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### Justice to J.D. Salinger

By [Janet Malcolm](#)

When J.D. Salinger's "Hapworth 16, 1924"—a very long and very strange story in the form of a letter from camp written by Seymour Glass when he was seven—appeared in *The New Yorker* in June 1965, it was greeted with unhappy, even embarrassed silence. It seemed to confirm the growing critical consensus that Salinger was going to hell in a handbasket. By the late Fifties, when the stories "Franny" and "Zooney" and "Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters" were coming out in the magazine, Salinger was no longer the universally beloved author of *The Catcher in the Rye*; he was now the seriously annoying creator of the Glass family.

When "Franny" and "Zooney" appeared in book form in 1961, a flood of pent-up resentment was released. The critical reception—by, among others, Alfred Kazin, Mary McCarthy, Joan Didion, and John Updike—was more like a public birching than an ordinary occasion of failure to please. "Zooney" had already been pronounced "an interminable, an appallingly bad story," by Maxwell Geismar<sup>[1]</sup> and "a piece of shapeless self-indulgence" by George Steiner.<sup>[2]</sup> Now Alfred Kazin, in an essay sardonically entitled "J.D. Salinger: 'Everybody's Favorite,'" set forth the terms on which Salinger would be relegated to the margins of literature for doting on the "horribly precocious" Glasses. "I am sorry to have to use the word 'cute' in respect to Salinger," Kazin wrote, "but there is absolutely no other word that for me so accurately typifies the self-conscious charm and prankishness of his own writing and his extraordinary cherishing of his favorite Glass characters."<sup>[3]</sup> McCarthy peevishly wrote: "Again the theme is the good people against the stupid phonies, and the good is still all in the family, like a family-owned 'closed' corporation.... Outside are the phonies, vainly signaling to be let in." And: "Why did [Seymour] kill himself? Because he had married a phony, whom he worshiped for her 'simplicity, her terrible honesty'?... Or because he had been lying, his author had been lying, and it was all terrible, and he was a fake?"<sup>[4]</sup>

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Didion dismissed *Franny and Zooney* as "finally spurious, and what makes it spurious is Salinger's tendency to flatter the essential triviality within each of his readers, his predilection for giving instructions for living. What gives the book its extremely potent appeal is precisely that it is self-help copy: it emerges finally as *Positive Thinking* for the upper middle classes, as *Double Your Energy and Live Without Fatigue* for Sarah Lawrence girls."<sup>[5]</sup> Even kindly John Updike's sadism was aroused. He mocked Salinger for his rendering of a character who is "just one of the remote millions coarse and foolish enough to be born outside the Glass family," and charged Salinger with portraying the Glasses "not to particularize imaginary people but to instill in the reader a mood of blind worship, tinged with envy." "Salinger loves the Glasses more than God loves them. He loves them too exclusively. Their invention

has become a hermitage for him. He loves them to the detriment of artistic moderation. 'Zooney' is just too long."<sup>[6]</sup>

Today "Zooney" does not seem too long, and is arguably Salinger's masterpiece. Rereading it and its companion piece "Franny" is no less rewarding than rereading *The Great Gatsby*. It remains brilliant and is in no essential sense dated. It is the contemporary criticism that has dated. Like the contemporary criticism of *Olympia*, for example, which jeered at Manet for his crude indecency, or that of *War and Peace*, which condescended to Tolstoy for the inept "shapelessness" of the novel, it now seems magnificently misguided. However—as T.J. Clark and Gary Saul Morson have shown in their respective exemplary studies of Manet and Tolstoy<sup>[7]</sup>—negative contemporary criticism of a masterpiece can be helpful to later critics, acting as a kind of radar that picks up the ping of the work's originality. The "mistakes" and "excesses" that early critics complain of are often precisely the innovations that have given the work its power.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the case of Salinger's critics, it is their extraordinary rage against the Glasses that points us toward Salinger's innovations. I don't know of any other case where literary characters have aroused such animosity, and where a writer of fiction has been so severely censured for failing to understand the offensiveness of his creations. In fact, Salinger understood the offensiveness of his creations perfectly well. "Zooney"'s narrator, Buddy Glass, wryly cites the view of some of the listeners to the quiz show *It's a Wise Child*, on which all the Glass children had appeared in turn, "that the Glasses were a bunch of insufferably 'superior' little bastards that should have been drowned or gassed at birth." The seven-year-old letter-writer in "Hapworth" reports that "I have been trying like hell since our arrival to leave a wide margin for human ill-will, fear, jealousy, and gnawing dislike of the uncommonplace." Throughout the Glass stories—as well as in *Catcher*—Salinger presents his abnormal heroes in the context of the normal world's dislike and fear of them. These works are fables of otherness—versions of Kafka's "Metamorphosis." However, Salinger's design is not as easy to make out as Kafka's. His Gregor Samsas are not overtly disgusting and threatening; they have retained their human shape and speech and are even, in the case of Franny and Zooney, preternaturally good-looking. Nor is his vision unrelentingly tragic; it characteristically oscillates between the tragic and the comic. But with the possible exception of the older daughter, Boo Boo, who grew up to become a suburban wife and mother, none of the Glass children is able to live comfortably in the world. They are out of place. They might as well be large insects. The critics' aversion points us toward their underlying freakishness, and toward Salinger's own literary deviance and irony.

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Ten years before the "interminable" and "shapeless" "Zooney" appeared in *The New Yorker*, a very short and well-made story called "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" appeared there, and traced the last few hours in the life of a young man who kills himself in the story's last sentence by putting a revolver to his temple. At the time, readers had no inkling that Seymour Glass—as the young man was called—would become a famous literary character, and that this was anything but a self-contained story about a suicidal depressive and his staggeringly shallow and unhelpful wife, Muriel. It is only in retrospect that we can see that the story is a kind of miniature and somewhat oversharped version of the allegory that the Glass family stories would enact.

The story, which takes place at a Florida resort, where the husband and wife are vacationing, is divided into two sections. In the first we overhear a telephone conversation between the wife and her mother in New York, which mordantly renders the bourgeois world of received ideas and relentless department-store shopping in which the women are comfortably and obviously ensconced. The second section takes place on the beach where the despairing Seymour is conversing with a little girl named Sybil Carpenter, whose mother has told her to "run and play" while she goes to the hotel to have a martini with a friend. Seymour is revealed as a man who is wonderful with children, not talking down to them but, rather, past them, as thus:

"My daddy's coming tomorrow on a nairiplane," Sybil said, kicking sand.

"Not in my face, baby," the young man said, putting his hand on Sybil's ankle. "Well, it's about time he got here, your daddy. I've been expecting him hourly. Hourly."

"Where's the lady?" Sybil said.

"The lady?" The young man brushed some sand out of his thin hair. "That's hard to say, Sybil. She may be in any one of a thousand places. At the hairdresser's. Having her hair dyed mink. Or making dolls for poor children, in her room."

Seymour is the Myshkin-like figure whose death inhabits the Glass family stories. But as he appears in "Bananafish," he isn't quite right for the role. He is too witty and too crazy. (When he leaves the beach and goes back to the hotel to kill himself, his behavior in the elevator is that of a bellicose maniac.) Salinger takes care of the problem by disclaiming authorship of "Bananafish." In "Seymour: An Introduction," he allows Buddy Glass, the second-oldest brother and the story's narrator, to claim authorship of "Bananafish" (as well as of *Catcher* and the story "Teddy"), and then to admit that his portrait of Seymour is wrong—is really a self-portrait. This is the sort of "prankishness" one imagines Kazin to have been complaining about and that no longer—after fifty years of postmodern experimentation (and five Zuckerman books by Philip Roth)—sticks in our craw. If our authors want to confess to the precariousness and handmade-ness of their enterprise, who are we to protest? Salinger would also considerably amplify and complicate the simple harsh sketch of the regular world that "Bananafish" renders. But he would permanently retain the dualism of "Bananafish," the view of the world as a battleground between the normal and the abnormal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the talentless and the gifted, the well and the sick.

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In "Zooney" we find the two youngest Glass children, Franny and Zooney, in their parents' large apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Salinger's use of recognizable places in New York and his ear for colloquial speech give the work a deceptive surface realism that obscures its fundamental fantastic character. The Glass family apartment is at once a faithfully, almost tenderly, rendered, cluttered, shabby, middle-class New York apartment and a kind of lair, a mountain fastness, to which Salinger's strange creations retreat, to be with their own kind. Twenty-year-old Franny, who is brilliant and kind, as well as exceptionally pretty, has come home from college after suffering a nervous collapse during a football weekend. In the shorter story "Franny," which serves as a kind of prologue to "Zooney," we have already seen her in the alien outer world, vainly struggling against her antipathy to her boyfriend, Lane Coutell. If the mother and daughter in "Bananafish" represented the least admirable features of mid-century female bourgeois culture, so Lane is an almost

equally unprepossessing manifestation of Fifties male culture. He is a smug and pretentious and condescending young man. Over lunch in a fancy restaurant, the conversation between Franny and Lane grows ever more unpleasant as he obviously boasts about his paper on Flaubert's *mot juste* for which he received an A and she tries less and less hard to hide her impatient disdain.

Lane is not alone as an object of Franny's jaundiced scrutiny. "Everything everybody does is so—I don't know—not wrong, or even mean, or even stupid necessarily. But just so tiny and meaningless and—sad making," she tells him. The one thing she finds meaningful is a little book she carries around with her called *The Way of the Pilgrim*, which proposes that the incessant repetition of the prayer "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" will bring about mystical experience. Lane is as unimpressed with the "Jesus Prayer" as Franny is with his Flaubert paper. As the breach between the pair widens, another agon is played out, that of food. Lane orders a large meal of snails, frogs' legs, and salad, which he eats with gusto, and Franny (to his irritation) orders a glass of milk, from which she takes a few tiny sips, and a chicken sandwich, which she leaves untouched.

As we follow Lane's consumption of his lunch (Salinger shows him chewing, cutting, buttering, even exhorting his frogs' legs to "sit still"), we also watch—with the bated breath of parents of anorexics—Franny's nonconsumption of hers. At the end of the story she falls into a faint. In "Zooey," at the Glass apartment, the drama of food continues, as the daughter continues to refuse to eat. As in "Metamorphosis" (and in its pendant "The Hunger Artist"), the person who is other, the misfit, is unable to eat the food normal people eat. He finds it repellent. Kafka's heroes die of their revulsion, as does Salinger's hero Seymour. (Though Seymour shoots himself, there is a suggestion that he, too, must be some sort of hunger artist. When he is on the beach with the little girl he tells her a cautionary tale about underwater creatures called bananafish, who crawl into holes where they gorge themselves on bananas and get so enlarged that they cannot get out again, and die.) In "Zooey," Franny is pulled back from the brink by her brother. The story has some of the atmosphere of the Greek myths about return from the underworld and the Bible stories in which dead children are resurrected.

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"Neither you nor Buddy knows how to talk to people you don't like. Don't love, really," Bessie Glass tells Zooey. She adds, "You can't live in the world with such strong likes and dislikes." But Buddy and Zooey do, in fact, live in the world, if uncomfortably. Buddy is a college teacher, Zooey a television actor. They have passed through crises like Franny's. They are misfits—Mary McCarthy will always be cross with them—but they are not Seymours. They will live. Now the job at hand is to bring Franny out of her dangerous state of disgust. As she lies fitfully sleeping in the Glass living room on a Monday morning, the mother urges the son to get going with the rescue mission.

The conversation takes place in a bathroom. Zooey is in the bathtub with a shower curtain drawn decorously around him—a red nylon shower curtain with canary yellow sharps, flats, and clefs printed on it—and the mother is sitting on the toilet seat. (The influence of the story's genteel first publisher, William Shawn, may be adduced from the fact that Salinger never comes right out and says where the mother is sitting.)

Both are smoking. In his essay on Salinger, Kazin writes with heavy irony, "Someday there will be learned theses on *The Use of the Ash Tray in J.D. Salinger's Stories*; no other writer has made so much of Americans lighting up, reaching for the ash tray, setting up the ash tray with one hand while with the other they reach for a ringing telephone." Kazin's observation is true, but his irony is misplaced. The smoking in Salinger is well worth tracking. There is nothing idle or random about the cigarettes and cigars that appear in his stories, or with the characters' dealings with them. In "Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters," Salinger achieves a brilliant effect with the lighting of a cigar that has been held unlit by a small old deaf-mute man during the first ninety pages of the story; and in "Zooney" another cigar is instrumental in the dawning of a recognition. The cigarettes that the mother and son smoke in the bathroom play less noticeable but no less noteworthy roles in the progress of the story.

Like the food in "Franny," the cigarettes in "Zooney" enact a kind of parallel plot. Cigarettes offer the writer (or used to offer) a great range of metaphoric possibilities. They have lives and deaths. They glow and they turn to ashes. They need attention. They create smoke. They make a mess. As we listen to Bessie Glass and Zooney talk, we follow the fortunes of their cigarettes. Some of them go out for lack of attention. Others threaten to burn the smoker's fingers. Our sense of the mother and son's aliveness, and of the life-and-death character of their discussion, is heightened by the perpetual presence of these inanimate yet animatable objects.

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Bessie and her husband, Les, respectively Irish-Catholic and Jewish, are a pair of retired vaudeville dancers; they closed down their act when the fourth of their seven children was born, and Les took some sort of vague job "in radio." He is himself a vague, recessive figure, an absence. (Note the name.) He is never physically described, nor does his Jewishness play a part in the narrative. One of the things that really got up Maxwell Geismar's nose was what he saw as Salinger's craven refusal to admit that all his characters were Jewish. Of *Catcher* Geismar wrote, "The locale of the New York sections is obviously that of a comfortable middle-class urban Jewish society where, however, all the leading figures have become beautifully Anglicized. Holden and Phoebe Caulfield: what perfect American social register names which are presented to us in both a social and a psychological void!" (In his discussion of "Zooney," Geismar dryly noted that the family cat, Bloomberg, "is apparently the only honest Jewish character in the tale.") As it happens, Salinger is himself honestly half-Jewish: his mother, née Marie Jillich, was an Irish-Catholic who, however, changed her name to Miriam and passed herself off as a Jew after she married Salinger's father, Sol, with the result that Salinger and his older sister Doris grew up believing they were wholly Jewish; only when Doris was nineteen, and after Salinger had been bar mitzvahed, were they told the surprising truth.

The connection between this piece of biography and Salinger's refusal to be an American Jewish writer writing about Jews in America is impossible to fully sort out, of course, given Salinger's reticence; we can only assume that it exists. But the refusal itself is what is significant. Geismar is acute to note it—but obtuse, I think, to condemn it. The "void" of which he speaks is a defining condition of Salinger's art. The preternatural vividness of Salinger's characters, our feeling that we have already met them, that they are portraits directly drawn from New York life, is an illusion.

Salinger's references to Central Park and Madison Avenue and Bonwit Teller, and the Manhattanish cadences of his characters' speech, are like the false leads that give a detective story its suspense. In Salinger's fiction we never really quite know where we are even as we constantly bump up against familiar landmarks. *The Catcher in the Rye*, though putatively set in an alien nighttime New York, evokes the familiar terrifying dark forest of fairy tales, through which the hero blunders until dawn. Near the end of "Zooney," its hero picks up a glass paperweight from his mother's desk, and shakes it to create a snowstorm around the snowman with a stovepipe hat within. So, we might say, Salinger creates the storms that whirl around his characters' heads in the close, hermetically sealed world in which they live.

Salinger will often literally set his scenes in small, sealed-off spaces—such as, for example, the limousine in which the central scene of "Raise High the Roof-Beam, Carpenters" is set. In "Franny" there is a startling moment when Lane, waiting for Franny to come back from the ladies' room, looks across the restaurant and sees someone he knows. It is startling because until this moment we had no awareness of there being anyone else in the restaurant. Salinger had typically isolated Franny and Lane at their table, so that we saw nothing and heard nothing but their conversation and the remarks of the waiter who attended to them.

The bathroom scene in "Zooney" is perhaps the consummate example of this hermeticity. As if the space of the bathroom was still not small enough, there is a space-within-a-space formed by the shower curtain drawn around the tub in which Zooney sits with a lit cigarette parked on the soapdish. The scene is one of the most remarkable mother-and-son scenes in literature. Before the drawing of the curtain occasioned by the mother's entrance, the immersed Zooney, drawing on his "dampish" cigarette, reads a four-year-old letter from Buddy, in which, among other things (such as encouraging Zooney in his decision to become an actor rather than going for a Ph.D.), Buddy tells Zooney to "be kinder to Bessie...when you can. I don't think I mean because she's our mother, but because she's weary. You will after you're thirty or so, when everybody slows down a little (even you, maybe), but try harder now. It isn't enough to treat her with the doting brutality of an apache dancer toward his partner."

The apache dance begins with Bessie's entrance:

"Do you know how long you've been in that tub? Exactly forty-five—"

"Don't tell me! Just don't tell me, Bessie."

"What do you mean, don't tell you?"

"Just what I said. Leave me the goddam illusion you haven't been out there counting the minutes I've—"

"Nobody's been counting any minutes, young man," Mrs. Glass said.

Bessie is a stout, middle-aged woman dressed in a garment Buddy calls her "pre-notification of death uniform"—a midnight blue Japanese kimono, whose pockets are stuffed with things like screws, nails, hinges, faucet handles, and ball-bearing casters, along with several packs of king-size cigarettes and matches, and who is as unlike the other women in her "not unfashionable" apartment building as her children are unlike the other people in the world at large. The other women in the building own fur coats and, like Muriel and her mother, spend their days shopping at Bonwit Teller and Saks Fifth Avenue. Bessie "looked, first, as if she never, never left the building at all, but that if she did she would be wearing a dark shawl and she would be going in

the direction of O'Connell Street, there to claim the body of one of her half-Irish, half-Jewish sons, who, through some clerical error, had just been shot dead by the Black and Tans." At the same time, her way of holding a cigarette between the ends of two fingers

tended to blow to some literary hell one's first, strong (and still perfectly tenable) impression that an invisible Dubliner's shawl covered her shoulders. Not only were her fingers of an extraordinary length and shapeliness—such as, very generally speaking, one wouldn't have expected of a medium stout woman's fingers—but they featured, as it were, a somewhat imperial-looking tremor; a deposed Balkan queen or a retired favorite courtesan might have had such an elegant tremor.

Bessie also has great legs. But her most significant attribute—the one that gives "Zooey"'s comedy its tragic underside (and raises the stakes of its outcome) is her grief:

It was a very touch and go business, in 1955, to get a wholly plausible reading from Mrs. Glass's face, and especially from her enormous blue eyes. Where once, a few years earlier, her eyes alone could break the news (either to people or to bathmats) that two of her sons were dead, one by suicide (her favorite, her most intricately calibrated, her kindest son), and one killed in World War II (her only truly lighthearted son)—where once Bessie Glass's eyes alone could report these facts, with an eloquence and a seeming passion for detail that neither her husband nor any of her adult surviving children could bear to look at, let alone take in, now in 1955, she was apt to use this same terrible Celtic equipment to break the news, usually at the front door, that the new delivery boy hadn't brought the leg of lamb in time for dinner or that some remote Hollywood starlet's marriage was on the rocks.

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All families of suicides are alike. They wear a kind of permanent letter S on their chests. Their guilt is never assuaged. Their anxiety never lifts. They are freaks among families in the way prodigies are freaks among individuals. Walter died tragically but "normally." Seymour haunts the family like a member of the Undead. At the beginning of "Zooey," Buddy (who again brashly claims authorship of Salinger's work) describes it as a love story, and it is true that the affection the family members feel for each other is an almost palpable presence. But it is also (what family story isn't?) a hate story. Ambivalence fills the air of the bathroom in which mother and son sit. The son behind the curtain repeatedly protests the mother's invasion of his privacy—even as he ensures that she remain rooted to the spot, transfixed by his relentless wit. She dutifully plays her straight-man role. When she grumbles about Franny's unhealthy diet, for example ("I don't think it's at all impossible that the kind of food that child takes into her system hasn't a lot to do with this whole entire funny business.... You can't go on abusing the body indefinitely, year in, year out—regardless of what you think"), she only opens the way for a new flight of aggressive fancy:

"You're absolutely right. You're absolutely right. It's staggering how you jump straight the hell into the heart of a matter. I'm goosebumps all over... By God, you inspire me. You inflame me, Bessie. You know what you've done? Do you realize what you've done? You've given this whole goddam issue a fresh, new, Biblical slant. I wrote four papers in college on the Crucifixion—five, really—and every one of them worried me

half crazy because I thought something was missing. Now I know what it was. Now it's clear to me. I see Christ in an entirely different light. His unhealthy fanaticism. His rudeness to those nice, sane, conservative, tax-paying Pharisees. Oh, this is exciting! In your simple, straightforward bigoted way, Bessie, you've sounded the missing keynote of the whole New Testament. Improper diet. Christ lived on cheeseburgers and Cokes. For all we know he probably fed the mult—"

"Just stop that, now," Mrs. Glass broke in, her voice quiet but dangerous. "Oh I'd like to put a diaper on that mouth of yours."

When Zooey gets out of the tub, the mother leaves the bathroom, only to return when he is half-dressed and shaving. During this second visit ("Ah! What a pleasant and gracious surprise!" the fresh son says when she enters, "Don't sit down! Let me drink you in first") she touches his bare back and remarks on its beauty. ("You're getting so broad and lovely," she says.) His response is to sharply recoil in a way we recall two other Salinger characters to have recoiled. One is the little girl in "Bananafish," who says "Hey!" when Seymour impulsively kisses the arch of her foot, after she says that she saw a bananafish. The other is Holden Caulfield, who jumps up and says "What the helly doing?" when he wakes up in the apartment of the one good teacher he ever had, Mr. Antoli, to find him sitting beside the bed patting his head. "Don't, willya?" Zooey says to his mother; and when she says, "Don't what?" he replies, "Just don't, that's all. Don't admire my goddam back."

The rescue fantasy from which *Catcher* takes its title—Holden imagines himself standing at the edge of a cliff at the end of a rye field where thousands of children are playing, and catching any child who starts going over the cliff—bears on the whole of Salinger's enterprise. Salinger is himself a kind of catcher of the children and young adults who appear in his stories and are in danger of falling—threatened by the adults who are supposed to be protecting them, but who cannot keep their hands off them. The frank pleasure Bessie Glass takes in the sight of her son's body is represented as the breaching of a boundary, as "something pervery" (in Holden's term). Even a good teacher like Mr. Antoli or a good parent like Bessie (or a good psychotic like Seymour) cannot be counted on, will ultimately fail the child in the test of disinterest. The young must stick together; only they can save each other. Thus, in *Catcher*, Phoebe saves Holden, and, in "Zooey," Zooey saves Franny. But where Phoebe, in *Catcher*, was "normal," in opposition to the off-center Holden, Franny and Zooey are peas in a pod. They have the Glass disease; they suffer from a kind of allergy to human frailty. The pettiness, vulgarity, banality, and vanity that few of us are free of, and thus can tolerate in others, are like ragweed for Salinger's helplessly uncontaminated heroes and heroines.

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The second half of "Zooey" is occupied with Zooey's blind-leading-the-blind attempt to propel Franny back into the world he himself stumbles about in. Interestingly, he does not consider his sister's (and his own) condition of hypercriticality congenital, but believes it to have been caused by the older brothers, who at an early age indoctrinated them in Eastern religion (as well as a kind of East-inflected Christianity). ("We wanted you both to know who and what Jesus and Gautama and Lao-tse and Shankaracharya and Huineng and Sri Ramakrishna, etc., were before you knew too much or anything about Homer or Shakespeare or even Blake or Whitman, let alone George Washington and his cherry tree or the definition of a peninsula or how to

parse a sentence," Buddy writes in his letter to Zooey.) "We're freaks, the two of us, Franny and I," Zooey says to Bessie:

I'm a twenty-five-year-old freak, and she's a twenty-year-old freak, and both those bastards are responsible.... I could murder them both without batting an eyelash. The great teachers. The great emancipators. My God. I can't even sit down to lunch with a man any more and hold up my end of a decent conversation. I either get so bored or so goddam preachy that if the son of a bitch had any sense, he'd break his chair over my head.

As Franny wanly lies on the living-room sofa under an afghan, with the Jewish cat snuggled up against her, Zooey makes his pitch—and gets nowhere for an excruciatingly long time. The charge that the story was "interminable" doubtless derived from Salinger's unwillingness—at whatever cost to the speed of his narrative—to scant the magnitude of Franny's retreat from life.

Finally, Zooey resorts to an interesting stratagem—he leaves the living room and calls Franny on a telephone extension in the apartment, first pretending he is Buddy, and then admitting he is himself. Salinger permits us to overhear both sides of the conversation, but to only see Franny, who has taken the telephone in her parents' bedroom, and is sitting tensely upright on one of the twin beds, smoking a cigarette, putting it out, and attempting to light another with her free hand. As Zooey talks—"If it's the religious life you want, you ought to know right now that you're missing out on every single goddam religious action that's going on around this house. You don't even have sense enough to drink when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup—which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings to anybody around this madhouse"—Franny's body language tells us that his message is coming through. The cure that could not be effected in the large, light-filled living room is achieved in the dark closet of the telephone conversation. Franny will eat from now on. Also, she will not carry out her threat of giving up acting because of "the stupidity of audiences," of "the goddam 'unskilled laughter' coming from the fifth row." "That's none of your business, Franny," Zooey says. "An artist's only concern is to shoot for some kind of perfection, and on his own terms, not anyone else's." Zooey's final offering, which causes Franny to hold the phone with both hands "for joy, apparently," is the now famous concept of the Fat Lady in the audience, who is Everyman, and who is Christ. I would have preferred that Salinger had stopped at the chicken soup and the artist's minding of his own business. Salinger rarely puts a foot wrong; but with the Fat Lady, I'm afraid he takes a tumble into condescension.

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Although Salinger stopped publishing after the appearance of "Hapworth," he evidently has never stopped writing, and someday there may be dozens, maybe hundreds, more Glass stories to read and reread. On the dust jacket of the 1961 Little, Brown edition of *Franny and Zooey* Salinger wrote an author's note about his enterprise:

Both stories are early, critical entries in a narrative series I'm doing about a family of settlers in twentieth-century New York, the Glasses. It is a long-term project, patently an ambitious one, and 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. On the whole, though, I'm very hopeful. I love working on these Glass stories, I've been waiting for them most of my life, and I think I have fairly decent, monomaniacal plans to finish them with due care and all-available skill.

The image of the patiently and confidently "waiting" writer is arresting, as is the term "settlers," with its connotations of uncharted territory and danger and hardship.

Salinger's own perilous journey away from the world has brought many misfortunes down on his head. His modest wish for privacy was perceived as a provocation, and met with hostility much like the hostility toward the Glasses. Eventually it offered an irresistible opportunity for commercial exploitation. The pain caused Salinger by the crass, vengeful memoirs of, respectively, his former girlfriend, Joyce Maynard,<sup>[9]</sup> and his daughter, Margaret,<sup>[10]</sup> may be imagined. A redeeming moment occurred a few weeks after the publication of the latter book, when a letter by, of all people, Margaret's younger brother, Matt, an actor who lives in New York, appeared in *The New York Observer*. He was writing to object to his sister's book. "I would hate to think I were responsible for her book selling one single extra copy, but I am also unable not to plant a small flag of protest over what she has done, and much of what she has to say." Matt went on to write of his sister's "troubled mind" and of the "gothic tales of our supposed childhood" she had liked to tell and that he had not challenged because he thought they had therapeutic value for her. He continued:

Of course, I can't say with any authority that she is consciously making anything up. I just know that I grew up in a very different house, with two very different parents from those my sister describes. I do not remember even one instance of my mother hitting either my sister or me. Not one. Nor do I remember any instance of my father "abusing" my mother in any way whatsoever. The only sometimes frightening presence I remember in the house, in fact, was my sister (the same person who in her book self-servingly casts herself as my benign protector)! She remembers a father who couldn't "tie his own shoe-laces" and I remember a man who helped me learn how to tie mine, and even—specifically—how to close off the end of a lace again once the plastic had worn away.

What is astonishing, almost eerie about the letter, is the sound that comes out of it—the singular and instantly recognizable sound of Salinger, which we haven't heard for nearly forty years (and to which the daughter's heavy drone could not be more unrelated). Whether Salinger is the rat his girlfriend and daughter say he is will endlessly occupy his well-paid biographers, and cannot change anything in his art. The breaking of ranks in Salinger's actual family only underscores the unbreakable solidarity of his imaginary one. "At least you know there won't be any goddam ulterior motives in this madhouse," Zooey tells Franny. "Whatever we are, we're not fishy, buddy." "Close on the heels of kindness, originality is one of the most thrilling things in the world, also the most rare!" Seymour writes in "Hapworth." What is thrilling about that sentence is, of course, the order in which kindness and originality are put. And what makes reading Salinger such a consistently bracing experience is our sense of always being in the presence of something that—whatever it is—isn't fishy.

## Notes

[1] "The Wise Child and the New Yorker School of Fiction," in *American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity* (Hill and Wang, 1958).

<sup>[2]</sup> "The Salinger Industry," *The Nation*, November 14, 1959.

<sup>[3]</sup> *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1961.

<sup>[4]</sup> "J.D. Salinger's Closed Circuit," *Harper's*, October 1962.

<sup>[5]</sup> "Finally (Fashionably) Spurious," *National Review*, November 18, 1961.

<sup>[6]</sup> "Anxious Days for the Glass Family," *The New York Times Book Review*, September 17, 1961.

<sup>[7]</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>[8]</sup> Evidently understanding this, Updike ended his review with this handsome concession: "When all reservations have been entered, in the correctly unctuous and apprehensive tone, about the direction [Salinger] has taken, it remains to acknowledge that it is a direction, and that the refusal to rest content, the willingness to risk excess on behalf of one's obsessions, is what distinguishes artists from entertainers, and what makes some artists adventurers on behalf of us all."

<sup>[9]</sup> *At Home in the World* (Picador, 1998).

<sup>[10]</sup> *Dream Catcher* (Washington Square Press, 2000).