



Cormier Talking

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Extracts from **Robert Cormier's** conversations with pupils (and teachers) during a recent visit to this country.

Robert Cormier, author of **The Chocolate War**, **I am the Cheese**, **After the First Death**, **The Bumblebee Flies Anyway**, **Beyond the Chocolate War**, was in Britain recently for the publication of his latest novel **Fade**.

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Cormier has always been a controversial author, guaranteed to polarise teachers, librarians and parents in their views of his writing. At the same time, he is hugely popular with teenagers, providing compelling and demanding reading for many young people who rarely find books to sustain their interest. His books have variously been described as 'powerful but deeply disturbing'? 'brilliant, brutal, uncompromising'? 'stunning'? compulsive'? 'physically disgusting'? 'sexist' and many other complimentary and damning comments.

In rather sharp contrast to his books, Robert Cormier is a gentle, caring, family-orientated man, with four grown-up children. An ex-journalist, now a full-time writer, he says he has always written, from as long ago as he can remember. It is his way of expressing his feelings and communicating with people. He is deeply concerned about the problems facing young people in the world today. He is frightened by today's world, terrified by big things: 'Big governments frighten me, so does big defence and the power of technology to control the individual. The size of schools frightens me. Kids can so easily slip through the cracks and the individual be defeated.'

He writes about the individual in the face of power, corruption, betrayal, victimisation, conspiracy. 'The question of identity runs through all my novels.' So too does a preoccupation with the nature of evil in the guise of expedience, pragmatism, profit and policy.

Cormier positively enjoys meeting his readers. On his latest visit he talked in schools with great sensitivity and understanding, reacting positively to questions and revealing much of himself as a writer and as a person.

Here for those not lucky enough to meet him is a selection of what he said.

'I'm writing books about young people but not for young people. How do you write for a 14-year-old person? Sitting at my typewriter I always have the image of an intelligent reader that I'm writing for - a person I can be complex with, a person who likes me, who'll forgive any of my errors or goofs. I found out when I wrote **The Chocolate War** that this person is often 14 or 15 - the good readers. Thank goodness my books are in the schools where there are teachers who lead students to the depths I hope are in my novels.

I think a writer has to be more human than other people. Emotion is the key to everything I write. If I'm not emotionally involved with a story then I find that it doesn't work for me, I can't reach the readers emotionally.'

The Chocolate War, Cormier's first novel, is rooted in a powerful emotional reaction to something that happened in his

family.

“The boy who did not sell the chocolates was fashioned on my son. One day he came home from school; I saw him get off the school bus and come up to the house; he had two shopping bags. I said “What have you got there Peter?” “Well Dad,” he said, “We’re having a chocolate sale at school to raise funds for the school and I have 25 boxes to sell.”

I was appalled. I was a kid growing up in the Depression and we sold everything - perfume, handkerchiefs, candy - to raise money to run the schools. Here we were two generations later, my son was going to a fine school and I thought it was nonsense that he should be required to sell chocolates. That night at the supper table we began talking about the sale. Peter knew how I felt. I told him “Look, we have options here. You can sell the chocolates. We could buy the chocolates. You don’t have to sell the chocolates. It’s a free world.” Peter said, “That’s what I’m going to do, Dad. I won’t sell the chocolates.” His answer left me a bit breathless. Peter was going to a boys’ school: 400 boys, a very active school football team, all kinds of athletics. I thought who knows what might happen there. It’s one thing to say something; it’s another to do it.

I said, “Tomorrow, instead of taking those chocolates back on the school bus, I’ll drive you to school.”

Well, I drove him to school and I watched him walking in carrying those two bags. It was his first year; he was with 400 strangers. There went my son, 14 years old, facing what?

I thought, he’s going to get murdered in there. He’s going against the grain and it’s very hard to go against what everyone else is doing. I was besieged by emotions: fear, apprehension, even guilt. As it was, nothing happened to Peter - but a lot happened to me. Writing **The Chocolate War** allowed me to explore the individual against society, how people can abuse authority. All those grand, deep themes came out of a very simple human emotion having to do with my son.’

A vividly recalled traumatic experience when Cormier was only 12 years old himself lies at the back of a lot of his writing. It is about betrayal.

“When I was young kids who had a lot of colds would be recommended to have their tonsils out. It was a big medical fashion. Whole families would go to out-patients to have their tonsils removed. One day my parents told me I was going to the hospital with my older brother and my younger sister to have my tonsils out. I didn’t want to have my tonsils out; but I had no say in the matter. Next thing I found myself in hospital, lying on this table, dressed in a gown that didn’t quite tie up at the back. I felt humiliated, terrified, lying there waiting, for what? Then a nice nurse came along and said, “Robert, we understand you are a singer.” Suddenly the whole situation was different, more human. I said “Yes, I am.” She said, “Would you like to give us a little tune?” I thought, this is great. Suddenly I was an individual. I started singing. I had about nine notes out and she clamped this ether mask over my mouth and nose; sent me hurtling into oblivion with a terrible suffocating feeling. But it was more than suffocation. I had such anger because she had tricked me.’

Asked about the themes of his novels, the selection of murder, suicide, terrorism, violence and brutality of all kinds as their subject matter, he replies:

‘I think there’s a lot going on in today’s world that we have a false view of. Television in particular is lying to us. In the programme before the nine o’clock news the good guy always wins - that’s a lie. The TV commercial tells you that if you use a certain deodorant everyone will love you - that’s a lie. We know life isn’t always fair and happy. There are enough books with happy endings. I think there’s room for the realistic novel about things that really go on in the world. I try to write a warning about what’s waiting out there.

In America we do have a Witness Relocation Programme where people are given new identities and things have gone wrong with that programme. Adam (in **I am the Cheese**) is part of that; he’s in a mental hospital because he’s an embarrassment to the government. In that story the relationship I show between organised crime and government shakes people. But it’s a fact of life. And there are experimental hospitals for terminally ill patients, young and old (**The Bumblebee Flies**

Anyway). And right outside the town where I live there's an army installation containing a secret agency. I can't ignore all that.'

Cormier's latest novel **Fade** is, he says, 'probably the most autobiographical thing I have written and it says a lot about how I feel about writing'.

Fade began with a family photograph.

'My father's family came down from Canada to New England in the early part of the century, like a lot of people who came to America to seek jobs and fortune. There were 10 children, my grandfather and grandmother. Before they left Canada they had a portrait taken. They sat outside on the steps of the farmhouse; the photographer came in from town, took the picture. About three weeks later they got the photograph back. When they looked at it they found that one of my uncles had disappeared, he wasn't in the photograph. He had been sitting there along with the others and somehow when the picture was developed he wasn't there - you could see parts of the house behind where he should have been. This picture's been in my family for years - it's a sort of family legend.

I sat down to write a story about what might have happened to my uncle. It ponders the possibilities of invisibility. Wouldn't it be wonderful you think to be invisible. But would it? Would it be a curse instead of a gift? There's also a lot of fading going on in our lives.

People fade in and out of our lives, desire fades, anger fades, innocence fades.

It begins in 1938 with a 13-year-old boy Paul who finds out about the uncle who disappeared from the picture and has now become a hobo, a tramp. Then he too inherits the "gift". The story covers three generations to 1988 and ends up with a 20-year-old Boston University student called Susan. It's about how gifts become curses - or that gifts aren't gifts at all.'

Fade continues a pattern of violence in the other books. There is violent death, child abuse, incest and voyeuristic sexual scenes.

'The first version was even more violent. Then I realised that even though I wanted him to be monstrous because of what the fade did to him I didn't want him to be completely without scruples or morals. I wanted to make him a victim. There are things you want to establish to shock the reader to the point where you have to believe why Paul acted the way he did. But I wrote unsensually, not to titillate or sensationalise.'

There's also a feeling that beneath any gift lies something to disgust, to be afraid of.

'Maybe that's a reflection of my own Catholic sense of sin. Like Paul, I was educated by nuns. At 13 years old you're just waking up to sexuality, where the most wonderful thing in the world is to think about a girl, and the nuns are telling you if you have evil thoughts you are going to hell - immediately, if this afternoon you get hit by a car. At Confession all your classmates were out there, listening, not wanting to listen but not being able to help listening because you're whispering behind this curtain, with a deaf priest - we had a deaf priest - who kept saying "Louder".

When I started writing **Fade** it was like loosening the floodgates of my past. I didn't realise what I was getting into and how far back I was going to go into my own life.'

Contributions to this feature from Judith Elkin, Marion Hobbs, Adrian Jackson and Nick Kinsley.

Robert Cormier's books are published in hardback by Gollancz and in paperback by Collins in their Teen Tracks series.

The Chocolate War (1975), 0 575 03712 1, £7.95; 0 00 671765 9, £2.50 pbk

I am the Cheese (1977), 0 575 02372 4, £8.95; 0 00 671766 7, £2.25 pbk

After the First Death (1979), 0 575 02665 0, £8.95; 0 00 671705 5, £2.50 pbk

The Bumblebee Flies Anyway (1983), 0 575 03327 4, £7.95; 0 00 672358 6, £2.25 pbk

Beyond the Chocolate War (1985), 0 575 037113, £7.95; 0 00 672538 4, £2.25 pbk

8 Plus 1, 0 00 673057 4, £2.50 pbk

Fade (1988), 0 575 04402 0, £9.95

Photographs of Robert Cormier by Richard Mewton.

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