

I arrived at the Manuscripts Desk fifteen minutes before it opened. I didn't know the name of the librarian who eventually opened the desk, but she looked familiar.

She spent an age rummaging through a folder of request slips as I eyed the trolley of retrievals, trying to read the spine labels on the plastic folders and work out which one was mine, which one was going to bring me the further adventures of Holden. I thought I could sense its presence just there on the trolley. But I couldn't, because the librarian finally found my request slip and, frowning, said words which made my heart sink.

'There's a problem with this one. Yes, I'm afraid you won't be able to view that manuscript.'

'Why not?'

She showed me the slip, pointing at a brutal stamp over it. 'Scholars only,' she said. 'The manager has ruled that only scholars are allowed to view that manuscript.'

'But I work here! I've taken the day off to read it!'

She bit her lip. 'Um, I don't think there's anything I can do about that.'

I sighed and walked away. I felt so frustrated at the library that I didn't care about rules or consequences. I had my swipe-card on my belt and they weren't going to stop me reading the manuscript.

No-one was in the corridor when I got to Rare Book Room 13. I swiped my card. I half expected sirens to start wailing but none did. The room and the lock were indifferent to my intent.

The thick door closed behind me. How much oxygen was in the room? Was it airtight? The room was dark, something I wasn't expecting for some reason. I felt around for a light switch. The walls were rough and dry and covered in a film of dust. I found the light switch, an old stiff one like a small lever. Pools of light appeared through the Rare Book Room. The ceiling felt extra low in the scant light.

Pulling the Salinger manuscript from the shelf, I marvelled at having it in my hands once again. I sat down in the black armchair, the leather smell comforting. It seemed there should be some ceremony for commencing to read it, but it's difficult for me to be ceremonious by myself and so I just started.

You wouldn't pick Salinger for a sentimentalist - or maybe you would - but Holden meets up with Jane Gallagher and she is everything he thought she was; she still likes to play draughts by piling up all her kings in the back row and she didn't let Stradlater give her the time.

Holden meets up with her and they get to live out his fantasy of escape from the phony world. With the money that was meant to put him through college, he buys a shack in the woods in upstate New York, chopping wood for the fire and fishing for their dinner. She starts a vegetable garden. He goes

for long walks through the woods and writes poems about the natural world that he won't even show her; they're only for himself. Once a week they go into town to buy supplies and borrow library books.

But the romance of their rustic life fades; they get so broke that she starts giving piano lessons. When they still don't have enough money, he half-heartedly tries for a few jobs without success. She ends up working in the bakery. He is bored and frustrated. They start arguing; she tries to incite him into doing something. Their dream is being dismantled and the passive voice is the only way to even say it, because who is dismantling their idyll? They aren't doing it themselves, exactly. It's not just their circumstances either. It's the way of things, the entropy and unhappiness built into the world.

Despite the sadness of the situation, I felt myself resonating with the story Salinger was telling. I spent my teens and twenties thinking it was finding my soulmate that gave life meaning and that when I found her the happily ever after would just happen. But now that I had Anita, I was discovering that the quest for a soulmate was so much easier than living with a soulmate.

Just as I was wondering (and fearing) how Salinger would resolve the situation he had set up for his characters, the story takes a dramatic turn.

I'm not proud of what I did, and that's to put it lightly. I didn't sleep at all that night, I was just watching her and all, and I was wondering if I could ever do what I was going to do. But you can do anything, in the end, if you think you have to. Even something you know's the worst thing you could ever do.

I was feeling pretty lousy at myself. I just figured I was the biggest phony of them all, and if Jane couldn't see it, then I had to take action myself.

I crept out just as the sun was rising. I was walking along the dirt road and I was crying, because the sun didn't even seem to know what I was doing. I kept on walking and then I got on a bus and it's like I'd just closed off my heart, because I didn't feel anything or see anything.

And with these words Holden embarks on his new quest for authenticity. It becomes a ten year odyssey. He spends some time as a bartender in Minnesota; it suits his personality better than living in the woods, because as much as he hates people he also loves them, he loves chewing the fat with the hunters and the workers, the travelling salesman and the drifters. In a scene that made me smile, he even has Holden slip some whisky into a coke for a twelve year-old Robert Zimmerman, who plays his harmonica for him. Holden likes Zimmerman but thinks he's got a big mouth for a kid so young. I didn't know Salinger was a Bob Dylan fan.

As he always will, Holden gets itchy feet, and after he racks up a hefty gambling debt in a disastrous poker game, he catches a Greyhound bus across the border to Canada. He spends time in a Canadian commune, shacking up with a feminist poet; but he still can't get Jane Gallagher out of his head. When the commune dissolves after a drug bust, he flies out to Australia, spending some time working at a petrol station in the outback. At this point, he starts writing obsessively to Jane Gallagher; he doesn't get any replies but he keeps sending the letters.

I'd become so absorbed in the story I'd lost track of time and I'd stopped worrying if anyone was going to come through the door and catch me here. I looked at my watch. It was nearly five o'clock. I sent a text message to Anita to say I'd be very late home, knowing she probably wouldn't read it. But she must have read it, because my phone started ringing after that. I turned it off and tensed, waiting for someone to burst in the door.

My absorption lost, I was no longer in a reading mood. It made me frustrated, because I wanted to be reading these precious pages in the perfect frame of mind, with total concentration and the patient hunger that lets me move in the flow of the words. But instead I was reading to finish, impatient to get to the end and feel that I had conquered the manuscript, that I could add it to the list of books I had read.

As the 1960s start, Holden returns to New York City. He finds Jane abandoned by her husband with two young children. After much pleading and months of careful, selfless friendship, he convinces her to take him back, to let him prove to her that not all men are bastards.

There is a perfect moment to end the story, with Jane and Holden marrying. But Salinger maintains his insight that that's only the beginning, and in a clumsy, lengthy postscript, provides sketches of their married life through the sixties and seventies as they struggle to hold things together while Holden's career as a travel writer takes off.

It was an unsatisfying but realistic ending. I only wished Salinger had taken the time to put the work through a few more drafts, to let it sparkle with the easygoing perfection of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I sat in the leather chair staring at the rows of manuscripts. I wasn't sure what to do in the wake of the end of the story. I'd lived in Holden's world all day. Never again would I learn for the first time everything that happened to him after *Catcher*. I'd just been through an unrepeatable experience. And there was no-one in the world to try to explain it to.

I realised that the question Salinger was trying to answer in "Holden Rides Again" was my question too. The question goes something like, 'What comes after the quest for authenticity?' Because when you're sixteen and you're on that quest for the first time, it's all fresh and poetic. You're up against the world for the first time and you can afford to make an enemy of everyone, or at least you think you can.

But what comes next? It's impossible to live that intensely forever. You have to make choices in the end, instead of just deciding everything's too phony to choose anything. And your choices, if you could see them at sixteen, they might look like terrible compromises with the world.