



## Authorgraph No 34: Robert Cormier

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Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**Robert Cormier** interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Tough, outspoken writing for young readers today no longer causes any particular controversy, yet the novels of Robert Cormier continue to be banned from various American schools and over here still cause strong argument. It's not so much the detail in his books; it's their overall atmosphere of decay and disillusion that offends many adults, although adolescent readers have no problems getting through his books ? it's rare to find a Cormier novel half-read. To have achieved this reputation with only five books for young readers in ten years is no mean achievement, and in addition there are soon to be films of two of his titles. So how has he managed it?

A brief outline of each story may help answer this question, given that his basic plots always deal with powerful fantasies of conspiracy, persecution and victimisation ? strong meat for all readers, but particularly so for adolescents with their new-found self-consciousness and occasional dives into morbid introspection. **The Chocolate War** describes how a young boy is destroyed by fellow pupils with the collusion of the school staff through his refusal to take part in the annual fund-raising chocolate sale. **I am the Cheese** is a first person narrative featuring an adolescent whose family was forced to take on a new identity after testifying about corruption at the highest level. By the end of the story we learn how the parents were killed off, even so, and that the same sinister organisation is soon to eliminate the boy too. **After the First Death** is about the hijacking of a school bus by terrorists ? an act that fails, but only after the boy narrator has been duped by his soldier father into acting as decoy. His reward is torture at the hands of the terrorists plus a terrible sense of failure; the other main character, the heroic girl student driving the bus, is killed by the youngest terrorist before he makes off to create further havoc elsewhere.

Not many laughs so far, and the next novel, **The Bumblebee Flies Anyway**, tests even the most determinedly cynical teenager's power of endurance. Set in a grim experimental hospital it features a group of terminally ill young patients who are little more than pawns for medical research. The self-induced group death that concludes this story is a blessed release from the suffering that precedes it, and almost makes Cormier's latest novel, **Beyond the Chocolate War**, seem light relief by comparison, even though this once again deals with relentless bullying, corrupt authority and the final victory of brute, force at its most menacing.

This, then, is the score up to now. A reader or interested commentator might well wonder why a 59-year-old American journalist, happily married with four children, should produce novels centring almost wholly on illness, murder, suicide, betrayal, terrorism, brutality and corruption. Cormier's present abode in New England could hardly be more tranquil, and by his own account neither he nor his family have ever suffered anything nearly as bad as the wretched, tortured character in his books. As a part-time journalist, Cormier has been responsible for a regular 'human interest' newspaper column; he has also devised commercials for a radio station, again with predictably up-beat messages. Yet once he starts writing for children light turns to dark and hope fades into fatalism. Why?

Cormier puts the record straight in a manner both mild and friendly. As a newspaper reporter he has seen increasing government encroachment on private citizens; to portray the same thing in his books he suggests is surely quite permissible. The small town where he lives, for example, is right outside an army installation containing a secret

agency. This has always been something of a brooding presence for him; exploring the possibilities of such agencies is something he long wanted to do. As for the trials of the boy in **I am the Cheese**, there is in fact an American government Witness Relocation Programme, designed to give complete new identities to key figures at risk after spilling the beans in court, just as there are experimental hospitals for terminally ill patients, young and old. Where school is concerned, he went to a fairly tough Catholic school himself and later on his own son was once asked to sell chocolates to aid school funds at a similar establishment. He refused and this was accepted, but Cormier couldn't help wondering what might have happened had the headmaster been less understanding and the other pupils as natively conformist as they have sometimes been in the past. Such things need to be teased out in novels, especially those written directly for children. Providing nothing but happy endings is a betrayal of the young; something Cormier wants to have no hand in at all.

Does this mean that Cormier is himself a pessimist about human affairs?

?Oh I'm much more hopeful than you might think. I would hate to be judged solely by **The Chocolate War** and if children only read that and other books like it I would be seriously worried. All I'm doing is warning them that when they get out into the world it's kind of tough out there, and that's something hardly any other book or TV show is doing for kids at the moment. Children really appreciate having some of their own realities confirmed in my novels; they write and tell me so themselves in large numbers.?

So is it something of a crusade, then, picturing the world to children in all its depths as well as heights?

?I don't know about a crusade. As a writer, I have to be true to myself. I would love to have happy endings to my stories ? I too become attached to my characters and wish for the best for them. But as I write, imagining the different possibilities as I go, I have to follow the ones that suddenly click, which means I then know exactly how it has to be. Don't ask me why it happens like that, but it does. Ironically, I'm quite optimistic myself about the future, precisely because of the young people I come across. They're far more idealistic today than they were in my time. The future rests with them, and on the whole I'm happy to trust them with it.?

For some adults, teachers and librarians especially, Cormier's novels are a strange way of expressing such optimism, so determinedly dark themselves it's possible they could occasionally help dash just those idealistic hopes in the young necessary for a better future. But while this might be said about his earlier novels, the later ones do show small but important changes in tone. In **The Chocolate War**, for example, the defeated hero's final message is never try to do your own thing; instead, ?Play ball... don't disturb the universe.? In its sequel, written eleven years later, the same hero now refuses to give in and even though badly beaten up, as before, preserves his moral ascendancy. **The Bumblebee Flies Anyway** also shows that even the most desperately handicapped children can still co-operate to achieve something positive in their lives, despite horrendous opposition.

In all this, however, Cormier remains a sombre writer, offering all sorts of painful messages to his audience. Adults who wish to protect children from these must consider very carefully what their own motivation is here, since merely to keep children's literature as a repository of cosy, sentimental set pieces is to serve no-one's interests. As it is, children already know something of the darker side of life if only from the evidence of their own playground squabbles or the sudden hatreds than can flare up at home. Cormier can hardly be faulted for raising such matters in his novels, and by putting them on occasions into a political context can help children to realise that governments too can sometimes behave like school bullies. Politics in children's literature is still something comparatively new, unless one counts previous lack of political discussion as itself a political act, preaching unthinking acquiescence to the status quo. But after reading a Cormier novel children can not only see some of their own realities reflected, albeit in a somewhat one-sided way. They might also be stimulated to ask hard questions about the society in which they live. Cormier hopes they will and the evidence in letters to him from readers suggests they do. Whether they get straight answers is another matter, but hardly something that can be laid at Cormier's door.

**The Books**

**After the First Death**, Gollancz, 0 575 02665 0, £6.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671705 5, £1.50

**The Bumblebee Flies Anyway**, Gollancz, 0 575 03327 4, £6.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 672358 6, £1.75

**The Chocolate War**, Gollancz, 0 575 01926 3, £7.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671765 9, £1.50

**I am the Cheese**, Gollancz, 0 575 02372 4, £6.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 671766 7, £1.50

**Beyond the Chocolate War**, Gollancz, 0 575 03711 3, £7.95

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