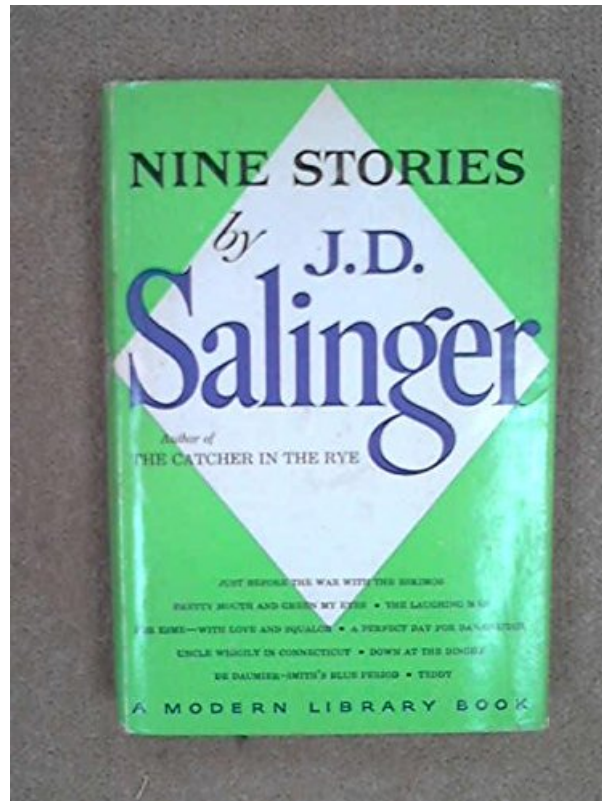
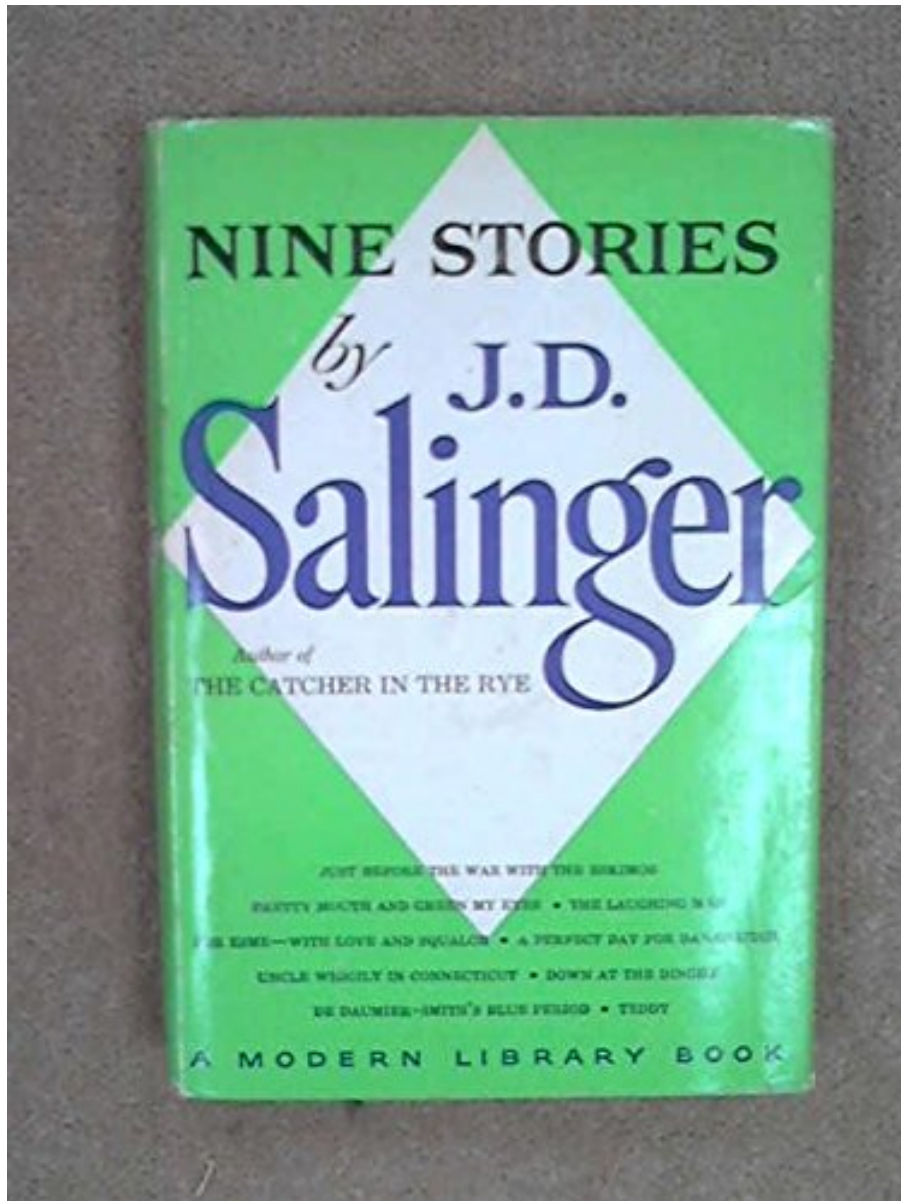


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What lies beneath the surface

By Guillermo Maynez

These are nine vignettes, barely sketches, of what goes on inside the souls of apparently perfectly normal people. More: they are normal, as most of us are, but they, like us, hide inside longings and surprising reactions to everyday situations. Most characters are New Yorkers, and most of them are also young, sometimes very young, people. Salinger, as showed in "Catcher in the Rye" and in "Franny and Zooey", has a great eye for the attitudes, perceptions and preoccupations of kids and teenagers, as well as a great ear for the way they really speak. Amazingly, most of the time Salinger's kids sound like contemporary ones.

In my opinion, the best four tales were these: "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", in which Seymour Glass, older brother to Franny and Zooey, meets his destiny after a strange but tender and amusing talk with a little girl on the beach. "For Esme, with Love and Squalor", tells the amazing conversation between a young British girl and a soldier fighting in WWII. She is one of the most interesting young characters in Salinger's work, and the end is poignant and painful, but endearing. "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" is a wonderful satire of painters' autobiographies, a tale in a farsical tone. And "Teddy" is another small masterpiece about a young boy travelling with his parents on a cruise. This boy is a lecturer on reincarnation, and his talk with an older but still young guy is one of the most memorable pieces in modern literature.

The rest are also good, but didn't strike me as much as the others. In "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" we see the emotional collapse of a young mother, as she talks and drinks the evening away with a friend from college, with the interesting appearance of her daughter, another weird but still normal Salingerian character. "Down at the Dinghy" is a short snap of another of the Glass girls talking with her shy but brave little son. "Just Before the War with the Eskimos" is another farce, a fight between two spoiled brats of New Yorker girls, and then how one of them discovers love, or at least romantic interest, in an unlikely guy. "The Laughing Man" is the most enigmatic of these tales. Finally, "Pretty Mouth and Green my Eyes" is just neurotic.

Christianism in its most unsuspected manifestations, the pains, agonies and glory of being a child or a teenager, people from the exotic New York, hidden longings and passions, all of this and more is the subject

of one of last century's most penetrating and enigmatic writers. I wonder what he has been up to these last years.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Blue Period

By Paul Miller

"De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" is one of the nine stories in this collection. In the story Daumier-Smith has an enlightening experience and afterwards makes the statement "Everybody is a nun". I originally thought this "Everybody is a nun" was the same type of statement we find in F&Z and Teddy about everyone being holy. I think he is saying this and more. Salinger was also saying that everyone is a unique holy person in their cloister or behind their own wall. When the shop girl in the display window starts to fall Daumier-Smith reaches out to stop her fall and his fingers hit the glass. He also realizes that she doesn't share his mind, that's why she is startled by his presence, she has a mind and life separate from his and doesn't really know why he should be standing there looking at her. He realizes the same thing about the nun. She knows nothing of his ideas and dreams about her, she is living her own life unaware of him. In part this is a deliverance from a creeping solipsism for Daumier-Smith. The wall theme is present in "For Esme". What does one wall say to the other? Meetcha at the corner. without this meeting at the corner we are either isolated behind our own wall or just solipsistically assume that another's experience is the same behind their wall as our own. I think Daumier-Smith had an experience of direct seeing of the reality of other selves, their situations and feelings, an empathic moment. He has a moment of pure empathy with the shop girl in the window and this empathy changes him, bringing him out of his self-involved world and letting him see others as they are. We are never told exactly what he experiences, except his vision of the sun hurtling towards the bridge of his nose. After the experience he becomes much more accepting of himself and others, even his hopeless art students who he had formerly snobbishly judged although accurately critiqued. There are allusions in this short story to Rilke, Rodan, Picasso, and of course the French artist Honore Daumier. This is one of Salinger's funniest stories.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Esme's compassion

By Paul Miller

The story "For Esme with Love and Squalor" is one of the nine stories in this collection. I remember a critic who wrote that "Esme", the story, was a gloss on the Dostoevski quote Sergeant X writes down. I bought into this at first. With closer reading I find I disagree with this. The quote Sergeant X writes is a way of reaching out and communicating to the Nazi lady, (Salinger actually married a Nazi lady he had arrested after the war, divorce soon followed.), and combating her idea that life is hell with the idea from Dostoevski that hell is the suffering of being unable to love. This latter idea, no matter how true, will not save the Nazi lady. For one thing she will never read it. Also ideas do not save people. Sergeant X realizes this failed attempt when he looks down and the quote is illegible and his own misery is very much intact. When he reads the letter from Esme, who we remember has been training herself to be more compassionate, this person to person compassion is redemptive for him. Esme has trained herself to surmount her own wall long enough to meet others at the corner where compassion is possible. In the Christian story, for example, it is not ideas or doctrine that save people. It takes a person to save a person, as Esme in a very real way saves Sergeant X with her compassion. Salinger participated in five of the major campaigns in WW2 Europe. This story gives you a glimpse of the toll that can take on a man. Thankyou to Salinger and all the others who fought for their country during the war.

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