

Books of The Times

By NASH K. BURGER

IT is just before Christmas and 16-year-old Holden Caulfield has been kicked out of exclusive Pencey Prep, a boys' school in Pennsylvania. Considering everything, this reflects more credit on Holden than on Pencey. Life at Pencey is dreary, regimented, artificial and, of course, expensive. This happens, however, to be only the latest of a series of schools from which Holden has been expelled. Understandably he is in no hurry to encounter his parents, but he is also reluctant to linger a moment longer than necessary at Pencey. He therefore takes what money he has and departs for New York, where he passes several days in a weird jumble of adventures and experiences, is involved with a variety of persons including taxi drivers, two nuns, an elevator man, three girls from Seattle, a prostitute, and a former teacher from whom Holden thinks it best to flee in the middle of the night and most of all from himself.

Holden's story is told in Holden's own strange, wonderful language by J. D. Salinger in an unusually brilliant first novel, "The Catcher in the Rye."* The Book-of-the-Month Club has chosen it as its current selection.

Adolescence Speaking for Itself

Holden is bewildered, lonely, ludicrous and pitiful. His troubles, his failings are not of his own making but of a world that is out of joint. There is nothing wrong with him that a little understanding and affection, preferably from his parents, couldn't have set right. Though confused and unsure of himself, like most 16-year-olds, he is observant and perceptive and filled with a certain wisdom. His minor delinquencies seem minor indeed when contrasted with the adult delinquencies with which he is confronted.

Mr. Salinger, whose work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, tells a story well, in this case under the special difficulties of casting it in the form of Holden's first-person narrative. This was a perilous undertaking, but one that has been successfully achieved. Mr. Salinger's rendering of teen-age speech is wonderful: the unconscious humor, the repetitions, the slang and profanity, the emphasis, all are just right. Holden's mercurial changes of mood, his stubborn refusal to admit his own sensitiveness and emotions, his cheerful disregard of what is sometimes known

as reality are typically and heart breakingly adolescent.

The author evidently takes a dim view of prep school life, and few writers have presented it with more effortless devastation. Holden's reminiscences and observations are short and to the point. "Pencey," he tells us, "was full of crooks. Quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families, but it was full of crooks anyway. The more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has. I'm not kidding." Holden is sometimes, but not for long, a little bitter, and it may be he has a tendency to generalize from too little evidence (in this case his camel's-hair coat had been stolen out of his room), but he has seen and done a lot for a 16-year-old, and a lot has been done to him. Mr. Salinger gives us a peek at Pencey's headmaster, who knows just which parents to talk with, which to ignore, gives a glimpse, too, of alumni and assorted students. Then there is a fine chapter in which Holden calls to say good-bye to an ancient teacher, an unlovable Mr. Chips without wisdom or imagination.

Poignant Reflections of Youth

In New York Holden's nightmarish efforts to escape from himself by liquor, sex, night clubs, movies, sociability—anything and everything—are fruitless. Misadventure piles on misadventure, but he bears it all with a grim cheerfulness and stubborn courage. He is finally saved as a result of his meeting with his little sister Phoebe, like Holden a wonderful creation. She is the single person who supplies—and just in time—the affection that Holden needs.

Certainly you'll look a long time before you'll meet another youngster like Holden Caulfield, as likable and, in spite of his failings, as sound. And though he's still not out of the woods entirely, there at the end, still we think he's going to turn out all right. We wouldn't even be surprised if he grew up to write a few books (he talks about books quite a lot), books like "Of Human Bondage," "Look Homeward, Angel," or "The Catcher in the Rye"—nothing so childish and innocent as "Seventeen," though.

A pretty good small volume of Holden's observations could be put together right now out of Mr. Salinger's book; call it "The Maxims and Moral Reflections of Holden Caulfield," say. Thus, On the Movies: "I can understand somebody going to the movies because there's nothing else to do, but when somebody really wants to go, then it depresses hell out of me." On Life Is a Game: "If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game." On Teachers: "You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher." On War: "I don't think I could stand it if I had to go to war. It wouldn't be so bad if they'd just take you out and shoot you, but you have to stay in the Army so * * * long."



J. D. Salinger

*THE CATCHER IN THE RYE. By J. D. Salinger. 277 pages. Little, Brown. \$3.