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 bejeweled 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 1700 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 linked to the first, with the children of peripheral characters moving to the center and generations lightly touched upon before they are leapfrogged. Johnny Appleseed wanders into Blackwell like some itinerant bodhi-attva, 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 sees from Mount Holyoke College to tramp about in the woods and stumbles into Blackwood, only to be.Peggy Orenstein challenges the ‘girlie-girl’ culture’ G4

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 mid-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 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 biography digs deep to find the nature of J.D. Salinger’s talent and his silence.

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Hidden man

Salinger from page 91

privileged life on New York’s Upper East Side. He presents,
too, an unattainable account of
Salinger’s life in the Army,
arguing that the arc of his mil-
tary 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 Slawen-
ski’s book. In them, he finds a
fundamental notion of human-
ity that guided Salinger’s major
fiction.

By charting Salinger’s ongo-
ing 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 Bar-
ncelona,” (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.” Sla-
wenski writes about the story
in terms of “blankness” 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 hu-
man 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 imag-
ination. 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 Salin-
ger revised stories for inclu-
sion.

There is much that is sug-
estive 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. Sla-
wenski 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. Sla-
wenski realizes that the physi-
cal appearance of the book has
potentially, as much cultural
meaning as the text itself; that
books are objects and that Sa-
linger 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 autobiogra-
phical announcements and
personal appearances, or unlike
Roth, who keeps refocusing the
same Newark boyhood through
different lenses, Salinger creat-
ed 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 biogra-
phy. He balked at authorizing
the reprinting of his final story,
“Hayworth and Curley,” in book
form.

And yet, he was oddly un-
guarded in his relationships.

While Salinger could look
back, Slawenski opines, ‘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
Weltner “impulsive,” Claire
Douglas had “black moods”
that “could rival his own.” And
in Joyce Maynard, a precocious
20-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
her 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 reeval-
uate 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 elo-
quently.

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Ghost town

Hoffman from page 1

To depart days later with a
broken heart and her real-life
Newfoundland dog, Carlos. A
little girl drown in the Eel
River and re-energizes 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 devas-
tating 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 collec-
tion—less than in a roiling
read, as "The Red Garden" is?

Alice Hoffman

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

Yet Blackwell is never quite
fully fleshed out as a charac-
ter. We know of its elements:
the Eel River, Hightop Moun-
tain, 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 portas of Blackwell never
grew to become a unique
and vivid place of its own.

As a story collection, 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
featherlight arc would be
a morbid weakness in a stan-
dard collection, it is—amaz-
ingly—the most beautiful
thing about her new book.

Here, the book 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 es-
cape civilization for the wild-
ness of the mountain. Ideas
grow depth and weight as
they recur in the stories, char-
acters change the ideas. By
the end of the book, the idea
day of bear has been so trans-
formed by the forces of time
and moderated repetition that
a bear’s skeleton in one of
the last stories takes on a terrify-
ing significance that the real
live beast hadn’t possessed in
Halle’s initial story. The red
dirt of the garden where the
animal had been interred all
those years before became 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
flights 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
reads any preconceived
expectations about form in
fictional and surrealist 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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