



Life-changing Literature

Tom Connolly

I STUDIED AFRO-CARIBBEAN Literature under a particularly inspiring tutor and – as a boy from a village going off to college in the mid-eighties of anti-Apartheid, Desmond Tutu and Trevor Huddleston, boycotting Barclays and renaming the Student Union building *Nelson Mandela House* – there would be a strong case for me locating the literature that changed my life somewhere amongst Bessie Head, Thomas Mofolo, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Roy Heath, Chinua Achebe — but that would be to forget how and why I got to that point.

The most life-changing book that I read was the first book that I read, which is to say, the first book I read properly and was captivated by, the book that made me aware that my childhood would end sooner than later (I was fourteen) and that made me begin to question the institutions and expectations I was growing up with. *The Catcher in the Rye* was the first book I re-read. It was the first book that I chose to stay between the pages of rather than be outside marauding the countryside or playing sport.

Before *The Catcher in the Rye* entered my life, I was in the slow lane at school. Whilst I excelled at sport, in the classroom I was directionless and divested of self-belief. I was unimpressed by the breed of teacher sent to educate me, by being addressed by my surname, by the coldness and absence of individuality. It didn't help that I was lazy and prone to daydreaming. My doubting of the institution I had won a free place at grew into a sullen, unspoken hatred for it and the latent bullying I felt was in its veins. My head was down. I planned to do my O levels and get out. At the



beginning of the fourth year (Year Ten in new money) an English teacher I feared but considered cool, on account of him having been in the squad for the 1968 Mexico Olympics, walked into our classroom and slapped a silver-cover version of J. D. Salinger's novel down in front of each one of us. 'Read it,' he said, 'all lesson, for homework, and the next lesson and next homework, until you've finished it.' And thirty-five minutes later, when the bell went, the change in me had begun.

The skill of that teacher was that I then allowed him to lead me to Hardy, Hemingway and Shakespeare because he had led me to this book first, and books changed my life. Precisely what it is about *The Catcher in the Rye* that changed me is not the point, and is the sort of literary dissection I have never enjoyed or taken part in. It doesn't matter why or how it affected me, it doesn't matter if it is a book that left you cold, as it did so many critics at the time of its publication in 1951. All that matters to me is that it is the book that made me love books.