

PROSE and CON

by DOUGLAS BARBOUR

Not so many years ago, J. D. Salinger published a small book called *Catcher in the Rye*. It sold well. Oh, let's be honest, it sold phenomenally; and has continued to sell (in paperbacks) ever since. Every year there is another large group of adolescents ready to read it, and say, along with good old Holden Caulfield, "God, but it's all so phony!" "Frosh college students seem to be the most susceptible, but they aren't the only ones, and Salinger has become America's Greatest Living Author."

One of the worst offshoots of this giant promotion is the review reserved for new books of adolescent life: "Deserves to be compared with *Catcher in the Rye*;" "Ranks with Salinger;" "Put this book on your shelf beside your other favorites, Salinger and (your choice)." What bothers me here is the fact that some of these books might be better than Salinger's, or at least more deserving of criticism on their own merits rather than on his. Although this is a personal judgment, I have read at least three books of adolescence which I would rank above *Catcher*, all written since 1950, and all different.

Before treating one of those novels however, I want to look just a little deeper into the Salinger thing. Why is it? If we go back to *Catcher* perhaps we can better understand Salinger's popularity, and the phenomenal success of *Franny and Zooie* with everyone except a few important critics such as Alfred Kazin. Salinger is one of those rare writers who manages to capture a complete idiom. Unlike many great artists. He has not developed a great, wild world of his own, but he has, and that effectively, transposed a small part of the contemporary world to paper. Holden is so appealing, because he is so much like someone you knew in high school: that rather smart, lazy rebellious kid, who never seemed to care.

This is fine, and the book does display his character quite effectively, but there is no development, and, in the end, it grates that one so (apparently) intelligent should not care. Oh, he hates phonies but he really doesn't care; not enough to do something about it. As I say, the presentation of the character is very well executed, and apparently valid from a psychological point of view, but a work of art is not a psychological text, and the artist has certain responsibilities, too. Salinger seems to have forgotten this. He has become as phony as that he rails against and this is exemplified not only by his inability to discover and use new subjects but also by his stubborn refusal to adopt language any further than he did in *Catcher*. On first reading, histories may thrill with their veracity; on the third reading they sicken because so deliberately are they real, they have no flavour of art.

In contrast to this sterile world is the world seen by Herb Gold in *Therefore be Bold*, one of the many books to be compared with *Catcher*. This book contains a deep centre of human humour that Salinger could never approach. Gold captured (sculpted really) valid adolescence in a fantastic poetic prism of spun glass (more like spun diamond; so brittle, hard and glaring is the style). He is an artist with words in a way that Salinger could never be: he puts them together in ways that are new and strange, and yet seem to strike a chord deep in the reader. One is involved (if only nostalgically) with his characters as they slowly learn to live in a world that wants to corrupt them and make them conform. Most important, however, one is struck with the humour of the book; Truly Gold understands life as comedy in the grand classical sense, and his comic vision informs the book and breathes life into it. Unlike most reviewers who have just rhapsodized as I have, I will not call this book great, a few years will allow for judgment on that score: I merely say it is damn enjoyable reading; and the laughter stays after the book is closed.

On Camera



Honourable Henry Hicks introduces his successor, Earl Urquhart to the anxious delegates. (Cohen)



Dean Henry D. Hicks beams as Gordon Cowan (left) congratulates Earl Urquhart, new provincial leader. (Cohen)

GAZETTE LISTINGS

The 1962 Massey Lectures, a series of six radio talks broadcast on the CBC radio network, this year are delivered by Northrop Frye, principal of Victoria College, University of Toronto.

The lectures, entitled *The Educated Imagination*, are heard Sundays at 10:30 p.m.

In the first three lectures, Principal Frye develops a theory of literature, describing the different ways in which we use language and distinguishing between art and science on the one hand, and art and religion on the other.

In the fourth lecture, he outlines what an education in literature, based on its nature and development, should be like.

In the fifth and sixth lectures he examines the value of an imagination educated in this way to both the individual and society.

The Massey Lectures were inaugurated in 1961 and named to honor the Rt. Hon. Vincent Massey, former governor-general of Canada. They take the form of an annual series of broadcasts in which a noted scholar presents the results of original study or research in his field.

Scope this Saturday at 9 p.m. on CTV presents "Portrait of Pearson," a non-political story. It was filmed while Pearson was in Halifax attending the provincial convention. Joe King hosts.

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