Why J.D. Salinger's 'Catcher in the Rye' still provokes book bans

In 1951, the novel was anti-everyone. But the profanity and sex are pretty tame for these times. So why has it provoked adult outrage for so many decades?

By Daniel Jack Chasan

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When I read earlier this year that J.D. Salinger had died, I remembered Holden Caulfield, the alienated teenage narrator of his 1951 novel, The Catcher in the Rye, riding in a cab through Manhattan — a key literary image of my own adolescence (although of course the book’s appeal lay not in its images but in its attitude). I also thought of book banning — that peculiarly American pastime in which Catcher has played such a prominent part since the mid-20th century — which figured significantly in my adolescence, too.

Recalling Salinger in The New Yorker, Adam Gopnik writes about a man in his 40s who loved Catcher in the Rye but feared that his own son would find the milieu too distant to connect. No problem: “the boy grasped it to his heart as his father had, as the Rough Guide to his experience.”

It seems remarkable that a novel presumably based partly on Salinger’s own prep school experience before World War II has spoken so strongly to kids growing up generations later, and just as strongly — albeit in different ways — to people who worried about those kids’ moral development. Despite the profanity and sex, it’s also hard to see why a relatively tame book of that vintage kept provoking adult outrage long after sex and drugs and rock-and-roll became integrated into the adolescent lifestyle. But the history speaks for itself:

“Selected in 1963 by the U.S. Information Service as ‘one of the 12 post-World War II American novels most likely to last,’” Pamela Hunt Steinle writes in In Cold Fear, “by 1981 Catcher had the dubious distinction of being at once the most frequently censored book across the country and the second most frequently taught novel in the public schools.”

“What makes [Catcher in the Rye] especially interesting,” the BBC observed in 2003, “is that it has been banned in many countries at one time or another and still remains on the banned list in areas of the USA. As well as containing ‘vulgar and obscene language’, drunkenness, prostitution, delinquency and references to sex it has also been accused of being: ‘anti-white’ (1963 - Columbus, Ohio), being part of a ‘communist plot to gain a foothold in schools’ (1978 - Issaquah, Washington). . . . Catcher in the Rye gained even more notoriety in 1981 when Mark Chapman approached John Lennon on the steps of the Dakota Hotel, New York and shot him five times killing him. Chapman then removed his copy of Catcher in the Rye from his pocket, signed by Lennon earlier that morning, and tried to read it.”

“Since its publication,” the American Library Association (ALA) says on its website, “[Catcher in the Rye] has been a favorite target of censors.” The site then lists a long series of bannings and attempted bannings from 1960 to 2001. “In 1960,” it says, “a teacher in Tulsa, Okla. was fired for assigning the book to an eleventh grade English class. The teacher appealed and was reinstated.
In the eye of the right beholder, it turned out to be anti-almost everyone. The ALA reports that it was "[c]hallenged in the Waterloo, Iowa schools (1992) and Duval County, Fla. public school libraries (1992) because of profanity, lurid passages about sex, and statements defamatory to minorities, God, women, and the disabled." The book was also "[c]hallenged as required reading in the Corona Norco, Calif. Unified School District (1993) because it is 'centered around negative activity'" and "[r]emoved by a Dorchester District 2 school board member in Summerville, SC (2001) because it 'is a filthy, filthy book.'" And, oh yes, as we already know, it was "[r]emoved from the Issaquah, Wash. Optional High School reading list" too.

The Issaquah board members who voted to ban the book were quickly recalled, but not before the community attracted its 5 minutes of unwelcome fame. Actually, Issaquah probably became less of a laughingstock than Federal Way did some 30 years later when its school board imposed a moratorium on showings of former Vice President Al Gore's film about climate change, An Inconvenient Truth. This was evidently the first time that any school district in the country had banned or limited the showing of the film.

A teacher had already shown it, and a parent had complained. According to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, "[b]oard members adopted a three-point policy that says teachers who want to show the movie must ensure that a 'credible, legitimate opposing view will be presented,' that they must get the OK of the principal and the superintendent, and that any teachers who have shown the film must now present an 'opposing view.'" This might have sounded less silly if the board had responded to a citizen skeptical of Gore's scientific data. But the board was responding to a Christian fundamentalist who said Gore's film didn't acknowledge that in the prophesied 'end times,' the Earth was supposed to get hot. The Post-Intelligencer quoted "Frosty Hardison, a parent of seven who also said that he believes the Earth is 14,000 years old. 'The information that's being presented is a very cockeyed view of what the truth is. ... The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up, but that perspective isn't in the DVD.'"

I don't know what kind of parental objection led administrators in my own upstate New York high school to ban Catcher in the Rye. It probably wasn't religious — we didn't hear much about religious objections in that time and place — but it may well have been moral. In sophomore English, everyone read Catcher. I wasn't in the room when it was removed bodily from the curriculum, but we all heard how it had happened: An enthusiastic young English teacher relatively fresh from Princeton was up in front of the class talking about Catcher in the Rye when the head of the English department walked in and literally took the book out of his hands. We never heard who had objected or why the book had been banned.

The head of the English department, Bill, was a good guy. He was a stocky former farm boy from farther upstate who wound up teaching at the UMass-Amherst School of Education. During World War II, he had been stationed for a while at Fort Lewis, where he had managed to drive a tank into a large Douglas Fir. The tank was totaled. The tree was fine. Soon after college, when I told him I was moving to the Northwest, he encouraged me. (My own father said he'd never speak to me again, but that's a different story.) Any place that grew trees big enough to wreck a tank was OK with him. I considered him a friend. But he knew which side of his bread was buttered, and he did what the administration told him to do.

(He didn't always do it very enthusiastically, though. In my junior year, when I was editing the school paper, some southern black kids who had just participated in the sit-ins came north to generate publicity and, I assume, raise money. They held a press conference in New York for high school journalists. I went and wrote an article about them. Bill had obviously been told to talk me out of publishing it. He explained that no one wanted to suppress the content of my article, No, no, the piece just wasn't my best work, and maybe I should think twice about making it public. Even at age 16, I knew I was being conned, and I was sure he knew I knew it. I basically ignored his suggestion. He never mentioned the article again.)
I wound up working with him the next time the school banned a book. The work in question was Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, another favorite of book banners. A girl in our class had taken the book home. Her mother had picked it up, opened it at random — she had never read it — and encountered a description of men and women naked in a shower. She had called the superintendent of schools. The superintendent had done the rest.

I and my friends talked about using the school paper to make an issue of the book banning. We could write a blistering editorial, launch a crusade. At the very least, we could leave the editorial page symbolically blank. Bill begged me not to publish anything, not to make a public issue of the banning, just yet. He wanted time to negotiate a compromise. If he failed, we could publish something in a later issue. I said OK.

But I and my friends did make an appointment to talk with the superintendent of schools. On the morning of our appointment, I got there early and sat in the outer office, waiting for my friends to show up. They never did.

So I went in to see the superintendent by myself. I knew him a little — he had a son in my class, and it was a small community — and after we chatted a while, he told me a story. He and his wife had been visiting friends who ran the local mortuary. (The mortician had once been a football star at our high school, and he still hung around high school and even junior high football practices. Even in my early teens, I knew this wasn’t healthy. When I first read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s description in *The Great Gatsby* of Daisy’s husband, the former college football star Tom Buchanan — “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax” — I thought of him.)

The superintendent and his wife arrived early, and the mortician was running late, so the superintendent, whose own father had been a mortician, went down to the basement to help out. The body he found down there belonged to a small black child. The superintendent told me that when he saw that small, black body, he had cried. As a high school junior, I had not expected the superintendent of schools to share that kind of moment with me. But I knew why he had done it. Civil rights was the defining issue of the time, and how a white person felt about people of other races placed him clearly on the political spectrum. Therefore, the superintendent’s story not only showed he was sensitive; it also showed he was basically pretty liberal — which was, of course, completely irrelevant.

Bill did manage to work out a compromise: Anyone whose family didn’t object could read *Brave New World*; anyone whose family objected could read something else.

Which actually wasn’t a bad solution. It was basically the result of the one book-banning campaign that I saw close-up as an adult. A 6th-grader had hanged himself on the school playground, hidden from drivers passing on the main highway by a one-story 1950s classroom building with an unusual concave roof. Some people chose to consider it an accident. Most considered it a suicide.

An English teacher at the high school subsequently assigned the novel *Ordinary People* to his students. Most of the book’s characters are high school students. The lead character has just returned to school from a mental hospital after trying to commit suicide. Before the novel ends, a girl he had known in the hospital does kill herself. To provide a sense of authenticity, the author puts a modest range of four-letter words into the students’ mouths.

The couple that had lost a son showed passages from the book to people at their church, pointing out the four-letter words and collecting signatures on a petition. With a list of names in hand, they went to see the English teacher. He capitulated immediately. I don’t think he pulled the book entirely; he just said that anyone whose family objected didn’t have to read it. While the petition drive had focused on the four-letter words, it was hard not to think that what really disturbed the couple was the preoccupation with suicide.

But I digress. Or maybe I don’t. It’s often hard to believe that the book itself is the only issue
when irate citizens try to get one pulled out of the classroom or off the shelves. Whatever the reason — or reasons — Salinger's novel seems to have triggered the book-banning impulse more frequently than most. In this country, that's saying something. At the first meeting of our local school board — of which I'm a member — after Salinger's death, I proposed banning *The Catcher in the Rye*. For old times sake. People seemed to like the idea, but no one made a motion. Oh well. It seemed the least I could do.

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