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Detachment

On 8 July 1944, little more than a week after the fall of Cherbourg, a staff sergeant of the 12th Infantry Regiment, a man whom Salinger had served with since D-Day, was abruptly killed when his jeep hit a landmine. The staff sergeant was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart for valour and his grief-stricken parents were consoled with the assurance that their son had died for a noble cause. The accident had occurred between engagements, at a time when he should have felt safe. After surviving Utah Beach, Émondeville, and Montebourg, death had chosen the moment of least suspicion in which to strike him down.

The arbitrary nature of death made a lasting impression upon Salinger and wove its way into his work. The fate of Vincent Caulfield, killed by mortar fire while warming his hands in the Hürtgen Forest, and of Walt Glass, slain by an innocent-looking Japanese stove, are Salinger's cries against the random structure of the hair-thin line that separates life and death. Salinger was encircled by such misfortune throughout the war and he came to recognize that death held no nobility and chose its victims without purpose. He himself had survived; but it was an outcome without reason. He could just as well have been driving that jeep in July 1944 or fallen victim to unseeing mortar fire in the forest. Consequently, when Salinger left the service, he took with him an entrenched fatalism that would echo throughout his life.

By 1960, it becomes clear that Salinger's tendency toward fatalism had gained the power of religious conviction. In 1957 he told Jamie Hamilton that he held no control over the subjects of his own writings, that a higher force mandated them. He counselled Judge Hand in 1959 that if God

wanted more from him, God himself would make it known. Even Salinger's characters echoed this conviction. In *Seymour – An Introduction*, Buddy Glass advised readers that, 'the true poet has no choice of material. The material plainly chooses him, not he it.'[1]

In April of 1960, Salinger had a dark vision. He saw himself seated in a ballroom, looking on as dancers waltzed to the music of a band. Strangely, the music was becoming dimmer and dimmer to his ears as the dancers appeared farther and farther away. It's a lonesome image of Salinger being withdrawn from the world around him — not so much out of choice, as out of fate. 'I've been expecting this kind of seating arrangement for years and years,' he mourned. Yet in the end, he refused to complain. It was, he resigned, the only way he knew how to work and he recognized that separation from the world was the price that his work demanded.[2]

Each winter at Cornish seemed to grow longer and Salinger's feelings of remoteness deepened. He was frequently depressed but refused to allow anything to tear him from his work.[3] To worsen his situation, in September 1961, Peggy began school. Salinger had always lavished attention upon his daughter and their daily walks together had become the highlight of his days. Her absence left a void in his schedule and hours previously spent with Peggy now found Salinger entrenched in his bunker. Before long, work began to take precedent over everything else and he frequently neglected opportunities to be with his family. During the winter holidays in 1961, Salinger and Claire flew with the children to New York City where they stayed with Salinger's parents on Park Avenue. But that trip was an exception. The following winter, Peggy and Matthew both developed bronchitis and Claire took them to St. Petersburg, Florida, while Salinger remained home at his typewriter.[4] In the winter of 1962, Claire and the children travelled to Barbados to spend time with Claire's mother.* Again, Salinger stayed behind, this time giving preparation for his new book as an excuse.[5]

At the same time, Salinger found he had few friends to whom he could

* Salinger harboured some bitterness toward his mother-in-law and her second husband after they took in Claire and Peggy in 1957. Because her father was wary of allowing too much contact between Jean Douglas and his family, Peggy Salinger reports the 1962 trip to Barbados as being the first time she ever met her grandmother. Although Claire and the children visited Jean with increasing frequency in coming years, a certain remoteness always permeated the relationship between mother and daughter.

turn. He had abandoned many. Along with Jamie Hamilton, he had discarded Robert Machell, who under different circumstances might have been his truest friend. After December 1959, there was little hope of renewing any bond with Whit Burnett. And those who had dared speak with reporters in 1961 had been swiftly cut away.

Perhaps unknown to Salinger at the time, the amazing serendipity of relationships that had blessed him throughout his life was at an end. No figure would arise to fill the gap left by departing friends or provide comfort when he needed affirmation. Those who had fallen away would now leave only empty spaces, reminders of just how far removed Salinger's ballroom chair had become.

On 2 July 1961, Ernest Hemingway, Salinger's friend and strength during the war, committed suicide at his home in Idaho. Six weeks later, on 18 August Judge Learned Hand, Salinger's closest friend and confidant, passed away in New York. For Salinger, the music had begun to fade into silence. The seclusion begun by his work habits and hardened by the media had evolved into a loneliness that was locked into place by the fatalism he embraced.

J.D. Salinger did not deliberately choose to withdraw from the world. His isolation was an insidious progression that slowly enveloped him. Sadly, he recognized the shadows descending but felt powerless to change the course. His work had become a holy obligation and he accepted that loneliness and seclusion might well be the price it demanded for fulfillment. In the jacket-flap biography he wrote for *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger shared these feelings with the public. He confessed that he felt himself vanishing into his work and confided, 'there is a real enough danger, I suppose, that sooner or later I'll bog down, perhaps disappear entirely, in my own methods, locutions, and mannerisms'. Salinger still held out hope that he would survive the demands of his calling. 'On the whole, though,' he injected, 'I am very hopeful.'[6] Yet nowhere in his public confession was there any indication that Salinger was willing to alter the path he now travelled. To the outside world, this was proof that he had left his life to the whims of fate. But to Salinger himself he was simply obeying the will of God. It would never have occurred to him to do otherwise.

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As successful as *Franny and Zooey* had been, Salinger's reputation still rested upon *The Catcher in the Rye*, which, in 1960, had slipped back onto the *New York Times* bestseller list (at number five) and by 1962 had sold over two million copies. It is therefore perplexing that Salinger remained silent when the novel was severely challenged by libraries, school boards and faculties, potentially eliminating a vast segment of youthful readers who had kept its sales thriving.

The Catcher in the Rye was first challenged in 1954 by a school board in California. Since then, many dozens of attempts were made to censor the book, demanding that schools ban it from the classroom and forbid their instructors from recommending the novel. Libraries, school boards and parents groups cited Holden's use of profanity and his attitudes toward authority, sexuality and education as reasons to suppress his voice. *Catcher*'s success propelled this controversy. The more popular the novel became, the more often it was challenged. *Catcher* may have been suitable to certain college curriculums but as its popularity grew among academics, high school teachers began to suggest the book to their students. Some had even tested the system by teaching the novel openly in the classroom. When they did, *Catcher*'s effect upon students was immediate. Many embraced Holden Caulfield as articulating their own deepest feelings. But parents were often appalled to find their children enraptured by a character they considered to be indecent and profane, one that drinks, smokes and curses while visiting cocktail lounges and paying prostitutes. The resulting furor put *The Catcher in the Rye* in a curious position. In a 1962 survey, California college professors placed the novel at the top of their list of titles to recommend to their students. At the same time *Catcher* was quickly becoming the most banned book in the United States.

Salinger is known to have made only one public statement on the issue and even that statement is diluted with the fact that it was in anticipation of events rather than a reaction to them. Shortly before the book's publication, Little, Brown and Company issued a limited publicity release in which Salinger was quoted as lamenting the possibility that *Catcher* might be censured for its language and content. 'Some of my best friends are children,' he began. 'In fact, 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.' This short comment, sent mainly to distributors, remains the only public statement made by the author on censorship.

By 1960, even this lukewarm opposition to the prospect of *Catcher*'s suppression had melted away into a fatalistic acceptance. And once again, Salinger gave his work as an excuse for that fatalism. For some years he had received a number of letters from a relentless graduate student named Donald Fiene. He was a former high school English teacher who had been dismissed from his position for recommending *The Catcher in the Rye* to his students. Now a lecturer at the University of Louisville in pursuit of his master's degree, he had set himself to the daunting task of compiling a complete bibliography of all Salinger works and translations for his master's dissertation. After several letters asking for Salinger's help went unanswered, Fiene was stunned to receive a response from the author in September 1960. In it, Salinger apologized for being unable to help Fiene in his project but went on to address his personal feelings concerning the debate that raged over *Catcher*'s suppression. 'It distresses me very much,' Salinger wrote, 'and I often wonder if there isn't something I can do about it.' Ultimately, Salinger had decided to ignore the controversy completely. He explained to Fiene that in order to devote himself to the new work he was currently 'buried under', he had chosen to let go of his feelings of responsibility toward old works.[7]

During the first week of June 1962, *Franny and Zooey* was published in Great Britain. After the fallout with Hamish Hamilton, Salinger attempted to withdraw from personal contact with publishers, while demanding yet greater control over his product's presentation. He placed Ober Associates in charge of locating a suitable agent for him in England. Olding chose Hughes, Massie & Co., who also managed Harper Lee, and assigned them the task of finding a publisher for *Franny and Zooey*. Among the first publishing houses to place a bid was Hamish Hamilton, who offered £10,000 for rights that, legally, they actually already possessed. Salinger ignored the offer by Hamilton and accepted a £4,000 bid by William Heinemann instead. Jamie Hamilton could well have sued Salinger for breach of contract but chose not to in an attempt to put an end to what he would later describe as the most painful experience of his career.

For William Heinemann and Hughes, Massie however, the pain was only

just beginning. They soon experienced the exasperation that for Little, Brown and Company, had become routine. Salinger immediately sought to apply the same level of perfection he demanded of himself to his new agent and publisher. When Salinger's agents drew up the Heinemann contract in March 1962, it came with a series of demands so meticulous in their details as to make them inconceivable when Heinemann first placed their bid. The contract stipulated that no publicity was to be issued without Salinger's consent. No photograph of him was to appear on the book's jacket. All advertisements were to be submitted to Salinger for approval. And no quotes 'favorable or unfavorable' were to be used.[8] William Heinemann signed the contract regardless.

When Salinger received an advance copy of the British *Franny and Zooey* in May (one can only imagine that, after the consequences of not have having obtained a copy of *For Esmé* from Hamilton, this too was a stipulation), he immediately wrote to his agent at Hughes, Massie. The Heinemann version of *Franny and Zooey* adhered to each of his demands but still looked cheap to him. Salinger claimed that the book reminded him of 'something any of the low-budget Iron Curtain countries might have brought out as well or even better'.[9] Hughes, Massie conveyed Salinger's disappointment to Dorothy Olding in a response that was at once apologetic, longsuffering, and brilliantly sarcastic. Salinger's dissatisfaction, it reported, appeared to be on two counts: the size of the paper and the quality of the binding material.[10] In the end, the British edition of *Franny and Zooey* reached the public in June 1962 just as Salinger had received it that May, but when Salinger's next book appeared in England two years later, upgrades were made to both the page size and binding material.

Salinger's fourth and, as it would turn out, final book, was published by Little, Brown and Company on 28 January 1963. Like *Franny and Zooey*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour – An Introduction* was a union of two Glass stories previously published in *The New Yorker* and would simply bear the titles of those two stories. Salinger had decided to publish the book in 1960, at the same time that he decided to publish *Franny and Zooey*, and arrangements were made for the production of both collec-

tions simultaneously. He had always intended that *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour – An Introduction* would follow *Franny and Zooey* and its release was more in keeping with the publisher's itineraries rather than Salinger's reaction to the critical derision for *Franny and Zooey* or its enormous public success.

The same as previous collection, *Raise High* and *Seymour* came with Salinger's usual list of demands. There was to be no cover art, marquees, photographs, or added text other than that written by Salinger himself. There was also to be very little advance publicity. The few advertisements allowed for *Raise High* and *Seymour* were sober and restrained. A full page ad appeared in *Publisher's Weekly* on January 7, announcing the book's upcoming release. It held no illustration other than a depiction of the book itself. On 7 April the *New York Times Book Review* held an ad that portrayed a pyramid of books similar to previous ads for *Franny and Zooey*. In fact, the release of *Raise High* and *Seymour* was a replica of the process undergone by the previous collection except that the ads began far closer to the actual release date.

At first glance, it might seem brazen of Salinger to release a new collection — especially one containing the perplexing 'Seymour – An Introduction' — after the onslaught of critical reviews following *Franny and Zooey*. But by 1963, Salinger's fatalism regarding his work had grown so firmly entrenched that the opinions of professional readers had lost their force with him. Indeed, Salinger's previous fears that he would disappear into his work had now given way to complete submission. In his dust jacket commentary for *Raise High* and *Seymour*, Salinger revealed the extent to which he had become enmeshed in his Glass series; and he did it without apology. Rather than confiding fears that he might 'bog down' in his work, as he had previously, Salinger explained to readers that he had coupled 'Raise High, the Roof Beam Carpenters' and 'Seymour – An Introduction' so they would not collide with forthcoming segments of the Glass series . He assured them that new additions to the Glass saga were in the works, currently 'waxing, dilating — each in its own way', both on paper and in his creative mind. And if he had become entrapped by these Glass characters, Salinger revealed that he considered it a blissful imprisonment. 'Oddly,' he noted, 'the joys and satisfactions of working on the Glass family peculiarly increase and deepen for me with the years.'[11]

The year 1963, then, promised a future replete with Salinger works.

Books and stories that the author himself promised would continue the chronicle of the Glass family. Some of these pieces were yet developing while others were near completion. The promise was not an empty one. When Little, Brown released *Raise High and Seymour*, it had already begun negotiations to pay Salinger an advance of $75,000 toward the publication of his next book.*

As might be suspected, critics were far less willing to suffer an extension of the Glass series — which now seemed interminable — regardless of whatever joys it offered the author. In general, reviews of *Raise High* and *Seymour* were less antagonistic than they had been for *Franny and Zooey*, but critics delivered a collective moan over the prospect that this book too would be followed by yet another Glass saga. They called for an end to the series in no uncertain terms. The *New York Times Book Review* accused Salinger of the 'self-indulgence of a writer flirting with depths of wisdom, yet coy and embarrassed in his advances'.[12] But it was *Time* magazine that boldly revealed the underlying exasperation that many critics felt but were reluctant to divulge. 'The grown reader,' *Time* sarcastically quipped, 'is beginning to wonder whether the sphinxlike Seymour has a secret worth sharing. And if so, when Salinger is going to reveal it.'[13]

The triumph of *Franny and Zooey* had taught Salinger that he could expect vindication from average readers regardless of critical derision. And when *Raise High* and *Seymour* was released, readers once again came to his defence. The book was an immediate success, quickly selling over 100,000 copies and seizing the coveted number one spot on the *New York Times* best-sellers list. Sales of *Raise High* and *Seymour* did not match those of *Franny and Zooey* but the achievement of *Franny* and *Zooey* had been so enormous that it did not matter. *Raise High* and *Seymour* was still a literary sensation and the third best selling book of 1963.

In response, Salinger acknowledged the debt that he owed to those readers who honoured his work against critical advice. In the second printing of *Raise High* and *Seymour*, he included a belated dedication to his readers that tenderly equated them with members of his own family. The dedication delivers appreciation to average readers as well as scorn for professional

* $75,000 was an enormous sum of money in 1963. Salinger's consideration of the fee proves his intention to continue publishing and his confidence in the quality of forthcoming projects.

critics. Among the books most enduring statements, it has become one of the most famous literary dedications of all time:

> If there is an amateur reader still left in the world—or anybody who just reads and runs—I ask him or her, with untellable affection and gratitude, to split the dedication of this book four ways with my wife and children.[14]

Twenty-four years after it was delivered, Salinger proved that he had learned Whit Burnett's lesson well. His respect for readers and his faith that they would feel the inspiration of his message had once again granted his career rescue. With the world around him receding, his own family becoming distanced, and his friends fading, it was the average reader who rose to save him. The bird watchers. Faulkner's beloved silent readers. For the rest, Salinger's attitude was plain: damn them all.