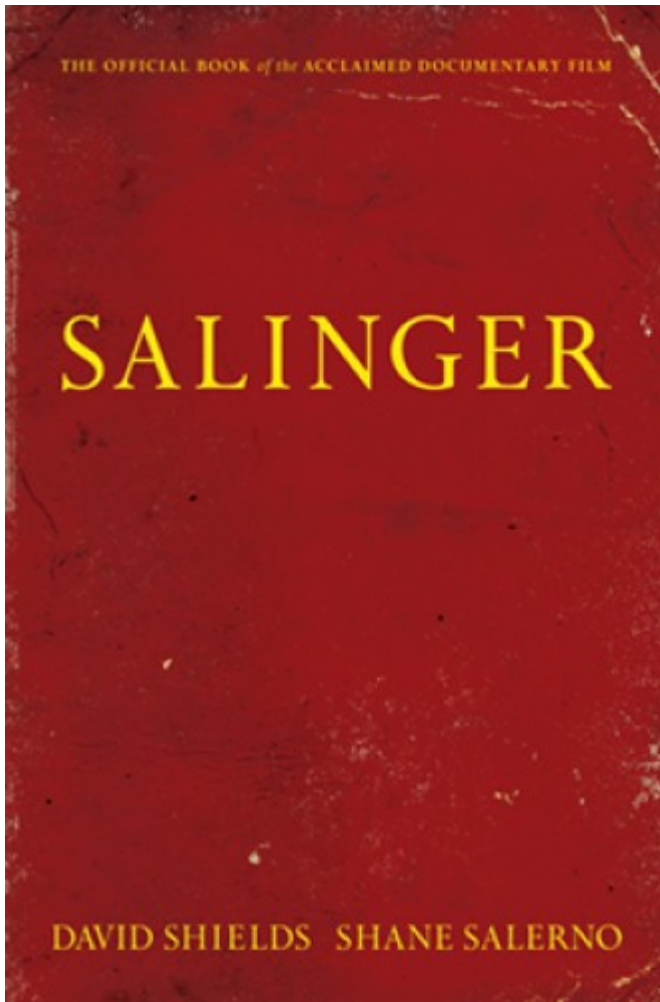


*Salinger*, by David Shields and Shane Salerno

reviewed by [Harold K. Bush](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue

## In Review



## Salinger

By David Shields and Shane Salerno  
Simon & Schuster

There is no denying the staying power of J. D. Salinger. All you have to do is teach *Catcher in the Rye* to a group of high schoolers—or better yet, assign *Franny and Zooey* to a bunch of unsuspecting college students—shake and stir, and voila!

Immediate knee-jerk admiration and wonder is almost guaranteed. For a large percentage of students, Salinger can still pack a tremendous punch, and he still connects with the spiritual seeker inclinations that are common among university students.

It's tough to put a finger on the precise nature of Salinger's cultlike following. While teaching *Franny and Zooey* last semester just after the release of the new book *Salinger* and the companion documentary film, I was deeply struck—again—by the infatuations that Salinger's often elegant and funny prose and his spiritual musings are able to inspire in readers at a certain stage in life. Near the end of *Franny and Zooey* is a moment when the young TV talent Zooey inspects the haunted room of his much older, dead-by-suicide brother, Seymour. The inside face of the door is covered with hand-scribbled quotes from muses, philosophers, and mystics from throughout the world's literary and religious traditions: Pascal, Baudelaire, Kobayashi Issa, Marcus Aurelius, Sri Ramakrishna, Kafka, Tolstoy, Emily Dickinson, and others.

The door represents the scores of spiritual options available to young seekers of truth; it also represents a doorway into the future—and into the past, being the entrance to the untouched room of the brilliant but suicidal Seymour. It was Seymour who expressed to his younger siblings the true power of the “Jesus prayer”: not an unending mumbling of a prayer under our breath, but a way of life, a spiritual practice in which we all see ourselves somehow achieving the glory of work by investing ourselves in whatever it is we can do best. Without actually naming this activity a *vocation* or *calling*, that's what Salinger seems to be getting at in *Franny and Zooey*, and it remains a powerful point for young people. But *Franny and Zooey* is also a story with a certain mazelike quality that resists any certainty or easy answers.

*Salinger* is likewise difficult to characterize. Already numerous reviewers and readers have taken the authors to task for its structure and form. At one point David Shields and Shane Salerno describe it as an oral biography. But it's more like a scrapbook. The authors seem intent on simply presenting a plethora of nearly unorganized quotes, anecdotes, jokes, excerpts from letters and journals, and occasional celebrity razzle-dazzle about one of Salinger's books or stories. There is no index, so for scholars who might like to use the book, it's very difficult to track down various topics or personalities. In short, this book is a mishmash, often brilliant, but sometimes odd and confusing. It's unwieldy and underedited: it has the decided feel

of being rushed into print.

The cover of the book is very cool: it resembles a worn-out and dog-eared copy of the original paperback *Catcher in the Rye*, one of the most famous book covers of the 20th century. The biographical scope of *Salinger* is extensive; the authors logged over 200 interviews with friends, family, and acquaintances of Salinger to add to what they'd already learned in their decades-long obsession with the mysterious author. The book also gathers excerpts from a large number of published interviews and other documents, so it is a handy edition of previously uncollected sources of information.

Much of the book is concerned with Salinger's sexual fixations on various young women, and it displays great curiosity about the psychological meaning of Salinger's testicular abnormalities. The authors and the publisher must both assume that these genital secrets have crucial explanatory powers. Another observer might argue that such information is mostly needed for the selling of books.

Far more interesting, and perhaps the greatest contribution to the book's value, is the material presented about Salinger's service during World War II. He landed on Utah Beach on D-Day and, along with a couple of other officers, worked the towns and villages for intelligence as the Allied armies marched toward Paris and later into Germany. (The book contains excellent photos of Salinger in uniform, alone and with his buddies.) Among other nuggets are vivid memories of the liberation of Dachau.

It is fascinating that while Salinger was doing his duty for army intelligence, he was simultaneously lugging around and scribbling sections of a novel he wanted to finish about a high schooler named Holden Caulfield. That novel, the first part of which Salinger carried onto the beaches on D-Day, has by now sold over 65 million copies. *Salinger* contains impressive, fresh insights about the traumatic experience of an army veteran whose later depictions of traumatized characters would rock the world of the baby boomers who reached their teens during the 1950s and '60s. Even though Salinger rarely mentioned the war in his fiction, Shields and Salerno recognize the influence of the traumas of World War II on Salinger's writings.

Another excellent addition is the very long section at depicting Salinger as a retired citizen of small-town America, a regular Joe who routinely came into town for lunch, strolled the sidewalks, and attended basketball games and civic meetings. He became a regular attendee of \$12 dinners at First Congregational Church in

Hartford, Vermont, where he always arrived early and always sat near the pies. Such a portrait goes against the grain of the legend of the reclusive author. During these same years, Salinger's relations with his own children were a mixed bag, and here again Shields and Salerno offer some excellent insights. Salinger's daughter, Margaret, wrote a scathing memoir of her father's irresponsibility, titled *Dream Catcher*, while his son, Matthew, remained an acolyte, serving the master without bitterness or regret.

Perhaps the most delightful revelation of the book is that, as has been suspected for a long time, Salinger continued to pound away at his typewriter almost daily. After one of his stories appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1965, Salinger published nothing more in his lifetime (he died in 2010), but he kept writing—obsessively even, especially about his beloved fictive family the Glasses. Among the several volumes the author left unpublished, we are told, is one based on his memories of serving as an intelligence officer during the war, another about a character whose experiences of a failed early marriage mirror his own, and further tales of the Glass family.

Salinger's long silence was predicated on his interest in Vedanta Hinduism and other forms of mystical experience, as well as his desire to live an ascetic lifestyle. One friend recalls that his choice to quit publishing was "heavily influenced" by these beliefs, and among the pile of unpublished manuscripts is a complete volume on Vedanta Hinduism. So if we learn nothing else from *Salinger*, we at least know that there are important and serious volumes to be published posthumously and that the legend of a vault containing them is based on fact.

I have long held the view that Salinger is very underrated. My classroom experience indicates that the spiritual Salinger is still rocking the worlds of young people. Perhaps these new volumes, as they appear over the next decade or so, along with the general Salinger revival that seems to be occurring, will help us to recover and to appreciate in a far deeper way the spiritual life of the creator of Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass.