

The Catcher in the Rye

By J. D. Salinger

About the Novel - A Brief Synopsis

Holden Caulfield, the seventeen-year-old narrator and protagonist of the novel, addresses the reader directly from a mental hospital or sanitarium in southern California. He wants to tell us about events that took place over a two-day period the previous December. Typically, he first digresses to mention his older brother, D.B., who was once a "terrific" short-story writer but now has sold out and writes scripts in nearby Hollywood. The body of the novel follows. It is a frame story, or long flashback, constructed through Holden's memory.

Holden begins at Pencey Prep, an exclusive private school in Pennsylvania, on the Saturday afternoon of the traditional football game with school rival, Saxon Hall. Holden misses the game. Manager of the fencing team, he managed to lose the team's equipment on the subway that morning, resulting in the cancellation of a match in New York. He is on his way to the home of his history teacher, Mr. Spencer, to say good-bye. Holden has been expelled and is not to return after Christmas break, which begins Wednesday.

Spencer is a well-meaning but long-winded old man, and Holden gladly escapes to the quiet of an almost deserted dorm. Wearing his new red hunting cap, he begins to read. His reverie is temporary. First, a dorm neighbor named Ackley disturbs him. Later, Holden argues with his roommate, Stradlater, who fails to appreciate a theme that Holden has written for him about Holden's deceased brother Allie's baseball glove. A womanizer, Stradlater has just returned from a date with Holden's old friend Jane Gallagher. The two roommates fight, Stradlater winning easily. Holden has had enough of Pencey Prep and catches a train to New York City where he plans to stay in a hotel until Wednesday, when his parents expect him to return home for Christmas vacation.

En route to New York, Holden meets the mother of a Pencey classmate and severely distorts the truth by telling her what a popular boy her "rat" son is. Holden's Manhattan hotel room faces windows of another wing of the hotel, and he observes assorted behavior by "perverts." Holden struggles with his own sexuality. He meets three women in their thirties, tourists from Seattle, in the hotel lounge and enjoys dancing with one but ends up with only the check. Following a disappointing visit to Ernie's Nightclub in Greenwich Village, Holden agrees to have a prostitute, Sunny, visit his room. Holden has second thoughts, makes up an excuse, and pays the girl to leave. To his surprise, Maurice, her pimp, soon returns with her and beats up Holden for more money. He has lost two fights in one night. It is near dawn Sunday morning.

After a short sleep, Holden telephones Sally Hayes, a familiar date, and agrees to meet her that afternoon to go to a play. Meanwhile, Holden leaves the hotel, checks his luggage at Grand Central Station, and has a late breakfast. He meets two nuns, one an English teacher, with whom he discusses Romeo and Juliet. Holden looks for a special record for his 10-year-old sister, Phoebe, called "Little Shirley Beans." He spots a small boy singing "If a body catch a body coming through the rye," which somehow makes Holden feel less depressed.

Sally is snobbish and "phony," but the two watch a play featuring married Broadway stars Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Sally and Holden skate at Radio City but fight when Holden tries to discuss things that really matter to him and suddenly suggests that they run off together. Holden leaves, sees the Christmas show at Radio City Music Hall, endures a movie, and gets very drunk. Throughout the novel, Holden has been worried about the ducks in the lagoon at Central Park. He tries to find them but only manages to break Phoebe's recording in the process. Exhausted physically and mentally, he heads home to see his sister.

Holden and Phoebe are close friends as well as siblings. He tells her that the one thing he'd like to be is "the catcher in the rye." He would stand near the edge of a cliff, by a field of rye, and catch any of the playing children who, in their abandon, come close to falling off. When his parents return from a late night out, Holden, undetected, leaves the apartment and visits the home of Mr. Antolini, a favorite teacher, where he hopes to stay a few days. Startled, Holden awakes in the predawn hours to find Antolini patting Holden's head. He quickly leaves.

Monday morning, Holden arranges to meet Phoebe for lunch. He plans to say good-bye and head west where he hopes to live as a deaf-mute. She insists on leaving with him, and he finally agrees to stay. Holden's story ends with Phoebe riding a carousel in the rain as Holden watches.

In the final chapter, Holden is at the sanitarium in California. He doesn't want to tell us any more. In fact, the whole story has only made him miss people, even the jerks.