

Work ethic: Fifty years of Salinger

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

I read *The Catcher in the Rye* when I was in college. J.D. Salinger's book, published in 1951, has sold more than 65 million copies and still sells 250,000 a year. *Catcher* became required reading for a whole generation. The antihero of the book, Holden Caulfield, remains a cult hero for some.

A few years ago I performed a wedding for a couple that was so enamored with the character of Holden Caulfield that they called each other "Holden," asked me to read their favorite passages from *Catcher* instead of delivering a homily, and wanted to refer to each other as "Holden" when they said their vows. I managed to talk them out of the latter. I did agree to use an excerpt from *Catcher* as an illustration in my homily.

Salinger, who died in January, lived a very private life after the success of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Besides *Catcher* he published only one collection of stories and one slim novel. He moved to a small town in New Hampshire and avoided the press. In one of his last interviews to the *New York Times* in 1974 he said, "There is a marvelous peace in not publishing. It's peaceful. . . . Publishing is a terrible invasion of my privacy. I like to write. I love to write. But I write for myself and my own pleasure."

Why didn't Salinger produce more? That mystery has intrigued me, and I was delighted to see Garrison Keillor address this issue in one of his recent newspaper columns. The topic was hard work, or lack of the same. On Salinger, Keillor commented: "No American author ever held onto such fame for so long for having done so little work."

While Salinger was hiding away in New Hampshire, Joyce Carol Oates, Philip Roth and John Updike were working away, cranking out book after book. Updike brought the Protestant work ethic to his art with astonishing results. He produced about a novel every year, plus poetry, essays, short stories, literary criticism and book reviews. He was writing poetry in his hospital bed until the day he died. Updike gave us an example of what Luther and Calvin meant by vocation. He understood that

God gives every person gifts and expects them to be used for the common good. Using your gifts is your vocation. "Don't hide your light under a bushel," Jesus said. "Let it shine."

So what was Salinger doing for 50 years? Was he sulking, pouting, doing crossword puzzles all day long?

It turns out he was writing. According to his daughter Margaret, Salinger wrote a lot and had a detailed filing system for his unpublished manuscripts. "A red mark meant, 'if I die before I finish my work, publish as is,' blue meant 'publish but edit first.'" One of Salinger's neighbors said that the author told him he had 15 unpublished novels in the files.

Keillor concluded his essay: "I still believe in hard work. It's more fun and a better way of life." It turns out Salinger may have believed in that too. We don't know what is in those manuscripts, but maybe he too kept using his gifts.