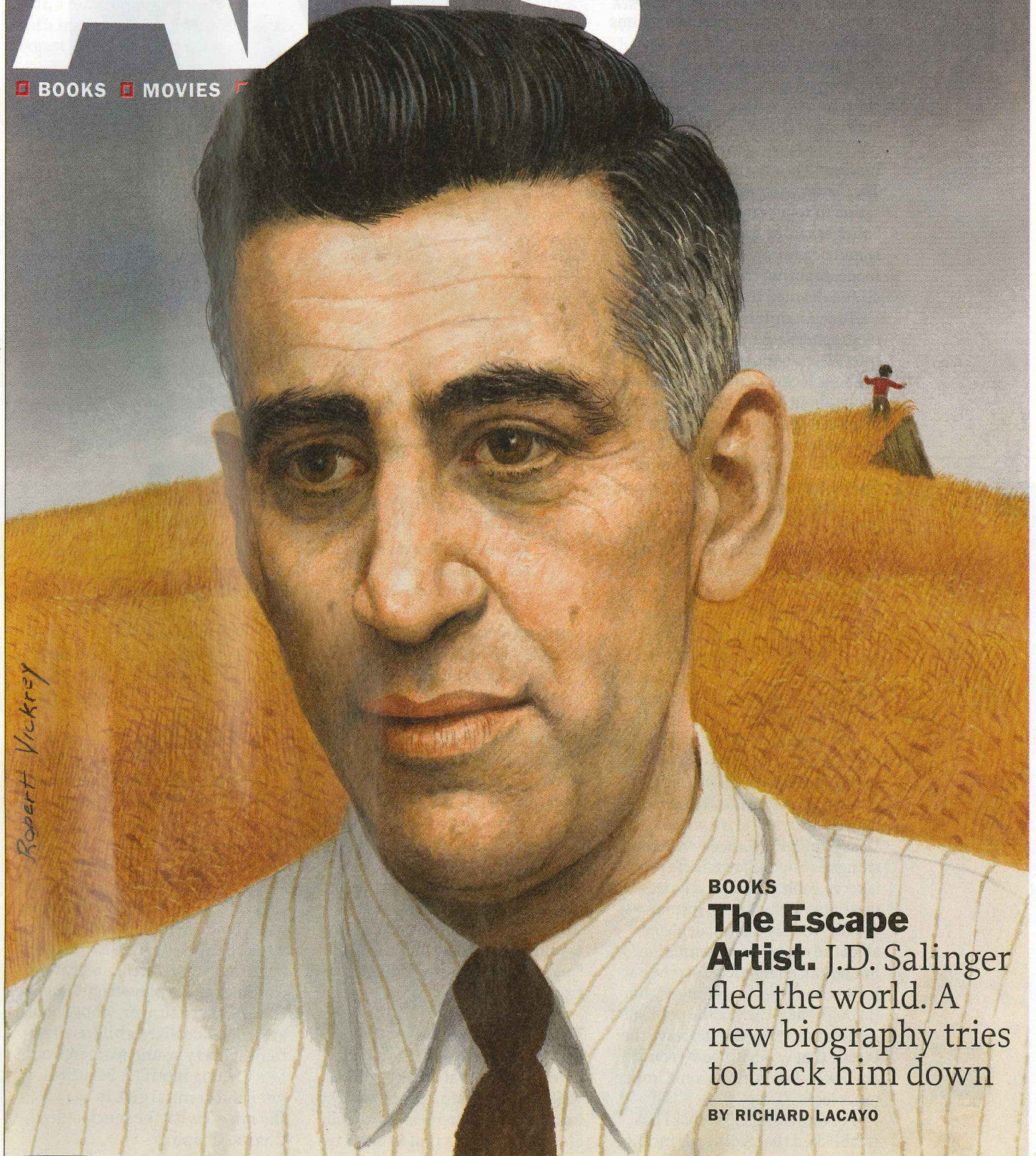


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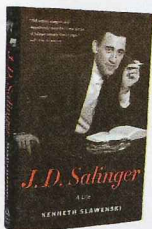
Robert Vickrey

BOOKS

The Escape Artist. J.D. Salinger fled the world. A new biography tries to track him down

BY RICHARD LACAYO

Illustration by Robert Vickrey for TIME



FIRST LINES

The Great War had changed everything. As 1919 dawned, people awoke to a fresh new world, one filled with promise but uncertainty.

IT WOULDN'T BE TRUE TO SAY that Holden Caulfield, the disaffected loner in *The Catcher in the Rye*, was always a stand-in for his creator, the disaffected loner J.D. Salinger. But there are times when Caulfield speaks that you just know it's Salinger talking. Like when the teenager imagines running off to Vermont and pretending to be a deaf-mute. "Then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life," he vows, "and they'd leave me alone."

No such luck. Even after Salinger retreated to his own Fortress of Solitude in rural Cornish, N.H., the world kept trying to beat a path to his door. The enormous success of *The Catcher in the Rye* upon its publication in 1951—an experience that Salinger said he found "professionally and personally demoralizing"—made its author irresistible to his all-too-devoted readers.

To put it mildly, Salinger is a biographer's nightmare. He refused interviews, banned his photo from his book jackets, cut off anyone who spoke about him to journalists and implored friends to destroy his letters. Some missives still made their way into various archives, but when the writer Ian Hamilton embarked on a biography in the 1980s, Salinger successfully sued to stop him from quoting from them. This, after all, was a man who once claimed that the very act of publishing was a "terrible invasion of my privacy." At some point Salinger decided that his work wasn't a conversation with his readers but with his characters. No one from outside their charmed circle need apply.

But barely a year after Salinger's death at age 91, a new biography is here. *J.D. Salinger: A Life* (Random House; 450 pages) is by Kenneth Slawenski, who runs a website, DeadCaulfields.com, devoted to all things Salinger. Slawenski's prose is serviceable at best, and he has a weakness for awkward formulations. ("Yet Ray has not depleted all of the reader's condemnation.") But he's an energetic researcher, at least with respect to Salinger's life through 1965, the year he published his final story. He doesn't solve the puzzle that was Salinger—could anyone?—but he finds some important pieces.

For one thing, Slawenski has established that Salinger's mother



Third time's the charm A rare 1998 photo of Salinger with his third wife, Colleen O'Neill, a nurse 40 years his junior. Their marriage, his longest, was revealed in 1992

was not, as often described, Irish Catholic but of German descent, though still a gentile who converted to Judaism when she married. Salinger's father Sol, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, was a meat and cheese importer. Their boy Jerome David was born in New York City on Jan. 1, 1919. By the time he turned 13, his father was prosperous enough to move the family to an apartment on Park Avenue and enroll his underachieving son at a Manhattan private school. Next came a military academy that would be the model for the den of "phonies" that Caulfield runs away from in *Catcher*.

The Apprentice Writer

SALINGER WOULD PUT IN ONLY three semesters at college, with a year in between in Europe partly to learn the ham business in Poland. Slawenski tells us that to mark his

brief stay in the city of Bydgoszcz, there are plans to erect a statue of Salinger standing in a patch of living rye. It's safe to say he wouldn't have approved.

Back in Manhattan, Salinger took a writing class at Columbia University taught by Whit Burnett, editor of the literary magazine *Story*. Within a year, Salinger had published there, and soon he was appearing in places like *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, aiming all the while for the prestigious pages of the *New Yorker*. Meanwhile, he also survived a romance with Oona O'Neill, the 16-year-old daughter of the playwright Eugene O'Neill. (For Salinger, whose books are full of idealized children, fixations on very young women would be a lifelong motif.) A beautiful but insubstantial girl, in 1943 she ran off with the much older Charlie Chaplin.

By that time, Salinger had been drafted. Attached to Army counter-intelligence, he was tasked with interrogating Nazis in territory liberated by the Allies. His infantry regiment landed at Normandy on D-Day and helped liberate Paris, where he made friends with Ernest Hemingway. He also took part in some of the worst fighting of the war, a months-long winter blood-bath in the mine-infested Hürtgen Forest in western Germany.

Soldier of Misfortune

THOUGH SALINGER STAYED TIGHT-lipped all his life about his combat experience, Slawenski does a fine job of detailing the sheer awfulness of Hürtgen Forest. He makes it plain why, at the end of the war, Salinger appears to have suffered some kind of nervous collapse, a trauma that helps to explain his abrupt leap into marriage with a German woman. But when a joint visit to New York in 1946 went badly, the woman, whom Slawenski has identified as Sylvia Werther, an eye doctor, returned to Europe and filed for divorce. That left Salinger

free to pursue his real love, Holden Caulfield, and to focus on getting into the *New Yorker*. Within months, he would score when the magazine decided at last to run a story featuring Caulfield that it had accepted years earlier. From then on, Salinger published only in the *New Yorker*, which ran most of the works collected in *Nine Stories* as well as Salinger's tales of the Glass family—with their odd mix of spiritual anguish, ecstatic compassion and serene detachment from the ordinary world—that would reappear as *Franny and Zooey* and as Salinger's final book, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*.

What the Glass stories make plain is that by the 1950s Salinger became nothing less than a religious writer, struggling to convey the messages of compassion and detachment that he had discovered in Hindu and Buddhist texts. That otherworldliness could make him a captivating writer but not always a terrific husband. In 1955 he married Claire Douglas, the daughter of a British art critic, who

would become the mother of his two children; their marriage soon foundered as he spent more and more time holed away in his studio on their property.

Slawenski races through the second half of Salinger's life, barely acknowledging the odd picture of Salinger we get from the memoirs of his daughter Margaret and of Joyce Maynard, the 18-year-old writer whom the 53-year-old Salinger, by then divorced, persuaded to join him in Cornish. Both women describe a man devoted to religious study, watching old movies with a reel projector and pursuing eccentric health regimes that included drinking his own urine and forced vomiting. Why does Slawenski step back so much here? Did he begin to share his subject's distaste for the biographer's messy probing into personal matters? You can be Salinger's friend, or you can be his biographer. You can't be both. Whatever Slawenski's motive, he leaves plenty of territory uncharted for whoever takes on Salinger next. And no matter who that turns out to be, you know Salinger would not approve. ■



The portrait on page 57 was created by the artist Robert Vickrey for TIME's Sept. 15, 1961, cover; it is now in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Salinger worried that the image would make him easier to spot in public



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