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Unself-Conscious Voices: Larger Contexts for Adolescents

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Hemingway is often quoted as saying that all American literature comes

from one book and that that book is *Huckleberry Finn*.¹ Whether one agrees about "all American literature," it is clear that that is where Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* comes from. And one can say, in dubious celebration of Salinger, that *The Catcher in the Rye* is the one book that the adolescent novel comes from. It is a difficult, deceptive heritage: satirical and ostensibly designed to offer a clearer mode of life and thought than that which the heroes witness. But certainly in Salinger's case, and very possibly in Twain's before him, there really are no alternatives. One's only salvation is to remain a child.

Even in his works about the Glass Family,² where he has turned to the adult world, Salinger is still celebrating childhood. While the Glass family can get quickly under one's skin, the books ultimately do not satisfy because the characters never quite get past what Zooey himself termed their "tenthrate nervous breakdowns," never accepting or confronting the ills of the adult world that so oppress them. They remain Salinger's children, sanctified and damaged by their sensibilities.

In all of Salinger's work, children alone offer solace to his tormented characters: twelve-year-old Esme is the only one of the narrator/Sergeant X's correspondents who can help him; Seymour Glass, the oldest of the Glass family children, now unhappily married, has a sad tryst in the ocean at Miami Beach with a little girl named Sybil before he blows his brains out. The family reminisces about Franny sitting in the kitchen as a child, having a small glass of milk with Jesus. And of course there is Holden's younger sister Phoebe, dressed in her pajamas with the elephants on the collar, urging Holden to face his parents—if not his problems. These are the ideal characters in Salinger's world, and adults are appealing insofar as they share the qualities and voice of childhood. Franny and Zooey, for all **[End Page 89]** their sophistication, are still pained children. Zooey's small, beautiful back—observed mostly by his mother who sits talking to him as he takes a bath—suggests a child's; Franny recovers from her depression by listening, open-mouthed, on the phone to her brother Zooey, who disguises his voice as their brother Buddy's and tells her the old adage of their brother Seymour that she

should live for the fat lady, because the fat lady is Christ. Seized and calmed by the truth of that simple notion, Franny climbs into her father's empty bed and goes beatifically to sleep. How comfortably, innocently incestuous they all are. "It's a Wise Child," the radio program on which each of the Glass family in turn spouted their wisdom, might be the name of any of Salinger's works.

The casual reader might be beguiled into the belief that Salinger's nay-saying characters are simply confused and short-sighted and that the author is implying they can mature and change. Zooey's pep talks with his sister—self-mocking, ironic, good humored—sound optimistic. But Salinger's humor comes more from desperation than distance. The unhappiness Holden feels because of his intolerance for compromise and his discomfort with sexuality cannot easily be helped. There is no successful model for him. One either compromises or goes under. And none of the Glass family is doing much better. Their fat lady—in the prophetic Seymour's extended description—has cancer and sits on her porch listening to the radio. In the face of this dismal vision, the Glass family must simply bear up under their crown of thorns.

In terms of what he finds acceptable, Salinger is not, in fact, very far from Lewis Carroll. He has much more sympathy for the compromises of the common man, but no more hope. Yet, like Carroll, he is authentic. He may have descended from Twain, but he is not an imitator. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of his descendants. The idiosyncracies—not to...

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