
Chris Kubica and Will Hochman, eds. *Letters to J.D. Salinger*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. 250p.

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Scholars overwhelmed with “must read” book towers will be delighted to know that at least one book safely can be placed in the “no need to read” stack. As a critical work, *Letters to J.D. Salinger* begins as a fraud and ends as a farce. Yet paradoxically, this collection of letters edited by Chris Kubica and Will Hochman yields as much genuine pleasure as it provokes deep annoyance. Additionally, *Letters* stimulates thought about the virtues of reader-response criticism even while it warns of its pitfalls.

Few are unaware of J.D. Salinger, whose highly lauded works including his sole novel *Catcher in the Rye* and collected short stories earned him iconic stature even before his decision to retreat from public life in 1965. Salinger’s refusal to grant interviews and to answer letters after sequestering himself in his New England estate prompted some devoted fans to become members of a kind of *literazzi*. (Some *literazzi* make pilgrimages to Salinger’s town in hope of catching a wry comment from their occasionally peripatetic idol.) Kubica and Hochman corral the collective desire of those who have something (generally flattering) to say to Salinger. Most of the letter writers in this collection know that the odds of Salinger’s reading the letters, let alone his responding to them, are remote at best. Besides an introduction by Kubica and an afterword (“Postscript: The Changing Art of Critical Response to the Fiction of J.D. Salinger”) by Hochman, *Letters to J.D. Salinger* is divided into three parts, letters written by “Writers & Readers,” by “Students & Teachers,” and by those who accepted invitations to write to Salinger “From the Web” site. Serious literary critics might not bother to read such a collection of letters. Such knowledge perhaps induced cover designers to produce the work’s deceptive dust jacket. The jacket promises “Letters to” (small thin letters, quite close together) “J.D.” (bolder, larger letters) “*Salinger*” (bodacious scripted letters, as in a signature, highlighted in orange, the only vibrant color on the truly attractive cover). A glance might trick a bookstore browser into believing the title reads “Letters of J.D. Salinger.” Even if one correctly deciphers the preposition, the prospective buyer still might believe the book contains letters to which Salinger has responded, or at least ones written by literary associates. Because the jacket design and title appear just shy of downright misleading, the work baits the reader with an oblique promise it never fulfills.

But even if tricked into buying the book, some readers might ultimately accept with gratitude the deception. Indeed, many of the letters prove so disarming that they compensate for other letters' irritating components, which include the propensity to hero-worship, imitation of Holden Caulfield's style, and a pathetic pleading for approval from Salinger, whom some writers have transformed into a silent-father figure. In a way, though, the *Letters*' structure mandates forgiveness of these aggravating traits, since each writer submits not a piece of literary criticism, but a personal missive. And although the letter format seemingly thwarts careful literary criticism, taken on the whole, *Letters* provides surprising insights about reading, responding to, and teaching literature. Lee K. Abbott, for example, decries the influence of Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" on contemporary writers. Abbott complains that "by letting Seymour [the story's protagonist] blow his brains all over room 507 ... [Salinger] gave every generation thereafter of would-be writers a far too convenient way to end every story.... The world is too much with you? Well, Bunky, put a noose around the neck" (27). Abbott further maintains that "Seymour, of course, has become an analogue for every young writer who imagines himself too smart, too sensitive, and too spiritual for this vale of etceteras" (28). As a published author and director of Ohio State's MFA creative-writing program, Abbott must derive from experience and from shrewd observation his assessment of Salinger's influence. But traditional critical forums would not have provided a venue for Abbott's insightful commentary, nor would they for Molly McQuade's eloquent praise of Salinger's frequent use of parentheses in the telling of Seymour's story via his brother, Buddy Glass. McQuade maintains that parentheses "safeguard paradox for Buddy without interrupting the momentum of the pages. They contain a contrary idea without squeezing or betraying it.... Like prayer, denunciation, revelation, or poetry, [Salinger's] writing *shows* what it is: the hopping soul of Buddy, landing briefly" (31). Many letter writers discuss how profoundly *Catcher in the Rye* has shaped their lives and their writing. Since *Letters* invites readers to respond to Salinger in any fashion desired, the resultant reader-response approach permits literary discussions refreshingly uninhibited by critical propriety and theoretical cant. But the book also provokes disturbing questions about culture's perennial misappropriation of fictional characters and its inability to apprehend the difference between art and artist. Several letters, for example, allude to the fact that Mark Chapman, a Salinger devotee, carried a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* with him when he murdered John Lennon. Other letters fail to distinguish between Salinger and his characters. Some letter writers doggedly, even if amusingly, defend Salinger's personal actions and grant him sainthood. In these instances, reader-response criticism results in a naïveté

that allows not a molecule of aesthetic distance. The subjective free-for-all towards the end of the book also permits publication of some farcical unedited letters from barely literate adolescents. One letter simply reads,

“ppppppppppppppppphhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhffftttttttttt” (206).

The work contains an undeniable charm. Both provocative and amusing at times, *Letters to J.D.* Salinger advocates an armchair criticism that strives to bridge the gap between educated readers and seasoned critics. Yet for the scholar struggling to read a library full of essential works, I maintain that this volume can be removed from one's obligatory reading list. However, one could do far worse than to place it on the very top of the “if-I-ever-find-the-time” stack. ✱