**Rye catches criticism from Left to Right**

Once deemed too graphic and subversive for school curricula, *The Catcher in the Rye* is now being tossed aside for books with a more multicultural perspective.

**By LINDA BORG**

Meg Freitag has this total crush on Holden Caulfield. She dreams about him, imagines conversations they might have over the late-night lattes. Meg even argues with her friend, Carly, about who deserves to be Holden's girlfriend.

“My love for Holden is true,” says Meg, a senior at Portsmouth High School. “He’s such a great person. He uses such great words. Carly’s love is based on his physical characteristics.”

“Meg has a crush on him.” Carly VanHof retorts, “but she doesn’t realize that she is worthy of such a man.”

Holden Caulfield, the teenager of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is an enduring symbol of adolescent angst.

His obscenity-laden rants about his phonies, parents and prep school have resonated with successive generations of teenagers, who see their own uneasy mix of cynicism and romantic longing in Holden’s tortured personality.

For several decades conservatives have painted *The Catcher in the Rye* as the ultimate subversive novel—too racy, too graphic—too anti-establishment.

Now, the attacks are coming from the left, as high school educators drop the J.D. Salinger classic in favor of fiction that reflects a more multi-cultural perspective.

“Very few people bother with it anymore,” said Sharon Michaelopoulos, who chairs the English department at Cumberland High School. “They say it's because children have stopped responding to it. It gets mixed reviews from the students. They find it dated.”

Why teach Salinger when there are so many other authors out there whose experience speaks more directly to teenagers from places like Southeast Asia or the Caribbean?

"With our population, it’s very hard to get students to relate to Holden,” said Alan Anderson, chairwoman of the English department at Central High School. “There are so many great books out there to teach. If we all kept reading the same things, you'd wonder if we were moving forward.”

The movement to expand the canon of the literature has made a real impact on high school curriculums, said Jonathan Goodman, English department chair man at Hope High School in Providence.

Twenty years ago, students only read white, male authors in high school. Now, coming-of-age classics like *A Separate Peace* are giving way to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. 
“You have to ask, what makes a book great?” Goodman said. The Catcher in the Rye is a good book but it's not a pair with the great Gatsby. You teach Gatsby because of its commentary of the American dream.

Too many English teachers, the very thought of dropping Salinger from the syllabus is heresy, pure and simple.

"The whole politically correct thing always kills me," said Brian Robert, who chairs the English department at Classical High School in Providence. "Canonical literature exists for a reason. There are texts that speak to us because they are timeless.

The dust up over The Catcher in the Rye is part of a much larger debate that has consumed English department on college campuses for more than a decade.

The discussion revolves around two questions: What is literature and what is it supposed to accomplish?

The debate has pitted colleague against colleague, with traditionalists arguing that great books bring people together and celebrate what is universal, and multiculturalists contending that literature should teach about other cultures and honor the difference between them.

Nancy Armstrong, chairwoman of the English department at Brown University, said it's foolish to think that the teaching of literature is an either-or proposition.

"I think the debate is excellent," she said. "High schools should be asking, ‘Why are we reading this?’ Rather than proclaiming the greatness of any text.

Most English teachers agree with Armstrong. Locally, high school English departments are trying to balance classics such as The Catcher in the Rye where fresh voices like Sandra Cisnero’s The House on Mango Street. “We do Salinger but we also do August Wilson," said Patricia Ustick, chair of the English department at Portsmouth High School. "The whole idea of holding being a white, privileged male may be valid, but that's not a reason to eliminate the novel. In fact, it can promote a discussion about whether he remains an everyman for this generation.”

The students discussed how Holden hates phonies and yet always pretends to be someone else, how his defiance masks and underlying innocence, expressed by his desire to be “the catcher in the rye.”

"What does Holden he about Hollywood?” Frankel asked.

“They're all sellouts, they act conceited,” one student said.

"Here's another contradiction, "Frankel explained. "He hates phonies and yet he is very self-dramatizing.

What do you think of the book the class is asked. Should schools continue to teach it?

Most students said yes.

"Where all teenagers, "said Matthew Carrier. "You feel with him and you understand why he feels that way.”

"If you're complaining about the book because Holden is white and middle class," added David Gorman. "Well, That's our school. “

It's obvious these students get Salinger.
Forget the debate about the novel’s relevance. Frankel said some of her students are living holdings life right now, with all of its emotional turbulence and indecision.

Perhaps the reason why the *Catcher in the Rye* endures is because it still has power to provoke.

“*Catcher in The Rye* has been attacked by the right and now the left,” said Claudia Eagan, chairwoman of Woonsocket high school's English department. “That says something about Salinger's relevance. He survives every battle.”