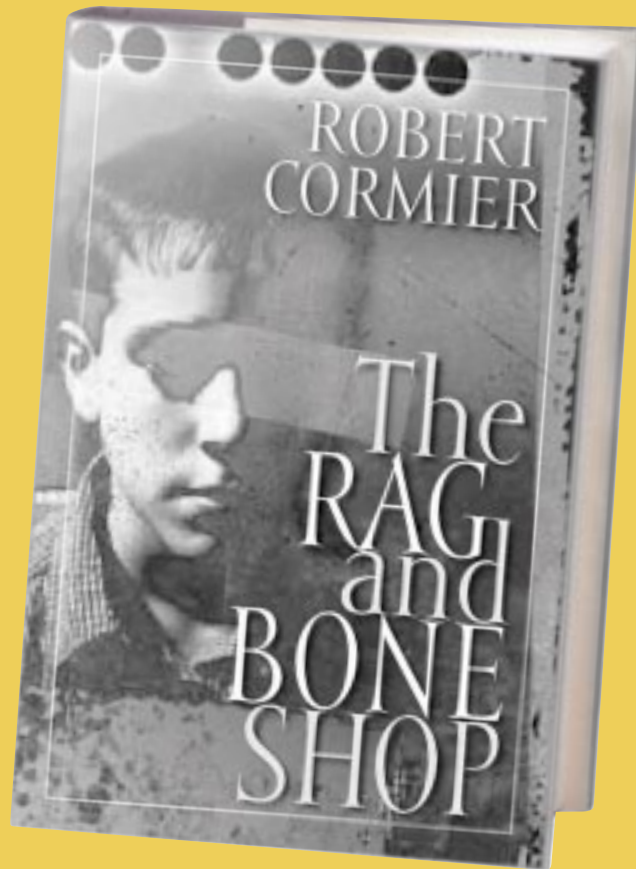


A Readers Companion

The Novels of

R O B E R T  
**CORMIER.**



0-385-72962-6 • \$15.95/\$23.95 Can.

# About This Guide

In Robert Cormier's unforgettable novels, an individual often stands alone, fighting for what is right—or just to survive—against powerful, sinister, and sometimes evil people. His books look unflinchingly at tyranny and the abuse of power, at treachery and betrayal, at guilt and forgiveness, love and hate, and the corruption of innocence. Cormier's gripping stories explore some of the darker corners of the human psyche, but always with a moral focus and a probing intelligence that compel readers to examine their own feelings and ethical beliefs.

The questions that follow are intended to spur discussion and to provoke thoughtful readers to contemplate some of the issues of identity, character, emotion, and morality that make Cormier's books so compelling.

## The Rag and Bone Shop

### Questions for Discussion

**Delving deep into the human psyche once again, Robert Cormier introduces Jason, a 12-year-old boy accused of a brutal murder, who faces the insidious scrutiny of a daunting and methodical interrogator determined to get his confession.**

1. The title of this novel is drawn from two lines of a poem by William Butler Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion." How does the phrase "the rag and bone shop" (i.e., a place where the worst castoffs end up) sum up the essence of this novel? What is Trent saying about his life when he quotes these two lines? (p. 71) And when he shifts into the final phase of the interrogation and remembers the first line? (p. 123)
2. After Jason vanquishes the bully Bobo Kelton with one blow, "he didn't think he'd ever hit anybody again but he had proved himself capable of doing it." (p. 26) How does the second part of that sentence become a weapon later for Trent? Why does hitting Bobo mean an end to Jason's tears? Is the principal right when he says violence never solves anything?
3. Trent's deceased wife Lottie had told him, "You are what you do." Why, coming from her, is this an accusation? How, coming from Trent himself at the end, is it a death sentence? Is it true that people are what they do, not only in their jobs, but in the sum total of all their acts, good and bad? Can this be changed?

4. Sarah Downes (and also Carl Seaton) compares Trent to a priest. How are Trent's interrogations like what a priest does in the confessional? But what crucial differences in Trent's intentions and capabilities make the outcome for his "perps" entirely different?
5. The exact definitions of the following words are important to understanding the ideas that underlie Cormier's themes of guilt, innocence, and forgiveness. Look up *admission*, *confession*, *absolution*, *indictment*, and *remission* and notice how their definitions overlap and where they differ. How are these terms central to this story?
6. What are the heavy external and internal pressures on Trent to get a confession from Jason? In real life, is it possible that this kind of pressure may result in hasty convictions of innocent people? Have you heard of any such cases? What might be done to keep this from happening?
7. Trent says he has "rules and regulations" for interrogations. What are some of these strategies that relate to the preliminary scenario, the physical set-up of the room, and the subtleties of psychological intimidation? How do these interrogation techniques affect the suspect?
8. "Thrust and parry" is a phrase Trent uses to describe the interrogation. From what sport does this expression come, and what image does it evoke? As the questioning proceeds, Trent suddenly knows irrevocably that Jason is innocent. How does he talk himself out of acting on this realization? What would have been the consequences if he had allowed himself to follow his conscience?
9. A stunning plot twist takes us by surprise when Trent emerges into the hall after he has tricked Jason into "confessing" and is told by Sarah Downes that Brad Bartlett has just admitted to killing his sister. Suddenly everything is different. What are the present and future implications of this new situation for Trent? For Jason? What emotions might they each have felt at this moment that they *didn't* feel?
10. In the end, Jason's view of reality has been badly twisted by Trent's perverse questioning and his own false confession. What does he tell himself to justify his plan to kill Bobo? How will this action restore his self-respect? If he carries through on this murder, who will then need to confess?

# The Chocolate War

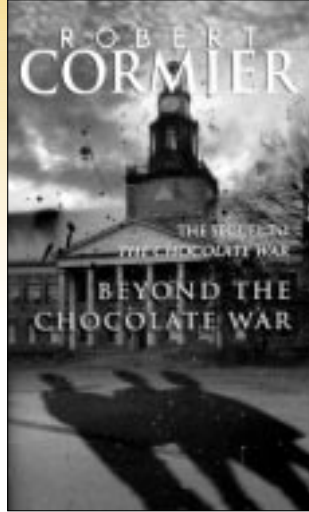


0-440-94459-7 • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can.

**Jerry Renault faces a psychological showdown with his school's secret society when he refuses to be bullied into selling chocolates for the school's annual fund-raising drive.**

1. The first sentence of this book is "They murdered him." In what ways does this small sentence apply to the book as a whole? Who is murdered, metaphorically, in the book? By whom?
2. There are no main female characters in the book, partly because Trinity is a boys' school. Yet the Trinity boys often discuss girls. Jerry wishes he could talk to the girl near the bus stop. Janza watches girls as they walk by, and Archie won't let anyone touch him except certain girls. What function(s) do you think girls play in the novel?
3. Why do you think Archie is repulsed by human sweat? What do you think this says about Archie as a person?
4. Archie's greatest strength is in exploiting other people's weaknesses. Why do you think Archie does this? Why do you think he needs to manipulate every situation?
5. Discuss the significance of the title. Why is it a chocolate "war"?
6. Why do you think Jerry decides not to sell the chocolates even after his assignment is over? Have you ever dared to "disturb the universe"? What happened?

## Beyond the Chocolate War



0-440-90580-X • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can.

**The school year is almost at an end, and the chocolate sale is ancient history. But no one at Trinity can forget.**

1. The narrator mentions that the Vigils are allowed to exist at Trinity because they keep the student body in control. At neighboring schools violence has broken out and bomb threats have been made, but not at Trinity. Still, most students agree that something is deeply wrong at the school. Why is Trinity so “creepy”? Which school situation do you think is better?
2. In what ways are Brother Leon and Archie similar or dissimilar? Why won't people stand up to either of them?
3. Carter tries to stand up to Archie by writing to the corrupt headmaster. Obie tries to kill him. Neither of these plans works. How else could Archie be foiled? What do you think Archie's greatest fear is?
4. Why does Jerry decide to go back to Trinity despite what has happened to him? What does he mean when he says, “You can look like a loser but don't have to be one.” (p. 223) Are there other characters who obtain such a sense of freedom?
5. How did you feel at the end of this book? Sad? Angry? How do you think Cormier wants you to feel?

## After the First Death



0-440-94459-7 • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can

**The suspense begins when terrorists kidnap a bus full of children, including the son of a general.**

1. This novel is told from multiple points of view. Why do you think Cormier has chosen this type of narration?
2. Why does Artkin say it is necessary for Miro to “bury” his real name forever? Are Miro and Artkin burying anything else?
3. Which characters do you sympathize with and why? Do you have a clear-cut sense of right and wrong at the end of this novel?
4. What role does the notion of “manhood” serve? Why does Miro want to achieve this status so badly? Miro thinks that Kate is trying to manipulate him when she says “it’s sad not to trust anyone.” (p. 170) Why does Miro have to shut this statement out of his mind?
5. How does a concept of duty (to Artkin, to his nation) affect Miro’s conception of self, of individuality? How does duty affect the general and his actions in regard to his son? Why does he volunteer his son for the mission?
6. Betrayal is a prominent theme throughout the novel. Do you think the general betrays his son? Who else betrays or is betrayed? How and why?

## 8 Bus 1



0-440-20838-6 • \$4.99/\$6.99 Can.

**A collection of nine short stories that deal with adolescent emotions, set mainly in contemporary times and places.**

1. "The Moustache" begins and ends with Mike's feelings about driving 75 miles per hour on the turnpike. How does this relate to the experience he had with his grandmother at the nursing home?
2. In "Mine on Thursdays," do you interpret the last sentence to mean that the narrator is or is not going to see Holly again? Why?
3. For "Another of Mike's Girls," discuss the two titles—the one Cormier's editors chose, "Another of Mike's Girls," and the one the author himself favored, "Except When You're Shaving, Don't Look into Mirrors." Which do you prefer and why?
4. In "President Cleveland, Where Are You?," what has replaced collecting chewing-gum cards in the lives of preteens today? How are these all-consuming passions a part of the maturation process?
5. Discuss the irony of Jefferson Johnson Stone's name in "My First Negro."
6. In the introduction to "A Bad Time for Fathers," Cormier discusses his opinions of titles and how magazine and book publishers have decided to change some of his titles over the years. He asks, "What's a good title, anyway?" What do you think?

## Frenchtown Summer



0-440-22854-9 • \$5.99/\$8.99 Can.

**Eugene is remembering the summer of 1938 when he was 12. He recalls his family, friends, life in a mill town, and, most important, his desire to make a connection with his distant father.**

1. The novel is written in free verse that condenses and intensifies emotions. How does this style of writing change your reading experience and your understanding of Eugene's world?
2. In the first sentence of the novel, Eugene refers to "that summer in Frenchtown in the days when I knew my name but did not know who I was." What do you think Eugene learns about himself by the end of the book?
3. When Eugene gets his first pair of glasses, he can literally see the world vividly for the first time. What can he see figuratively?
4. There is death all around Eugene throughout the novel, yet he seems shocked to learn that his father is not immortal. How do you explain this?
5. Eugene often wonders if his father loves him. What are some examples of how his father does love Eugene? How does the airplane incident at the end of the novel signify his father's love for him?

# Heroes



0-440-22769-0 • \$5.50/\$8.50 Can.

**Eighteen-year-old Francis Joseph Cassavant has just returned home from World War II, and he has no face. He does have a gun and a mission: to murder his childhood hero.**

1. The title of this novel could be meant ironically. In other words, this may be a book about “heroes” who are not true heroes. How many examples of such non-heroes do you see in the book?
2. The book begins with Francis’s shocking statement that he “has no face.” In the context of the story, what are other metaphorical expressions about “face” that are relevant? How do these apply to Francis?
3. What is your definition of a hero? Francis feels that he is “a fake.” When he threw himself on the grenade it was not to save his comrades but to end his own life. Is a heroic act still heroic even if it’s done for the wrong reasons?
4. Francis says about the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, “We had discovered in one moment on a Sunday afternoon that the world was not a safe place anymore.” (p. 79) What was the significance of that event for America? What happened as a result?
5. Forgiveness is a major theme in many of Cormier’s novels. Trace how each of the three main characters forgive and are forgiven, and how they are affected when forgiveness is withheld and when it is granted. Which is harder—to forgive someone else or yourself?

## I Am the Cheese



0-440-94060-5 • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can.

**A boy's search for his father becomes a desperate journey to unlock a secret past.**

1. Adam is pedaling on the bike at the beginning and the end of the novel. What do you think this endless cycling refers to? Does the book have a sense of motion? Is there a destination?
2. Discuss the meaning of the title. Is it significant that it comes from a nursery song sung by Adam at the end of the book?
3. Adam is struggling to understand his identity. What composes his identity? What composes your identity? What defines you?
4. Adam sees his experiences dramatically. Rain doesn't just fall, it *slashes* and *pelts*. What is Cormier trying to show about Adam's character through his choice of language?
5. Do you think this novel is a tragedy? What types of injustice are done to Adam? How does the government view him? Does it value him? In what way(s)?
6. Adam is being manipulated by the doctors/government. How is Cormier manipulating you as the reader, and why?

# Tenderness



0-440-22034-3 • \$5.50/\$6.99 Can.

**Eighteen-year-old Eric has just been released from juvenile detention for murdering his mother and stepfather. Now he's looking for some tenderness—killing beautiful girls.**

1. Robert Cormier has suggested some of the meanings of *tenderness* in the two quotes which open the book. How many meanings can you think of? What things or actions could be said to be tender?
2. Both Eric and Lori have a desperate need for tenderness, and both of them are driven by their need to acts beyond their control. How does their difference—in terms of giving or receiving tenderness—affect the way they act out their needs? Does Cormier tell us about any circumstances which might be the source of this need? Would any be enough to explain Eric's extreme pathology?
3. Typically a novel is built around conflict. What is the climactic scene for each of these conflicts and how does it resolve the tension: The question of whether Eric will kill Lori? Jake Proctor's stalking of Eric? The growing possibility of love between Eric and Lori?
4. At the end of the story, when Eric is in his cell, he cries for the first time in his life. What do you feel toward him at this point? How have your feelings changed over the course of the book? How has Cormier built up our sympathy for this serial killer?

## About Robert Cormier



1925–2000

**Robert Cormier's** writing is unique in its richness and power, and he was often called one of the finest young adult novelists in America. His books are brilliant and complex structures full of intricate wordplay and subtle thought.

Robert Cormier's novels have received many awards, consistently appearing on the Best Books for Young Adults lists of the American Library Association. In 1991 he received the Margaret A. Edwards Award honoring his lifetime contribution in writing for teens, for *The Chocolate War*, *I Am the Cheese*, and *After the First Death*. Most recently, *Frenchtown Summer* was awarded the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Young Adult Fiction.

Cormier lived all his life in the little New England mill town of Leominster, Massachusetts, where he grew up as part of a close, warm community of French Canadian immigrants. He and his wife, Connie, had four children and many grandchildren who lived nearby. He was for many years a newspaperman specializing in human interest stories.

*The Rag and Bone Shop* was the last novel completed by Cormier before his death in 2000.

### Other Books by Robert Cormier

*The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*  
0-440-90871-X • \$4.99/\$6.99 Can.

*In the Middle of the Night*  
0-440-22686-4 • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can.

*Fade*  
0-440-21091-7 • \$5.50/\$7.99 Can.

*Tunes for Bears to Dance To*  
0-440-21903-5 • \$4.99/\$7.50 Can.

*Other Bells for Us to Ring*  
0-440-22862-X • \$4.99/\$6.99 Can.

*We All Fall Down*  
0-440-21556-0 • \$5.50/\$8.50 Can.

*The Rag and Bone Shop* is available in Delacorte Press hardcover;  
all other titles available in Laurel-Leaf paperback.

*The Rag and Bone Shop* discussion questions and portions of this guide were written by Patty Campbell, author of *Presenting Robert Cormier* (Twayne, Dell) and 1989 winner of the ALA's Grollier Foundation Award for distinguished service to young adults and libraries.

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