CATCH-22

50th Anniversary Edition

A NOVEL BY

JOSEPH HELLER

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

Finalist for the 1962 National Book Award for Fiction

Named to "Best Novels" lists by *Time*, *Newsweek*,
the Modern Library, the New York Public Library,
the American Library Association, *The Observer* (UK),
and *The Guardian* (UK)

"A monumental artifact of contemporary American literature, almost as assured of longevity as the statues on Easter Island. . . . *Catch-22* is a novel that reminds us once again of all that we have taken for granted in our world and should not, the madness we try not to bother to notice, the deceptions and falsehoods we lack the will to try to distinguish from truth."

—JOHN W. ALDRIDGE, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* (1986)

"*Catch-22* I still think is one of the most phenomenal novels in the English language because of Heller's ability to make you laugh literally on every page while writing about the darkest of all human conditions, wartime. I'm still blown away by that book."

—CARL HIAASEN, *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY* (2010)

"Wildly original, brilliantly comic, brutally gruesome, it is a dazzling performance that will probably outrage nearly as many readers as it delights. . . . *Catch-22* is a funny book—vulgarly, bitterly, savagely funny."

—ORVILLE PRESCOTT, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* (1961)

"*Catch-22* is a bitter, anguished joke of a novel that embraces the existential absurdity of war without ever quite succumbing to it."

—LEV GROSSMAN, *TIME* MAGAZINE'S "ALL TIME 100 NOVELS" (2005)

"You will meet in this astonishing novel, certainly one of the most original in years, madmen of every rank. Page after page, you will howl, you will roar. You may even fall off your chair as I did. Suddenly you will sit up and mumble:

‘What’s so funny?’ To call it the finest comic novel of our day is faulting it. If Joseph Heller writes no other book, he will be well remembered for this apocalyptic masterpiece.”

—STUDS TERKEL, *CHICAGO SUN-TIMES* (1961)

“A novel of great power and commanding skill. One of the very best to come out of the second world war.”

—*NEWSWEEK* (1961)

BY JOSEPH HELLER

Catch as Catch Can
Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man
Closing Time
Picture This
No Laughing Matter (with Speed Vogel)
God Knows
Good as Gold
Something Happened
Catch-22

CATCH-22

50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Joseph Heller

Introduction by Christopher Buckley

Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

To my mother
and to my wife, Shirley,
and my children, Erica and Ted
(1961)

To Candida Donadio, literary agent,
and Robert Gottlieb, editor.
Colleagues.
(1994)

CONTENTS

HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND CRITICISM

PART ONE - THE STORY OF CATCH-22

PART TWO - OTHER VOICES

INTRODUCTION

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and he could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.

The phrase "Catch-22" has so permeated American language—or embedded itself, to put it in Desert Storm terminology—that we deploy it almost every day, usually to describe an encounter with the Department of Motor Vehicles. Its usage is so common that it's right there in the dictionary. Not many book titles end up being (sorry; unavoidable) catchphrases. My own *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as: "1.a A situation in which a desired outcome or solution is impossible to attain because of a set of inherently illogical rules or conditions. *In the Catch-22 of a close repertoire, only music that is already familiar is thought to deserve familiarity. (Joseph McLennan)*."

Joseph . . . who? But it's possible, even likely in fact, that the other Joseph would be amused at not being mentioned until the very bottom of the entry. I can hear him chuckling and asking, "And how many copies of the *American Heritage Dictionary* have they sold so far?" I don't know, but my guess is, not as many as *Catch-22*, which, in the fifty years since it first appeared in October 1961, has sold over ten million.

In his memoir *Now and Then*, published the year he died, Heller tells us that he wrote the first chapter of his masterpiece in longhand on a yellow legal pad in 1953. It was published two years later in the quarterly *New American Writing #7*, under the title "Catch-18." Also in that number were stories by A. A. Alvarez, Dylan Thomas, Heinrich Böll, and one by someone calling himself "Jean-Louis"—Jack Kerouac, a piece from a book he was writing called *On The Road. Catch-22* and *On The Road*? Not a bad issue of *New American Writing*, that.

The full story of how *Catch-22* came about is told in Tracy Daugherty's fascinating new biography, *Just One Catch*. Briefly: the novel grew out of Heller's experiences as a bombardier in World War II, flying missions out of Corsica over Italy. It was seven years in the writing, while its author worked in the promotional departments of *McCall's* and *Time* magazines. Just before being published, the novel had to be retitled, when it was learned that Leon Uris was about to bring out a World War II novel called *Mila 18*. Which is why you didn't have a Catch-18 experience today at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

The novel got some good reviews, some mixed reviews, and some pretty nasty reviews. *The New Yorker*'s was literary waterboarding: ". . . doesn't even seem to have been written; instead it gives the impression of having been shouted onto paper . . . what remains is a debris of sour jokes." Heller dwells on that particular review in his memoir: "I am tempted to drown in my own gloating laughter even as I set this down. What restrains me is the knowledge that the lashings still smart, even after so many years, and if I ever pretend to be a jolly good sport about them, as I am doing now, I am only pretending." (That was Joe Heller. Whatever flaws he may have had as a writer and human being, he absolutely possessed what Hemingway called the writer's most essential tool: a first-class bullshit detector.) Evelyn Waugh, one of Heller's literary heroes, pointedly declined to provide a blurb for the jacket. *Catch* never won a literary prize and never made the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list.

But a number of people fell for it—hard. To quote the novel's first line, "It was love at first sight." They took it up as a cause, not just a book, with evangelical ardor. Among these were S. J. Perelman, Art Buchwald, and TV newsman John Chancellor, who printed up YOSSARIAN LIVES bumper stickers. (The phrase eventually became an antiwar slogan, the "Kilroy Was Here" of the Vietnam era.) Word spread: *you have to read this book.* In England, it went straight to the top of the bestseller lists. A reviewer there called it, "*The Naked and the Dead* scripted for the Marx Brothers, a kind of *From Here to Insanity*"

Back on native soil, the novel took off after it was published in paperback. By April 1963, it had sold over a million copies, and by the end of the decade had gone through thirty printings. Daugherty concludes his *Catch-22* chapter with an arresting quote from a letter Heller received a few months after the hardcover came out: "For sixteen years, I have been waiting for the great anti-war book which I knew WWII must produce. I rather doubted, however, that it would come out of America; I would have guessed Germany. I am happy to have been wrong . . . thank you." The writer was historian Stephen Ambrose.

Joe Heller began work on his World War II novel around the time the Korean War was winding down and published it just as another American war, in Vietnam, was getting under way. He was not the first twentieth-century author to find dark humor in war. Jaroslav Hašek's unfinished classic *The Good Soldier Švchweik*—a book Heller knew well—got there first. But *Catch*'s tone of outraged bewilderment in the face of carnage and a deranged military mentality set the tone for the satires against the arms race and Vietnam. *Dr. Strangelove* appeared in 1964. Robert Altman's 1970 film *M*A*S*H*, with its Osterizer blend of black humor and stark horror, is a direct descendant of *Catch-22*. Ironically, that movie appeared the same year as Mike Nichols's film version of *Catch*. *M*A*S*H* is the better movie by far, but in a nice bit of irony, it propelled the novel—finally!—onto American bestseller lists.

When Heller died in December 1999, James Webb, the highly decorated Marine platoon leader, novelist (*Fields of Fire*), journalist,

movie-maker, and now United States senator for Virginia, wrote an appreciation in *The Wall Street Journal*. Webb, a self-described Air Force brat, had first read and liked the novel as a teenager growing up on a Nebraska air base. He reread it in a foxhole in Vietnam in 1969, during a lull in fierce combat that took the lives of many of his men. One day, as he lay there feverish, insides crawling with hookworm from bad water, one of Webb's men began laughing "uncontrollably, waving a book in the air. He crawled underneath my poncho hooch and held the book in front of me, open at a favorite page.

" 'Read this!' he said, unable to stop laughing. 'Read it!' "

Webb wrote, "In the next few days I devoured the book again. It mattered not to me that Joseph Heller was then protesting the war in which I was fighting, and it matters not a whit to me today. In his book, from that lonely place of blood and misery and disease, I found a soul mate who helped me face the next day and all the days and months that followed."

Soul mate. *Catch-22*'s admirers cross boundaries—ideological, generational, geographical. Daugherty relates a very funny anecdote about Bertrand Russell, the pacifist and philosopher. He had praised the book in print and invited Heller to visit him while in England. (Russell was then in his nineties.) When Heller presented himself at the door, Russell flew into a rage, screaming, "Go away, damn you! Never come back here again!" A perplexed Heller fled, only to be intercepted by Russell's man-servant, who explained, "Mr. Russell thought you said 'Edward Teller.' " The ideological distance between Jim Webb and Bertrand Russell can be measured in light years. An author who reaches both of them exerts something like universal appeal.

Returning to a favorite book, one approaches with trepidation. Will it be as good as one remembers it? Has it dated? As Heller's friend and fan Christopher Hitchens would say, "Has it time-traveled?" Any answer is subjective, but a fifty-year-old book that continues to sell 85,000 copies a year must be doing something right, time travel–wise—even discounting the number assigned in the classroom.

I asked Salman Rushdie, another friend and admirer of Heller's, what he thought about the book all these years later.

"I think *Catch-22* stands the test of time pretty well," he replied, "because Heller's language-comedy, the twisted-sane logic of his twisted-insane world, is as funny now as it was when the book came out. The bits of *Catch-22* that survive best are the craziest bits: Milo Minderbinder's chocolate-coated cotton-wool, Major Major Major Major's name, and of course the immortal Catch itself ('it's the best there is'). The only storyline that now seems sentimental, even mawkish, is the one about 'Nately's whore.' Oh well. As Joe E. Brown said to Jack Lemmon, 'Nobody's perfect.' "

A book resonates along different bandwidths as it ages. *Catch-22*'s first readers were largely of the generation that went through World War II. For them, it provided a startlingly fresh take, a much-needed, much-delayed laugh at the terror and madness they endured. To the Vietnam generation, enduring its own terror and madness, crawling through malarial rice paddies while pacifying hamlets with napalm and Zippo lighters, the book amounted to existential comfort and the knowledge that they were not alone. (Note, too, that *Catch* ends with Yossarian setting off AWOL for Sweden, which, before becoming famous for IKEA and girls with dragon tattoos, was a haven for Vietnam-era draft evaders.)

As for *Catch*'s current readers, it's not hard to imagine a brave but frustrated American marine huddling in his Afghan foxhole, drawing sustenance and companionship from these pages in the midst of fighting an unwinnable war against stone-age fanatics.

Daugherty tells how Heller was required to take a barrage of psychological tests for a magazine job. (Fodder, surely, for an episode of *Mad Men*.) The color cards he was shown conjured in his mind terrible images of gore and amputated limbs. He mentioned to one of his examiners that he was working on a novel. One of them asked, *Oh, what's it about*? Joe wrote in his memoir forty years later, "That question still makes me squirm."

There's a certain numerology about *Catch-22*: Yossarian, helpless and furious as the brass keep raising the number of missions he has to fly before he can go home. He's Sisyphus, with attitude. Then there's the title itself, a sort of algorithm expressing the predicament of the soldier up against an implacable, martial bureaucracy. For us civilians, the algorithm describes a more prosaic conundrum, that of standing before the soft-faced functionary telling us that the car cannot be registered until we produce a document that *does not exist*. Bureaucracy, as Hannah Arendt defined it: the rule of nobody.

Roll credits. *Catch-22* is Joe Heller's book, but it did not arrive on the shelves all by itself. His literary agent, Candida Donadio, got the first chapter into the hands of Arabel Porter, editor of *New American Writing*, and then into the all-important hands of Robert Gottlieb at Simon and Schuster. Gottlieb, one of the great book editors of his day —he later became head of Alfred A. Knopf—played a critical role in shaping the text. Daugherty describes how the two of them pieced together a jigsaw puzzle from a total of nine separate manuscripts; *Catch-22* seems to have been stitched together with no less care and effort than the Bayeux Tapestry. Their collaboration was astonishingly devoid of friction. Gottlieb was a genius, but Heller was an editor's dream, that rare thing—an author without proprietary sensitivity, willing to make any change, to (in Scott Fitzgerald's wonderful phrase) murder any darling. As the work proceeded, it took on within the offices of Simon and Schuster "the aura of a Manhattan Project."

Nina Bourne, advertising manager at S&S, was passionate about the book and promoted it relentlessly after it initially faltered, with a zeal that would induce a sigh of envy in any author's breast. The jacket design with the red soldier dangling like a marionette against a blue background became iconic. It was the work of Paul Bacon, himself another World War II veteran, who also designed the original covers for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Ragtime*, and *Shogun*.

It was a fertile time for letters. While Heller was conjuring Yossarian and Major Major Major Major and Milo Minderbinder and Chaplain

Tappman and the other members of the 488 Bomb Squadron, J. P. Donleavy was writing *The Ginger Man*, Ken Kesey was at work on *Cuckoo's Nest*, Thomas Pynchon on *V.* Heller's good friend Kurt Vonnegut was typing away at *Cat's Cradle*.

Joseph Heller will forever be known as the author of *Catch-22*—and who wouldn't be happy to wear that laurel? But in the opinion of some, including Bob Gottlieb, it is not his best novel. According to this view, that honor belongs to *Something Happened*, Heller's dark and brilliant 1974 novel about tragic office worker and family man Bob Slocum. The reviewer for *The New York Times* wryly observed that to film *Catch-22*, Mike Nichols assembled a fleet of eighteen B-25 bombers—in effect the world's twelfth largest air force. To turn *Something Happened* into a movie, the reviewer ventured, would cost roughly nothing.

I put it to Joe once, after a martini or two: So, did he think *Something Happened* was a better book?

He smiled and shrugged, "Who can choose?"

American literature is deplorably replete with books that secured fame for their authors, but little fortune. Think of poor old Melville schlepping about the streets of Manhattan as a customs inspector, having earned a lifetime profit of about $500 for *his* hyphenated masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*.

Joe made out rather better. Simon and Schuster paid him an advance of $1,500 (about $11,000 today). If the paperback royalties didn't make him rich, they certainly made him comfortable. The movie rights went for a tidy price, and larger paychecks lay ahead. Not bad for a kid who grew up poor in Coney Island. In fact, one might ask, *What's the catch?*

We became friends in his final years. I loved him. For someone who had flown sixty missions in a world war, who had endured a devastating, near-fatal illness (Guillain-Barré), who had gone through a rough and somewhat public divorce, Joe seemed to me a surprisingly *joyous* person. He sought joy, and seemed to find it often enough—in his myriad and devoted friends; in good food and dry martinis; in his wife Valerie, his son, Ted, and his daughter, Erica, who has written a touching and frank

account of growing up as an Eloise of the Apthorp apartment building in Manhattan.

In that book, *Yossarian Slept Here*, she writes, "When *Catch* was finally beginning to make a real name for itself . . . my parents would often jump into a cab at night and ride around to all of the city's leading bookstores in order to see that jaunty riot of red, white and blue and the crooked little man, the covers of 'the book,' piled up in towers and pyramids, stacked in all the nighttime store windows. Was anything ever again as much fun for either of them, I wonder?"

A few months before Joe died, I wrote him in the midst of a too-long book tour, in somewhat low spirits. His tough love and sharp-elbowed humor always yanked me back from the brink of acedia. This time there were no jokes; instead something like resignation.

"The life of a novelist," he wrote me, "is almost inevitably destined for anguish, humiliations, and disappointment—when you get to read the two chapters in my new novel I've just finished you will recognize why."

That book, *Portrait of the Artist, as an Old Man*, is a sad one, about a novelist who has had great success early on, only to have less in later years. It was published after Joe died.

So perhaps in the end, there always *is* a catch. But the one Joe Heller left us remains, even after all these years, the best catch of all.

—Christopher Buckley
December 2010

THERE WAS ONLY ONE CATCH . . .
AND THAT WAS CATCH-22.

The island of Pianosa lies in the Mediterranean Sea eight miles south of Elba. It is very small and obviously could not accommodate all of the actions described. Like the setting of this novel, the characters, too, are fictitious.

Catch-22

• • 1 • •

The Texan

It was love at first sight.

The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.

Each morning they came around, three brisk and serious men with efficient mouths and inefficient eyes, accompanied by brisk and serious Nurse Duckett, one of the ward nurses who didn't like Yossarian. They read the chart at the foot of the bed and asked impatiently about the pain. They seemed irritated when he told them it was exactly the same.

"Still no movement?" the full colonel demanded.

The doctors exchanged a look when he shook his head.

"Give him another pill."

Nurse Duckett made a note to give Yossarian another pill, and the four of them moved along to the next bed. None of the nurses liked Yossarian. Actually, the pain in his liver had gone away, but Yossarian didn't say anything and the doctors never suspected. They just suspected that he had been moving his bowels and not telling anyone.

Yossarian had everything he wanted in the hospital. The food wasn't too bad, and his meals were brought to him in bed. There were extra rations of fresh meat, and during the hot part of the afternoon he and the others were served chilled fruit juice or chilled chocolate milk. Apart from the doctors and the nurses, no one ever disturbed him. For a little while in the morning he had to censor letters, but he was free

after that to spend the rest of each day lying around idly with a clear conscience. He was comfortable in the hospital, and it was easy to stay on because he always ran a temperature of 101. He was even more comfortable than Dunbar, who had to keep falling down on his face in order to get *his* meals brought to him in bed.

After he made up his mind to spend the rest of the war in the hospital, Yossarian wrote letters to everyone he knew saying that he was in the hospital but never mentioning why. One day he had a better idea. To everyone he knew he wrote that he was going on a very dangerous mission. "They asked for volunteers. It's very dangerous, but someone has to do it. I'll write you the instant I get back." And he had not written anyone since.

All the officer patients in the ward were forced to censor letters written by all the enlisted-men patients, who were kept in residence in wards of their own. It was a monotonous job, and Yossarian was disappointed to learn that the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than the lives of officers. After the first day he had no curiosity at all. To break the monotony he invented games. Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but *a*, *an* and *the*. That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions, he felt, and in just about every case left a message far more universal. Soon he was proscribing parts of salutations and signatures and leaving the text untouched. One time he blacked out all but the salutation "Dear Mary" from a letter, and at the bottom he wrote, "I yearn for you tragically. A. T. Tappman, Chaplain, U.S. Army." A. T. Tappman was the group chaplain's name.

When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God. Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name. Most letters he

didn't read at all. On those he didn't read at all he wrote his own name. On those he did read he wrote, "Washington Irving." When that grew monotonous he wrote, "Irving Washington." Censoring the envelopes had serious repercussions, produced a ripple of anxiety on some ethereal military echelon that floated a C.I.D. man back into the ward posing as a patient. They all knew he was a C.I.D. man because he kept inquiring about an officer named Irving or Washington and because after his first day there he wouldn't censor letters. He found them too monotonous.

It was a good ward this time, one of the best he and Dunbar had ever enjoyed. With them this time was the twenty-four-year-old fighter-pilot captain with the sparse golden mustache who had been shot into the Adriatic Sea in midwinter and had not even caught cold. Now the summer was upon them, the captain had not been shot down, and he said he had the grippe. In the bed on Yossarian's right, still lying amorously on his belly, was the startled captain with malaria in his blood and a mosquito bite on his ass. Across the aisle from Yossarian was Dunbar, and next to Dunbar was the artillery captain with whom Yossarian had stopped playing chess. The captain was a good chess player, and the games were always interesting. Yossarian had stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting they were foolish. Then there was the educated Texan from Texas who looked like someone in Technicolor and felt, patriotically, that people of means—decent folk—should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheists and indecent folk—people without means.

Yossarian was unspringing rhythms in the letters the day they brought the Texan in. It was another quiet, hot, untroubled day. The heat pressed heavily on the roof, stifling sound. Dunbar was lying motionless on his back again with his eyes staring up at the ceiling like a doll's. He was working hard at increasing his life span. He did it by cultivating boredom. Dunbar was working so hard at increasing his life span that Yossarian thought he was dead. They put the Texan in a bed

in the middle of the ward, and it wasn't long before he donated his views.

Dunbar sat up like a shot. "That's it," he cried excitedly. "There was something missing—all the time I knew there was something missing—and now I know what it is." He banged his fist down into his palm. "No patriotism," he declared.

"You're right," Yossarian shouted back. "You're right, you're right, you're right. The hot dog, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Mom's apple pie. That's what everyone's fighting for. But who's fighting for the decent folk? Who's fighting for more votes for the decent folk? There's no patriotism, that's what it is. And no matriotism, either."

The warrant officer on Yossarian's left was unimpressed. "Who gives a shit?" he asked tiredly, and turned over on his side to go to sleep.

The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him.

He sent shudders of annoyance scampering up ticklish spines, and everybody fled from him—everybody but the soldier in white, who had no choice. The soldier in white was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms. He had been smuggled into the ward during the night, and the men had no idea he was among them until they awoke in the morning and saw the two strange legs hoisted from the hips, the two strange arms anchored up perpendicularly, all four limbs pinioned strangely in air by lead weights suspended darkly above him that never moved. Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could drip back into him. All they ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth.

The soldier in white had been filed next to the Texan, and the Texan sat sideways on his own bed and talked to him throughout the