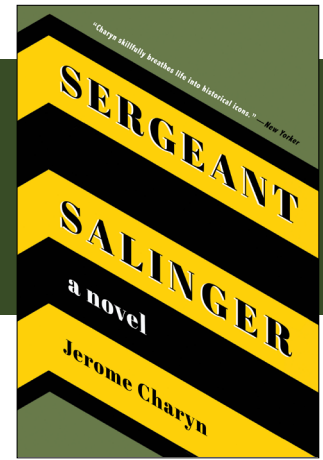




## Sergeant Salinger

A novel by Jerome Charyn

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“*Sergeant Salinger* is a gift for anyone who would like to know more about the author who made Holden Caulfield a classroom name. . . . If you feel about Salinger as I do, I hope you will visit the pages of this insightful novel if for no other reason than to enjoy a great story.”  
—Linda Bond, Auntie’s Bookstore (Spokane, WA)

“[A] literary tour de force. . . . Charyn vividly portrays [J.D. Salinger’s] journey from slick short story writer to suffering artist. The winning result humanizes a legend.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“This supremely engaging novel leaves us with a new, sometimes heart-rending understanding of [J.D. Salinger] and the times in which he came of age.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Charyn deftly leaves the reader wondering whether Holden Caulfield’s teenage angst was really Salinger’s personification of post-traumatic stress disorder.” —*Library Journal*

“Two intriguing suggestions are buried deeply in the story that Charyn tells so compellingly in *Sergeant Salinger*. One is that Salinger could have but chose not to write one of the great war novels of the twentieth century. (In a real sense, Charyn has done it for him.) The other is that Salinger’s experience of war drove him to explore only the inner lives of the characters he invented and to hide his own inner life from the generations of readers who revere him.” —*Jewish Journal*

### INTRODUCTION

J.D. Salinger, mysterious author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is remembered today as a reclusive misanthrope. Jerome Charyn’s *Sergeant Salinger* is a young American WWII draftee assigned to the Counter Intelligence Corps, a band of secret soldiers who trained with the British. A rifleman and an interrogator, he witnessed all the horrors of the war—from the landing on D-Day to the relentless hand-to-hand combat in the hedgerows of Normandy, to the Battle of the Bulge, and finally to the first Allied entry into a Bavarian death camp, where corpses were piled like cordwood.

After the war, interned in a Nuremberg psychiatric clinic, Salinger became enchanted with a suspected Nazi informant. They married, but not long after he brought her home to New York, the marriage collapsed. Maladjusted to civilian life, he lived like a “spook,” with invisible stripes on his shoulder, the ghosts of the murdered inside his head, and stories to tell.

Grounded in biographical fact and reimagined as only Charyn could, *Sergeant Salinger* is an astonishing portrait of a devastated young man on his way to becoming the mythical figure behind a novel that has marked generations.

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. When we meet J. D. “Sonny” Salinger in the first scene, we learn that he’s the son of a wealthy family and already an accomplished writer, but he’s still disparaged by some as a “Yid,” a Jew. How is he perceived in the social scene of Manhattan? Among his fellow soldiers in Devon?
2. Oona O’Neill is sixteen when we first meet her at the Stork Club, the “Debutante of the Year” surrounded by powerful older men. What agency does she have at the club, despite her young age? What do you make of Sonny’s infatuation with her?
3. Salinger is introduced in the book by Oona as “one of my beaux, Sonny Salinger, the short-story writer.” His first line is one of defiance: “Sir,’ Sonny said, standing up and towering over the table at six feet two and a half. ‘I can defend myself.’” Can he? Is the novel a defense of his legacy?



4. Ernest Hemingway makes a couple of cameo appearances in the novel, first at the Stork Club in Manhattan and then at the Ritz in wartime Paris. How does Charyn portray the Nobel Prize–winning writer? How does he measure up to Sonny’s starstruck admiration? To your own image of the legendary author?
5. Charyn only chooses to describe the true horrors of the war in select scenes, like the aftermath of the concentration camp Kaufering Lager IV. How did these powerful descriptions of violence and agony affect how you read the sections set in the social scene of New York? How does the trauma of the war echo throughout Salinger’s life?
6. At the concentration camp, Sonny reflects that he needs to “*Look for the narrative*. That’s what his instructors always told him.” How would you describe the narrative of Sonny’s life?
7. Sonny’s mother calls Sylvia, Sonny’s first wife and a suspected Gestapo informant, “Dracula’s Daughter” in the novel. How does she compare to his first love, Oona? Do you think the Salingers’ treatment of her is justified?
8. When Doris, Sonny’s sister, meets with him in the final chapter, she realizes “that writing had become his sole religion, his sacred quest. He’d returned from the war with a sadness that chiseled his features, until half his face was in shadow, except for his big ears.” How has his character changed? Why is writing so essential to him?
9. Sonny complains to Doris about feeling used by the magazines he writes for. “I’m not going to write for the slicks anymore. I’ve had it. They change my titles, and run amuck with my prose. I’m a piece of merchandise.” How has Salinger and his work been co-opted by the public? Did you find that the novel demystifies the man, or does it elevate him to even more epic proportions?
10. Salinger admitted that his famous novel, *A Catcher in the Rye*, was at least somewhat autobiographical. Did you find any echoes of that novel in his life as portrayed in *Sergeant Salinger*? What about his celebrated short stories such as “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” and “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”?
11. Toward the end of *Sergeant Salinger*, Charyn writes that “Sonny was the same bar mitzvah boy, with a black turtleneck instead of a silk prayer shawl. . . . He’d always be that bar mitzvah boy who fell from grace, the cadet from Valley Forge who began writing stories in the middle of the night with a flashlight under his blanket, an errant sergeant major with his lone degree.” Has Sonny changed at all throughout the novel? How much can anyone escape their past and reshape their identity?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerome Charyn is the author of more than fifty works of fiction and nonfiction, including *Sergeant Salinger*; *Cesare: A Novel of War-Torn Berlin*; *In the Shadow of King Saul: Essays on Silence and Song*; *Jerzy: A Novel*; and *A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century*. Among other honors, his work has been longlisted for the PEN Award for Biography, shortlisted for the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Award, and selected as finalists for the Firecracker Award and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. Charyn has also been named a Commander of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture and received a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He lives in New York. Visit his website at [www.jeromecharyn.com](http://www.jeromecharyn.com).

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