



## War Buddies

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# When Salinger Bonded With Hemingway

Papa was a literary star and Salinger was a soldier when they met during the liberation of Paris in 1944. Each admired the other's writing and the aversion to BS.

Seventy years ago on July 27, 1945, J.D. Salinger, then serving with the U.S. Army in Germany, sent Ernest Hemingway a letter that reflected the friendship the two had begun a year earlier during the midst of World War II.

Whether [Salinger](#) expected a reply from [Hemingway](#), at the time the most famous writer in America, is unclear. His request for Hemingway to drop him a line—“if” he can manage it—reflects his uncertainty about getting a return letter. With only a handful of short stories to his credit, Salinger could not help wondering if he had made a genuine connection with a writer he had grown up reading.

As it turned out, he had. Salinger’s 1945 letter to Hemingway is a poignant reminder of a friendship that brought out the best in both and foretold the changing of the literary guard in America.

In [The Catcher in the Rye](#) Holden Caulfield can’t stand Hemingway’s [A Farewell to Arms](#). He thinks that Frederic Henry, the novel’s narrator, is a “phony,” and he doesn’t see why his brother, a short-story writer who fought in World War II and hated the Army, likes the book so much.

But in his 1945 letter to Hemingway, Salinger shows no signs of sharing Holden’s judgment of *A Farewell to Arms*. As Kenneth Slawenski points out in his telling biography of Salinger, Salinger is writing Hemingway primarily to thank him for taking an interest in his work. In his letter Salinger describes himself as the chairman of Hemingway’s numerous fan clubs, and he opens up to Hemingway in a fashion that is uncharacteristic of him. He volunteers that he is writing from a Nuremberg hospital that he has checked himself into because he thought it would be a good idea to talk to “somebody sane.”

Salinger was a sergeant in the Counter Intelligence Corps when he and Hemingway met in Paris at the time of its liberation from Nazi occupation. Before then he and Hemingway already had “a couple of long talks” according to a letter Salinger wrote early in August 1944 to Frances Glassmoyer, a friend from his days at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. But the Paris meeting was a special occasion, one that for the moment left the dangers of the battlefield behind.

## They were far from being the literary odd couple they can be made to seem.

Salinger and the 4th Infantry Division’s 12th Regiment, to which he belonged, entered Paris, along with the 2nd French Armored Division of General Jacques-Philippe Leclerc, on August 25, 1944, the day German General Dietrich von Choltitz, disobeying Hitler’s orders to burn Paris to the ground, surrendered the city and 17,000 German troops. Salinger’s assignment was to seek out and arrest Nazi collaborators, but he also had time to witness the celebrations that filled Paris’s streets.

As a war correspondent for *Collier’s*, Hemingway took a shorter path to get to Paris. For a while he attached himself to the 22nd Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division, and then as the division neared Paris, he branched out on his own, surrounding himself, with the approval of the future ambassador to France, Colonel David Bruce of the Office of Strategic Services, with a group of French partisans.

When the American Army entered Paris, Hemingway, who had armed himself with a carbine, participated in the scattered street fighting still going on, then headed for the Travellers Club on the Champs-Élysées. By the day's end, he had taken up residence at the Ritz Hotel, where before long his visitors included his future wife, Mary Welsh, then working for *Time*, French novelist André Malraux, and photographer Robert Capa, who in his book, *Slightly Out of Focus*, recalls Hemingway giving him the key to one of the Ritz's best rooms.

Salinger had learned that Hemingway was in Paris, and, along with John Keenan, his close friend in the Counter Intelligence Corps, got into his jeep and headed for the Ritz, confident Hemingway would be there. The visit might easily have ended with Salinger being ignored, given who else was going in and out of Hemingway's rooms. But Hemingway went out of his way to make Salinger feel welcome, even asking him if he had any new fiction with him.

Salinger was able to show Hemingway a copy of *The Saturday Evening Post* containing his recent short story, "Last Day of the Last Furlough," and by the time their meeting was over, he had had his best day in the war. The story of the Paris meeting with Hemingway appears in *Dream Catcher*, the memoir of Salinger's daughter, Margaret, and also in a September 9, 1944, letter Salinger wrote Whit Burnett, his friend and editor at *Story* magazine. In the letter to Burnett, Salinger goes out of his way to say what a "good guy" Hemingway is.

After their Paris visit, Salinger initiated at least one other meeting with Hemingway while the war was going on. That meeting occurred later in 1944 when the Fourth Infantry Division was battling German forces in the Hurtgen Forest. The meeting is described in detail in *From Dachau to D-Day*, the memoir of Salinger's Army buddy, Werner Kleeman, who recalls Salinger saying to him one night, "Let's go and look up Hemingway."

They found Hemingway staying in a small farmhouse that had been set aside for correspondents, and their visit, Kleeman remembers, was one in which Hemingway could not have been more cordial. The three spent the evening talking and drinking champagne from aluminum cups.

Salinger remained the junior partner in his relationship with Hemingway. Even after *The Catcher in the Rye* made him famous, Salinger still took pride in having won Hemingway's approval. In a remembrance that she published in *The Observer* in 2010, the year of Salinger's death, *New Yorker* writer Lillian Ross, who knew both Salinger and Hemingway well, recalled Salinger once showing her a copy of a handwritten, wartime "Dear Jerry" letter from Hemingway telling him, "First you have a marvelous ear and you write tenderly and lovingly without getting wet."

Hemingway was not just being, as he put it in his letter to Salinger, an "easy praiser." His actions show that he admired Salinger's work. During and after the war, he made a point of calling Salinger to the attention of people for whom Salinger was an unknown. In a September 3, 1945, letter to his friend, the critic and editor Malcolm Cowley, Hemingway, after discussing his own generation of writers, went out of his way to mention "a kid" named Jerry Salinger, whom he had met and who, in his opinion, "wrote well."

A decade later, Hemingway was still praising Salinger. In her memoir, *Running with the Bulls: My Years with the Hemingways*, Valerie Hemingway, who worked for Hemingway as his

personal secretary and for a number of years was married to his son Gregory, recalls Hemingway buying her a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1959 and remarking that the contemporary American writers he most admired were J.D. Salinger, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote.

Hemingway, who was critical of the World War II novels of James Jones and Norman Mailer, had plenty of time to change his mind about Salinger in the years that followed their first meeting. That he did not is a reminder that they were far from being the literary odd couple they can be made to seem if we typecast Hemingway as the champion of the hardboiled and Salinger as the relentless defender of sensitivity.

Born 20 years apart, Hemingway and Salinger began their literary careers with war at the center of their best stories and became famous for a style of writing attuned to the rhythms of speech and built around directness and brevity. The battle-weary Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* saying that he is repelled by the abstract words “sacred, glorious, and sacrifice” when the sacrifices he has seen “were like the stockyards of Chicago” is not only making a statement about war. He is talking about falseness on a grand scale, and in this second regard, he is a precursor of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* rejecting the values of post-World War II America.

What both novels’ narrators—and by extension their authors—are after is a way of describing the world that undermines the conventions by which the majority of people live. In a 1954 interview in *The Atlantic*, Hemingway likened this viewpoint to having a “crap detector.” Holden Caulfield called it looking out for phonies, but the result in both cases was fiction preoccupied with rooting out the inauthentic.

By 1961, the year that Hemingway took his own life, he and Salinger were no longer known and unknown writer. Salinger was by then the novelist whom the young increasingly regarded as speaking for them. Hemingway was the literary lion from a bygone era. It was a change in literary fortunes that paralleled the social change that President John Kennedy, just two years older than Salinger and, like him, a World War II vet, described in his 1961 Inaugural Address when he declared “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace.”

For Salinger, who years earlier had moved to remote Cornish, New Hampshire, where he would remain for the rest of his life, being crowned the next star writer in America had little appeal. He did not want to occupy the pedestal on which Hemingway once stood nor benefit from his death. When he learned of Hemingway’s suicide, his reaction was to recall the time they had spent together during World War II.

“I have the feeling you must have been saddened, too, over the fact and circumstance of Hemingway’s death,” Werner Kleeman reports Salinger writing him in 1961. “I remember his kindness, and I’m sure you do, too.”

Lillian Ross recalls a similar reaction by Salinger when, in the years after his death, Hemingway was savaged in *The Partisan Review* by Leslie Fiedler and in *Esquire* by Malcolm Muggeridge.

Fiedler, Salinger told her, needed to be “wormed every six months or so,” and as for that “rotten Muggeridge,” he was like “all the Hemingway ghouls.”

In his conversation with Ross, there is no mistaking Salinger’s disdain for Fielder and Muggeridge, but in defending Hemingway against them, Salinger was doing much more than making a literary case. He was defending a fallen comrade from whom he had experienced only generosity.

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