

SUSPENSE

space and time were just beginning to be truly apprehended. And invariably his characters, fallaciously but understandably, read into this disparity of scale a kind of cosmic malice. Confronting the dead eyes of the fossil, which have replaced the living, seductive blue eyes of Elfride in his field of vision, Knight acquires a new understanding, both poignant and bleak, of his own mortality.

The scene is extended for some pages by the same means: philosophical reflections on geology, prehistory and the apparent spitefulness of Nature (the wind whips Knight's clothing, the rain stings his face, a red sun looks on "with a drunken leer") punctuated by questions that keep the wire of narrative suspense taut: "Was he to die? . . . He had hoped for deliverance, but what could a girl do? He dared not move an inch. Was Death really stretching out his hand?"

Elfride, of course, rescues him. How she does it I will not divulge, except to say, by way of encouragement to those of you who haven't yet got round to reading this delightful book, that it entails taking off all her clothes.

4 Teenage Skaz

Old Sally didn't talk much, except to rave about the Lunts, because she was busy rubbering and being charming. Then, all of a sudden, she saw some jerk she knew on the other side of the lobby. Some guy in one of those very dark grey flannel suits and one of those checkered vests. Strictly Ivy League. Big deal. He was standing next to the wall, smoking himself to death and looking bored as hell. Old Sally kept saying, "I know that boy from somewhere." She always knew somebody, any place you took her, or thought she did. She kept saying that till I got bored as hell, and I said to her, "Why don't you go on over and give him a big soul kiss, if you know him. He'll enjoy it." She got sore when I said that. Finally, though, the jerk noticed her and came over and said hello. You should've seen the way they said hello. You'd have thought they hadn't seen each other in twenty years. You'd have thought they'd taken baths in the same bathtub or something when they were little kids. Old buddies. It was nauseating. The funny part was, they probably met each other just once, at some phoney party. Finally, when they were all done slobbering around, old Sally introduced us. His name was George something - I don't even remember - and he went to Andover. Big, big deal. You should've seen him when old Sally asked him how he liked the play. He was the kind of a phoney that have to give themselves room when they answer somebody's question. He stepped back, and stepped right on the lady's foot behind him. He probably broke every toe in her body. He said the play itself was no masterpiece, but that the Lunts, of course, were absolute angels. Angels. For Chrissake. Angels. That killed me. Then he and old Sally started talking about a lot of people they both knew. It was the phoniest conversation you ever heard in your life.

J. D. SALINGER *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

Skaz IS A RATHER APPEALING Russian word (suggesting "jazz" and "scat", as in "scat-singing", to the English ear) used to designate a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word. In this kind of novel or story, the narrator is a character who refers to himself (or herself) as "I", and addresses the reader as "you". He or she uses vocabulary and syntax characteristic of colloquial speech, and appears to be relating the story spontaneously rather than delivering a carefully constructed and polished written account. We don't so much read it as listen to it, as to a talkative stranger encountered in a pub or railway carriage. Needless to say, this is an illusion, the product of much calculated effort and painstaking rewriting by the "real" author. A narrative style that faithfully imitated actual speech would be virtually unintelligible, as are transcripts of recorded conversations. But it is an illusion that can create a powerful effect of authenticity and sincerity, of truth-telling.

For American novelists *skaz* was an obvious way to free themselves from the inherited literary traditions of England and Europe. The crucial impetus was given by Mark Twain. "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," said Ernest Hemingway – an overstatement, but an illuminating one. Twain's masterstroke was to unite a vernacular colloquial style with a naive, immature narrator, an adolescent boy who is wiser than he knows, whose vision of the adult world has a devastating freshness and honesty. This, for example, is Huck's reaction to different types of Christian faith:

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see there were two Providences and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no hope for him any more.

J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield is a literary descendant of Huck Finn: more educated and sophisticated, the son of affluent

New Yorkers, but like Huck a youthful runaway from a world of adult hypocrisy, venality and, to use one of his own favourite words, phoniness. What particularly appeals Holden is the eagerness of his peers to adopt that corrupt grownup behaviour. In the course of the story, Holden takes a girlfriend to a matinée of a Broadway play starring a famous acting couple, Alfred and Lynn Lunt. "Old Sally", and the acquaintance she meets in the lobby during the interval, are described in this extract as acting out a wholly inauthentic type of adult social behaviour.

The features of Holden's narrative style that make it sound like speech rather than writing, and a teenager's speech at that, are easy enough to identify. There's a lot of repetition (because elegant variation in vocabulary requires careful thought) especially of slang expressions like "jerk", "bored as hell", "phoney", "big deal", "killed me" and "old" (an epithet applied promiscuously to anything familiar, whatever its age). Like many young people, Holden expresses the strength of his feelings by exaggeration, the device rhetoricians call hyperbole: "smoking himself to death", "You'd have thought they hadn't seen each other in twenty years", "slobbering around". The syntax is simple. Sentences are typically short and uncomplicated. Many of them aren't properly formed, lacking a finite verb ("Strictly Ivy League. Big deal.") There are grammatical mistakes such as speakers often make ("He was the kind of a phoney that have to give themselves *room* . . ."). In longer sentences, clauses are strung together as they seem to occur to the speaker, rather than being subordinated to each other in complex structures.

The informality of Holden's discourse is the guarantee of his spontaneity and authenticity. It is thrown into relief by the well-formed but pretentious small talk of George: "He said the play itself was no masterpiece, but that the Lunts, of course, were absolute angels." This utterance is further downgraded, and made to seem especially stilted, by being rendered as indirect or reported speech, in contrast to Holden's exasperated outburst to Sally, which is quoted directly: "Why don't you go on over and give him a big soul kiss . . ."

It is, as I say, easy enough to describe Holden's style of narration;

but more difficult to explain how it holds our attention and gives us pleasure for the length of a whole novel. For, make no mistake, it's the style that makes the book interesting. The story it tells is episodic, inconclusive and largely made up of trivial events. Yet the language is, by normal literary criteria, very impoverished. Salinger, the invisible ventriloquist who speaks to us through Holden, must say everything he has to say about life and death and ultimate values within the limitations of a seventeen-year-old New Yorker's argot, eschewing poetic metaphors, periodic cadences, fine writing of any kind.

Part of the answer is certainly the derisive humour created by the application of Holden's "low" language to the polite pretences of social and cultural life as exhibited by Sally and George. The formal incorrectness of his English is also a source of humour – the funniest line in the extract is, "He probably broke every toe in her body", a distortion of "every bone in her body", and another hyperbolic expression. A further reason is that Holden's language implies more than it states. In this extract, for instance, there is clearly an unacknowledged theme of jealousy on Holden's part, towards the rival male figure of George, much as Holden claims to despise his status-conferring Ivy-League clothes and suave manners. The pathos of Holden Caulfield's situation, here and throughout the book, is more effective for not being explicitly spoken.

In the last analysis, though, there's something surprisingly poetic about this prose, a subtle manipulation of the rhythms of colloquial speech which makes it an effortless pleasure to read, and re-read. As jazz musicians say, it swings.

5 The Epistolary Novel

What I can't bear is that for one moment she recognized my claims, acknowledged my rights. What makes me want to hammer my fist on the table . . .

Phone. Ringing. Hold on.

No. Just some student having a breakdown. Yes, what makes me want to howl at the moon is the thought of her scratching away down there in London as if nothing had happened. I'd just like to know that she had lifted her head from her imaginary world for one moment, and said . . .

Another thought has just occurred to me, though. She may not be scratching away as if nothing had happened. She may be putting down some version of the events in the guest room. One of her maddeningly percipient, odd, crabwise heroines may be scuttering bizarrely sideways at the sight of some bumptious young academic's aubergine underpants. No need for one of your looks, thank you – I have managed to grasp the irony of this unprompted. It's different, though – she's not writing privately to a friend of hers in some comfortingly remote country. She's writing to friends of mine. And enemies of mine. And colleagues of mine. And students of mine . . .

What? Are my underpants aubergine? Of course they're not aubergine! Don't you know anything about my taste at all? But she may be saying they're aubergine! That's what they do, these people. They embroider, they improve on the truth – they tell lies.

MICHAEL FRAYN *The Trick of It* (1989)