

## Exercise 2.4

Let us see if, together, we can adapt an entire book into a one-panel cartoon, conveying the feeling, tone, and plot as concisely as possible, challenging ourselves to elicit the maximum amount of information with a minimum number of lines. We shall use the J.D. Salinger classic, *The Catcher*

*in the Rye*, as there are fortunately no visual references (i.e., films, photos, etc.) for this book, allowing us to translate it and capture its essence freely, without the fuss and clutter of previously received images.

Let us start with a character, the main character: Holden Caulfield. We sketch his head: a simple circle, nose, and eye. He is sullen, so we add the appropriately directed eyebrow. He has a hat, right? Not just any hat, a duck hunter's cap, which is actually important in the story: to Holden, it sets him apart from the run-of-the-mill, identifies him as "different." Hey, we can also show his attitude by his walk: he is sullen, so he should be kind of stooped over. Body language powerfully communicates mood, and note that posture is important to character development, even in one panel.

Where is he walking? Hmm... in the city. Not just any city: New York City. So maybe we draw an abstracted Empire State Building in the background. Now, what time of year is it? Winter, so we draw some snow on the ground; maybe some flurries in the air? Better yet, how about just a bare tree in the background? Note that snow takes up more graphic space, thus potentially distracting us from the main point, perhaps even competing with it. The story is not really "about" snow, but we need to evoke the season, out of loyalty to the narrative and its tone.

Is it day or night? Let us choose daytime, which is a little easier to draw, anyway. If it is nighttime, we run into the problem of how to ink, say, black hair against a black sky. This is a perennial cartooning conundrum. One solution is to draw a white "halo" around the black foreground shapes that abut the black background. Well, we need not bog ourselves down with this issue just yet. Let us soldier on and keep moving forward.

Holden is out of step with humanity, so we might draw a group of people in the composition. This also intensifies the feeling of his isolation. It seems apt that he should be the dominant figure in the cartoon, since the book is a first-person narrative from his point of view. To reflect the book, the cartoon should also help us empathize with him. To that end, note that he is walking in the same direction as the flow of our reading (left to right), while the other people are walking against the flow.

How many people should we draw in the background? One other person? Well, that doesn't feel like "people" walking in the city, does it? It implies a pretty desolate, abandoned street, which is not what we want. We could draw two people in the background, but this implies a pair, or opposition (a polarity); no, two is too specific, and our minds will automatically connect or "relate" the two people somehow. How about... three! Now, that implies a group. Three is just enough to tell us, simply, "people"; besides, four or more would just make the composition too cluttered.

Since the book is entirely Holden's narration, and we get to know him through his words, maybe he should be saying something here. How would we know he is the one talking? Well, we can use a word balloon (but its "tail" would be too vulgar and intrusive in this composition) or a thought balloon (too clownish and broad here, no?). How about a caption, with quotation marks? That seems nice, because it could suggest both speech and an internal monologue. We could also have something in the composition that directs our eye toward Holden—some lines, or even an arrangement of lights and darks, that lead our eye right to him. And we will draw a mouth on him but not on the other characters, how about that?

Note also that he occupies (roughly) the center of the space, which helps us focus our eyes on him. But we do not place him directly into the exact center, which would kind of deaden the composition and any sense of movement or visual interest. Sometimes a border around the image seems too definite, too overbearing. We could keep the composition open but not amorphous, and thus only imply the circle. However, the circle visually "rhymes" with Holden's head and makes for a nice, airtight overall structure; it creates the sense of a self-enclosed world inside the character's head, which mirrors the book's monologue.

What is he saying? How do we sum up the essence of Holden Caulfield? "What a bunch of phonies!" or maybe "Buncha phonies!" Hmm... getting there. "Phonies! Phonies! Phonies! Phonies!" Nah, I don't like the exclamation point; it's too emphatic and overstated. "Phonies, phonies, phonies, phonies." Or, how about the simplest, most elegant solution? "Phonies." I think we have a winner.



"What a bunch of phonies!"

"Buncha phonies!"

"Phonies."

Figure 2.1. *The Catcher in the Rye* as a single-panel cartoon.