

['Holden Caulfield Is Unactable'](#)

POSTED BY [Sundeep Dougal](#) ON Jan 29, 2010 AT 02:18 IST

After his experience with [My Foolish Heart](#), JD Salinger seems to have decided resolutely to refuse to let his stories be adapted into films ("Those movies, they kill you, they really do"), and in this letter written in 1957 in response to an enquiry from a Mr. Herbert, Salinger explains why he would never sell the stage and screen rights to the *Catcher in the Rye* in this letter that is up for auction [here](#):

R. D. 2  
Windsor, Vt.  
July 19, 1957

Dear Mr. Herbert,

I'll try to tell you what my attitude is to the stage and screen rights of The Catcher in the Rye. I've sung this tune quite a few times, so if my heart doesn't seem to be in it, try to be tolerant....Firstly, it is possible that one day the rights will be sold. Since there's an ever-looming possibility that I won't die rich, I toy very seriously with the idea of leaving the unsold rights to my wife and daughter as a kind of insurance policy. It pleases me no end, though, I might quickly add, to know that I won't have to see the results of the transaction. I keep saying this and nobody seems to agree, but The Catcher in the Rye is a very novelistic novel. There are readymade "scenes" - only a fool would deny that - but, for me, the weight of the book is in the narrator's voice, the non-stop peculiarities of it, his personal, extremely discriminating attitude to his reader-listener, his asides about gasoline rainbows in street puddles, his philosophy or way of looking at cowhide suitcases and empty toothpaste cartons - in a ~~wax~~ word, his thoughts. He can't legitimately be separated from his own first-person technique. True, if the separation is forcibly made, there is enough material left over for something called and Exciting (or maybe just Interesting) Evening in the Theater. But I find that idea if not odious, at least odious enough to keep me from selling the rights. There are many of his thoughts, of course, that could be labored into dialogue - or into some sort of stream-of-consciousness ~~xxxx~~ loud-speaker device - but labored is exactly the right word. What he thinks and does so naturally in his solitude in the novel, on the stage could at best only be pseudo-simulated, if there is such a word (and I hope not).

Not to mention, God help us all, the immeasurably risky business of using actors. Have you ever seen a child actress sitting crosslegged on a bed and looking right? I'm sure not. And Holden Caulfield himself, in my undoubtedly super-biassed opinion, is essentially unactable. A Sensitive, Intelligent, Talented Young Actor in a Reversible Coat wouldn't be nearly enough. It would take someone with X to bring it off, and no very young man even if he has X quite knows what to do with it. And, I might add, I don't think any director can tell him.

I'll stop there. I'm afraid I can only tell you, to end with, that I feel very firm about all this, if you haven't already guessed.

Thank you, though, for your friendly and highly readable letter. My mail from producers has mostly been hell.

Sincerely,

*J. D. Salinger*  
J. D. Salinger

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Sincerely,

(Signed, 'J. D. Salinger')

(via: [Letters of Note](#))

## Study Questions!!!

In your composition books, do the following activities for the letter J.D. Salinger wrote:

1. SOAPSTone
2. Review your notes about J.D. Salinger and *Catcher in the Rye*. Explain the significance of this letter in light of the historical context.
3. Many students complain about the lack of a movie about this book; however, Salinger explains his reasons in this letter. Do you agree with Salinger's assertion that Holden's character "unactable"? Why? Give specific reasons.
  - a. P.S.—we will be revisiting this question at the end of the book.
4. Do you think someone should attempt to write a movie script for this book? Why. Give specific reasons.
  - a. P.S.—we will be revisiting this question at the end of the book.