

HOLDEN THROUGH THE TIMES

In November 1989 a new translation of The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger was published in the Netherlands and there was much talk about it, because this translation was very different from the one that was published thirty years ago. Some critics were very enthusiastic and said that the language of the main character, Holden Caulfield, had finally been adapted to the time we live in now, but other critics considered it an insult to the Holden that was created by Salinger in the first place and one of the critics even called it a 'rape' of Salinger's mastercreation.

You can imagine the curiosity this evoked in me, so I went to the library to get both translations in order to compare them to the English edition. When I did that, I experienced that besides the 'real' Holden in the English edition, in the two translations, two completely different Holdens were speaking to me, because the use of language was so different. So I actually had three different Holdens speaking to me, which confused me 100 % ! Dazzled as I was, I decided to lay aside the two translations, never to look at them again and to stick to the one and only Holden that Salinger had created. This was the Holden I knew and bore in mind.

This whole experience, however, had made me wonder if thirty years ago readers of the book experienced or felt different about Holden than readers do now. (Of course everyone reads a book in his own subjective way, but it is very likely that the time you live in has something to do with it too).

To try to find an answer to this, I went to my father who read the book thirty years ago at the age of sixteen, just as I did (and Holden happens to be sixteen years too) and we talked about our feelings about Holden, a boy from the upper middle class who has just been kicked out of school once again and is searching for an identity and someone real in New York.

While Holden is telling us his story, he exaggerates a lot, something that is evident in his use of language and slangwords ('horsing around, goddam, corny, and all, it really goes') which makes the story very funny to read, but which

probably also shows his nervousness and lack of self-confidence. He pretends to be a real sturdy boy, but his experience with the prostitute, for instance, proves that's he's actually a big coward and that he's merely a boy of big stories and words. However, Holden seems to be a good boy at heart. He is just afraid of living in the real world and facing reality.

He's very critical and observant of the people he meets, especially people who can be stereotyped. People put in boxes and belonging to different groups are hated by Holden as can be seen in his words:

"...and everybody sticks in these goddam clicks. The guys that are on the basketball team stick together, the Catholics stick together, the goddam intellectuals stick together, the guys that play bridge stick together, even the guys that belong to the goddam Book-of-the Month Club stick together." (p.137)^{*}

This attitude is exactly what I didn't fully like about Holden. I felt irritated at a certain point that Holden doesn't even try to like someone; he forms his ideas and judgements beforehand. What irritated me even further was that he doesn't seem to care about anything, including his schooling and his future. Holden is unaware of the fact that he's completely messing up his life. He doesn't realise that as he keeps searching, hiding and running from place to place, he's falling to pieces physically and mentally. But, unlike Holden, I care very much about the things I do and about my future ! Holden's attitude towards life is really a bit negative, a thing that his younger sister, Phoebe, has also noticed:

You don't like anything that's happening", she says to Holden (p.176). But there is one exception: Holden adores children , because they are so natural, honest and they are still themselves. Phoebe, for example, just about kills him and he wants to protect her from the mean outside world of grown-ups, who are

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J.D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, Penguin Edition 1963. All quotations referring to The Catcher in the Rye will be from this edition.

hypocritical and dishonest. (I do not think, by the way, that it's a coincidence that the author has given her the name of Phoebe, because Phoebus was Apollo, the god of sun. Phoebe is the shining bright little kid for Holden, his sunshine.)

However, I think Holden actually does care for other people besides children and he admits this himself in the last line of the book: " Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." he says (p.220). It's clear, that Holden is a boy who's afraid of commitment, rejection and becoming one of the others. He's very scared of entering the big adult world and facing its responsibilities. He longs for the safety of childhood (and don't we all sometimes ?).

To compensate for his own failure, Holden makes up a brave hero-role for himself; : he wants to be a catcher in the rye when he grows up: " I am standing on the edge of some crazy cliff, what I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff".(p.180)

Holden dedicates himself to the idea of saving children in order to keep them from belonging to a group when they grow up, like the phoney adults who stick together in their 'goddam clicks'. But this is an impossible task he's aiming at. " If you had a million years to do it, you couldn't rub out even half the '-you' signs in the world. It's impossible, Holden realizes (p.208). And we really know for sure that Holden will lose his fight, when the two little boys, that accompany him in the museum, are frightened and run away when they have come down to the tomb with mummies. Left alone down there with the burried Egyptian, Holden thinks about his own tombstone.

" I think, even if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetary and I have a tombstone and all, it'll say 'Holden Caulfield' on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and right under that it'll say '-you'. I'm positive in fact" (p.211). I really felt sorry for Holden at this point: he isn't even able to prevent a '-you' sign on his own tombstone!

My father and I didn't have the same feelings about Holden in all respects, though we were same age when we read the book. To my father, the most important part of the book was Holden's long wandering through New York trying to find an honest person, in which he recognized himself. But, as I said before, in this part of the book, I was often annoyed by the fact that Holden doesn't seem to care about his future at all. It's however logical that my father felt closer to Holden at this point, because he lived in a different time, in which you didn't know if it was any use caring about a future.

My father belonged to the generation that grew up just after the Second World War, when a great many dreams seemed to have been shattered forever. Those young people were desperately looking for something real to hold on to and live for, just like Holden is searching for love, human contact and the truth about life in a world, where children seem to be the only real and honest people remaining. You just had to look around to see what the behaviour of adults had resulted in! So the young people felt disgusted by the corruption and hypocrisy of the adult world and my father was among the millions of young people that recognized in Holden an image of themselves. They felt that they were not alone, but they felt supported by Holden.

Whereas my father lived in this uncertain period, in which you didn't know what you were heading for and in which ideals had been destroyed, I live in a completely new modern mass society, in which everything seems to be planned and ruled by computers (the ironical thing is that I live in the world that these young people helped to build up. This scares me!).

That's why I felt related to Holden in the way, that in this mass world, where computers tend to take over control, we, young people, also have to look for an identity and to be careful not to lose ourselves. But the sad thing is, if you don't want to lose yourself, most of the time you have to conform to a group of people, who stick together in their little box, just the thing Holden hates.

However, you have to live with it to survive and in the end, Holden fortunately realizes that himself. So to me, this was the most important part of the book: Although Phoebe is too big, she gets on the carousel and she tries to catch the ring during the ride, because she'll get a free ride if she catches it. Holden says: "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it is bad if you say anything to them." (p. 218).

It is exactly here, I think he realizes, that he cannot prevent children from growing up, and moreover, he suddenly sees the light in his own messed-up life. He has to catch the ring in life in order to get out of his misery and to be able to start again. So although he is miserable and sick, he feels happy inside because he has seen the light. "I felt so damned happy all of a sudden" he says (p. 219).

I absolutely see this as a positive end to the book, because Holden has thought about himself and now he will be able to make a completely fresh and new start in life. This made me happy, because Holden is too sweet a boy not to survive in life. It just happens to be so that every young person has to find himself a way through this time. We have to find some kind of an identity and make the step into the big adult world and this makes us all little Holdens.

So although my father and I read the book in different times and didn't consider the same parts of the book equally important, we could both identify ourselves with Holden, and Holden became for both of us a little part of ourselves!

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