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Books

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Cinderella syndrome
Peggy Orenstein challenges the 'girlie-girl' culture' G4



FICTION

Ghost town

By Lauren Groff
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

What a mysterious beast Alice Hoffman has created with her new book, "The Red Garden"! While it could plausibly be either a linked story collection or a novel, it is neither fish nor fowl, but, rather, a lovingly befinned and be-feathered chimera of both.

There are 14 swift, consecutive stories in the book, most of which stand firmly on their own. We begin in 1750 when the town of Blackwell, Mass., is founded by a brave young woman named Hallie Brady, who saves her fellow settlers by milking a hibernating bear. The subsequent stories are

The Red Garden

By Alice Hoffman
(Crown; 270 pages; \$25)

linked to the first, with the children of peripheral characters moving to the center and generations lightly touched upon before they are leap-frogged. Johnny Applesseed wanders into Blackwell like some itinerant bodhisattva, leaving behind the Tree of Life, an apple tree that will feed the entire town during a famine, as well as a baby in a young widow's womb.

Emily Dickinson flees from Mount Holyoke College to tramp about in the woods and stumbles into Blackwood, only

Hoffman continues on page G2

BIOGRAPHY

Hidden man

By Seth Lerer
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Dead just a year, J.D. Salinger still fascinates us. Together with John Updike and John Cheever, he defined 20th century short fiction: the twist of fate, the detailed attention to character, the fissures in families and friendships. Along with Philip Roth, he wrote the script for postwar American boyhood. In my high school, you were either Alex Portnoy or Holden Caulfield — both characters, in their own way, descendants of Huck Finn and David Copperfield. And yet, there is so little to

J.D. Salinger

A Life
By Kenneth Slawenski
(Random House; 450 pages; \$27)

work with. Updike and Cheever left us with scores of stories; Roth continues to publish a novel almost every year. But Salinger, after a dazzling literary flowering of 20 years, shut up. He disappeared into New Hampshire, silenced his critics and his confidants, and lived on in other people's rumors.

Kenneth Slawenski's "J.D. Salinger: A Life" digs deep to find the nature of his talent and his silence. Slawenski gives us reams of detail, especially about Salinger's early,

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Kenneth Slawenski's biography digs deep to find the nature of J.D. Salinger's talent and his silence.

Lotte Salinger 1951

Hidden man

Salinger from page G1

privileged life on New York's Upper East Side. He presents, too, an attentive account of Salinger's life in the Army, arguing that the arc of his military experience — from basic training to European duty — profoundly shaped his literary vision. These years of military service (1942-1946) take up more than a quarter of Slawenski's book. In them, he finds a fundamental notion of humanity that guided Salinger's major fiction.

By charting Salinger's ongoing writing throughout the war, and by capping this part of his narrative with an analysis of Salinger's first, truly major story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (accepted by *The New Yorker* in January 1948), Slawenski illuminates the source of Salinger's power. The gift for dialogue, the descriptive understatement, the nihilistic ending — all of these features

emerge in "Bananafish." Slawenski writes about the story in terms of "bleakness" and "liberation." What he shows us, subtly, is that this is really a war story, and that Seymour Glass is really a casualty of war — a war of emotions and human relationships, but a war nonetheless. Normandy Beach (at which Salinger landed) becomes transformed into the sandy shore off of which Seymour swims.

Slawenski strips aside the trappings of domestic boredom to show the Second World War as the spur to Salinger's imagination. It is a brilliant move, and nothing in the rest of the biography quite matches it. Much of the middle third of the book is taken up with life at *The New Yorker* in its heyday: how the magazine was edited, what they paid, and how Salinger revised stories for inclusion.

There is much that is suggestive here, especially about how

magazines such as *The New Yorker* and its editor William Shawn (and its fiction editor William Maxwell) shaped mid-20th century American literary taste. There is much, too, that fascinates about the making and reception of "The Catcher in the Rye." Among the points that struck me was Salinger's control over the cover design of the book. Slawenski notes that Salinger "instructed Bantam on what typeface to use, the precise size and kerning of its characters." Salinger "even mailed it a swatch of the exact color he wanted used for the book's cover. ... To this day, Salinger's design arguably remains the most beloved and cherished book presentation in American literary history."

This is a stunning intuition, and I'd love to have more. Slawenski realizes that the physical appearance of the book has, potentially, as much cultural meaning as the text itself; that books are objects and that Salinger knew it — knew it as much as Walt Whitman knew it when he oversaw the look of

"Leaves of Grass," knew it as much as James Joyce knew it when he took an interest in the size of the S at the opening of "Ulysses." Salinger, we come to understand, was not simply writing words; he was making objects.

But he also was unmaking himself. Unlike Updike and Cheever, who chiseled their personae through autobiographical announcements and personal appearances, or unlike Roth, who keeps refocusing the same Newark boyhood through different lenses, Salinger created a literary self as stark and enigmatic as the cover of that Bantam "Catcher in the Rye." He guarded his correspondence so carefully that he prevented Ian Hamilton, in the mid-1980s, from quoting it in his biography. He balked at authorizing the reprinting of his final story, "Hapworth 16, 1924," in book form.

And yet, he was oddly unguarded in his relationships. "While Salinger could look back," Slawenski opines, "on an impressive array of women who had been drawn to him

throughout his life, he had seldom chosen wisely." Oona O'Neill was unstable, Sylvia Welter "impetuous," Claire Douglas had "black moods" that "could rival his own." And in Joyce Maynard, a precocious 18-year-old writer, Salinger chose most unwisely. Twenty-five years after their brief romance, Maynard published a tell-all book and sold her copies of his letters.

A sad footnote to a brilliant career, perhaps. Or, more likely, a meaningful coda to a writer's life shaped by the terrors of war and the tensions of class. Slawenski summarizes Holden Caulfield's dilemma: "to reevaluate his perceptions in order to find a place in the world of the living." Salinger, in his silent exile, could not find that place. It is now left to us, his readers, to assess his place in the world of literature, where he and Holden continue to live eloquently.

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Ghost town

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to depart days later with a broken heart and her real-life Newfoundland dog, Carlos. A little girl drowns in the Eel River and re-emerges stories later as the Apparition, a ghost; a young man with a hideous deformity flees to the solitude of Hightop Mountain, only to fall in love with, and write embarrassing poetry to, a beautiful young woman of the town.

Hoffman writes with devastating economy, and, after the best of the stories — "The Principles of Devotion" and "The Monster of Blackwell," among others — a dazzled reader has to put down the book for a time to allow the narratives to gently sink in.

Does it matter what a book calls itself — novel or collection — as long as it's a ripping

read, as "The Red Garden" is? The wicked writer in me knows that genre doesn't matter, that subverting reader expectations is one of the more delicious satisfactions in writing fiction. But readers are a categorizing species, and with good reason: When thousands of new books are pumped into the marketplace every week, shuffling narratives into pigeonholes helps a reader find the kinds of books she will most likely enjoy.

One approaches a novel expecting a long, luxurious immersion in a story; one approaches a linked story collection expecting stand-alone parts that form a greater whole. As a novel, "The Red Garden" bewilders: Because we are taken in such a rapid-fire manner through the history of Blackwell, in a way that dismisses to oblivion most of



Deborah Felingold

Alice Hoffman

the characters as soon as their stories are over, the book's necessary anchor quickly becomes the town itself.

Yet Blackwell is never quite fully fleshed out as a character. We know of its elements: the Eel River, Hightop Mountain, Hallie Brady's house and the cottage out back, the red garden, Jack Straw's Bar and Grill. But knowing only the elements of a town is akin to describing a person by listing physical characteristics, and the parts of Blackwell never congeal to become a unique and vivid place of its own.

As a story collection; on the

other hand, each part of "The Red Garden" is finely written, but the build of the overall arc is so subtle it could be easily missed. Though Hoffman's feather-slight arc would be a mortal weakness in a standard collection, it is — amazingly — the most beautiful thing about her new book. Here, the build comes almost entirely in gently repeated themes.

Again and again we see bears and ghosts, poetry and collies, eels and apple trees and wounded souls who escape civilization for the wilderness of the mountain. Ideas grow depth and weight as they recur in the stories; characters change the ideas. By the end of the book, the idea of bear has been so transformed by the forces of time and moderated repetition that a bear's skeleton in one of the last stories takes on a terrifying significance that the real live bear hadn't possessed in Hallie's initial story. The red

dirt of the garden where the animal had been interred all those years becomes the shared blood and love and history of 250 years of the town.

Building a book around layered themes is not a new convention, but it is one that is most commonly seen in poetry collections, where the arc is often subterranean, emerging in time through feints and intimations. Maybe, then, the most satisfying way to think of "The Red Garden" is as a book of poetry poured into a prose mold. If a reader releases any preconceived expectations about form in fiction and surrenders to the book's quietly courageous structure, Hoffman's immense grace as a storyteller will repay the reader for her faith, a hundred times over.

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