Concentration in the Park

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**Conversation in the Park**

I sat on an old wooden bench in the middle of a park, silently feeding stale bread crumbs to the hungry, chirping birds. I watched the people: fathers playing catch with their sons, mothers and daughters laying out items for a picnic, young couples strolling romantically in the afternoon sunlight, old men playing chess beneath the shade of the large oak trees, grandmothers chattering endlessly about their grandchildren. I was so entranced, so enthralled that I didn't even notice when a seemingly kind elderly man took a seat beside me. I kept watching when suddenly he said, "Hello there, young lady. It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

I was a little startled, but when I turned and saw the gentleness in his eyes, I replied, "Yes, it is a beautiful day. I was just watching the people." I turned away and resumed my activities. I thought that was the end of our conversation.

"I like to watch people, too. When I was your age, that was all I did—watch people in the park. I loved to imagine what their lives were like after they left, what they did when they weren't spending their days here. It looks as though you like to do the same." He smiled as I turned and looked at him.

"I do like to make up stories. It's fun. I guess I've always liked to venture into other worlds." I threw some more bread crumbs at the birds.

"Do you like to read? It looks like you like to read," the man asked me. I felt as though I looked like a bookworm, but I replied honestly. "I do like to read. It's one of my favorite pastimes, besides people-watching." I was wondering if I should have left at that point. I had no idea where the conversation was headed, but I was ready for it to come to an end. The elderly man, however, had other plans.

"So you ever read any Salinger?" he asked.

"Yes. I've read pretty much his whole collection."

"What'd you think?"

"He's all right, I guess." This man, whom I had once thought of as kind and gentle, was starting to get on my nerves. I felt as though he was desperate for conversation.

"Just all right, eh? Well, who is it that you like to read?" he prodded me again for information.

I had gotten far enough into the discussion that I decided that I might as well continue. "I like a lot of different authors, but right now, I'm studying Chaim Potok, and I really enjoy him." I turned my attention to the chirping birds once again and fed them some more stale crumbs.

"Potok. The Jewish rabbi. I've read his stuff, too. Actually, I really enjoy his works. I think he and Salinger are very similar."
That statement baffled me. "Salinger and Potok? What could they possibly have in common? One's a Jew, the other's a gentile. One has a Ph.D.; the other never graduated from college. How are they alike?" I looked at him, eyes wide, mouth agape. I was utterly amazed.

"Don't look so bewildered, child. There are similarities, but you just don't want to see them. You like one author, and the other, you find to be just 'all right.' Your differences are superficial. Their similarities lie deeper than their religion or their schooling. Their similarities lie within the context of their writing, within their meaning."

His eyes looked gentle to me once again. For some reason, I wanted to hear his explanation. Suddenly, what the people in the park were doing didn't seem so interesting anymore. I wanted to know how two seemingly different authors could be so alike.

"Please explain your reasoning. How are they alike?" I asked.

"You're familiar with many Potok works also?"

I nodded.

He leaned back and placed his hand on his chin. "Well, then, tell me what you know about Salinger and what you know about Potok. And I don't mean about their personal lives, but about their writing and their topics.

I wasn't expecting that, but it seemed to be a valid question. He wanted me to think. "Okay. Salinger. He likes to write about intelligent people; actually, they're more than intelligent, they're intellectual geniuses. His characters deal with understanding one another and understanding themselves. With The Glasses, he deals primarily with the idea of being too smart and knowing too much. With Holden, though, Salinger shows the bitter trials of the teenage years. It's a topic that any generation can identify with." I took a breath.

The old man was still leaning back. He caressed his chin and smiled.

I continued, "Potok. Well, the reason I like Potok is that he writes on a level we can all understand. He talks mostly about family and relationships within the family. Potok also stresses tradition and culture in his novels and how difficult it is to choose between what you know is right for you and what culture deems is right." I looked blankly at him. "See? Salinger and Potok are nothing alike. I just don't understand."

He slowly began to lean forward. "Did you listen to yourself? It sounded like a lot of what you said was similar." He could tell that I wasn't convinced. "Here. Let me tell you what I know. Salinger and Potok are different. That's obvious. They're two very different men with very different backgrounds. You stated that yourself. But I say that their writing is very similar, and I dare say that you shouldn't read one without the other. Don't look at me so amazed, child. These two authors are wonderful storytellers--they are storytellers of life. What one talks about in one way, the other further emphasizes in another way."

I was about to say something.

"No. Let me finish. Take, for instance, the characters of Seymour and Asher. They're both geniuses who don't fit into either of their societies. Seymour is too intelligent. He
constantly questions people’s ideals and ways of thinking. Asher is an artist. He paints pictures that are not allowed in his Jewish world. Two men writing about two different things, yet they’re the same. The characters struggle with pain and with fitting into society. Seymour says he feels like a bananafish—a creature that swims into a hole with thousands of other creatures just like it, and it will eventually die, never having any meaning in life (‘A Perfect Day for Bananafish’ 16). Asher is fighting that bananafish-sameness. He wants to be more than just a member of his religion; he wants to make a statement to the world with his gift.” The man looked at me.

I was silent. I urged him to continue, to finish his lesson for me.

"Salinger and Potok deal with family issues," he continued. "When Buddy tells the story of Seymour’s life, he talks about the pressures of family life (‘Seymour—An Introduction’ 115). Don’t you think it would be tough to live in a family full of intelligent people? Don’t you think it would be tough to live up to everybody’s standards?” He waited for an answer, and when I didn’t reply, he continued. "Asher was the same. He had pressures. He wanted to do what he felt was best for his life, but his father kept ‘reminding’ him of his faith. It was a struggle for him. Asher didn’t want to turn his back on his faith, but he also didn’t want to turn his back on his gift. When he ended up doing what he thought was right for himself, he hurt his family."

I took it all in. Everything this man had said made complete sense to me. Even though I didn’t like Salinger, I could see the similarities between him and Potok now. But something was still bothering me. "What I don’t understand, though, is why you think that they should be read together."

He looked at me and slowly shook his head. "They should be read together because what you don’t understand in Salinger, you will understand after you have read Potok and vice versa. You didn’t enjoy Salinger, but now that you see the similarities, do you understand him better?"

Amazingly enough, he was right. "Yeah, I do understand him better, actually. I guess you were right; I guess they are a lot alike."

He smiled at me. "If they’re alike, can you tell me what you’ve learned, what you think is similar about them? Make me a believer as I’ve made you one."

I started to enjoy his method of teaching. He truly wanted me to understand. This day in the park had turned out to be an eventful one.

"Well, after you mentioned the fact that they both deal with intelligent people and family issues, I realized that Salinger and Potok also deal with communication and its effects on people. Both writers show the negative side of not being able to say what you feel, of not being able to let people into your thoughts. If Holden could have talked to someone, maybe he wouldn’t have been so messed up. Maybe his relationships with people would have been better. If Danny Saunders wouldn’t have been brought up in silence, maybe his relationship would have been better with his father. And maybe later, they could have had a normal relationship, but instead, they were never really able to talk."

The elderly man was beaming now. It was as if his mission in life had been accomplished—he had been able to teach something of importance to him.
I looked at my watch. The hours had quickly passed in the park. "Goodness, it looks like it's time for me to go." I looked at him and smiled. "Thanks for opening my eyes to Salinger. I probably would have never liked him if I hadn't seen how he was similar to Potok. I think I'll go reread some of his stuff."

The old man smiled and said, "You do that, and maybe you'll see even more similarities. Now you'll understand why they are better when read together. You learn great lessons about life when you read those authors side-by-side. You correlate the two and make them a standard for your own life. You know what I mean, young lady?"

"Yeah, I do. Thanks. I hope I'll see you again soon."

"Yes, maybe so. See you soon."

Unfortunately we never did meet again, but it turned out to be a worthwhile conversation in the park.

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**John Rich**  
**Ode to Brunelleschi: The Lament of an Artist**

O dear dead Brunelleschi,  
fingers tremble beneath the weight  
of your historical significance  
as rulers are withdrawn from buildings on paper  
built brick by brick by brick  
toward a single point  
on an illusory horizon  
where I pin you in effigy.

Those schoolboys don't know  
that your talk is treason, Brunelleschi, heresy!  
You've overrun art with reason  
and made it God's great gift to great men.  
I hear you mumbling beneath that shroud how  
men are the measure of all things;  
well you are no man who can measure me.

O Slavedriver! Manipulator of space!  
You've stolen the vision of a child  
and replaced it with one-eyed mania.  
Under your order, objects  
do not preserve their own sanctity  
or their own relationship with the whole.  
Rather they are twisted and contrived and  
wronged into exactitude.  
This is not nature.