



**Kenneth Slawenski:**  
**J. D. Salinger: A Life Raised High**

Pomona Books, 15 March 2010  
ISBN: 978-190-459-0231



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- Genre: Biography
- Extent: 423 pages
- Description: JD Salinger: A Life Raised High reveals the surprising reality behind the enigmatic author of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Readers travel with the author through both his stories and the events of his life. It is a biographical journey, a story of ambition and ego that collides with integrity, an account of Salinger's struggle to deal with the consequences of his own fame while attempting to understand the nature of God and humanity after experiencing the darkest days of human history. With unique insights into Salinger's complex personality, the text covers his youth, war years, career and relationships, as well as his emergence as an American icon and final withdrawal. With over 400 citations and first-hand accounts, the details of Salinger's life have been thoroughly researched and the book uncovers many surprising facts never before exposed. By peeling away myth from truth, a far more compelling life-story is actually revealed. A final chapter to cover the response on Salinger's death was added to bring this unique book up to date.
- Author: Born and raised in New Jersey, Kenneth Slawenski attended community and state colleges, where he earned two degrees in Information Technology. Re-reading *The Catcher in the Rye* as an adult led to an interest in J.D. Salinger and he began to independently research Salinger's life. In 2004, he created the site Dead Caulfields ([www.deadcaulfields.com](http://www.deadcaulfields.com)), endorsed by *The New York Times* as the best Salinger resource on the Internet. In recent years, he has worked with Hollywood filmmakers as an historical consultant.
- Reviews: "It is well written, energetic and magnificently researched; a true picture of Salinger emerges from its pages." *The Times*  
"Slawenski enthrallingly illuminates what turned Salinger into an extraordinary literary phenomenon ... a fascinated and fascinating biography ..." *The Times on Sunday*  
"The result is a first-rate book which is especially good on the links between Salinger's fictions and their thematic developments. ... The passages on Salinger's own war show that Slawenski can be an excellent storyteller himself." *The Telegraph*  
"He deals exceptionally well with a life that, from the outside, appeared to stall in 1951, when Salinger was 32, but which continued for another 59 years." *The Observer*

”In fact, *A Life Raised High* is a straightforward, rather old-fashioned work of biography: sensible, almost straight-laced, diligent, respectful, resolute in its refusal to include gossip, always ready to acknowledge the point at which evidence ends and speculation begins.” *The Mail on Sunday*

“A detailed, unsensational biography ...” *The Herald Scotland*

“... his book is as irresistible to me as Salinger himself. ... If you can imagine Salinger having a soft spot for any book about him — which of course you can’t — then Slawenski’s might be the one.” *The Spectator*

“Slawenski wisely sticks to the facts ... a responsible biography that does the man justice.” *The Skinny*

## Chapter overview:

### 0 Introduction

**1 Sonny (1919–1939):** Covers Salinger’s birth and upbringing, his relationship with his parents and their changing attitudes as they ascend New York society. Emphasis is placed upon his schooling, especially his time at Valley Forge Military Academy, the basis for Holden Caulfield’s school in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger’s full genealogy is provided as well as the true story behind his parents’ marriage. After floundering from one school to the next and spending a year in Austria and Poland, the chapter ends with Salinger’s commitment to study writing.

Interviews with Salinger’s relatives were used to construct this chapter. Correlation is drawn between Salinger’s youth and his later stories.

**2 Ambition (1939–1941):** Entering Columbia University, Salinger is torn between poetry and prose. The sale of his first published story (to a magazine owned by one of his professors, Whit Burnett) convinces him to pursue short story writing but he has difficulty selling another piece. After a commercial breakthrough, Salinger begins to write *The Catcher in the Rye* and becomes romantically involved with Oona O’Neill.

In this chapter, Salinger strives for professional success but is frequently disappointed.

Works Covered: 10 short stories (6 published, 1 unpublished, 3 lost); 1 poem, unpublished.

**3 Indecision (1941–1943):** After Pearl Harbor, Salinger is drafted into the army. His desire to be published by *The New Yorker* frustrated, he turns his attentions to seeking military promotion. When he does return to writing, his works are divided between commercial and serious but he continues to work on *The Catcher in the Rye*. Oona O’Neill abandons Salinger for Charlie Chaplin and he falls into depression. Revived by a new romance and increased story sales, Salinger is then accepted by the army Counter Intelligence Corp.

In this Chapter, Salinger is conflicted - torn between writing and the military, between producing quality and commercialism.

Interviews with Salinger’s former girlfriend were used to construct this chapter.

Works Covered: 18 short stories (7 published, 1 unpublished, 10 lost.)

**4 Displacement (1944):** Salinger is stationed in England, where he trains for D-Day. While in Britain, he submits a number of stories with little success, including one narrated by Holden Caulfield. During a training exercise, he witnesses a catastrophe that takes the lives of 750 sol-

diers. Salinger's time in England is detailed as well as his shifting attitudes as he contemplates going to war.

Works Covered: 5 short stories (2 published, 2 unpublished, 1 lost).

**5 Hell (1944–1945, D-Day – VE Day):** Salinger lands at Normandy on D-Day and endures 11 months of continuous combat, participating in 5 major campaigns. Each is detailed. During the liberation of Paris, he befriends Ernest Hemingway. After fighting in the Hürtgen Forest and the Battle of the Bulge, Salinger enters Bavaria, where he encounters sub-camps of Dachau. Writing and a new-found faith see him through, but by war's end he is broken, hospitalized in Nuremberg for battle stress, and reaches out to Hemingway for consolation.

Continuing to write during the war, Salinger's stories reflect his combat experiences and acknowledge the beginnings of spiritual exploration.

The testimonies of 12th Regiment soldiers were used to construct this chapter.

Works Covered: 7 short stories (3 published, 2 unpublished, 2 lost).

**6 Purgatory (1945–1946):** Salinger remains in Germany for a year, continuing to serve with Counter Intelligence. Settling in Bavaria, he marries an ophthalmologist from Frankfurt named Sylvia Welter – much to the shock of his family. Salinger's work in Germany is covered, as well as personal descriptions of his life with Sylvia, who travels back to New York with Salinger in May 1946. Rebuffed by his family, she soon returns to Europe and files for divorce. At the same time, a promised book deal collapses and Salinger blames his editor and mentor, Whit Burnett. In anger, he briefly submits a 90 page version of *The Catcher in the Rye* for publication before returning to his senses. Ignoring the ramifications of war, Salinger indulges in a vigorous Greenwich Village nightlife while ineffectively attempting to write.

During this period, Salinger acts irrationally, determined to retrieve a life shattered by the war. His writings are black, his persona unsteady.

Interviews with Sylvia's friends were used to construct this chapter.

Works Covered: 2 short stories (1 published, 1 unpublished); 1 novella ("The Inverted Forest")

**7 Recognition (1947–1948):** With the publication of his first Holden Caulfield story, Salinger is finally accepted by *The New Yorker*, his fondest dream. After molding the piece for a year, the magazine then prints Salinger's darkest story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish". Its success delivers him into the fold of *The New Yorker* elite, where he establishes new relationships and transforms his living situation. Granted a salary by the magazine, he moves from his parents' Park Avenue apartment. His career now in focus, Salinger begins to deliver stories whose quality marks him as a rising star.

By allowing his wartime sufferings to surface, Salinger reaches new literary heights and establishes a near-exclusive relationship with America's most important magazine; yet he is still tortured by his wartime experiences and his works remain grim.

Works Covered: 4 published stories.

**8 Reaffirmation (1948–1949):** Reconnecting with the inner strength that saw him through the war, Salinger ends the production of gloomy works and begins to write stories that offer hope and that engage his wartime experiences in positive ways. Despite numerous rejections, he publishes 3 stories that elevate his status and that solidify his position at *The New Yorker*, works that begin to influence other writers. In late 1949, one of his stories is adapted to film. Salinger detests the production (described in detail) and grows increasingly uncomfortable with his new-found

fame. After publishing the highly successful “For Esmé – with Love and Squalor”, Salinger devotes himself to finishing of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Works Covered: 8 short stories (3 published, 5 lost)

**9 Holden (1949–1951):** After procuring a publisher who later abandons him, Salinger completes *The Catcher in the Rye*. The process is detailed along with a number of important relationships (Hamish Hamilton, John Woodburn, Harold Ross). Salinger’s combative relationship with his publishers is highlighted. Frustrated by events, Salinger travels to the British Isles, returning to New York just as his book is released. A sampling of reviews indicates the novel’s warm reception, but Salinger remains displeased.

This chapter explains Salinger’s exploration of Zen Buddhism and how it conflicted with the process of publication. It reviews *Catcher* in a new light, revealing its subtle spirituality and underlying effects of the war.

Works Covered: 2 short stories (1 published, 1 lost); 1 novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*

**10 Crossroads (1951–1952):** Thrown off balance by success, Salinger sinks into depression. Afraid of being recognized, he hides in his Manhattan apartment, eventually fleeing the city for Florida and Mexico. An emerging romance with Claire Douglas (his future wife) is explored as the two begin to date. Seeking refuge from New York, Salinger purchases a 90 acre farm in rural Cornish, NH.

During this period, Salinger discovers the writings of Sri Ramakrishna, enthusiastically embracing Vedantic Hinduism. He works on two stories of religious fiction. Both stories encounter problems, leaving Salinger in search of characters through which he can express his new beliefs.

Works Covered: 2 published stories (“De Daumier-Smith’s Blue period” and “Teddy”).

**11 Positionings (1953):** Salinger moves to Cornish, NH. He works on his new home and befriends a group of local students. His second book, the collection *Nine Stories*, is published to fair reviews and excellent sales. Salinger’s relationship with Claire Douglas intensifies, but she chooses another boyfriend over him. This event, coupled with a betrayal by one of the students, causes Salinger to withdraw yet again.

Works Covered: *Nine Stories*

**12 Franny (1954):** Claire Douglas is wed to her boyfriend (their relationship and his identity are revealed for the first time) but the marriage is brief. Unable to reconcile religious differences with her husband, Claire returns to Salinger. The episode inspires Salinger to write “Franny”.

This chapter examines Salinger’s romance with Claire Douglas and the importance of religion in their relationship. Douglas’ biography is detailed as well as her impact upon Salinger’s work.

Works Covered: 1 published story (“Franny”)

**13 Two Families (1955):** Salinger begins two families: his own and the fictional Glass family. He marries Claire Douglas, who soon becomes pregnant. The couples’ life in rural Cornish is detailed together with Claire’s growing feelings of isolation. After the success of “Franny”, Salinger writes his first true story of the Glass family series, an event examined through an overview of “Raise High”.

Works Covered: 1 published story (“Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters”)

**14 Zooney (1956–1957):** Salinger's daughter Peggy is born. Claire suffers post partum depression. Her situation worsens when Salinger builds a writing bunker apart from the house, where he spends most of his time working on a new novel. The death of Salinger's editor creates havoc at *The New Yorker*, threatening his position at the magazine. When they reject his next story, Salinger attempts to sell another piece to Hollywood. As the Glass family takes precedent over his own, Salinger and Claire separate for a time. *The New Yorker* reconsiders his submission and he labors for months to condense the story. In it, Salinger acknowledges a personal struggle with ego and his belief that his work is in the service of God.

This chapter closely examines the tensions in Salinger's marriage, the growing religiosity of his work, as well as a number of important personal and professional relationships (Learned Hand, William Maxwell, Katherine White, and William Shawn among them). Office intrigues at *The New Yorker* are revealed and a portrayal of Salinger's life in Cornish is provided.

Works Covered: 1 published novella ("Zooney")

**15 Seymour (1958–1959):** Now completely submerged into his characters, Salinger's philosophy comes to a climax with the production of "Seymour – An Introduction". Writing the erratic novella is an ordeal that causes him to fall ill and that further strains his marriage. Still, he attempts to gain complete control over the presentation of his work. The Beat generation takes center stage and popular esteem elevates Salinger among America's greatest writers. Yet, he uses his next story to dampen popular reverence.

This chapter examines Salinger's position and reactions to shifting times and to his increasingly elevated status. His influence upon his generation is discussed. The layers of "Seymour-An Introduction" are examined, pointing out certain personal references previously unnoted.

Works Covered: 1 published novella ("Seymour – An Introduction").

**16 Reluctant Summit (1969–1961):** Salinger's son is born but he remains obsessed with his work. He has an unfortunate run-in with Whit Burnett and after feeling betrayed by Jamie Hamilton, cuts him off also. With the release of *Franny and Zooey*, Salinger's career reaches its summit, but he recoils from the resulting onslaught of attention. While refusing to grant interviews, he is bombarded by journalists and fans that lurk about his home. Contemporary reviews (most of them scathing) and articles are examined in detail, along with Salinger's reactions. An intimate portrayal is provided through reviews, letters, articles and accounts.

Works Covered: 1 book (*Franny and Zooey*); 1 editorial to the *New York Post*.

**17 Detachment (1962–1963):** After several conflicts with his publishers, Salinger releases his fourth and final book. Critics deride the collection but its sales are enormous. Personally, Salinger confides that he senses himself receding from the world but refuses to change course.

In a sense, Salinger begins to dissolve as the chapter moves between past and present, between Salinger's dreams and actual events. His family troubles deepen. His religious fatalism becomes ingrained, displayed in his reaction to a rising controversy over *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Works Covered: 1 book (*Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour – An Introduction*).

**18 Farewell (1964–1965):** Salinger expands his home and lands at Cornish. His children's upbringing is discussed. His marriage beyond repair, he moves to a separate apartment within the house. He is crushed by the Kennedy assassination and various attempts by the government to pressure him into service are recalled. As a gift to Whit Burnett, Salinger pens an introduction to

an anthology that Burnett refuses to print. 1964 is spent writing his final published story, “Hapworth 16, 1924”, released in 1965. “Hapworth” is examined at length. Through the character of Seymour Glass, Salinger makes his final statements to the world, announcing he has left his life to the will of God. For the first time since his youth, a Salinger story is ignored by the media.

Works Covered: 1 novella (“Hapworth 16, 1924”)

**19 The Poetry of Silence (1966–2010):** The (formerly) final chapter chronicles each major event in Salinger’s life since his retirement. Only well-substantiated facts are used.

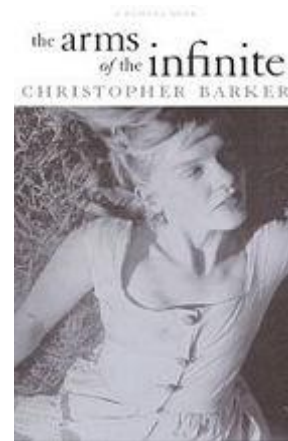
Salinger and Claire are divorced but the author builds a separate house on his property in order to maintain ties with the children. By 1970, he has decided not to publish and begins to retrieve any hint of personal information (repaying a book advance and asking his agent to destroy 500 personal letters). Legal battles are discussed (a fight over the publication of his early stories and a famous case involving a biography by Ian Hamilton). Major interviews are documented: to the New York Times (1974), the Paris Review (1980), and a 1986 court deposition. The death of John Lennon, Salinger’s relationship with Joyce Maynard and his third marriage are highlighted. As the chapter ends, Salinger remains silent when confronted with the damaging memoirs of both Joyce Maynard and his daughter, Peggy. It closes with a balanced look at Salinger’s legacy and the priorities involved in measuring his life.

**20 Coming Through the Rye:** Responses to Salinger's death



## Christopher Barker: The Arms of the Infinite

Pomona Books, July 2006  
ISBN: 978-1-904590-04-7



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Genre: Biography/Memoir  
Extent: 329 pages  
Description: The memoirs of Christopher Barker, the son of the cult writer Elizabeth Smart (*By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*) and the poet George Barker. He beautifully relates the inner-workings of a Bohemian up-bringing and offers an intriguing insight into one of the century's most important writers. Although he is primarily a photographer, Christopher is himself a gifted writer and an early draft of his memoir formed a recent cover story for the literary magazine *Granta*.

Marketing advice: In March 2011 the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Elizabeth Smarts death and in December 2013 her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday will be – culture sections probably will note that.

Extract:  
WHEN THEY WERE WORKING, THE TWO ROBERTS USED A creaking wooden shed at the back of the garden as a studio. I think it had been purpose built for this because one of its walls was a large window that had an outside shutter that could be raised or lowered from the front. When I smell oil paint from a tube the wild mess of the interior comes tumbling back and my eyes smart with the memory. There was usually an easel in one corner with a work in progress clamped to it. The palette was no more than a square of plywood mottled with smeared colours. Amongst a tangle of crossed brushes lay leaded tubes of paint, curled up like winded toy soldiers. Their fallen caps were beside them as different coloured gore oozed from their severed necks.

Colquhoun spent most of his time in there while MacBryde tended to our needs, but sometimes he would emerge, beaten back from his work by the weight of his hangover. Then we would all sit around the kitchen table and compete to see who could draw a perfect circle. Although Colquhoun's circle was frilled, as if inked by the trembling stylus of a Richter meter registering an aftershock, he always won MacBryde's mischief sometimes knew no bounds, He once put on a special tea and the treat was a plate of newly baked cakes. Among many old favourites was a particularly toothsome looking meringue, nestling in a frilly white cake-cup. Presenting the plate with this speciality foremost he asked me to choose. Of course, how could I refuse? As I bit into the glazed sugar carapace my teeth cracked on a lump of rock that MacBryde had gleefully baked into the centre. The tea-time table of siblings fell about with laughter.

Reviews:

1)

Christopher Barker is the son of writer Elizabeth Smart and George Barker, a literary star of his time: published by Eliot, anthologised by Yeats, and believed to be one of the chief lyrical men of the age. Because of mummy's needs and daddy's needs, or what one needed from the other, the Barker kids were always being shifted about and enjoying the company of relative strangers acting in loco parentis. Half-mad painters and poets were forever clanking in from a drinking session at Muriel's to talk and then fight. Barker is brilliant at summoning the fear in the atmosphere, and at these points his prose is textured with shards of glass. But there are also the happy years at the millhouse at Tilty in Essex, where Smart built a family life filled with punting and fishing and ballet slippers, but inevitably all would turn grey when the agitations of their parents' on-off love affair put everything on hold or into the kind of shadow thrown by a million coloured butterflies. Christopher Barker tells his story beautifully and it is a story worth telling.

*(Andrew O'Hagan, London Review Bookshop)*

2)

It was the best of times and the worst of times

*Fiona Green applauds Christopher Barker's tribute to his creative but wayward parents – poet George Barker and writer Elizabeth Smart*

CHRISTOPHER Barker is the son of the writer Elizabeth Smart and the notorious poet, George Barker, and in this memoir about his parents, he describes their first meeting and subsequent elopement; revealing a passionate, obsessive and often volatile affair.

Christopher's prose is perfect and his sentiments wonderfully understated. The book begins with a shocking first chapter describing his mother's death, and ends on his father's demise.

Drawing on some previously unpublished material – in the form of letters, excerpts from journals and diaries – Christopher's carefully shaped retrospective looks back with tenderness and courage, as he unfolds the tragic story of two talented bohemians. Christopher's attention to detail is astonishing and worth savouring.

Elizabeth's early life began in Canada as a debutante, with a mother determined to marry her to an aristocrat. She was educated at private schools in Canada and at King's College London.

After a series of dalliances with dull, unsuitable aristocrats, she wrote in 1936: "I must marry a poet. It's the only thing. Why don't I know any?" She was also growing more aware that she would make writing her life's occupation. One day later that year, in Better Books on Charing Cross Road, she found a slender book of poetry by George Barker and fell in love with the writing. She sets out in earnest to meet and marry him.

In the intervening period, she had an affair with a passionate Turk called Varda, who introduced her to Surrealism – and to Alice Paalen. It was within the close, sexual relationship with this writer she learned to understand her controlling mother, and the knowledge released her to fulfil her obsession with Barker.

Elizabeth writes to George, inviting him to America. He responded immediately, believing her to be a wealthy woman with funds who would free him from a hated lectureship in Japan, and conscription in England.

Elizabeth raised the funds, little realising that in so doing she was laying down a template of behaviour which was to be repeated relentlessly throughout their relationship: George expecting money from her, and moving faithlessly between her and Jessica, the wife he was bringing with him.

The story of their love affair is famously recorded by Elizabeth in *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* and by George in *The Dead Seagull*.

I met Elizabeth in 1961 and she took me under her wing like an older sister or surrogate mother. We met in the Fitzroy Tavern, Charlotte Street and I stayed variously at her house in Suffolk and at her flat in Soho. I also got to know Sebastien and Rose, two of her four children.

Christopher's chapter on Rose is an almost unbearably painful description of his vulnerable sister's decline into heroin dependency – a casualty of George's lack of commitment to his children.

When I first met George he proudly told me "I have 13 children and 14 published books: I think that's a record".

I was unimpressed by this attitude to children as trophies. As was Rose, who at 13 wrote in her diary in 1960 "I wish my father would be like a father. He never pays for anything, he doesn't seem to realise he has a wife and four children who need money to live.

"I don't see how he can expect us to love him, although I still do, but I can't say I always speak highly of him... oh I wish he didn't drink."

Rose was beautiful, passionate and died of a heroin overdose at 36. Her life was really one suicide note and an endless cry for help, which George, the narcissist, rarely responded to. Elizabeth never really recovered from her tragic death.

This book by Christopher is enormously loving and forgiving: a really honest tribute to his creative and wayward parents; an important record of their turbulent times and now one of my favourite books.

*(Camden New Journal)*