

# THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

## SUMMARY

Meet Holden Caulfield. He's got a lot of attitude and lot of dated profanity, and he wants to tell us all about "this madman stuff" that happened to him "around last Christmas." His story begins on a December Saturday at Pencey Prep School in Pennsylvania, where he's just been given the ax (read: kicked out) for failing all his classes except English. Turns out, getting the ax is a recurring theme in Holden's past.

Back in the dorm, Holden goofs around with Robert Ackley, a pimply and annoying kid. We're introduced to Holden's distinctive red hunting hat, and we meet his roommate, Stradlater, who is a "sexy bastard" getting ready for a date with Jane Gallagher, an old friend (and sort-of romantic interest) of Holden's. Holden is none too happy about this impending date, but agrees anyway to write an English composition for the "moron" Stradlater.

Holden writes about his younger brother Allie, who died three years earlier of leukemia. More specifically, the composition is about Allie's left-handed baseball mitt, which had poems written all over it in green ink (so that Allie would have something to read while out in the field). Holden reveals that on the night Allie died, Holden broke all the windows in the garage with his bare hand. As a result, he still can't make a good fist with his hand.

Stradlater comes back and Holden tries to figure out if anything happened (in the sex sense of "anything") with Jane. Stradlater is evasive, so Holden tackles him and gets the worse end of the scuffle (a bloody nose). He tries to chat with Ackley for company, but ends up so fed up with everyone and everything that he decides to leave Pencey, right then and there. But first, he has to bum around New York for a few days before going home (otherwise his parents will know he's gotten the ax).

In New York, he gets a pretty swank hotel room and then tries to get lucky. And fails. Not to mention that he can't score booze, because he's a minor. Instead, he reminisces about Jane. It's all very innocent: golf, checkers, movies, holding hands, without much sexy stuff.

He then heads off to "Ernie's," where he knows he can drink, but has to leave to avoid an old and annoying acquaintance. Back in his own hotel, he somehow ends up with a prostitute named Sunny in his room. He's more into talking than sex, and Sunny, who's quite young herself, gets confused and leaves his room with a little of Holden's money but no sex. She comes back later with her pimp to get more money, and Holden ends up with a punch in the stomach.

The next day Holden leaves his hotel, makes a date with an old friend named Sally Hayes, and meets two nuns while he's having breakfast. After he leaves, he buys a record for his

little sister, Phoebe, and overhears a boy singing, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." More on this soon.

Holden heads to the park to kill some time before his date with Sally. He chats with a girl in the park and has some Deep Thoughts about childhood before meeting Sally. He shares his fantasy of running away, living in a log cabin, and doing log-cabin-y things for the rest of his life. When Sally is unsurprisingly not too into this, Holden flips out.

Alone yet again for the evening, Holden calls up an old acquaintance from school, Carl Luce, and arranges to meet him for drinks. At the bar, Carl takes the annoying "I'm soooo mature" attitude, so the night ends early. Well, it ends early for Carl. Holden stays alone at the bar and drinks himself into fuzzy oblivion. After trying to make a date with the coat-check girl, he goes to the park to look for the ducks (he's really into ducks). Seeing no ducks, he heads home to visit his sister Phoebe, who we've been told is the greatest girl in the world.

Phoebe does in fact appear to be the greatest girl in the world. They talk about how depressed Holden is, and he says all he wants to do with his life is be the catcher in the rye—if there were a bunch of children playing in a field of rye next to a big cliff, he'd be the guy to catch them before they go off the edge. Phoebe informs him that the "song" he heard about the catcher in the rye is actually a poem by Robert Burns, and it's about bodies meeting bodies, not catching bodies.

Next on Holden's visiting list is Mr. Antolini, an old teacher. This visit ends badly, when Mr. Antolini maybe comes on to him. Holden bolts, and spends a really depressing night in the train station. After this, Holden decides to run away. He tells Phoebe via a note, and she decides she wants to come, too. No way, says Holden. Phoebe gets angry and pulls a "Fine, I'm not talking to you anymore."

Fortunately, being mad at someone doesn't mean you won't go to the zoo with them, which she does. They end up at the carousel, where Holden promises Phoebe that he won't run away after all. As he watches her go around and around on the carousel, he declares he's happy. Hey, that's a first!

At last, we pull out of the narrative and back to the Holden of one year later, the one who was telling us this story. He's clearly in therapy for getting "sick" in some way. He says he's supposed to go back to school in September, but he's not sure whether or not things will be any different (that is, any better) this time around. He concludes that he sort of wishes he hadn't told us this story at all, since relating it makes him miss all the people he'd met.

## **CHARACTERS**

**Holden Caulfield** - The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Holden is a sixteen-year-old junior who has just been expelled for academic failure from a school called Pencey Prep. Although he is intelligent and sensitive, Holden narrates in a cynical and jaded voice. He finds the hypocrisy and ugliness of the world around him almost unbearable, and through his cynicism he tries to protect himself from the pain and disappointment of the adult world. However, the criticisms that Holden aims at people around him are also aimed at himself. He is uncomfortable with his own weaknesses, and at times displays as much phoniness, meanness, and superficiality as anyone else in the book. As the novel opens, Holden stands poised on the cliff separating childhood from adulthood. His inability to successfully negotiate the chasm leaves him on the verge of emotional collapse.

**Ackley** - Holden's next-door neighbor in his dorm at Pencey Prep. Ackley is a pimply, insecure boy with terrible dental hygiene. He often barges into Holden's room and acts completely oblivious to Holden's hints that he should leave. Holden believes that Ackley makes up elaborate lies about his sexual experience.

**Stradlater** - Holden's roommate at Pencey Prep. Stradlater is handsome, self-satisfied, and popular, but Holden calls him a "secret slob," because he appears well groomed, but his toiletries, such as his razor, are disgustingly unclean. Stradlater is sexually active and quite experienced for a prep school student, which is why Holden also calls him a "sexy bastard."

**Phoebe Caulfield** - Phoebe is Holden's ten-year-old sister, whom he loves dearly. Although she is six years younger than Holden, she listens to what he says and understands him more than most other people do. Phoebe is intelligent, neat, and a wonderful dancer, and her childish innocence is one of Holden's only consistent sources of happiness throughout the novel. At times, she exhibits great maturity and even chastises Holden for his immaturity. Like Mr. Antolini, Phoebe seems to recognize that Holden is his own worst enemy.

**Allie Caulfield** - Holden's younger brother. Allie dies of leukemia three years before the start of the novel. Allie was a brilliant, friendly, red-headed boy—according to Holden, he was the smartest of the Caulfields. Holden is tormented by Allie's death and carries around a baseball glove on which Allie used to write poems in green ink.

**D. B. Caulfield** - Holden's older brother. D. B. wrote a volume of short stories that Holden admires very much, but Holden feels that D. B. prostitutes his talents by writing for Hollywood movies.

**Sally Hayes** - A very attractive girl whom Holden has known and dated for a long time. Though Sally is well read, Holden claims that she is "stupid," although it is difficult to tell

whether this judgment is based in reality or merely in Holden's ambivalence about being sexually attracted to her. She is certainly more conventional than Holden in her tastes and manners.

**Mr. Spencer** - Holden's history teacher at Pencey Prep, who unsuccessfully tries to shake Holden out of his academic apathy.

**Carl Luce** - A student at Columbia who was Holden's student advisor at the Whooton School. Luce is three years older than Holden and has a great deal of sexual experience. At Whooton, he was a source of knowledge about sex for the younger boys, and Holden tries to get him to talk about sex at their meeting.

**Mr. Antolini** - Holden's former English teacher at the Elkton Hills School. Mr. Antolini now teaches at New York University. He is young, clever, sympathetic, and likable, and Holden respects him. Holden sometimes finds him a bit too clever, but he looks to him for guidance. Like many characters in the novel, he drinks heavily.

**Maurice** - The elevator operator at the Edmont Hotel, who procures a prostitute for Holden.

**Sunny** - The prostitute whom Holden hires through Maurice. She is one of a number of women in the book with whom Holden clumsily attempts to connect

## **SYMBOLS**

### **The "Catcher in the Rye"**

As the source of the book's title, this symbol merits close inspection. It first appears in Chapter 16, when a kid Holden admires for walking in the street rather than on the sidewalk is singing the Robert Burns song "Comin' Thro' the Rye." In Chapter 22, when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to do with his life, he replies with his image, from the song, of a "catcher in the rye." Holden imagines a field of rye perched high on a cliff, full of children romping and playing. He says he would like to protect the children from falling off the edge of the cliff by "catching" them if they were on the verge of tumbling over. As Phoebe points out, Holden has misheard the lyric. He thinks the line is "If a body catch a body comin' through the rye," but the actual lyric is "If a body meet a body, coming through the rye."

The song “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye” asks if it is wrong for two people to have a romantic encounter out in the fields, away from the public eye, even if they don’t plan to have a commitment to one another. It is highly ironic that the word “meet” refers to an encounter that leads to recreational sex, because the word that Holden substitutes —“catch”—takes on the exact opposite meaning in his mind. Holden wants to catch children before they fall out of innocence into knowledge of the adult world, including knowledge of sex.

### **Holden’s Red Hunting Hat**

The red hunting hat is one of the most recognizable symbols from twentieth-century American literature. It is inseparable from our image of Holden, with good reason: it is a symbol of his uniqueness and individuality. The hat is outlandish, and it shows that Holden desires to be different from everyone around him. At the same time, he is very self-conscious about the hat—he always mentions when he is wearing it, and he often doesn’t wear it if he is going to be around people he knows. The presence of the hat, therefore, mirrors the central conflict in the book: Holden’s need for isolation versus his need for companionship.

It is worth noting that the hat’s color, red, is the same as that of Allie’s and Phoebe’s hair. Perhaps Holden associates it with the innocence and purity he believes these characters represent and wears it as a way to connect to them. He never explicitly comments on the hat’s significance other than to mention its unusual appearance.

### **The Museum of Natural History**

Holden tells us the symbolic meaning of the museum’s displays: they appeal to him because they are frozen and unchanging. He also mentions that he is troubled by the fact that he has changed every time he returns to them. The museum represents the world Holden wishes he could live in: it’s the world of his “catcher in the rye” fantasy, a world where nothing ever changes, where everything is simple, understandable, and infinite. Holden is terrified by the unpredictable challenges of the world—he hates conflict, he is confused by Allie’s senseless death, and he fears interaction with other people.

### **The Ducks in the Central Park Lagoon**

Holden’s curiosity about where the ducks go during the winter reveals a genuine, more youthful side to his character. For most of the book, he sounds like a grumpy old man who is angry at the world, but his search for the ducks represents the curiosity of youth and a joyful willingness to encounter the mysteries of the world. It is a memorable moment, because Holden clearly lacks such willingness in other aspects of his life.

The ducks and their pond are symbolic in several ways. Their mysterious perseverance in the face of an inhospitable environment resonates with Holden's understanding of his own situation. In addition, the ducks prove that some vanishings are only temporary. Traumatized and made acutely aware of the fragility of life by his brother Allie's death, Holden is terrified by the idea of change and disappearance. The ducks vanish every winter, but they return every spring, thus symbolizing change that isn't permanent, but cyclical. Finally, the pond itself becomes a minor metaphor for the world as Holden sees it, because it is "partly frozen and partly not frozen." The pond is in transition between two states, just as Holden is in transition between childhood and adulthood.