

# *Salinger: The New One*

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“So Where Are the New J. D. Salinger Books We Were Promised?”

—Matthew Haag, *The New York*

*Times*, 25 October 2017

TEN-THIRTY on an absolutely gorgeous November morning, when I went to pick up my new Salinger at the local bookstore—independent, since the town I live in is rolling in them, and it just seemed wrong to have the usual behemoth beam a potentially holy object directly into my mailbox, Kindle, or retinal chip—there was a line around the block and then some. Word was out that one of the stories took place in the Pacific Northwest (word was right) and the excitement was palpable. One person was actually passing out mittens. There’s something about Salinger that brings people together, even if it’s the consensus that everyone else is a drip. Parents were there with children, children were there with parents, and teenagers were there with one other. There were also quite a few people on their glorious lonesomes, hunched over or with shoulders back—in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 80s—no one, strangely, in their 70s (I asked for a show of mittened hands). Long story short, the line was not only lengthy but densely and demographically populated. Regardless of age or other darling particulars, most everyone had the air of a green-eyed girl archery expert from the wilds of Scarsdale who had lost the Scottish family manse in a game of Twenty-One the night before and had already forgotten to tell you about it. One (actual) girl with shoulder-length hair, blue-greyled at its edges, was wearing a plaid hunting cap; otherwise the clothing was free range. But you don’t really want to know about that. To business!

First, though, I must caution the reader that what follows abounds, nay teems, with if not spoilers, then the divulgence of myriad details you might not want to squander, first-encounter-wise, on a mere review, however heartfelt my offering. (And it’s goddam heartfelt,

believe you me.) So maybe you just stop now, turn on your beautiful heel, and get thy lovely self to a (here's hoping) bookstore. I'm going to do my job—boat-building or teaching, it's what we're here to do (and we're probably all teachers)—but I'm not going to kid either of us that you need me. Dear reader—dearest reader—what you need is to listen to your soul, and let's face it: your soul probably would be a lot happier if you put this thing down and got out of the house a teensy bit more. We'll be here when you get back, smoking up a storm in the kitchen.

Alright, so where were we? (A one-eyed kitten that the neighbor's kid sister has insisted I adopt just came in and insisted, entirely unsentimentally, on dinner. The kid said the kitten reminded her of a pirate. I was helpless.)

The new book is divided into two parts: "Nine More Stories" and "Miscellaneous." My unadventurous bet is the editors came up with those labels; and while it's not like they knocked themselves out, it's essentially true to the form and, let's face it, paratext isn't mountain climbing. You don't have to fancy the stuff up with clamps or those things they invented in the 1910s that everyone got worried about because they thought it took the spirit out of scaling said mountains, making it easier, which is the same thing as making things harder if you think about it. Pitons. The latter section of the book includes a group of haiku, letters, and fragments, not in that order.

The first part is what you'll read first or my middle name isn't Esmé. (Not kidding; and born, not made.) The opening story, "A Lemur Named Pestilence," is pretty much what you'd expect. It features a taxidermist from Thermopolis, Wyoming, faced with a career challenge. My sense is that Salinger might have been having a bad day, or decade more like—the editors say he was at work on it from 1967 to 1977, at which point he abandoned the thing, then returned to it for a feverish few months again at the tail end of the Me Decade. The taxidermist is never named, so the Salinger scholars can go to town on that one, since the book's "Letters" section features some pretty racy exchanges with an actual taxidermist employed by the Natural History Museum. It's clear there was mutual respect between the two.

Salinger is up to the “How do I handle this oryx?” talk, with the occasional bits of advice to his correspondent (“Staplegun?” he writes on 10 April 1970). The taxidermist is also unnamed in the notes since the Natural History Museum apparently put down its legal hoof and refused to release employment records, but an adventurous graduate student could likely make some scholarly hay there. Back in the mimetic wilds, “A Lemur Named Pestilence” has some surprisingly specific local color concerning Big Sky Country (or is that Montana?), and without giving anything away, the macramé sequence is a keeper.

Glass family archivists will be pleased with the continuation of the chronicles. Buddy takes a back seat to Boo Boo, who is awarded several stories of her own. In the first, the Tuckahoevian homemaker has become a widow, and remarried an older gentlemen, a one-handed martial-arts expert who is, we gather, quite something in the boudoir.

We gradually learn more about them. But slowly, slowly. “Autumn, Late but Not Forgotten” unexpectedly begins in Washington state (hence my tribe’s excitement). Lolly Hu is an international student living in Spokane, and wakes up one morning with a stomach ache. We remain in bed with her for the majority of the story as she contemplates having to turn in a paper for her film class on the early work of cineaste Ozu. Lolly, it turns out, had visited the master’s graveside in the Kanagawa prefecture and left a Bazooka Joe comic directly beneath the *mu* character—which she had thought meant “all,” but turned out to mean “nothing.” Rather than write her term paper, Lolly mulls over returning to Japan and retrieving the Bazooka Joe comic. Her musings are interrupted by a pretty young freshman, clearly smitten, who asks her several times if she is going to the dance; Lolly stalls, says no, and then tells the poor kid to go away and to let her think already. The poor kid goes away, at which point Lolly stares off into space, and then, as a beam of light finds its way onto the dense forest-green and maroon paisley bedspread, suddenly rises from the bed, fumbles for her bunny slippers, and, unable to find the second one, utters a word you’d never imagine you’d find in a Salinger story, then gallops (fetchingly) to the door and out into the hallway, calling the freshman’s name. It’s a quiet, brilliant ending.

Romance, in other words, has snuck past the moat, swung onto the turrets, and landed with an Errol Flynn–like thump—resounding but svelte—atop the long wooden table in the middle of the dining hall chez Castle Salinger, where it occasionally breaks into a soft-shoe number. As we learn in “There Is a Man in Scotland I Must Meet If Anything Is to Be Done,” Lolly Hu has an older half-brother, Ortega, who, having met the widow at a macramé class (a red thread—sorry; it just got the better of me), woos Boo Boo, and then is surprised when *she* proposes to him, mid-class and while executing a charmingly clumsy double half hitch. The two honeymoon in Venice (Italy), where they are graced with an unexpected visitor, her son Lionel Tannenbaum, who has pursued his Uncle Zooey’s profession and is now starring in a remake of *Lost Horizon* but is in danger of being fired and has taken some time for himself and by proxy his perennially unfazed mother. Ortega leaves the two alone and goes for a walk, then gets lost, then meets an English (not Scottish—that comes to matter anon) couple, and then eats a tangerine gelato while contemplating whether *Il Tramonto* is in fact a Giorgione. He returns to their room, finds Boo Boo sitting alone on the bed, and asks her if she wants to cha-cha. She says no. He asks her if she *needs* to cha-cha. She says yes. The story is about family resemblances, and things of that ilk—it’s got ilk running in the streets—including a Celtic motif that I won’t get into now because word count waits for no woman, and my editor—a charming gentleman who wields a mean martini, but he does at times tend to worry in lieu of breathing—is texting me like there’s no tomorrow. Which is ironic, if you think about Buddhism for a minute.

In “Mrs. Mermelstein’s Third Comeback,” Boo Boo Hu takes the stage front and center. We’re back in Caulfield country, a.k.a. The Big Apple, where the couple has moved following the unexpected literary success of Ortega, who, having abandoned artistry for writing ad copy, wrestles with his soul from the glowing reaches of the Upper East Side in a charming apartment over the Health Wise Pharmacy on Seventy-Ninth and York. Whilst husband wrestles, Boo Boo descends to street level, almost tripping over a bike in the stairwell, and, having hit pavement, has a conversation with the doorman down the street,

comparing child-rearing techniques, and watches a radiantly dingy white poodle romp unleashed in Carl Schurz Park. Boo Boo then goes home to announce she is definitely not pregnant.

“F Is for Fluency” is about a translator with a stuttering boyfriend; “Happy Birthday, Mr. Atrocity” concerns the construction of a cake featuring a walnut bas-relief of Ricardo Montalbán; and “The King of Redonda” puts us smack-dab in the center of the Caribbean micronation. We go for a Catskills fishing trip in “A Canary for Two”; and “Eek & Malarkey,” the last story, features a recipe for homemade yogurt and the escapades of two actors voicing a set of early-cinema Looney Tune–like cartoon stars.

It is in the haiku section that we get a glimpse of what Salinger may have been hinting at with Seymour’s invention of the double haiku, and while you may have been sleeping fine at night, I’ve been scratching my head about this since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. Since several of these “new” poems are *auf* Sanskrit (thanks, the editors tell us, to a Cornish neighbor who had retired from the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute and with whom Salinger played, fiercely, whist on a bimonthly basis), I’ve taken the liberty of translating one (thanks to my Ballard neighbor, who has retired from the University of Puget Sound’s Asian Studies Department and with whom I play, unfiercely, tag biweekly):

The days of swing may be dead but Cookie  
Babcock and her one true love live the life of high stepping  
And glamour known only to precious few.

A bare morsel, my friends, but mayhap morsel enow. There’s more, but you’ve got things to do and damned if that kitten doesn’t have its eye on me again. *And* my phone is going supernova. I therefore tip my hat and take my leave. Readers may not be sated, but something should be slaked. The editors assure us there is more Salinger to be had, but what is here should suffice for the time being, and maybe even into the next lifetime, which in all likelihood we have waiting for us, hopefully alongside a library card.