Salinger's *Nine Stories*: Fifty Years Later

BY DOMINIC SMITH

Fifty years ago, J. D. Salinger published *Nine Stories*, his second book and arguably the highpoint of his foreshortened publishing career. *Nine Stories* was the best-selling collection that introduced and killed Seymour Glass—the brooding figure that gave rise to the Glass family dynasty, the fictional subject that held Salinger's attention until he stopped publishing in 1965. It was with this book that Salinger's art and life intersected best, where his Zen interests coalesced with his emerging themes, where he gave new life to the American short story. Not since Hemingway's *In Our Time* had a collection of stories so raised the bar on the form, creating characters and scenes that were hypnotic, mysterious, and unusually powerful.

Nineteen fifty-three was a year of bravado and dramatic change: Eisenhower was elected president, Stalin died, and Edmund Hillary conquered Everest. American magazines were full of advertisements for electronic transistors dubbed the "Little Giants," and Orville Wright published an essay in *Harper's* called "How We Invented the Airplane." The national mood combined post-war optimism with a cavalier belief in technology. But there was also an undercurrent of despair, a sense of entering a turbulent era. Thornton Wilder published a magazine piece on the declining moral standards of America's youth, and John Cheever, as if to chronicle these uncertain times, published *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*—featuring such emblematic titles as "The Season of Divorce," "O City of Broken Dreams," and "Christmas is a Sad Season for the Poor."

Nine Stories tapped into this ambivalent milieu: the stories dealt with genius, spiritual integrity, moral corruption, and the occasional

ability of innocence to transform our lives. If there was social angst over the morality of America's youth then Salinger couldn't have disagreed more—seven of the nine stories feature children, all of whom stand on higher moral ground than their adult guardians.

Salinger was thirty-four when *Nine Stories* came out and already a national literary figure, largely due to the popularity of his first book, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). But even at this early stage of success, Salinger was uneasy with fame, refusing interviews and dodging the press. Those who were allowed into his social circle described him as aloof and wry, as having a "dark aura" and "an incredibly strong physical and mental presence." The Hemingway biographer A. E. Hotchner described Salinger from around this time as having "an ego of cast iron" and confesses, "I found his intellectual flailings enormously attractive, peppered as they were with sardonic wit and a myopic sense of humor." In 1953 Salinger was a World War II veteran, he'd been married and divorced, he was darkly disillusioned, but he was also a rising star in American letters. Like the era itself, he was a mixed bag.

Thematically, *Nine Stories* landed somewhere between hope and despair, between what Salinger termed "love and squalor." Often, these two extremes are combined within the same story—the edginess of Seymour Glass in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" coupled with his childlike innocence; the spiritual wisdom of the boy genius in "Teddy" as he plods toward his own unpleasant fate; the drunken self-indulgence of the mother in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" combined with the daughter's endearing imaginary world; the pleasure of hearing boyhood stories involving Chinese bandits and emerald vaults in the Black Sea in "The Laughing Man" juxtaposed with the betrayal of the storyteller. But the flagship story for this contrast is "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," which portrays an American army sergeant who finds redemption in a gift from a young British girl. In the wake of V-E Day the soldier has suffered a nervous breakdown. Unable to sleep but deeply fatigued, he receives a package from Esmé, whom he'd met briefly in an English teashop. Inside the package is Esmé's watch, once belonging to her father who was killed in action. The sergeant, so moved by the gift, begins to ascend from his battlefield trauma. "Then, suddenly, almost ecstatically, he felt sleepy. You take a really sleepy man, Esmé, and he *al*ways stands a chance of again becoming a man with all his fac—with all his f-a-c-u-l-t-i-e-s intact."

The damage and cost of war echoes in other stories as well. In "Just

Before the War with the Eskimos," a jaded young man who worked in a warplane factory sees everything in terms of the next campaign—he's half-convinced that the "goddam fools" in the streets are waiting to be drafted to fight the Eskimos. Seymour Glass is a war victim recently discharged from a military mental ward. His brother, Walter, is the dead and lamented soldier in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," a man killed by a freak wartime accident in the Pacific. This is the first and last time Salinger draws so directly from his experiences of war.

The thematic concerns of the stories are supported by an abundance of technical skill. The intensity of observation, the precision of language, the creation of meaning through the juxtaposition of scene, the ironic, razor-sharp dialogue, all suggest an artist working at the height of his craft. There is also a dogged faith in the dramatic moment and a strong controlling intention. But the stories derive meaning without ever sacrificing the mystery of human experience; they try to suggest more than they try to illustrate and in this way remain illusive at their core.

But if *Nine Stories* tapped into the buried ambivalence of the fifties, it also defied the social and artistic climate of the time. In lieu of the customary author photo—which Salinger had refused since the third print run of *The Catcher in the Rye*—was a Zen koan: *We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?* A koan has no right answer; it's designed to float in the mind of the Zen aspirant. While the riddle may be approached from all sides, often over the course of many years, the essence of the conundrum remains insoluble. This seems to mirror Salinger's mission with *Nine Stories*: to create engaging paradoxes or puzzles that, at their core, both reflect life yet refuse to be a part of it. The stories set out to illuminate characters but have their actions remain slightly beyond our grasp, to create what Flannery O'Connor once called the "mystery of personality."

The Catcher in the Rye had already earned Salinger critical praise and a wide readership from college professors, to high school students, to supermarket book buyers. Within a short time it was on the required reading lists at hundreds of colleges and universities around the country, and it sold in the U.S. at the steady clip of 250, 000 copies a year. But it would be a mistake to assume that *Nine Stories* rode on the coattails of *Catcher*'s popularity. They were both successful in their own right and for different reasons. The novel, in the tradition of *The*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, contained an intoxicating blend of pathos and humor; a deep sense of irony, and a cadenced, colloquial voice. It was a masterly satire of the East Coast prep-school circuit and the malaise of bourgeois New Yorkers. It nailed the alienation of the young from the old, the pretentious from the real. But it remained a conventional novel—essentially a quest tale with an adolescent slant. It was *Nine Stories* that played with form and expectation, that bent the rules, that asked new questions about what fiction could do.

Salinger was also known as a writer in 1953 because many of his stories had been appearing in the *New Yorker* to some acclaim. After nearly a decade of rejection from the magazine, Salinger had a story accepted in 1946. "A Slight Rebellion off Madison"—which never made the cut for *Nine Stories*—featured Holden Caulfield, the adolescent narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as a runaway. While that story generated some interest in Salinger, in 1948 his name generated a buzz at the *New Yorker*. He sold them three stories that year: "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" in January; "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" in March; and "Just Before the War with the Eskimos" in June. He'd received his New York benediction. It was a milestone, but also a step toward his permanent retreat from the East Coast literary scene.

By the time *Nine Stories* came out, Salinger had completed a writing apprenticeship that took him from penning stories, at age fifteen, on his dormitory bunk in the Valley Forge Military Academy in the Pennsylvania hills, to writing stories in the foxholes of WWII. He carried a typewriter in his army Jeep and by 1944 had published fiction in *Story*, *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. His job as a soldier was to discover Gestapo agents by interviewing French civilians and captured Germans; he also landed at Normandy and took part in the Battle of the Bulge. While in Europe he had an audience with War Correspondent Hemingway, and later commented in a letter to his college friend Elizabeth Murray how little the man moved him. By the close of the war, he'd received several medals for valor but was deeply troubled.

In 1945, Salinger returned to the United States disillusioned and married, briefly, to a French doctor. (It was not the first time he'd experienced ruined love. Salinger, who grew up among the elite in prep schools and Manhattan's Upper West Side, had briefly dated Oona O'Neill, Eugene O'Neill's daughter, before she spurned him for Charlie Chaplin.) The marriage lasted eight months, and after the divorce Salinger began a period of drifting that lasted for several years. He left

Manhattan, where he'd lived in his parents' Park Avenue apartment, for a garage apartment in Tarrytown, Westchester County, then to a barn studio in Stamford, Connecticut. While wandering, he read and studied Zen Buddhism and worked on new short stories. His fiction now moves from the high-concept punch of the *Collier's* mold, to the ephemeral quality that imbues *Nine Stories*.

During this time Salinger continued to work on *The Catcher in the Rye*, which was still finding momentum. In a set of Salinger archives at the Harry Ransom Center for Humanities in Texas are pages from a 1945 draft of *Catcher* in which the narrative is in the third person. Holden Caulfield is there, center stage, but we don't see the world through his eyes. The manuscript pages seem flat without his jaded and wry inflection. This archive suggests that sometime during his post-war meandering pilgrimage, Salinger allowed Holden to take over the narrative and developed the alienated, adolescent voice that made the book famous.

Dislocated from his childhood New York, recuperating from the horrors of war, recently divorced, and deepening in his study of Zen, Salinger brought something new to his art. He developed two elements in his fiction—the austerity and submerged meaning found in *Nine Stories*, and the energized first-person narration found in his first and only novel. These additions ended up making his career.

When *Nine Stories* came out, it seemed to awe, puzzle, and unnerve reviewers in equal measure. The critics' response was partly determined by their ability to accept the stories as paradoxes rather than narrative statements. Eudora Welty reviewed *Nine Stories* in the *New York Times Book Review* on April 3, 1953. She wrote of Salinger, "He has the equipment of a born writer to begin with—his sensitive eye, his incredibly good ear, and something I think of no other word for but grace. There is not a trace of sentimentality in his work, although it is full of children that are bound to be adored." Paul Pickrel, in the *Yale Review*, calls one of the stories, "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor," "one of the greatest stories of the last decade, and technically one of the most dazzling I know." Seymour Krim, in *Commonweal*, compared Salinger to Fitzgerald: "both writers have that particular poignance which results from a lyrical identification with subject-matter set off by a critical intelligence; they are both lovers, so to speak, who are forced to acknowledge that they have been 'had,' and this gives their work the emotion of subtle heartbreak."

Among the detractors were Charles Poore, in the *New York Times*, and Sidney Monas, in the *Hudson Review*. Poore called the stories "disjointed, uneasy little dreams," while Monas wrote, "One has sometimes an oppressive and uncomfortable awareness of the author's nervous involvement in the hurt of his sensitive, witty, suicidal heroes. One also senses in these stories, as in the novel, a peculiar conceptual separation of the child from the adult, as though they were of different species, not merely different ages. For the child, anything is possible; for the adult, conformity or death."

While the critical response to Salinger's second book was mixed, the book received plenty of attention and sold well, despite the waning popularity of the American short story. People have continued to read it, keeping it reprinted in paperback for half a century. Exactly how many readers buy this book every year is unknown—book sales figures from the publishers, like everything Salinger-esque, are shrouded in secrecy.

The question of where Salinger fits in twentieth-century American literature is a complex one. Harold Bloom calls *Catcher in the Rye* and *Nine Stories* minor classics, and relates the former as " a Gatsby-like, modern version of Twain's Huckleberry Finn." The latter, these nine stories, often seem like fictional anomalies that arrived at the *New Yorker* in the middle of the last century. Salinger seems to borrow from multiple short story traditions and yet combines the elements into something that is uniquely his. The *Nine Stories* are clearly in the mold of the Chekhov-Hemingway school of dramatic realism—they attempt to compress action into fairly continuous segments of time; reveal character in-scene; and arrange fictional elements to give us the impression of lives stolen and submerged within the page. Exposition is rare and the stories, because of that, have a cinematic quality. Salinger's stories have the rich dialogue subtext of Hemingway stories, but the scenic treatment of *Nine Stories* is much more adorned, especially when it comes to character gesture, to the nuances of how a man holds a cigarette or folds a napkin. Salinger stories usually open at the heart of a crisis that is never fully explained. As David Stevenson, a Salinger critic, once remarked, "The Salinger-*New Yorker* story is always a kind of closet scene between Hamlet and his mother with the rest of the play left out."

In their use of the epiphany, the Salinger stories seem to merge

Chekhov, Hemingway, and arch-modernist James Joyce. The crowning moments of *Nine Stories* have the gravity and significance one associates with Joyce stories like "Araby," but with the muted, barely reported, and subtle quality of certain Chekhov and Hemingway stories. The action resolution is extreme, but there is no narrator or writer to interpret its full meaning for us or the characters. We are left, as with the ending of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," stunned and reeling, looking back through our reading for the fictional clues that support this outcome—the buried quips and ambiguous gestures that now seem ominous. Salinger's epiphanies are bold, then, but their significance emerges slowly in our minds, the images a little distorted; it's like we've watched the story's action through a pane of old, mottled glass. There is always an element of mystery and inscrutability.

It's not without irony that *Nine Stories* appears the same year as Cheever's *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*. The two writers represent opposite reactions to the post-war era. Cheever captures the tide of wartime men returning to quiet neighborhoods to forget the horrors of combat; in such suburban enclaves the greatest moral failure is infidelity among married couples. The war must be forgotten. Salinger's stories seem to usher in an entirely different sentiment: the war has been internalized; men are broken and brutalized; corruption of the spirit can only occasionally be undone by the antidote of innocence, often in the form of children. Cheever finds some fundamental good in the return to the middle-class neighborhoods, in the solace of the nuclear family, while Salinger finds the worst kind of spiritual death in these same arenas. Salinger, by being ardently against conformity in all his fiction, amplifies his *Catcher in the Rye* theme of the individual estranged from society.

Nine Stories, then, in both theme and form, seems to hover in the middle of the last century as a strange and compelling amalgam of influences. These stories are a belated smorgasbord of certain modernist trends: they have the religious style epiphany of Joyce, the cinematic elegance of Chekhov, and some of the hardboiled irony and deep subtext of Hemingway stories. To be sure, Salinger pales a little when laid against these masters, but he nonetheless encapsulates the bourgeois malaise and spiritual hunger of post-war America as opposed to the spirit of prosperity and return to suburban quietude that often characterizes fiction of this period. And he does this by expanding on the tradition of modernist fiction—the isolation of the individual from society takes on fresh angles and intensity, the structuring of meaning

via juxtaposition instead of exposition is done elegantly, and the idea of a story as a puzzle becomes a crucial element. None of these things was individually new or novel in 1953, but the combination in Salinger's *Nine Stories* is particularly artful.

But "expanding on the tradition of modernism" does not fully capture the place of *Nine Stories* and Salinger in the roll call of twentieth-century short-story writers. That's because the unifying principle for Salinger is not so much a fictional aesthetic as it is a spiritual one: namely, Zen Buddhism. It is a curious coincidence of history that Zen and certain schools of modernism share a number of important ideas: life as illusory, life as suffering, non-attachment to fixed meaning, experience as fragmentary and subjective, intuition as central, a sense of the absurd in human experience, the necessity of irrationality combined with a turning away from absolute coherence and unity. Salinger, in applying his Zen orientation, happens to craft stories that are necessarily more oblique in their intentions than, say, Hemingway. For Salinger, character motivation is less important than the mystery of personality as revealed in the moment of crisis (while in good Hemingway stories there is often a strong logical sense of motivation in a character's actions). In bridging the demands of fiction with his Zen aesthetic, Salinger combines extreme epiphanies—Teddy falling into the swimming pool, Seymour shooting himself, the mother breaking down in "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut"—with an extreme reliance on the present, dramatic moment. We don't pull out from the action and filter the epiphany through a changed state of consciousness as with Joyce's "Araby"; rather, we let the moment speak for itself. Zen as the unifying principle of Salinger's fiction after 1951 allows him to blend modernist techniques, to write between the poles of rationality and irrationality, meaning and randomness, character history and the exclusive reliance on the "witnessed" moment. The mysterious inner lives of his characters, the labyrinth of character and story through which he minimally guides us, that slight sensation that we have missed some vital clue to a character's downfall yet recognize that this is the same clue we miss every time we watch the disasters of the evening news or a neighbor's life reduced to tragedy—these arise out of navigating between these poles and become Salinger's fictional legacy. Fifty years on, Salinger's *Nine Stories* remain compelling anomalies.

Nowhere has Salinger endured more, especially with *Nine Stories*, than

among younger American writers. In a book co-edited with Thomas Beller—*With Love and Squalor*—Kip Kotzen suggests that "writers have a different, very sensitive, sometimes quite introspective view of the world that Salinger captured in his work." In this book, fourteen writers, including Charles D'Ambrosio, Aleksander Hemon, and Aimee Bender, respond to Salinger and his work with personal essays. While they differ in their appreciation of his art, all agree that Salinger did something important to fiction, particularly to the short story, in the second half of the twentieth century. There is a sense among many of these younger writers that Salinger is to them what Twain and Dickens were to aspiring writers a century ago.

For writer René Steinke, *Nine Stories* encapsulated an era of musing about the wider world as a thirteen-year-old girl in a small Texas town: "Salinger's deceptively straightforward sentences seemed to sing to me; the searching observations, not unlike the kind I had when I was bored or daydreaming, felt familiar. There were compact, memorable lines, part smart-aleck, part philosophical, that struck me as unpretentious and wise. It was clearly an adult book, but if felt as if it had been written for me." Steinke goes on to recount a story told by a New York uncle in which there were "excited people lining up around the block, the way people now line up for concert tickets, waiting at the newsstand to buy the new *New Yorker* with the latest Salinger story printed inside."

Today, the image of fans lining up for magazine fiction seems surreal—something dredged from a writer's ego-dream. And it's equally puzzling to imagine a writer walking away from that amount of fame. But walk he did, from the Greenwich literary haunts to the ninety-acre wood in New Hampshire. He slipped away from us and we should have seen it coming—all the clues were in *Nine Stories*. While his retreat was surely coming into focus even as *Catcher in the Rye* was still selling in hardback, there is a way in which *Nine Stories* holds the key to Salinger's upcoming escape. The stories cement the theme that Salinger introduced in the novel and that resonated in his own life: the sensitive, alienated man in search of innocence and love in a world of corruption. In other words, a man who wants to escape the "phonies."

But the search for this innocence leads to exile. And here is the point where Salinger's biography intersects with his fiction most profoundly. Whereas writers like Nabokov used exile from the homeland as a catalyst for expression, Salinger created exile for himself and his characters. The writer gets lost in his New Hampshire hermitage, just

as his child heroes are marooned by their quest for innocence, or by being too gifted or too sensitive. Paradoxically—this is the fiction of Zen after all—these same children are Salinger's symbols of hope.

But hope, when it comes in *Nine Stories,* is not just in the form of the grand epiphany. It comes in the little things: a girl's appreciation of wax and olives, her tactile pleasure with sand; Esmé's conversational lilt and her brother's love of riddles; a boy's thrill over a story told on a snowy night concerning kidnapping Chinese bandits; the small pleasure of Teddy, the boy genius, keeping lists in his pockets of things to look up at the library—these are the big ticket items in Salinger's fictional universe. These are the moments that make the exile worthwhile.

Whether *Nine Stories* will, in fact, prove to be the high point of Salinger's literary career remains to be seen. The *New Yorker* stories that came after it—"Franny" (1955), "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" (1955), "Zooey" (1957), "Seymour: An Introduction" (1959), and "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965), while containing moments of brilliance, were a little too self-conscious and rambling, and they floundered between forms. They lacked the distilled power of good short stories and the full-bellied story arcs of superior novels. But Salinger has continued to write for at least some of these last four decades of publishing silence, or so we're told. In both the Joyce Maynard memoir (*At Home in the World*) and the Margaret Salinger autobiography (*Dream Catcher*) the authors report that Salinger has been writing everyday, keeping his developing opus in a safe. In the 1990s, when Salinger sued his unauthorized biographer, Ian Hamilton, over alleged misuse of Salinger's unpublished letters, the writer stated, under oath, that he had been continuing to write all these years. But when asked by the court what kind of writing he does, he hesitated, saying that it was very difficult to define his current project. No one can be sure what he's been working on; it sounds as if even he is not sure. A continuation of the Glass Family saga? A novel narrated by the Zen saint Seymour Glass before his untimely death? Possibly. In a letter written to longtime friend Elizabeth Murray in 1963, Salinger indicates that he has a long way to go before finishing with the Glass family. But then that strange and long story, "Hapworth 16, 1924," which includes a letter from the young Seymour Glass at summer camp, came along and tried to tie up the loose ends of the family's fictional life. That long, disjointed story was Salinger's last published word.

If a novel or a set of stories emerges from Salinger's posthumous

vault in Cornish, New Hampshire, it will undoubtedly arouse a great deal of literary interest. But as interesting as that outcome might be, the question of whether Salinger's craft benefited from his long-standing and self-imposed exile is a striking one. One hopes he made a return to the austerity and submerged tension of *Nine Stories*. As the book turns fifty, it seems more than ever that this is where Salinger's art and life intersected best. Personal turmoil, spiritual hunger, and the sheer prowess of Salinger's literary craft, all combined to make this collection the best sort of Zen koan—one that's pleasing and unforgettable in its own right.