

# The Reader in the Rye

GABRIEL BELLUE



---

*WRITER'S COMMENT: As soon as I read my UWP 101 course's first paper prompt—to write a narrative about a personal experience with mental health—I began thinking of ways out of it. Fearful of exposing too much of myself in writing (as if that is ever possible), I decided to sidestep the vulnerability that the prompt was asking for by writing a more traditional, literature-based paper on *The Catcher in the Rye*. Once I got started, however, I found it impossible to separate my surface-level claim that I wanted to rehabilitate the novel's lukewarm reputation from my emotions. *The Catcher in the Rye* means a lot to me because of its honest portrayal of grief and, in the end, I had to forgo my uncertainty to write my own portrayal of grief too. To those who have never lost someone close to you, I hope this paper offers some new insight into the experience. To those who have, I hope my struggle to accept my loss can offer consolation, in some small way, as you face your own.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: When I first read "The Reader in the Rye," I immediately felt grateful and awed. Our UWP 101 class was participating in the Campus Community Book Project, reading the graphic memoir "Marbles," by Ellen Forney. Students were assigned to write a narrative essay relating to mental health, with two to four sources. Gabriel's narrative surpasses usual genre expectations. Not only is the storytelling deeply personal, teaching us about sibling loss, but it is also part literary analysis, showing us a unique interpretation of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Gab's use of sources also blew my mind. I expected source information about mental illness characteristics or statistics, but I never expected a historical examination*

*of the meanings that critics have ascribed to the novel. Ultimately, I feel humbled reading “The Reader in the Rye.” Gabriel shares much about sibling loss, thus giving a voice to those oftentimes too young to express their pain. Even if you never read *The Catcher in the Rye*, Gabriel’s narrative would still convince you of the impact of literature, the loneliness of grief, and the depths of sibling love.*

—Agnes Stark, *University Writing Program*

When my high school English teacher assigned *The Catcher in the Rye*, I dreaded reading it. It is one of those classic novels everyone has heard of, and I had heard nothing good. A synopsis from my teacher offered little besides that I would be exposed to an abundance of outdated 1950’s slang and Holden Caulfield, a protagonist who manages to spend the majority of the story doing little more than wandering New York City and complaining. To say I was uninterested would be an understatement. But I consoled myself that the book promised, at the very least, to be a quick read, so I picked it up and got to reading.

It only took a few pages for Holden’s adventure to have me enthralled. As he got expelled from his prestigious prep school and managed to annoy everyone he came across on his quest to meet up with his younger sister, he reeled me into the novel, deeper and deeper. I didn’t identify with his every thought, necessarily—he spends a good chunk of time insisting that he is better than other people, who “never notice anything” (Salinger 12) and “always clap for the wrong things” (94)—but I didn’t mind them either. I didn’t mind them because, from the first mention of his deceased brother, Allie, I recognized the quiet undercurrent of his grief as my own. In the ten years since my own brother died in a car accident, I have never read something that captured my feelings quite like this.

It should not have taken me so long to find a story I could connect with, because for all my conviction that I was alone in the grief I faced, I knew that was untrue. Five to eight percent of people experience a sibling death in their childhood (Fletcher et al). Though this percentage is hardly high, comparable only to equally consequential events like maternal death, it serves as a reminder that my pain was not unknowable. Yet I was so certain it was. My brother’s death fell upon me like a heavy fog, and I imagined myself suddenly separate from my peers. I turned to whatever

books I could get my hands on, hoping that they might make sense of my insurmountable grief for me. None did. Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and Barbara Park's *Mick Harte was Here* came the closest to explaining the immediate stab of loss, but as I grew up and grew into my newfound position of the eldest child in my family, they faded in relevance for me.

*The Catcher in the Rye* did the exact opposite. Emotions burst from the pages and forced their way to the forefront of my mind, and as I processed Holden's supposedly obnoxious behavior, I found myself nodding along to the complexity of his grief. He does not mention his brother often, but he does mention his fascination with finality, whether that means preserving his brother's keepsakes or ensuring he says goodbye to a place before he leaves it. I understood this fascination innately. I also understood the relationship that unfolds with his younger sister, and why he is so intent on protecting her innocence for as long as possible. I have always felt the same way toward my own sister—as if giving her more memories than I had of myself and my brother might, in some small way, make things right. As the novel ends with Holden crying over the sight of his sister happily enjoying a carousel ride, I felt as if one of the least obvious but most powerful symptoms of my own loss was finally recognized.

After finishing the novel, I hurried to read reviews of it. Holden's story validated mine, and so I imagined seeing others acknowledging his pain would be like an acknowledgement for myself, as well. However, reality quickly dashed my hopes.

In the countless reviews I read, few noted Holden's grief as a very significant part of the novel, the way I believed it was. *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik praised that "no book has ever captured a city better than *The Catcher in the Rye* captured New York in the forties," and the BBC's Finlo Rohrer described it as "the defining work on what it is like to be a teenager" (Gopnik; Rohrer). In David Shields and Shane Salerno's biography on the author, J.D. Salinger, they insist that the novel "can best be understood as a disguised war novel" (Shields and Salerno). Looking at these reviews and many more together, I came to a realization. My belief that the novel is primarily about grief is not a popular one.

What could be called a Holden-esque reaction followed. I decided that those reviews were wrong, and that the writers behind them just didn't *get it* like I did. Without meaning to, I caught myself echoing

Holden's own self-important mindset, assuring myself that I was correct while everyone else was—to use his own words—a phony. Holden's grief saturated every page of the novel. My own saturated my every passing day. How did others not see that?

It was this reaction to the general consensus on *The Catcher in the Rye* that taught me more about grief than the actual novel did. The book reminded me that, despite the not uncommon experience of sibling death, it remains an isolating incident. In her 2017 dissertation on the impact of sibling death, PhD candidate Jan-Louise Godfrey found that many adolescents who experienced a sibling death felt not only increased grief, but an increased sense of disenfranchisement as well (Godfrey). These people often feel, as I certainly did, that their relationship with their late sibling was not recognized in its full capacity as they grieved, and that few people truly understood their pain. In retrospect, I realize that my own feelings of that nature were surfacing when I read through the reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and I felt my own grief being as disregarded as Holden's was.

Ultimately, I had to do as Holden does, and accept this reality for what it is. I cannot control what people think of a book, just as much as I cannot control the loss I have faced. In both cases, grief proves itself to be impossible to ignore or understand. It has been Holden's words, in all their pretentious and dramatic glory, that remind me of this. As he says upon departing his school, "I don't care if it's a sad good-bye or a bad good-bye, but when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse" (Salinger 7). I can think of no better string of sentences to hold onto in the face of grief. Such a deep loss can never be forgotten or made right, but the comfort that comes from merely acknowledging it and processing it is something. It is enough.

## Works Cited

- Fletcher, Jason, et al. "A Sibling Death in the Family: Common and Consequential." *Demography*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 803–826. doi.org/10.1007/s13524-012-0162-4
- Godfrey, Jan-Louise. "The Impact of Sibling Death on Adolescent Psychosocial Development and Psychological Wellbeing." *Swinburne University of Technology*, Faculty of Health, Arts and Design Swinburne University of Technology, 2017. researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/ea74d804-5c86-4f58-aa31-d20788f41079/1/jan\_louise\_godfrey\_thesis.pdf
- Gopnik, Adam. "J. D. Salinger." *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2017. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/08/j-d-salinger
- Rohrer, Finlo. "Why Does Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* Still Resonate?" *BBC News*, 5 June 2009. news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\_news/magazine/8084931.stm
- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher In The Rye*. Little, Brown, 2019.
- Shields, David, and Shane Salerno. "JD Salinger | Book Introduction to Salinger." *Public Broadcasting Service*, 4 Aug. 2015. www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/jd-salinger-book-introduction-to-salinger/2791/