

AMERICA'S EVOLVING DIARY: FLUCTUATING MEMORY OF *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

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Introduction: *The Catcher in the Rye* as a Memory Site

J.D. Salinger's iconic novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is widely regarded by scholars, critics, and the American people as the quintessential "American" novel. It is a member of an elite literary group along with classics such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* that define a specific period in American life through the written word. Unlike many of its companions, America's memory of *Catcher* is constantly in flux and its place in society as a defining cultural device is regularly debated. While some encounter censorship controversies, most iconic American novels enjoy relative stability in their cultural position; however, American memory of *Catcher* is volatile, erratic and mythical.

Pierre Nora introduces memory scholars to a concept called "memory sites" or *lieux de memoire*.¹ Memory sites are both material and non-material, but most academic scholarship reviews the physical locations of memory such as battlefields, monuments, cemeteries, memorials, and museums. Material memory sites are easier to study because their change over time is visually measurable, which can be assessed by in-depth research contained in archives, museums, and other repositories. Yet some of the most important agents of national memory exist in the form of non-material items in literature, film, and other Americana which must be observed

1. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/89NoraLieuxIntroRepresentations.pdf> (accessed March 23 2011), 7.

through less clinical approaches to research. These memory sites are much harder to evaluate because such memory often does not end at the completion of its production or its initial reception. Non-material memory sites are perpetually changing and are used by university scholars, critics and the American public to fit the current political, cultural, and economic needs, making non-material memories harder to document and assess. *Catcher* is a prime example of such non-material memory sites, and the national memory of the novel, its protagonist Holden Caulfield, and its author J.D. Salinger constantly evolves.

Social histories of the novel are commonplace in academic literature, yet few attempt to explain *Catcher's* role in American memory. This essay explores the changing memory of *Catcher* in America, its reception at its publication, the "age of the teenager" that resulted from its publication, and the later interpretations and reactions that shaped the controversies the book encountered in school boards across the country. Additionally, the

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essay looks at the major “shapers” of *Catcher's* memory, primarily Salinger himself. America's memory of *The Catcher in the Rye* was constantly torn between reverence and revulsion since its publication in 1951. Much of the public's intrigue with the novel comes from its mysterious background and Salinger's legend, and in recent years the prevailing

opinion on *Catcher* is mythical and at times, even negative. Yet *Catcher* is regularly reevaluated by the public to find new meaning and interpretation, a fact that makes the study of its role in American memory both fascinating and difficult to decipher.

Publication, Reactions, and the Immediate Canonization of *Catcher*

J.D. Salinger's characterization of Holden Caulfield was an immediate success. Salinger spent a majority of his army years in World War II perfecting the Caulfield family by writing several short stories involving Holden and his brother. It was not easy for Salinger to find a publisher at first; the *New Yorker* refused to print it, stating that they found the characters

“unbelievable and the Caulfield children, in particular, too precocious.”² He eventually found a partner in Little, Brown & Company which published *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951 and resulted initially in shining reviews. *Time* magazine wrote “the prize catch in *Catcher* may well be Novelist Salinger himself.” *The New York Times* called it “unusually brilliant” and the *Saturday Review* described it as “remarkable and absorbing.” The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it “literature of a very high order.” Salinger’s dedicated fans fell in love with Holden. Critical reviews followed shortly after the praiseworthy ones. *Catholic World* and the *Christian Science Monitor* found the novel “repellant” and “vulgar,” and some literary critics and writers expressed physical revulsion to the story and its protagonist.³ Most accounts of physical revulsion came from the implicit themes and images of death, rot, and decay. One such example of the disturbing images that upset many critics: “I pictured myself coming out of the goddam bathroom, dressed and all, with my automatic in my pocket, and staggering around a little bit... then I’d walk downstairs ... I’d hold onto the banister and all, with this blood trickling out of the side of my mouth a little at a time... what I’d do, I’d walk down a few floors-- holding onto my guts, blood leaking all over the place”⁴ Gerald Rosen explains that, “disgust is our culturally conditioned response to these natural data,” and when the book appeared on the national scene in 1951, many teachers and reviewers or “people who are successfully functioning within the culture’s institutional system... did, in fact, respond to the mention of these matters in the text with disgust.”⁵ Many critics did not appreciate Salinger’s raw depiction of a teenager dealing with adult situations, such as drinking in a bar and hiring a prostitute. At first, these opinions were muted by the public’s fascination with the novel.

The book was immensely popular among the masses for a variety of reasons. *Catcher*’s initial popularity was due in part to its use in Book-of-the-Month clubs, a popular pastime for many Americans that usually delivered avant-garde and obscure books each month to patrons’ doorsteps during the 1950s and 1960s. Several unofficial biographical sketches un-

2. Kenneth Slawenski, *J.D. Salinger: A Life* (New York: Random House, 2011), 195.

3. *Ibid.*, 203.

4. J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 104.

5. Gerald Rosen, “A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 5 (1977): 550.

covered that Salinger spent much of his own life on the busy streets of New York City, prompting many readers to draw conclusions about the autobiographical nature of Holden Caulfield. At this point, readers began to accrue a strong interest in the author himself. These early biographical inquiries were a crucial introduction to the mysterious life of Holden's creator and initiated a firestorm of inquiries into the author's personal life from journalists and fans.

Aside from the growing interest in the author's life, his intentions regarding the novel, and the mystery surrounding Holden, the book was headed to surefire canonization, and there was little doubt among Americans and critics that *Catcher* would be considered a landmark novel in American history. Immediately after its publication, people compared it to older classics. Continuing themes from Charles Dickens' masterpieces that were "welded to American culture by Mark Twain," critics and readers constantly compared the style, themes, plotline, and protagonist to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.⁶ Critics immediately identified *Catcher* as a "coming of age" novel, but did note an important distinction between Holden and his literary peers. Specifically, one theme critics reported was readers' initial reaction to Holden's disconnection from his society, which is not a theme in other great American coming of age novels such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While *Catcher* was immediately identified as a literary highlight, readers and critics were able to decipher a notable distinction between it and the other literary landmarks.

After it was published, the book sparked emotions and interpretations among several different cultural groups in America, which resulted in many different reactions and definitions of the *Catcher* memory. While many people praised Salinger for his honest portrayal of adolescent experiences, many groups did not appreciate the novel's frank depiction of adult themes and situations like drinking, especially as experienced by a teenager. Holden describes his experience this way: "... there were very few people around my age in the place they were mostly old, show-offy-looking guys with their dates... there were these three girls around thirty or so the blonde one, wasn't too bad... I started giving her the old eye a little bit, but just then the waiter came up for my order. I ordered a Scotch and soda, and told him not to mix it-- I said it fast as hell, because if you hem and haw, they think you're under twenty-one and won't sell you any intoxicating

6. Slawenski, 205.

liquor.”⁷

Unlike many other American classics, *Catcher* did not take years to develop in prominence among the population—it was almost an overnight classic, due to the varied effect on its readers. But even more important than its reception, the novel introduced an entirely new concept in American culture by ushering in the “age of the teenager.” Most Americans could identify with the novel’s themes, but an even stronger identification with Holden Caulfield was brewing among America’s youth. Adults—critics, schools, and parents—evaluated it from what it offered as a literary entity; however, teenagers read an entirely different novel: an account that could have been a personal memoir or private journal. For the first time in American literary history, *Catcher* gave a voice to a growing social group in America. Slawenski explains that in the years after *Catcher*’s initial publication, the “youths of America suddenly seized upon the character of Holden Caulfield as the spokesperson of their generation.”⁸ It is this identification that has primarily permeated the memory of *Catcher* in America.

The Age of the Teenager: Holden as a Spokesperson for American Adolescence

Salinger’s ability to perfectly describe what it’s like to be a teenager is one of the reasons readers were drawn to *Catcher* throughout its history. Jonathon Yardley claims that *Catcher* “created adolescence as we now know it.” While older adolescents existed in every previous generation, it was in the 1950s that a new political, economic and cultural outlook regarding teenagers developed. Literary historians, writers and critics all note that *Catcher* not only created a new social category, the “newly economically empowered;” that were “hungry for culture” and fed by music, films, and novels, but it gave a voice to this emerging socially important group.⁹ To teenagers, Holden captured the attention of adults that were beginning to see their group as a legitimate developmental stage. To its adult readers, *Catcher* exposed the precarious position between childhood and adulthood. Late adolescents respond to *Catcher* “...because they recognize themselves in

7. Salinger, 69.

8. Slawenski, 307.

9. Jonathon Yardley, “J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, Aging Gracelessly,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A43680-2004Oct18.html> (accessed March 23, 2011).

the character of Holden Caulfield...Salinger is imagined to have given voice to what every adolescent, or at least, every sensitive, intelligent, middle-class adolescent, thinks but is too inhibited to say."¹⁰ From its publication to present day, *Catcher* is consistently remembered as a memoir of teenage life. It addresses issues that teenagers experienced in the 1950s and continue to face today. It creates the feeling among teenagers that their emotions, their feelings, and their sentiments are normal. It exposes the unstable and unpredictable conditions that face American youth.

Similarly, reminiscence of the teenage years prompts adult readers to create their own memories of *Catcher* because of the nostalgia for the innocence of childhood and the lack of responsibilities and restraints that accompany youth. When adults re-read *Catcher* in 2012, many do so as a way to recapture youthful thinking. Maurice Halbwachs contends that this yearning is "that faraway world where we remember that we suffered... [that] nevertheless exercises an incomprehensible attraction on the person who has survived it and who seems to think he has left there the best part of himself, which he tries to recapture."¹¹ Part of the reason reading *Catcher* as an adult is so appealing is this sort of contemplative memory helps readers escape from society. Yet it is ironic that this confusing, lonely stage in development appeals to some adults as an escape. Child development specialists note that in late adolescence (fifteen to seventeen years old) teens are able to think about their future and understand the long-term effects of their decisions.¹² Although it is premature, the teenager develops long-term conceptualizations which place him or her in a larger world-view. This forward-thinking cognitive skill enables teenagers to face the concept of life and death in a meaningful way for the first time in their development. Because Holden deals with death directly (of his younger brother, Allie) and abstractly (of truth and reality, in contrast to "phoniness"), he appeals to those who are learning the same lessons. Additionally, older adolescents have a higher mortality rate than those of any other developmental stage due to motor vehicle accidents and suicide. Holden draws parallels to teenagers across generations when he explains that "...life is a game... Game my

10. Louis Menand, "Holden at Fifty: *The Catcher in the Rye* and What it Spawned," *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2001, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2001/10/01/011001fa_FACT3#ixzz1IofZRT9b (accessed March 23 2011).

11. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992), 49.

12. "Adolescent Development," *University of Maryland Medical Center*, <http://www.umm.edu/ency/article/002003.htm> (accessed November 2011).

ass.”¹³ Holden’s reaction to the game is that it is only fun for the winners, and in life there are no winners- only corpses.¹⁴ Holden’s viewpoints give a voice to the experiences and feelings of teenagers of every generation, which adults can revisit when they reread *Catcher*.

Teenagers could easily grasp other themes that emerge throughout *Catcher*. Feeling disconnected from both parents and religion is detailed throughout the pages of the novel and is a major theme in adolescent development. Teenagers can identify with Holden’s anguished isolation from family, the lack of role models to emulate, and the unknown status among peers. The ability of Holden to capture the hearts and minds of so many adolescents coincided with the creation of a brand new “youth culture.” It was a culture aimed at this specific group of teenagers, the ones who identified most with Holden Caulfield. Movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause*, books such as *Lord of the Flies*, and musical artists such as Elvis Presley played off of what Holden made so successful in the 1950s by appealing to teenagers’ sense of detachment from adults and cynicism. Menand explains that a great deal of “youth culture” played to the feeling of loss, a feeling present in current youth culture as well.¹⁵

Menand argues that Holden Caulfield is a “prodigy” and not a typical teenager who “seems to have something that few people ever consistently attain: an attitude toward life.”¹⁶ Holden’s youthful attitude was cynical, although he strived to see the good in people and wanted to protect others from falling prey to what he saw as a disintegrating culture. Many older readers critique Holden as being too self-involved. This is not surprising, considering child development specialists pinpoint the years between fifteen and seventeen as some of the most self-involved years in a child’s development, a time when an individual feels they are mostly alone and can do things alone¹⁷ Salinger gave this developmental stage a voice in Holden, but that does not imply that it was beneficial to the teenager. Yardley explains that “...*Catcher* can be fobbed off on kids as a book about themselves...it is

13. Salinger, 8.

14. Rosen, 550.

15. Menand.

16. Yardley.

17. American Psychological Association, *Developing Adolescence: A Reference For Professionals* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2002), <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/develop.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2012).

required reading as therapy, a way to encourage young people to bathe in the warm, soothing waters of resentment (all grown-ups are phonies) and self-pity without having to think a lucid thought.”¹⁸

The voice of the teenager is the main reminiscence of *Catcher* in American memory. Many readers “feel sorry” for Holden during several of his encounters; for example, when he buys a record for his younger sister and it shatters before he is able to give it to her this characterizes his despair and loneliness in his journey and in his adolescence. While many teenagers may interpret Holden differently, the most prominent response is the identification with Holden’s age and anguish. This echoes national sentiment toward the book: it is a story about being a teenager first, and any other themes fall by the wayside.

Historical Context, Interpretations and Later Reactions

Catcher eventually evolved in public memory as an enigma. Salinger’s silence and obstinate protection of the intellectual rights to *Catcher* shaped the way it evolved in public memory and heightened interest in readers to figure out his underlying intentions. The strict boundaries of the text and Salinger’s unwillingness to be more forthcoming or self-revealing caused the memory of the novel in the following years to fluctuate wildly and instigated many different interpretations. A closer look at the historical context of novel’s publication and the following decades reveals this evolution.

Family structure and roles began to shift dramatically in the early 1950s which coincided with the 1951 publication of *Catcher*. Teenagers no longer worked in the family business instead of attending school, as they did in the Depression during the late 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, after World War II ended young adults returned to the United States and resumed their lives as part of a nuclear family that was deemed critically important for the survival of the nation. Rosen asserts that the Cold War exposed deep rifts in Americans, especially during the McCarthy era when *Catcher* was “given final shape... and it is basically a novel of disillusionment.”¹⁹ Salinger’s experience in World War II traumatized him, and it seemed as if the country was traumatized as well. During this period, Salinger’s uncovering the country’s general unhappiness resonated with

18. Yardley.

19. Rosen, 548.

many Americans. Menand interprets *Catcher* as “...the purest extract of that mood... Holden Caulfield is their sorrow king... Americans who grew up in later decades still read Salinger’s novel, but they have their own versions of his story.”²⁰ The tone of unhappiness and disillusionment was especially intense among the teenagers. Its reception as “...some sort of important cultural statement didn’t happen until the mid-fifties, when people started talking about ‘alienation’ and ‘conformity’ and the ‘youth culture.’”²¹

Some saw Holden’s obstinate revulsion to conformity as Salinger’s statement on capitalism’s negative effects on culture and society. Several examples from *Catcher* lend credibility to this interpretation. One example occurs in chapter 17, when Holden advises that, “you ought to go to a boy’s school sometimes... it’s full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day.”²² Holden also states his distaste for “Goddam money... it always ends up making you blue as hell.”²³ Writer James Miller believes that *Catcher* is “...defined in essence as a ‘serious critical mimesis of bourgeois life in the Eastern United States circa 1950- of snobbery, privilege, class injury, culture as a badge of superiority, sexual exploitation, education subordinated to status, warped social feeling, competitiveness, stunted human possibility, the list could go on.’”²⁴ He claims that the novel draws readers in with its ability to illustrate a “powerful longing for what could be,” and offers that “...Holden’s (and Salinger’s) main failure is in choosing only between rejoining or dropping out from this bourgeois, capitalistic society instead of opting for radical—that is socialist—change.”²⁵ By focusing on the novel’s “universal elements,” such as depression, isolation, loneliness, teenage angst, and others, it removes the novel’s relation to its moment in time, which many critics felt was just as important to the story.²⁶

Throughout the years, the book and its protagonist have taken many shapes and interpretations, mostly because of the aura of mystery it has produced in the years following its publication. There is no clear answer

20. Menand.

21. Ibid.

22. Salinger, 131.

23. Ibid., 113.

24. James Miller, “*Catcher* in and out of History,” *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 (1977): 600.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

to what Holden's story means, what it means today, or what Salinger even wanted it to mean. Many people have recently reevaluated its unique voice of the "outsider," since so many people do not meet Holden's expectations (so many people are "phonies") that often the reader feels as if he or she is the outsider.²⁷ It has also led to numerous negative reviews in the later 20th century and early twenty-first century. Yardley points out that the criticism upon reading *Catcher* as an adult in later years is that Holden seems to be "just about as phony as those he criticized" as well as an "unregenerate whiner and egoist."²⁸ Critics continually question why teachers insist upon teaching it in schools, where it is often part of state-mandated curriculum. "Why do English teachers," Yardley asks, "whose responsibility is to teach good writing, repeatedly and reflexively require students to read a book as badly written as this one?" Other critics in recent years have claimed it to be "flagrantly manipulative" and an "easy exploitation of the reader's emotion." Yardley attacks its "...utter, innocent sincerity with which it was written," noting that "...a better, more cynical writer than Salinger easily could write a book about a troubled yet appealing teenager, but its artifice and insincerity would be self-evident and readers would reject it as false."²⁹ It is overlooked by American critics today because of its "pedestrian content."³⁰ And in recent years, students themselves have asserted their stance on Holden as an incessant complainer who uses too much salty language, such as "god-dam," "hell," "ass," and "sonovabitch."

The recent negative interpretations and reviews contrast the novel's enduring popularity among the American population. Louis Menand's theory is the novel's role as a cultural rite-of-passage. Many people who read *Catcher* for the first time are teenagers, he explains. The appeal of *Catcher*, "...what makes it addictive, is that it provides you with a reason... it gives a content to chemistry." Reading *Catcher* as a teenager helps explain feelings during a confusing time in development. Adults remember this feeling and identification, their memory of the book is one of comfort and warmth during a turbulent time in development; when adults eventually have their own families with teenagers, they are more likely to pass *Catcher* on as a

27. Charles Taylor, "The Ballad of John and J.D." *Nation* 292, no. 7 (2011).

28. Yardley.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Danielle Roemer, "The Personal Narrative and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*," *Western Folklore* 51, no.1 (1992): 5.

“rite-of-passage.”³¹

As the novel aged and the generation that was empowered by its initial publication grew into adulthood, retirement, and old age, the initial meaning of the story was obscured once it was removed from its historical context through the culture’s emphasis on its universal elements. Different interpretations proliferated, obscuring its initial meaning further. The obscurity of its message and meaning was aggrandized by the mystery surrounding the details of its author, his intentions, and its publication. While the material limits to the book are clear and measurable, and to many readers insufficient, *Catcher’s* meaning and interpretation were what Americans ultimately could grasp onto. It was Salinger’s tight control over the memory of *Catcher* that prolonged the mystery until his death in 2010.

Shapers of Memory: Salinger, Schools, and *Catcher* in the News

From 1951 until his death, J.D. Salinger was the single most important “shaper” of America’s memory of *Catcher*; in addition to shaping the novel through his authorship, he exhibited strict control over it in every way possible. In 2004, Yardley noted that “...Salinger seems to have been totally undone by the fame that *Catcher* inflicted upon him.”³² Salinger’s tight grasp on intellectual and reproduction rights to the story shaped the way America has recreated the original 1950s nostalgia for Holden. Additionally, previously unknown information about Salinger’s life display a much more vivid correlation between Holden and his author, influencing the way America now sees both. It is almost as if readers cannot identify *Catcher’s* narrator as Holden or as Salinger, but rather as “...the author imagined as J.D. Salinger imagined as Holden Caulfield.”³³ Salinger’s tight hold onto his privacy mixed with his strict control over *Catcher’s* reproductions makes him the largest “shaper” of its memory in American culture.

Throughout his life, Salinger was a very private man. It was his reclusiveness later in life that sparked rumors about the novel, previously unpublished “Salingeriana,” and possible sequels to the classic. Yardley asserts that rumors repeatedly “...made their way across the land that Salinger [was] busily writing at his writing table, that his literary fecundity [remained] undiminished, that bank vaults in New England contain vast

31. Menand.

32. Yardley.

33. Menand.

stores of unpublished Salingeriana.”³⁴ People eagerly awaited more information about their favorite literary character. Salinger’s reclusiveness created a public atmosphere that Yardley also explains “heighten[ed], rather than diminish[ed], the mystique of *Catcher*... it isn’t just a novel, it’s a dispatch from an unknown, mysterious universe, which may help explain the phenomenal sales it enjoys to this day.”³⁵ Salinger’s solitary nature made many of his fans, readers, critics, and observers question his intentions with the book, and because he was practically inseparable from Holden Caulfield, they began to reevaluate Holden’s outlook on life that was portrayed to the 1950s “youth culture” generation. “Salinger’s withdrawal,” Menand explains, “is one of the things behind... Holden Caulfield’s transformation from a fictional character into a culture hero: it helped to confirm the belief that Holden’s unhappiness was less personal than it appears—that it was really some sort of protest against modern life.”³⁶ It also helped to confirm that there was no distinction between Salinger and his characters. In Holden, Salinger increasingly seemed as if he was generalizing his discontent with American society and culture. His reclusiveness was a snub at sensationalist and gossip journalism, paparazzi, and the celebrity culture that arose from Elvis Presley and was amplified by the generation infatuated with the Beatles. The more time that passed from the 1951 publication, the more impossible it was to read *Catcher* and not draw conclusions about its author’s intentions.

Salinger’s seclusion was a controversy in itself. People were drawn to *Catcher* for many reasons and because there was so much room for interpretation it was only natural for people to reach out to the author for explanation; however, Salinger was unwilling to expound. Salinger’s seclusion was seen as a snub to his fans, who thought his silence was rude and unappreciative. To the outside world, Salinger’s withdrawal was a frustration, and it created a “mysterious void” that many determined readers demanded replenishment despite his pleas to be left alone. According to Kenneth Slawenski, Salinger’s isolation “...allowed his legend to grow without contest,” subsequently heightening popular fascination with Salinger himself instead of appreciation for his work.³⁷

34. Yardley.

35. Ibid.

36. Menand.

37. Slawenski, 373.

While his reclusiveness indirectly shaped America's memory of *Catcher* in the decades following its publication, Salinger exhibited direct control over this memory by severely restricting replicas, reproductions, fan fiction, or any adaptations of his work. Salinger famously stated, "There's no more to Holden Caulfield... read the book again... it's all there... Holden Caulfield is only a frozen moment in time."³⁸ He intended on ending the memory the same as Holden's insistence of "...don't ever tell anybody anything... if you do, you start missing everybody."³⁹ When Hollywood executives approached Salinger with generous film offers, he refused every time, stating that he would not participate in the adaptation of his work. Broadway playwrights wanted to turn *Catcher* into a play, but Salinger refused because he feared it would displease his protagonist. He restricted access to *Catcher's* content for the rest of his life: in 2009, Salinger emerged from isolation to stop an unauthorized sequel to *Catcher* called *60 Years Later* and the lawsuit demanded that all sales be halted and that books already distributed be recalled and destroyed.⁴⁰

Movie executives, playwrights, and authors soon learned that recreating Holden Caulfield would have to be done stealthily and creatively. Many of the film reproductions attempt to characterize Holden by setting him in the present time. Films such as *Charlie Bartlett*, *The Graduate*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Tadpole*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Igby Goes Down*, and *Mean Girls* are all considered "Holden films" because they include cynical young adult protagonists attempting the transition between childhood and adulthood. Katrina Onstad explains that they are often in conversation with each other, delving slightly deeper into the heart of Holden Caulfield.⁴¹ The movies are considered "coming of age movies," a genre that expanded during the age of the teenager with films such as *The Outsiders* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. In addition to films, many book adaptations attempted to pick up where Salinger left off in 1951. Sylvia Plath is one of the most famous examples of this creative imitation. Critics often consider Plath's novel, *The Bell Jar*, the "female version" of *Catcher*; the novel's protagonist is an aspir-

38. Doug Gross, "Lawsuit Targets 'Rip-off' of 'Catcher in the Rye,'" *CNN*, June 3, 2009, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-03/entertainment/salinger.catcher.lawsuit_1_holden-caulfield-john-david-california-flick-book?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ (accessed March 23 2011).

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. Katrina Onstad, "Beholden to Holden," *CBCNews.ca*, February 22, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/film/bartlett.html> (accessed March 23 2011).

ing magazine writer in 1953—which was considered very “Salingeresque” at the time of its publication since Salinger himself was a writer for the *New Yorker*, a prestigious magazine that showcased the latest up-and-coming literary talent. Each generation has experienced “rewrites” of *Catcher*, and “each one seemed to hit a generational nerve, as though no one has ever told that story, or sounded those notes, before.”⁴² Subsequently, each new facsimile struck a nostalgic chord in its readers and critics, and many books that feature unhappy young people were written by authors who “no doubt regarded Salinger as a model and influence,” but cannot be considered rewrites because “the bar is set a good deal higher than that, and the reason has to do with the Salinger mystique.”⁴³ People can try to recreate Holden, but it is distinctly because of Salinger’s mystery that none of them will ever come close.

Schools and parents were also major shapers of the memory of *Catcher* throughout its sixty years of existence. Today, *Catcher* is required reading for many sophomore and junior English students and often taught in conjunction with a United States history course. To some American cultural scholars, it is perceived to be a “rite-of-passage” novel along with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and other novels that portray young adolescents surveying adulthood and encountering adult situations. While the school curriculum ensures its perpetuation in American memory, the efforts to ban the book by many school boards have also significantly shaped its image in the American narrative. The attempts to ban the novel from academic settings have been mostly counterproductive, as many scholars, journalists and critics found that restricting access to it in high school only heightens interest in the book. In 1989, the small conservative town of Boron, California, placed *Catcher* on the banned book list, but the local librarian told *The New York Times* that she had a waiting list of fifteen people for the book that had been “sitting on the shelf all these years pretty much unnoticed.”⁴⁴

The first attempt to ban the book was in 1954 in California. Salinger remained mostly silent when the novel was opposed by libraries, school

42. Menand.

43. Ibid.

44. Seth Mydans, “In a Small Town, a Battle Over a Book,” *NY Times*, September 3, 1989, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE1D7103CF930A3575AC0A96F948260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1> (accessed March 23 2011).

boards, and faculties in the 1950s, making only one comment on censorship before it even threatened his work: Salinger “lamented” that it could possibly be censored for language and content, saying “all my best friends are children... it’s almost unbearable for me to realize that my book will be kept on a shelf out of their reach.”⁴⁵ Parents objected to Holden’s vulgar language, his adult encounters, and his disobedience to authority; many religious people disapproved of the “blasphemous and irreligious” content, the disobedience to adults and family values, and the fact that Holden is not a good role model for children. Offended parents disapproved of Holden’s stance on religion and Christianity, particularly in chapter 14 where he claims:

“I’m sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance. They annoyed the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while He was alive, they were about as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting Him down. I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples. If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic and all, that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones. I like him ten times as much as the Disciples, that poor bastard.”⁴⁶

Parents refused to let Salinger’s supporters, and the book’s supporters, rise in *Catcher’s* defense. According to the *New York Times* article on Boron, California, an English teacher who proposed teaching the novel was asked not to speak at a parent meeting where they discussed banning the book. Jim Sommers, the head of the school board at Boron, said the students would “...get a full and complete education without that book.” Additionally, even though the book’s contents are no longer as shocking as they once were, Boron parents still felt that they “didn’t have to accept” them, “just the same as we don’t have to accept the narcotics that are in the streets and the murders that are happening all over the country.”⁴⁷ To the

45. Slawenski, 344-345.

46. Salinger, 99.

47. Mydans.

parents of Boron, like parents in similar settings throughout the country, exposing their children to the “disobedience, blasphemy and vulgarity” of Holden Caulfield was equivalent to criminal activity. Like Holden Caulfield, the parents of Boron—a case study in the efforts of parents to ban the book from school curriculum—are acting as catchers in the rye, attempting to salvage the little innocence left of their children by keeping them far away from it, even though these attempts have only propelled the interest in the book and have kept it on several bestseller lists from the day it was published.

Decades after it was first published, *Catcher* retained its newsworthiness, yet for entirely different reasons than censorship and Salinger's mystique. A few events would “forever stigmatize” *Catcher* and would associate the novel's fans with emotional instability. Twenty-five-year-old security guard Mark David Chapman convinced himself that he would write the last chapter of *Catcher* in “John Lennon's blood:” Chapman considered himself the modern-day Holden Caulfield attempting to save Americans from the phoniness of Lennon, whom he felt was trying to steal the title of “modern-day Holden Caulfield” away from him.⁴⁸ On December 8, 1980, Chapman assassinated Lennon; when Chapman was apprehended later he was discovered reading his copy of *Catcher*, which contained his signature “Holden Caulfield” under the words, “This is my statement.”⁴⁹ Later at his sentencing hearing when the judge asked Chapman if he wanted to give a statement, he replied with a passage from *Catcher*, perhaps the most famous from the book: “...Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all... what I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff... that's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.”⁵⁰ Only a few months later, on March 30th, 1981, John Hinkley, Jr. shot President Ronald Reagan, his press secretary, and his bodyguard; when police searched his hotel room, they found ten books on his nightstand. Among them was a book on insanity pleas and *Catcher in the Rye*. The press exploited the discovery which had come less than four months after Lennon's assassination, and the book was often viewed as mentally unstable and dangerous, as were its fans. In the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*, even the purchase of the book from a book-

48. Taylor, 33-36.

49. Ibid.

50. Salinger, 173.

store would fictitiously raise a red flag to the computers of an unnamed government agency.⁵¹ Unfortunately, the memory of *Catcher* in the 1980s shifted to represent social outcasts who were capable of harm to themselves or others. Salinger never commented on this evolution, instead retreating deeper into isolation. Tinged with controversy, the memory of *Catcher* in the 1980s through 1990s was associated with disorder and decay. There was little to anchor its memory until decades later in the 2000s when physical memory sites began materializing.

The Role of Memory in *Catcher's* Past: Pierre Nora, Memory Sites

The study of history is the study of past events and change over time; to study *Catcher's* history would encompass a chronological description of major events that have occurred in its sixty year lifetime. The study of memory, on the other hand, is more applicable to *Catcher's* readers and fans, as it constantly changes to fit society's need. The history of *Catcher* is far from complete, especially since the author's death in 2010 has opened new questions regarding the intellectual rights to the book and the characters. In the context of *Catcher*, as well as other persistent significant non-material cultural items, memory is far more appropriate. Even though there is no end to the book's evolution in time because there is no threat of physical deterioration, studying collective memory is to make the book's evolution more relevant and dynamic, and to incorporate its past into the present.

Pierre Nora explains that “memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting... history, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”⁵² Memory is the human side of history— it is organically produced in each individual to form a collective narrative that serves different functions throughout time. Nora introduces the concept of “lieux de memoire,” or memory sites, to enlighten his readers that while memory is dynamic, it is not spontaneous, and certain material objects, locations, and cultural ephemera allow people to “feel a visceral attachment to that which made us what we are.”⁵³ *Catcher* is certainly one of those memory sites; the mention of *Catcher*,

51. Taylor.

52. Nora, 8.

53. Ibid., 9.

Holden, or Salinger himself is enough to conjure memories in every American who has read the book or encountered it in popular culture and current events. Nostalgia for the book's historical "feeling" guides much of the way it is remembered in collective memory. It also contains timeless topics that make it hard for critics and scholars to pinpoint an end to the book's history and memory, since it is always evolving and is still as pertinent to American literature as it was in 1951. The book's underlying themes; primarily teenage angst, childhood innocence, depression, "phoniness," urban commotion, and loneliness, ensure that *Catcher* is always relevant, and therefore the memory is constantly in flux.

The desire to turn a part of the past into a physical memory site of the present is apparent in Ursinus College's effort to capitalize on the fact that Salinger was a student there for one semester in the fall of 1938. At Ursinus College, creative writing students are able to apply for a \$30,000 scholarship (officially called the Ursinus College Creative Writing Scholarship, but unofficially referred to as "Not The Salinger Scholarship") and the chance to spend the year in the famous "Salinger room," the dorm room that Salinger occupied.⁵⁴ Although the room is "pretty tiny," the carpets "threadbare" and the walls peeling and yellowed, the chance to stay in a room that housed one of America's favorite authors prompts intense competition among students who wish to partake in the physical memory of Salinger and one of the college's main sources of pride. The students are not the only ones to place a heavy importance on the physical memory site, the school itself indicated they knew they owned a piece of history by owning Salinger's old room, and sought to give students something no other college could offer. As a professor explained, "...any college could offer money, nobody else could offer Salinger's room."⁵⁵ His dorm room has turned into a *lieu de memoire* itself, because it has a unique ability to revive old meanings and create new ones while creating new connections between person and place. Journalist Michael Winerip describes a plaque in the hallway that identifies the room, and the carpet and paint on the walls which look so old, that "it does seem possible that Salinger walked on it."⁵⁶ The college's

54. Michael Winerip, "J.D. Salinger Slept Here (Just Don't Tell Anyone)," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/education/21winerip.html?ref=j> (accessed March 25, 2011).

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

insistence on retaining the room's original historic integrity indicates that the room itself is a cultural identifier for Ursinus. For a novel with such elusive meaning and interpretation, this physical site of memory is welcomed as one of the few places the past can be observed in the present.

Conclusion

Catcher's quick canonization prepared it for long-lasting intrigue in American culture; the reactions at first were torn between celebratory and disgust. The novel introduced a new social group; American teenagers, which were yearning for their own "youth culture" to anchor themselves and give meaning to their new responsibilities in society. At first, *Catcher's* canonization and social consequences prompted people to draw conclusions about the protagonist and his creator, J. D. Salinger, but the more fans, journalists and scholars inquired, the more he pushed back. In later years, Salinger's silence regarding the novel, his intentions and the meaning of the book, the several controversies that surrounded it, and his intense desire to shut down any unofficial reproductions or adaptations, were a major factor in the evolution of its memory. Like it did among the public, it prompted many writers, filmmakers, and artists to interpret Holden Caulfield and the book in wildly creative ways, careful not to cross the delicate line of copyright infringement. The character of Holden may have finished at the last page of the novel, but many later efforts to bring him back to life have only resurrected his raw sincerity, innocence, and cynicism in different adolescent characters; characteristics that resonate with late adolescents and nostalgic adults alike. The novel is still seen today as a memoir of teenage life, a how-to manual for sixteen-year-olds on the brink of adulthood while they navigate the uncertain world.

Like other memory sites, *The Catcher in the Rye* is a symbol of American history. It links the present to the past by evoking memories among spectators. It defines a piece of American heritage and is constantly reevaluated to find new meaning with each generation. Part of *Catcher's* cross-generational appeal is its enduring ability to speak to a certain time in everyone's life, and each individual who reads it is filled with unique memories of their own experience and can relate it to the content on its pages. Halbwachs explains that in our present society "we occupy a definite position and are subject to the constraints that go with it," but when we recall memories we are given the illusion of "living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which impose themselves on us only so far and so

long as we accept them.”⁵⁷ For all of its controversies and negative reviews, *Catcher* certainly is an escape for readers because of this unique ability. The memory of the novel does not end here; it is still assigned in sophomore and junior English classes nationwide, it is still regularly contested by school boards and remains one of the most highly banned and censored books in America, and it is still used to craft characters and themes in movies, books, and art. *Catcher* is very prevalent in American consciousness, and luckily for historians and scholars of memory, it always will be.

57. Halbwachs, 50.