

# Teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*

## An Online Professional Development Seminar

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and American Studies  
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**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

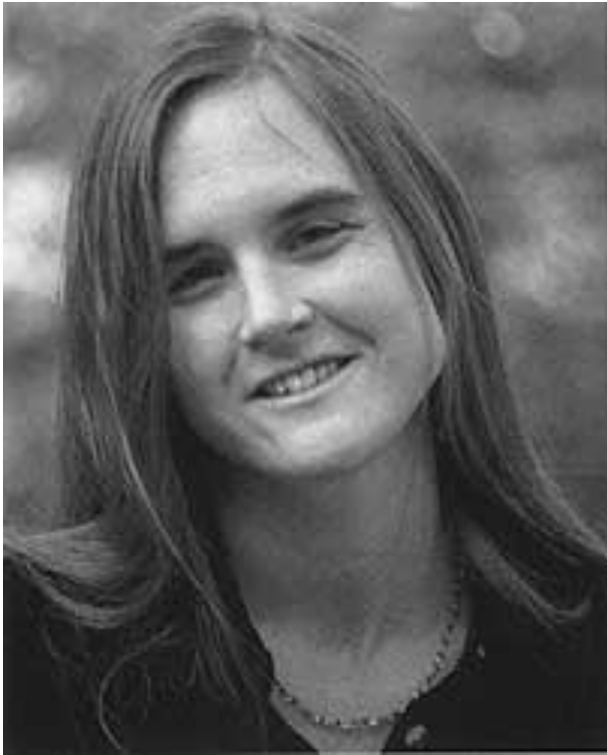
*from the* National Humanities Center

## FROM THE FORUM Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Fresh, updated, challenging perspectives
- Focus on Holden's voice and the themes of conformity, nonconformity, the protection of innocence, rebellion, and challenging the status quo
- Do contemporary students relate to Holden?

## UNDERSTANDING

*The Catcher in the Rye* foreshadows the age of Facebook: its protagonist tells a story of the self in order to connect with others and find community.



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2002-03

*A Nation of Outsiders: How the White  
Middle-Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in  
Postwar America* (2011)

*Making Whiteness: The Culture of  
Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (1998)

- General history:
  - published in 1951
  - postwar prosperity
  - emergence of what people called mass culture (commercialized, mass-produced forms of expression and artifacts, not new but critical mass)
  - paperback publishing revolution
- Intellectual and cultural history:
  - turn inward, exploration of emotions, feelings, interior spaces of individual
  - popularity of Freud and psychological thinking generally
  - Intellectuals: fear that mass culture erodes individualism
- Literary history:
  - state of fiction at the time: how *Catcher* shaped by history of writing that proceeds it
  - Salinger's biography and talent: how Salinger's life shapes the novel

“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. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They’re quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They’re nice and all – I’m not saying that - but they’re also touchy as hell. Besides, I’m not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I’ll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas ...”

## Discussion Question

What do we learn about Holden and the novel from this opening sentence?

## Framing Questions

- Why do people want to see themselves as outsiders?
- What are the effects of this desire on history and culture?

“When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don’t know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, “*Sleep tight, ya morons!*” I’ll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out.”

## Discussion Question

What is Holden leaving?

What significance would this act have in the life of an adolescent?



Holden sets off on a search.

What kind of a character is he?

What is he looking for?

“Lawyers are all right, I guess—but it doesn’t appeal to me. I mean they’re all right if they go around saving innocent guys’ lives all the time, and like that, but you don’t *do* that kind of stuff if you’re a lawyer...Even if you did go round saving guys’ lives and all, how would you know if you did it because you really *wanted* to save guys’ lives, or because you did it because what you *really* wanted to do was to be a terrific lawyer, with everybody slapping you on the back and congratulating you in court when the goddam trial was over, the reporters and everybody, the way it is in the dirty movies? How would you know you weren’t being a phony? The trouble is, you *wouldn’t*.”

“Game my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right—I admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it.

Nothing. No game.”

“And I hate to tell you,” he said, “but I think that once you have a fair idea where you want to go, your first , move will be to apply yourself in school. You’ll have to. You’re a student—whether the idea appeals to you or not. You’re in love with knowledge. And I think you’ll find, once you get past all the Mr. Vineses and their Oral Comp—”

“Mr. Vinsons,” I said. He meant all the Mr. Vinsons, not all the Mr. Vinses. I shouldn’t have interrupted him, though.

“All right—the Mr. Vinsons. Once you get past all the Mr. Vinsons, you’re going to start getting closer and closer—that is, if you *want* to, and if you look for it and wait for it—to the kind of information that will be very, very dear to your heart. Among other things, you’ll find that you’re not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You’re by no means alone on that score, you’ll be excited and *stimulated* to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles.”

“You’ll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It’s a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn’t education. It’s history. It’s poetry.”

“You don’t always have to get too sexy to get to know a girl,” he tells us. “Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not too much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall half in love with them, and then you never know *where* the hell you are.”

“. . . When I finally get up, I had to walk to the bathroom all doubled up and holding onto my stomach and all.

But I'm crazy. I swear to God I am. About halfway to the bathroom, I sort of start pretending I had a bullet in my guts. Old Maurice had plugged me. Now I was on the way to the bathroom to get a good shot of bourbon or something to steady my nerves and help me *really* go into action. I pictured my self coming out of the goddamn bathroom, dressed and all, with my automatic in my pocket, and staggering around a little bit. Then I'd walk downstairs, instead of using the elevator. I'd hold onto the bannister 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—and then I'd ring the elevator bell. As soon as old Maurice opened the door, he'd see me with the automatic in my hand and he'd start screaming at me, in this very high-pitched voice, to leave him alone. But I'd plug him anyway.”

“Six shots right through his fat hairy belly. Then I’d throw my automatic down the elevator shaft—after I’d wiped off all the finger prints and all. Then I’d crawl back to my room and call up Jane and have her come over and bandage up my guts. I pictured her holding a cigarette for me to smoke while I was bleeding and all.

The goddamn movies. They can ruin you. I’m not kidding.

I stayed in the bathroom for about an hour, taking a bath and all. Then I got back in bed. It took me quite a while to get to sleep—I wasn’t even tired—but finally U did. I felt like jumping out the eindow. I probably would’ve done it, too, if I’d been sure somebody’d cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn’t want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory.”



“Boy, it began to rain like a bastard. In *buckets*, I swear to God. All the parents and mothers and everybody went over and stood right under the roof of the carrousel, so they wouldn’t get soaked to the skin or anything, but I stuck around on the bench for quite awhile. I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants. My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way, but I got soaked anyway. I didn’t care, though. I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don’t know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could’ve been there.”

“You know that song, “If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye”? I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I’m standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they’re running and they don’t want to look where they’re going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That’s all I’d do all day. I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all.”

“I knew my mother’d get nervous as hell and start to cry and beg me to stay home and not go back to my cabin, but I’d go anyway. I’d be casual as hell. I’d ask them all to visit me sometime if they wanted to, but I wouldn’t insist or anything. What I’d do, I’d let old Phoebe come out and visit me in the summertime and on Christmas vacation and Easter vacation. And I’d let D. B. come . . . but he couldn’t write any movies in my cabin, only stories and books. I’d have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn’t stay.”

Final slide.

Thank You