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J. D. Salinger, Literary Recluse, Dies at 91

By CHARLES McGRATH

[J. D. Salinger](#), who was thought at one time to be the most important American writer to emerge since World War II but who then turned his back on success and adulation, becoming the Garbo of letters, famous for not wanting to be famous, died on Wednesday at his home in Cornish, N.H., where he had lived in seclusion for more than 50 years. He was 91.

Mr. Salinger's literary representative, Harold Ober Associates, announced the death, saying it was of natural causes. "Despite having broken his hip in May," the agency said, "his health had been excellent until a rather sudden decline after the new year. He was not in any pain before or at the time of his death."

Mr. Salinger's literary reputation rests on a slender but enormously influential body of published work: the novel "The Catcher in the Rye," the collection "Nine Stories" and two compilations, each with two long stories about the fictional Glass family: "Franny and Zooey" and "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction."

"Catcher" was published in 1951, and its very first sentence, distantly echoing [Mark Twain](#), struck a brash new note in American literature: "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that [David Copperfield](#) kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth."

Though not everyone, teachers and librarians especially, was sure what to make of it, "Catcher" became an almost immediate best seller, and its narrator and main character, Holden Caulfield, a teenager newly expelled from prep school, became America's best-known literary truant since Huckleberry Finn.

With its cynical, slangy vernacular voice (Holden's two favorite expressions are "phony" and "goddam"), its sympathetic understanding of adolescence and its fierce if alienated sense of morality and distrust of the adult world, the novel struck a nerve in cold war America and quickly attained cult status, especially among the young. Reading "Catcher" used to be an essential rite of passage, almost as important as getting your learner's permit.

The novel's allure persists to this day, even if some of Holden's preoccupations now seem a bit dated, and it continues to sell more than 250,000 copies a year in paperback. [Mark David Chapman](#), who killed [John Lennon](#) in 1980, even said the explanation for his act could be found in the pages of "The Catcher in the Rye." In 1974 [Philip Roth](#) wrote, "The response of college students to the work of J. D. Salinger indicates that he, more than anyone else, has not turned his back on the times but, instead, has managed to put his finger on whatever struggle of significance is going on today between self and culture."

Many critics were more admiring of "Nine Stories," which came out in 1953 and helped shape writers like Mr. Roth, [John Updike](#) and [Harold Brodkey](#). The stories were remarkable for their sharp social observation, their pitch-perfect dialogue (Mr. Salinger, who used italics almost as a form of musical notation, was a master not of literary speech but of speech as people actually spoke it) and the way they demolished whatever was left of the traditional architecture of the short story — the old structure of beginning, middle, end — for an architecture of emotion, in which a story could turn on a tiny alteration of mood or irony. Mr. Updike said he admired "that open-ended Zen quality they have, the way they don't snap shut."

Mr. Salinger also perfected the great trick of literary irony — of validating what you mean by saying less than, or even the opposite of, what you intend. [Orville Prescott](#) wrote in The New York Times in 1963, "Rarely if ever in literary history has a handful of stories aroused so much discussion, controversy, praise, denunciation, mystification and interpretation."

As a young man Mr. Salinger yearned ardently for just this kind of attention. He bragged in college about his literary talent and ambitions, and wrote swaggering letters to Whit Burnett, the editor of Story magazine. But success, once it arrived, paled quickly for him. He told the editors of Saturday Review that he was "good and sick" of seeing his photograph on the dust jacket of "The Catcher in the Rye" and demanded that it be removed from subsequent editions. He ordered his agent to burn any fan mail. In 1953 Mr. Salinger, who had been living on East 57th Street in Manhattan, fled the literary world altogether and moved to a 90-acre compound on a wooded hillside in Cornish. He seemed to be fulfilling Holden's desire to build himself "a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life," away from "any goddam stupid conversation with anybody."

He seldom left, except occasionally to vacation in Florida or to visit William Shawn, the almost equally reclusive former editor of [The New Yorker](#). Avoiding Mr. Shawn's usual (and very public) table at the Algonquin Hotel, they would meet under the clock at the old Biltmore Hotel, the rendezvous for generations of prep-school and college students.

After Mr. Salinger moved to New Hampshire his publications slowed to a trickle and soon stopped completely. "Franny and Zooey" and "Raise High the Roof Beam," both collections of

material previously published in *The New Yorker*, came out in 1961 and 1963, and the last work of Mr. Salinger's to appear in print was "Hapworth 16, 1924," a 25,000-word story that took up most of the June 19, 1965, issue of *The New Yorker*.

In 1997 Mr. Salinger agreed to let Orchises Press, a small publisher in Alexandria, Va., bring out "Hapworth" in book form, but he backed out of the deal at the last minute. He never collected the rest of his stories or allowed any of them to be reprinted in textbooks or anthologies. One story, "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," was turned into "My Foolish Heart," a movie so bad that Mr. Salinger was never tempted to sell film rights again.

Befriended, Then Betrayed

In the fall of 1953 he befriended some local teenagers and allowed one of them to interview him for what he assumed would be an article on the high school page of a local paper, *The Claremont Daily Eagle*. The article appeared instead as a feature on the editorial page, and Mr. Salinger felt so betrayed that he broke off with the teenagers and built a six-and-a-half-foot fence around his property.

He seldom spoke to the press again, [except in 1974](#) when, trying to fend off the unauthorized publication of his uncollected stories, he told a reporter from *The Times*: "There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It's peaceful. Still. Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I love to write. But I write just for myself and my own pleasure."

And yet the more he sought privacy, the more famous he became, especially after his appearance on [the cover of Time](#) in 1961. For years it was a sort of journalistic sport for newspapers and magazines to send reporters to New Hampshire in hopes of a sighting. As a young man Mr. Salinger had a long, melancholy face and deep soulful eyes, but now, in the few photographs that surfaced, he looked gaunt and gray, like someone in an El Greco painting. He spent more time and energy avoiding the world, it was sometimes said, than most people do in embracing it, and his elusiveness only added to the mythology growing up around him.

Depending on one's point of view, he was either a crackpot or the American Tolstoy, who had turned silence itself into his most eloquent work of art. Some believed he was publishing under an assumed name, and for a while in the late 1970s, William Wharton, author of "Birdy," was rumored to be Mr. Salinger, writing under another name, until it turned out that William Wharton was instead a pen name for the writer Albert du Aime.

In 1984 the British literary critic Ian Hamilton approached Mr. Salinger with the notion of writing his biography. Not surprisingly, Mr. Salinger turned him down, saying he had "borne all the exploitation and loss of privacy I can possibly bear in a single lifetime." Mr. Hamilton went ahead

anyway, and in 1986, Mr. Salinger took him to court to prevent the use of quotations and paraphrases from unpublished letters. The case went all the way to the [Supreme Court](#), and to the surprise of many, Mr. Salinger eventually won, though not without some cost to his cherished privacy. (In June 2009 he also sued Fredrik Colting, the Swedish author and publisher of a novel said to be a sequel to “The Catcher in the Rye.” In July a federal judge indefinitely enjoined publication of the book.)

Mr. Salinger’s privacy was further punctured in 1998 and again in 2000 with the publication of memoirs by, first, [Joyce Maynard](#) — with whom he had a 10-month affair in 1973, when Ms. Maynard was a college freshman — and then his daughter, Margaret. Some critics complained that both women were trying to exploit and profit from their history with Mr. Salinger, and Mr. Salinger’s son, Matthew, wrote in a letter to [The New York Observer](#) that his sister had “a troubled mind,” and that he didn’t recognize the man portrayed in her account. Both books nevertheless added a creepy, Howard Hughesish element to the Salinger legend.

Mr. Salinger was controlling and sexually manipulative, Ms. Maynard wrote, and a health nut obsessed with homeopathic medicine and with his diet (frozen peas for breakfast, undercooked lamb burger for dinner). Ms. Salinger said that her father was pathologically self-centered and abusive toward her mother, and to the homeopathy and food fads she added a long list of other enthusiasms: Zen Buddhism, Vedanta Hinduism, Christian Science, [Scientology](#) and acupuncture. Mr. Salinger drank his own urine, she wrote, and sat for hours in an orgone box.

But was he writing? The question obsessed Salingerologists, and in the absence of real evidence, theories multiplied. He hadn’t written a word for years. Or, like the character in the [Stanley Kubrick](#) film “The Shining,” he wrote the same sentence over and over again. Or like [Gogol](#) at the end of his life, he wrote prolifically but then burned it all. Ms. Maynard said she believed there were at least two novels locked away in a safe, though she had never seen them.

Early Life

Jerome David Salinger was born in Manhattan on New Year’s Day, 1919, the second of two children. His sister, Doris, who died in 2001, was for many years a buyer in the dress department at Bloomingdale’s. Like the Glasses, the Salinger children were the product of a mixed marriage. Their father, Sol, was a Jew, the son of a rabbi, but sufficiently assimilated that he made his living importing both cheese and ham. Their mother, Marie Jillisch, was of Irish descent, born in Scotland, but changed her first name to Miriam to appease her in-laws. The family was living in Harlem when Mr. Salinger was born, but then, as Sol Salinger’s business prospered, moved to West 82nd Street and then to Park Avenue.

Never much of a student, Mr. Salinger, then known as Sonny, attended the progressive McBurney

School on the Upper West Side. (He told the admissions office his interests were dramatics and tropical fish.) But he flunked out after two years and in 1934 was packed off to Valley Forge Military Academy, in Wayne, Pa., which became the model for Holden's Pencey Prep. Like Holden, Mr. Salinger was the manager of the school fencing team, and he also became the literary editor of the school yearbook, *Crossed Swords*, and wrote a school song that was either a heartfelt pastiche of 19th-century sentiment or else a masterpiece of irony:

Hide not thy tears on this last day

Your sorrow has no shame;

To march no more midst lines of gray;

No longer play the game.

Four years have passed in joyful ways — Wouldst stay those old times dear?

Then cherish now these fleeting days,

The few while you are here.

In 1937, after a couple of unenthusiastic weeks at [New York University](#), Mr. Salinger traveled with his father to Austria and Poland, where the father's plan was for him to learn the ham business. Deciding that wasn't for him, he returned to America and drifted through a term or so at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pa. Fellow students remember him striding around campus in a black chesterfield with velvet collar and announcing that he was going to write the Great American Novel.

Mr. Salinger's most sustained exposure to higher education was an evening class he took at Columbia in 1939, taught by Whit Burnett, and under Mr. Burnett's tutelage he managed to sell a story, "The Young Folks," to *Story* magazine. He subsequently sold stories to *Esquire*, *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post* — formulaic work that gave little hint of real originality.

In 1941, after several rejections, Mr. Salinger finally cracked *The New Yorker*, the ultimate goal of any aspiring writer back then, with a story, "Slight Rebellion Off Madison," that was an early sketch of what became a scene in "The Catcher in the Rye." But the magazine then had second thoughts, apparently worried about seeming to encourage young people to run away from school, and held the story for five years — an eternity even for *The New Yorker* — before finally publishing it in 1946, buried in the back of an issue.

Meanwhile Mr. Salinger had been drafted. He served with the Counter-Intelligence Corps of the Fourth Infantry Division, whose job was to interview Nazi deserters and sympathizers, and was

stationed for a while in Tiverton, Devon, the setting of “For Esmé — with Love and Squalor,” probably the most deeply felt of the “Nine Stories.” On June 6, 1944, he landed at Utah Beach, and he later saw action during the Battle of the Bulge.

In 1945 he was hospitalized for “battle fatigue” — often a euphemism for a breakdown — and after recovering he stayed on in Europe past the end of the war, chasing Nazi functionaries. He married a German woman, very briefly — a doctor about whom biographers have been able to discover very little. Her name was Sylvia, Margaret Salinger said, but Mr. Salinger always called her Saliva.

A Different Kind of Writer

Back in New York, Mr. Salinger moved into his parents' apartment and, having never stopped writing, even during the war, resumed his career. “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” austere, mysterious and Mr. Salinger's most famous and still most discussed story, appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1948 and suggested, not wrongly, that he had become a very different kind of writer. And like so many writers he eventually found in *The New Yorker* not just an outlet but a kind of home and developed a close relationship with the magazine's editor, William Shawn, himself famously shy and agoraphobic — a kindred spirit. In 1961 Mr. Salinger dedicated “Franny and Zooey” to Shawn, writing, “I urge my editor, mentor and (heaven help him) closest friend, William Shawn, genius domus of *The New Yorker*, lover of the long shot, protector of the unprolific, defender of the hopelessly flamboyant, most unreasonably modest of born great artist-editors, to accept this pretty skimpy-looking book.”

As a young writer Mr. Salinger was something of a ladies' man and dated, among others, Oona O'Neill, the daughter of [Eugene O'Neill](#) and the future wife of [Charlie Chaplin](#). In 1953 he met Claire Douglas, the daughter of the British art critic Robert Langdon Douglas, who was then a 19-year-old Radcliffe sophomore who in many ways resembled Franny Glass (or vice versa); they were married two years later. (Ms. Douglas had married and divorced in the meantime.) Margaret was born in 1955, and Matthew, now an actor and film producer, was born in 1960. But the marriage soon turned distant and isolating, and in 1966, Ms. Douglas sued for divorce, claiming that “a continuation of the marriage would seriously injure her health and endanger her reason.”

The affair with Ms. Maynard, then a [Yale](#) freshman, began in 1972, after Mr. Salinger read an article she had written for *The New York Times Magazine* titled “[An 18-Year-Old Looks Back on Life.](#)” They moved in together but broke up abruptly after 10 months when Mr. Salinger said he had no desire for more children. For a while in the '80s Mr. Salinger was involved with the actress Elaine Joyce, and late in that decade he married Colleen O'Neill, a nurse, who is considerably younger than he is. Not much is known about the marriage because Ms. O'Neill embraced her husband's code of seclusion.

Besides his son, Matthew, Mr. Salinger is survived by Ms. O'Neill and his daughter, Margaret, as well as three grandsons. His literary agents said in a statement that "in keeping with his lifelong, uncompromising desire to protect and defend his privacy, there will be no service, and the family asks that people's respect for him, his work and his privacy be extended to them, individually and collectively, during this time."

"Salinger had remarked that he was in this world but not of it," the statement said. "His body is gone but the family hopes that he is still with those he loves, whether they are religious or historical figures, personal friends or fictional characters."

As for the fictional family the Glasses, Mr. Salinger had apparently been writing about them nonstop. Ms. Maynard said she saw shelves of notebooks devoted to the family. In Mr. Salinger's fiction the Glasses first turn up in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," in which Seymour, the oldest son and family favorite, kills himself during his honeymoon. Characters who turn out in retrospect to have been Glasses appear glancingly in "Nine Stories," but the family saga really begins to be elaborated upon in "Franny and Zooey," "Raise High the Roof Beam" and "Hapworth," the long short story, which is ostensibly a letter written by Seymour from camp when he is just 7 years old but already reading several languages and lusting after Mrs. Happy, wife of the camp owner.

Readers also began to learn about the parents, Les and Bessie, long-suffering ex-vaudevillians, and Seymour's siblings Franny, Zooey, Buddy, Walt, Waker and Boo Boo; about the Glasses' Upper West Side apartment; about the radio quiz show on which all the children appeared. Seldom has a fictional family been so lovingly or richly imagined.

Too lovingly, some critics complained. With the publication of "Franny and Zooey" even staunch Salinger admirers began to break ranks. [John Updike wrote](#) in The Times Book Review: "Salinger loves the Glasses more than God loves them. He loves them too exclusively. Their invention has become a hermitage for him. He loves them to the detriment of artistic moderation." Other readers hated the growing streak of Eastern mysticism in the saga, as Seymour evolved, in successive retellings, from a suicidal young man into a genius, a sage, even a saint of sorts.

But writing in The New York Review of Books in 2001, [Janet Malcolm](#) argued that the critics had all along been wrong about Mr. Salinger, just as short-sighted contemporaries were wrong about Manet and about Tolstoy. The very things people complain about, Ms. Malcolm contended, were the qualities that made Mr. Salinger great. That the Glasses (and, by implication, their creator) were not at home in the world was the whole point, Ms. Malcolm wrote, and it said as much about the world as about the kind of people who failed to get along there.

An earlier version of this article stated incorrectly that Miriam was the name of the wife of

Seymour Glass, one of Mr. Salinger's characters. And it erroneously gave June 4, 1944, as the date that Mr. Salinger landed at Utah Beach.

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