

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



American Fiction

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds

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About the Book

Catch 22 by Joseph Heller, *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee and *Native Son* by Richard Wright: this guide deals with the themes, genre and narrative technique within these four classic American novels. A close reading and comparison of the texts provides a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels. Also included in this guide are detailed reading plans for all four novels, questions for essays and discussion, contextual material, suggested texts for complementary and comparative reading, a critical overview, a biography, bibliography and a glossary of literary terms.

About the Editors

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

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VINTAGE
LIVING
TEXTS

American Fiction

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE

Native Son – Richard Wright

To Kill A Mockingbird – Harper Lee

The Catcher in the Rye – J. D. Salinger

Catch-22 – Joseph Heller


V I N T A G E

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text – without ever telling you what to think.

Content

Usually the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution

may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

In the case of *American Fiction* we have included an account drawn from published interviews with, or prefaces by, Harper Lee, Richard Wright and Joseph Heller to offer some perspective on their literary opinions, methods and preoccupations. For J. D. Salinger we have included an account of his silence on his work and treated that silence as, in itself, a comment.

Most of the titles in the series are author-focused and cover at least three novels by that writer, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material. With *American Fiction* we are catering for a particular school and college audience who often study these four key works of twentieth-century fiction, either together or separately.

How to use this series

In the reading plans that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In which case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are

reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Make up' or 'Write'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an exam. In that case, you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. But whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides will be like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and for GCE A-level and International Baccalaureate English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can be easily selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways that the awarding

bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and hope that they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references to *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catch-22* refer to the Vintage editions. Page references to *The Catcher in the Rye* refer to the paperback Penguin edition.

American Fiction

Introduction

'The truth about Salinger was always there, in his fiction.'

ONE OF THE guiding principles of the *Vintage Living Texts* series is to establish the idea of the author as a 'reader' of his or her own fictions. We suggest that the authors offer insights into their fiction, but that they provide no definitive version of their own texts. You, the reader, should be in charge of your own interpretation. As an intelligent reader you draw upon as many resources – historical, literary, biographical or personal – as you possibly can to make your reading as sophisticated as it can be.

This text has particular differences from the rest of the *Vintage Living Texts* series, as there is no exclusive interview with any of the writers included. However, this provides a special opportunity to focus on what it means to 'speak to', or read an interview with, an author. 'Interviews and silences' examines how you deal with the comments of an author, as it analyses Richard Wright's essay 'How "Bigger" Was Born' (which is included in your Vintage edition of the novel). It also considers the consequence of an author's silence or refusal to speak on their own text. The introduction, therefore, leaves the discussion of the author's role to 'Interviews and silences', and, instead, offers you a concise biography of the four authors featured here. It then takes you through the conceptual link that

brings reading guides for *Native Son*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Catch-22* together in one text.

The first text covered in this collection is Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Originally published in March 1940, it became an instant best-seller. Born in 1908 in Natchez, Mississippi, Wright was the older of two boys and raised by his mother, his father having left when the boys were small. Wright's childhood was framed by the necessity of moving from town to town while his mother searched for work, and by the segregation laws of the Southern states. He fled the South and its treatment of the black population, and settled in Chicago at the age of nineteen. In Chicago he struggled to find work, read avidly, and became an active member of the Communist Party. The influence of this political affiliation is clear in *Native Son*.

Six years after the publication of *Native Son*, Wright published his memoir, entitled *Black Boy*, and in its successful aftermath he visited France, where he was to settle for the rest of his life. Wright became a central member of the Paris literati, associating with the likes of James Baldwin and Simone de Beauvoir.

In terms of Wright's literary heritage *Native Son* is, by far, his most famous novel, but *Uncle Tom's Children* – written in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – is also important. This text helps the reader to establish what Wright is writing against, what he disassociates himself from, as well as his political aspirations as revealed in *Native Son*. He spent the majority of his writing life attempting to present to the reader the frameworks of oppression he identified. Wright did not regard 'racism' as a Southern or even an American problem, but rather as a hierarchy securing white cultural and political supremacy.

Wright died at the age of fifty-two, in 1960, the year Harper Lee's novel, also about the segregated South in 1930s America, was published. Harper Lee was born on 28 April 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. The youngest of a

family of four, she was educated in both Alabama and England (she attended Oxford University in the late 1940s). Initially composed in 1957, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was submitted to J. B. Lippincott & Co., who suggested she rewrite sections of her material. This rewriting took Lee two and a half years, and when her only novel was finally published, Lee was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Apart from writing the odd article for American *Vogue*, she has gone on to publish very little.

While Lee is famous for her authorial silence, her literary connections are well publicised. Truman Capote, author – perhaps most famously – of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood*, lived as a child next door to Lee. He is commonly thought to be the basis for the character of Dill, although, of course, Lee herself does not comment upon this association.

The text is closely allied to both Lee's personal and public history. Her understanding of her father's legal career (Amasa Coleman Lee was a lawyer) seems to have influenced her characterisation of Atticus, and her regard for the legal profession. Similarly, her treatment of the trial of the Scottsboro boys, a controversial case alleging the rape of two white girls by a gang of black boys, seems to have formed the substance of Lee's plot for her. It also appears to have influenced her treatment of Tom Robinson, and her meditation on the nature of false accusation. Lee's upbringing in Monroe County and the state of Alabama situates the novel both culturally and geographically.

J. D. Salinger's most famous novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, is also framed by the author's childhood context. Salinger was born in New York City on 1 January 1919, and the biographical details of his life are notoriously difficult to authenticate. As a child he attended the Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania, which, unlike his protagonist Holden Caulfield, he is believed to have very much enjoyed. His academic career included sojourns at

Columbia University, New York University and the rather less famous Ursinus College; he also fought in the Second World War with the Twelfth Infantry Regiment. *The Catcher in the Rye*, first published in 1951, brought him a great deal of media attention, which he is rumoured to have used to attract numbers of young women. However, he quickly shunned his public profile and has subsequently lived the life of a 'recluse' in Cornish New Hampshire. His familial relationships are understood to be severely ruptured: it is commonly cited, for instance, that he did not attend his father's funeral; and in an interview with the online magazine *Salon*, his daughter Peggy spoke about their volatile relationship:

[Peggy] reports that in the early 70s, after living with Salinger for eight months, she was unceremoniously booted out of his life. Eighteen years old to Salinger's 53, she spent the next 20 years wondering what it was that she had done . . . After an argument, Salinger told his daughter, 'I'll always love you, but when I lose respect for a person, I'm done with them. Finished.'

<http://dir.salon.com/books/feature/2000/10/02/salinger/index.html>

Famed for his lack of interest in people, including his fans, Salinger's complicated relation with one other writer is particularly notorious. Ian Hamilton attempted to publish a biography of Salinger, which the author challenged in the courts. Hamilton then went on to use much of his biography in an account of his attempts to produce the biography itself, entitled *In Search of J. D. Salinger*.

Joseph Heller was born in New York in 1923 and served as a bombardier in the Second World War. Out of his experiences in the army came the fourth novel covered in this volume – *Catch-22*, published in 1961. Heller taught for a while at Pennsylvania State University, but he developed the idea for his most famous novel while working in the advertising departments of eminent magazines such as *Time*, *Look* and *McCall's*.

Heller's awareness of the growing significance of an American consumer culture, where everything is up for grabs, combined with the story of Ian Hamilton's public challenge to Salinger's right to privacy, provide one of the thematic links that bind the novels examined in this text. In order to protect his rights as an individual and a private person, Salinger took Hamilton to court and *won*, preventing Hamilton from publishing the text he had written. Salinger was protected by the American system of justice set in place to secure the rights of the individual. While *Catch-22* shows the crazy workings of an army system which denied the rights of the individual, Heller's theme places emphasis on the same cherished American ideal.

The idea of the trial, or court scene, as a means of achieving justice is one that Salinger has relied upon. It worked to protect him as a 'victim' of the intrusive journalist. In both *Native Son* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this idea is interrogated. The texts challenge the idea of the victim, suggesting that the men on trial – Bigger in *Native Son* and Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* – are not only the 'criminals' on trial, but also the *victims* of the culture in which they live. The novels explore the extent to which the justice system protects certain individuals at the expense of other American citizens. The authors take up very different positions in this debate, but they both wholeheartedly enter this complex arena, and use courtroom drama to put the ideas of justice, innocence and guilt on trial.

What it means to be 'innocent' is also a central concept in *The Catcher in the Rye*. The context, rather than being a courtroom, is the idea that part of adolescence is rebellion, but just as with Bigger and Tom, Holden's relationship to his crimes is complicated. He frequently asserts that his own actions are beyond his control and that he is therefore not responsible, or 'guilty', as a result. Similarly, in Heller's *Catch-22* an impossible contradiction in army rules means that individuality is denied and responsibility abrogated.

The second linking theme for these four books is the idea of the 'text', or story, as a powerful tool in the creation of cultural and social imperatives. In all four texts the idea of the 'story' and the power of narrative is central. In Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* the power of storytelling is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in Mayella's 'story' about Tom Robinson. Her account of their relationship – the story she tells in court – ultimately leads to his death. But the importance of stories is reiterated throughout the novel: by Scout, Jem and Dill's 'stories' about Boo Radley, or in Jem's reluctant storytelling when he visits Mrs Dubose. Equally, in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden constantly blurs the boundary between storytelling and any notion of 'truth'. The idea of the story is highlighted in its relationship to psychology and the idea of storytelling as therapy. This is epitomised in Holden's 'story' about Allie's glove. The characters fail to appreciate the importance of this story to Holden, but the reader is left in no doubt about the meaningful narratives throughout this novel, even if Holden insists on disguising them with heavy irony.

In *Native Son* Bigger provides a contrast to Holden Caulfield. Whereas Holden is perhaps uncontrollably creative, constantly (and consciously) referring to the narrative qualities of his life by mentioning other stories, Bigger is only confronted by narrative possibilities as he faces the electric chair. This novel argues for the force of narrative, not as a possibility for the individual, but rather as a possible form of oppression. (Much as the 'narrative' or the 'story' of army rules results in a form of oppression in Heller's *Catch-22*.) Bigger thinks the story of a black man's life is mapped out for him – he knows the possible plot twists and its grand finale. This is suggested by his game with Gus (pp. 46–52) where they fantasise about 'white' jobs and lifestyles; the story of their lives includes these narrative possibilities. The novel, polemic in style, unlike *The Catcher in the Rye*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, drives home

to the reader the consequences of telling a community one story, of offering them restricted possibilities for their autobiography, and places the responsibility for that narrative squarely with the storyteller, not the protagonist.

These very different versions of the power of narrative offer up one key reminder to the reader. They suggest, in their various styles and subject matters, the fundamental importance of interpretation. They all encourage you, the reader, to *read* these narratives against the grain. Through irony (*The Catcher in the Rye* and *Catch-22*), sympathy (*Mockingbird*), or polemic (*Native Son*), they demand that you do not simply sit back and agree. This active understanding of reading runs through all four novels. They all ask the reader to take a questioning, creative approach, while demanding that you recognise the political, cultural, and – perhaps most importantly – personal force of narrative.

Interviews and silences

THE *VINTAGE LIVING Texts* reading guides include, where possible, an interview with the author featured. In the case of this guide to four books by American authors widely studied in schools and colleges, one of the things that links these diverse writers is the fact that we cannot speak directly to the authors themselves. Richard Wright died in 1960, Joseph Heller in 1999; Harper Lee has been unwilling to speak about her work, and J. D. Salinger is, and always has been, notoriously reclusive.

In the first part of this section, Richard Wright's introduction to *Native Son*, 'How "Bigger" was Born', is 'transformed' by us into direct responses to specific questions. Wright's introduction as a whole is a valuable critical tool; here, however, it is restructured to help you trace particular critical concerns. You are given the page references for the introduction, in the Vintage edition, to help you orient yourself, but the question-and-answer format is designed to help you think about the introduction as a critical resource. For Joseph Heller we have used the same approach, devising questions that we – and, we hope, you – would have liked to ask Heller, and finding the answers in his published introduction to the 1994 Vintage edition of *Catch-22*. (You may find that this is a useful method when you are considering your own reading of other writers' published 'introductions' to their own work.)

Both Harper Lee and J. D. Salinger are still alive, but equally, both are famous for their refusal to give interviews, to comment on their fiction, or in fact to appear in public at all. This introduction, therefore, focuses on their silence. In