

The Catcher in the Rye and Philosophy

*A Book for Bastards, Morons,
and Madmen*

Edited by
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human liberty. In order to have a healthy, flourishing society, individuals have to be allowed unrestricted access to ideas and information, including those which are unpopular or different from the norms of a given community. While the outright banning of books by governments is rare in the democratic societies of today, individuals and groups persist in trying to get books removed from classrooms or library shelves. Even sixty years later, *Catcher in the Rye* continues to be a target for those who do not understand its artistic and educational value. Many parents and religious groups still regard it as obscene and blasphemous.

A recent controversy surrounding a newly-published, sanitized version of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—another American classic targeted for its offensive language—points to the reason why censorship is so insidious.⁷ We can't eradicate the horrors of our country's racism as depicted by Twain (this edition replaced the "n-word" with the word "slave"), no more than we can the problems faced by an adolescent on the verge of adulthood. Literature is a microcosm of society, and we can learn from the stories that we read. By having access to a variety of ideas as portrayed in books like these, we can learn how things were and how things should be. If someone erased all the bad language that Salinger uses, just as Holden erased the bad word on the wall in Phoebe's school, then would the story have the same impact or meaning? Would we still understand Holden's struggle to reconcile the authenticity and purity of childhood with the phoniness and messiness of adulthood? Most likely, the answer is "no."

Salinger's novel remains widely read despite numerous attempts to ban it. By using teenage vernacular, Salinger lets Holden Caulfield speak to young adults in a way that matters. Strip away the curse words, the smoking and drinking, and the curiosity about sex, and Holden's story is the story of all children on the threshold of adulthood. Actually, keep all of that, and readers learn that Holden is just like them. He's like any young person trying to discover their place in a phony and often confusing world.

⁷ Alan Gribben, *Mark Twain's Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn: The New South Edition*, New South, 2011.

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The Case Against Salinger's Trash

CLAUDIA FRANZISKA BRÜHWILER

You've been selected to serve on the Jury in this case of various plaintiffs against *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. The book is charged with being:

1. *anti-American*, anti-authority, anti-Catholic, and anti-white
2. *immoral*
3. *defamatory* to the disabled, to minorities, and to women
4. *Communist*
5. *an advocate* of alcoholism, dishonesty, homosexuality, and prostitution
6. *profane*.

Some of these charges resound in the menacing words of Ackley, Holden Caulfield's former colleague at Pencey Prep, when he says: "Listen, I don't care what you say about *me* or anything, but if you start making cracks about my goddam religion, for Chrissake—" (7, p. 65).

In a similar spirit and more in tune with the plaintiffs' concerns, the Educational Research Analysts, a Christian organization reviewing textbooks since 1961,¹ drafted a list of criteria under which a book should be banned from schools.

¹ The organization still exists: <http://www.textbookreviews.org/>.

On this list, *The Catcher in the Rye* can be found in Category 43, "trash."

Today, you are to decide whether the book should be banned from libraries and school curricula on the grounds of its having adverse effects on readers. In other words, you'll first have to determine whether literature can have any impact on the reader at all.

Secondly, you are to decide whether the book at hand has a positive or a negative effect on its readers.

Thirdly, if you find that the book has a negative effect on its readers, you're to judge whether this warrants a ban. In order to reach a just decision, you will first hear a brief history of the case. Subsequently, the plaintiffs will present their case for a book ban. The defense will then have the chance to counter these charges. At the end, you are called to consider and weigh the evidence presented by the parties, including the testimony of all the witnesses who will appear before you.

You alone will determine whether to believe any witness and the extent to which you believe them. You are reminded of the oath which you have taken as a juror. If you follow that oath, and try the issues without fear or prejudice, bias or sympathy, you will arrive at a true and just verdict.

The Case

The Catcher in the Rye was first published in 1951. In 2009, the American Library Association still ranked it sixth on a list of—not the most read or most popular school books, but—the most challenged books. It was by no means the first time that the book appeared in this listing; it has been a censor's favorite for decades.² Nor was Holden's story the only modern classic to meet such opposition: it shared and still shares this honor with other classics such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, as well as rather recent best-sellers such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series.

But who challenges the account of Holden Caulfield's trip to and through New York? It is groups and individuals of consid-

² You can find the ranking on the website of the American Library Association as well as other useful information on book bans in the United States: <http://www.ala.org>.

erable diversity, yet with similar preoccupations, as a—starkly abbreviated—chronology of challenges against *The Catcher in the Rye* reveals:

1956 The National Organization for Decent Literature, a Roman Catholic pressure group, declared the novel objectionable. Holden might sneer: "Catholics are always trying to find out if you're a Catholic." (15, p. 146)

1960 In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a teacher was fired because he had assigned *The Catcher in the Rye* to an eleventh-grade English class.

1978 In Issaquah, Washington, a watchful citizen tabulated 785 "profanities" in the novel and launched a campaign, which resulted in Holden's story being banned from local high schools. Holden might comment: "So I got the ax." (1, p. 6)

1987 In Napoleon, North Dakota, parents and the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal service organization, pressured a high school board to remove the book from the mandatory English reading list.

1997 In Brunswick, Georgia, a student challenged the book, although unsuccessfully.

In Marysville, California, the school superintendent removed the book from the required reading list.

Among the plaintiffs, we find both parents and pupils, school representatives and religious circles, as well as worried citizens assembled. Now that the plaintiffs have been identified, let us hear how they perceive the case!

Evidence Offered by the Plaintiffs

The plaintiffs do not wish to further elaborate on the charges that have been presented by the Court at the outset of the trial, as they are not at the center of the question presented to you, Member of the Jury. Instead, their evidence shall prove that a book such as *The Catcher in the Rye* can have a negative impact

on its readers. In the course of the following argument, you will hear the testimony of eminent expert witnesses.

Exhibit 1: the first paperback edition of the book. While today's readers have to actually read *The Catcher in the Rye* to capture its allegedly offensive content, in 1953, readers of the first paperback edition could tell from the cover what to expect: "This unusual book may shock you," it announced, and further nourished this particular expectation with the depiction of a young Holden standing in front of a dubious nightclub with a woman at his side, probably a prostitute, who is lighting a cigarette. Dangers await the young protagonist, even more dangers await the reader, is the message of the cover. Holden himself explains why the reader is at great risk while he watches the "perverts" in the other rooms at the Edmont Hotel: "The trouble was, that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch, even if you don't want it to be" (9, p. 81).

Fascination goes, in the eyes of the plaintiffs, hand in hand with influence: "that kind of junk" (9, p. 81) may in the end influence you—very negatively. Evidence, Members of the Jury?

Exhibit 2: a copy of the book with a handwritten dedication in it, "*To Holden Caulfield. From Holden Caulfield. This is my statement.*" Exhibit 2 was found in the pocket of Mark David Chapman, who, equally obsessed with *The Catcher* and *The Beatles*, shot John Lennon on December 8th, 1980.

Admittedly we, the plaintiffs, would be phonies if we insisted that the book could turn every reader into an assassin. Our point is, however, that the book has a detrimental influence, particularly on young readers, and that it's the plaintiffs' duty to protect their offspring from it. To further elaborate on this point, the plaintiffs call an expert witness: Plato (427–347 B.C.), philosopher and disciple of Socrates. He saw it as the duty of every just government to protect children from indecency—and he would have shared the plaintiffs' concern.

Although the "novel" as a genre had yet to be created in Plato's era, it's an example of what Plato called *mimetic* art. *Mimesis* means "imitation" and describes what Plato saw as the main function of art and poetry, namely to imitate the world as it is. Because literature as a mimetic art only imitates the world and the actors within, Plato believed it incapable of broadening our knowledge of anything. Since writers and poets rarely have first-hand knowledge of what they describe, they

cannot provide the reader with true insight. One could liken Plato's distaste for mimetic art to Holden Caulfield's problem with actors: "I hate actors. They never act like people. They just think they do. . . . If an actor acts it out, I hardly listen. I keep worrying about whether he's going to do something phony every minute" (16, p. 152–53).

"So what?" the defense might want to interject—who would read Holden Caulfield's account in the hope of getting a sociological study of American boarding schools? In the case of *The Catcher in the Rye* it is indeed not possible pseudo-knowledge that worries the plaintiffs. We would rather want you, Member of the Jury, to focus on Plato's chief work *The Republic*, in which he outlined the ideal society. According to Plato, it would require guardians, who would be selected during early childhood and trained from the very beginning of their education in a guardian's virtues and duties. As guardians, they would protect the Republic against its enemies, but not abuse their strength and power to oppress the other citizens; instead, they would be loyal servants of their community.

Reflecting on the future guardians' education, Plato considered what these children should be allowed to read. In doing so, Plato contemplated literature's effects on its readers. He concluded that their curriculum had to be monitored carefully, for Plato found that mimetic art can have both negative and positive effects on the reader's mind. From Plato's perspective, a book like *The Catcher in the Rye* could have particularly adverse effects on future guardians and contravene an important virtue they should develop. Holden Caulfield mocks authorities, calls people of repute "phony," and repeatedly violates rules. In short, he would have set a bad example for the guardians, who were supposed to preserve the status quo and defend public order.

Plato would argue that it would be disastrous for the community if its guardians felt about Holden as he feels for his favorite books: "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it" (3, p. 25). What would Holden advise a guardian to do if the latter ever doubted his or her superiors? The answer, as you will agree, would probably imperil society's order.

The plaintiffs believe that they have offered enough evidence to prove their case that *The Catcher in the Rye* should be banished from classrooms and school reading lists. Let's hear whether the defense has any convincing counter-arguments!

Evidence Offered by the Defense

The defense against banning *The Catcher in the Rye* will address mainly two claims: 1. that literature cannot teach us anything and 2. that literary works such as Holden's coming of age story are harmful. Plato's most famous disciple Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) had a more positive view of mimetic art and believed it to be "more philosophical" than history. Instead of simply showing what had happened, as history does, literature, Aristotle argued, shows what might have happened, what twists and turns life can take.³

The defense's second expert witness, contemporary American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (*1947) has further explored Aristotle's thought that literature can indeed teach us more—or, more precisely, something else—than history. In *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Beacon Press, 1995), Nussbaum argues that literature can have a lasting impact on readers' behavior, an emotional impact which can hardly be achieved by history or other types of scholarly texts. Literature, she writes, "summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles" (p. 5). It exerts an emotive power over its readers and appeals to an innate human capacity she calls "fancy," a term she borrows from Charles Dickens.

Although Holden Caulfield is not exactly a fan of Dickens (1, p. 1, 18, p. 179), he would definitely agree that a writer's actual experience and expertise is never as important as his or her ability to incite a reader's imagination and evoke emotions. In this vein, Holden shares the opinion of his brother D.B. that actual military experience is not needed in order to convey an accurate impression of war's realities: "I remember Allie once asked him wasn't it sort of good that D.B. was in the war because he was a writer and it gave him a lot to write about and all. He made Allie go get his baseball mitt and then he

asked him who was the best war poet, Rupert Brooke or Emily Dickinson. Allie said Emily Dickinson" (18, p. 182).

English poet Rupert Chawner Brooke (1887–1915) died while serving in the British naval force, while American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) hardly ever left her home. Still, both army trained D.B. and the relatively inexperienced Allie agree that it's the poetry of this mysterious spinster rather than the words of the worldly Brooke which captures best the realities of war and violence.

According to Nussbaum, literature evokes emotions, one of which is particularly important to our life as citizens: compassion, or "fellow-feeling." The latter term was coined by our next witness, the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790), who most of you, Members of the Jury, might know best for his inquiry into the mechanisms of markets in his classic *The Wealth of Nations*, but he also wrote about morality.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith describes the concept of the impartial or judicious spectator. The judicious spectator is the ideal combination of reason and emotion. According to Smith, the judicious spectator can not only imagine himself—vividly, as Nussbaum stresses—in another person's situation, but simultaneously perceive the situation "with his present reason and judgment" (p. 76). Nussbaum refers to this idea when she describes how literature instills compassion: by assuming the position of the "judicious spectator," she argues, the reader is able to comprehend the inner plight of a person and feelings he never experienced himself. In other words, individuals who read will be able to simultaneously take the stand of the rational observer, the spectator, and of the person concerned. Thus, the reader is forced to assume an outside and inside perspective at the same time. Literature has a moral effect by instilling in its readers compassion, Nussbaum argues, which eventually turns them into better citizens.

"A minority view!" some might interject. Not at all. Martha Nussbaum's views are shared by American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007). In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), Rorty argued that citizens can only grasp the nature of current problems by reading novels along with philosophic works. Just like Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty believes that literature gives individuals insight into ways of living that are otherwise inaccessible, insights

³ See, in particular, Aristotle's *Poetics*.

which alter individuals' moral disposition and teach compassion. The latter is key to achieving the main goal of liberalism. This goal consists for Rorty in the reduction of cruelty, an idea he adopts from the philosopher Judith Shklar (1928–1992).

In her influential essay "The Liberalism of Fear" (*Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, University of Chicago Press, 1998), Judith Shklar bases the legitimacy of liberalism on the idea of the greatest evil, a *summum malum*, which she identifies as cruelty and the fear of cruelty: as different as we all may be from each other, as much as culture and heritage may set us apart, we all fear cruelty. A just regime thus has to guarantee that no one's afraid of systematic cruelty. According to Richard Rorty, literature heightens our awareness of cruelty in two ways: firstly, it makes us more sensitive to cruelty suffered by people whom we usually ignore. Secondly, reading makes us aware of the cruelty of which we ourselves might be capable.

Defense: Conclusions from the Evidence

The jury might wonder, "In what way should Holden Caulfield's account make anyone more sensitive to cruelty?"

As teenagers, many of us often felt misunderstood; some of us still do as adults—but few may have been so frequently misunderstood as J.D. Salinger's anti-hero. Hidden behind his inappropriate, offensive language and his contemptuous attitude, Holden is a caring, vulnerable adolescent who struggles with the hypocrisy and the contradictions of his environs. Holden is only in his "*mind* . . . the biggest sex maniac you ever saw" (9, p. 81); he's actually a sensitive young man, his dearest wish being to protect the innocent and "just be the catcher in the rye and all" (22, p. 225). Holden's desire is very similar to the plaintiffs' effort to keep their children from reading "trash"; recall his efforts to clean his sister's school of verbal smut:

Somebody'd written 'Fuck you' on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant, and how they'd all think about it and maybe even worry about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it. (25, p. 260)

Both the plaintiffs and Holden want to protect children from ugliness and the other bad things in life; they want to preserve their innocence and purity. However, the plaintiffs and, of course, the rest of the readership would first have to reconsider their own position and realize, as Holden Caulfield did, that they could not act forever as "the catcher in the rye":

That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write 'Fuck you' right under your nose. (25, p. 264)

Through Holden's eyes, the plaintiffs would also learn to see the conventions of this society differently. His disgust with the phoniness, pretenses and superficiality of the adult world invites a discussion of everyday morality and ethics, his eventual expression of compassion for the phonies even more so. Finally, Holden's account mirrors the fears and angst of a generation that grew up during the Cold War and was constantly reminded of the impending danger of a nuclear war: "Anyway, I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will" (18, p. 183). We, today's readers, live in a different world, but are confronted with comparable existential threats. Holden may offer us a chance of introspection, a chance to see our own fears through his eyes and reflect on alternative ways to confront them.

The Catcher in the Rye is one of the works of literature that, to quote Martha Nussbaum, promotes "identification and emotional reaction, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront" (p. 6). At first sight, Holden seems to be just another spoiled, dissatisfied youth who exerts a destructive influence on his environs and succumbs to his immediate desire to loath and waste away. A second, prolonged look reveals the young man's sensitivity, as he points out society's superficiality, its contradictions and complexity. Holden's account is one of the many mirrors of our world that we should not be afraid to look into—don't you agree, Member of the Jury?

The defense rests.

Verdict

You have heard the evidence, you have heard different expert opinions. Now it's up to you, Member of the Jury, to reach a verdict.

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Is Holden Mentally Ill?

MICHAEL CUNDALL

Why does Holden want to be a catcher in the rye? He says, "I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy" (22, p. 225).

Holden's dream seems nonsensical: heartfelt but nuts. One couldn't do that, as no such profession really exists. How would he live and support himself? Where could he do this? Given that many of Holden Caulfield's other claims throughout the novel turn out to be false or dubious at best, the fact that he has wild swings in behavior and mood (his general crumbiness), the traumatic effects of his witnessing the suicide of a classmate and his near-descent into madness as he crosses the streets and comes ever closer to walking into traffic, many readers have thought that Holden suffered from sort of mental disease or disorder.

But the problem is that Holden always seems to come back from his nadirs. He recovers and moves on. And at the end of the novel his attitude toward his story seems fairly nonchalant. Is he just telling us about a couple of bad days or is this just another brief moment of lucidity and normalcy before another episode occurs?

While it's not easy to diagnose someone as having a mental illness based on a snapshot of a few days, it doesn't seem a stretch to believe that Holden Caulfield was, in some meaningful way, suffering from a mental disorder or problem. While the ultimate answer to whether or not Caulfield has a mental disorder is probably not something that can adequately be resolved (we can't give a good diagnosis on only a few days