard from Salinger over the last several decades. So all we really have to go on is what can be pieced together by biographers. This book traces Salinger's life and career, giving a good analysis of why Salinger chose to stop publishing and retreat from the public eye. It also does a nice job of providing insight into the development of the Glass family and Holden Caulfield, exploring just how much of the characters' personas come from Salinger's own existence. Since the book proceeds chronologically through Salinger's career, it is an excellent reference for learning about Salinger's stories that were published in magazines but never collected in books. As if all that weren't interesting enough, the final chapters of the book take a look at the cult phenomenon of *Catcher in the Rye*, with special attention given to Mark David Chapman assassinating John Lennon and claiming *Catcher in the Rye* was his motive.

The bottom line is we are never going to hear from Salinger himself, and even after he dies we may never get to read what I'm assuming are the thousands of manuscripts sitting in his house. His daughter's memoir is pretty patronizing--she definitely inherited her father's ego--so if someone is looking to learn about Salinger, I would recommend this book over Margaret Salinger's *Dream Catcher*.

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