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Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*: Paranoia and Paradox

PERRY NODELMAN

'If schools are what they were in my time,' Tom Brown's father tells his son in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, 'You'll see a great many cruel blackguard things done, and hear a great deal of foul bad talk.'¹ Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* suggests that, a century and a half later, schools are still what they once were. In this story of the evil machinations surrounding the fund-raising chocolate sale at Trinity High, the boys speak a great deal of foul bad talk, and do a great many cruel blackguard things; and that has created a lot of controversy. Many readers have complained that *The Chocolate War* is an inaccurate representation of reality, a vision of a hopeless world that encourages an unhealthy hopelessness in young readers.² During one of the many attempts to censor the book, in Proctor, Vermont in 1981, a parent nicely summed up this sort of response in two short sentences: 'I thought it was hostile and totally disgusting. To show that evil triumphs is kind of sick to me.'³

Sick or not, the ending of the novel is certainly unexpected – and a key factor in determining how readers respond to it. In refusing to take part in a chocolate sale in defiance of the powerful establishment of his school, Jerry Renault fits the pattern of the underdog non-conformist found frequently in fairy tales, TV shows, movies, and novels. Conventionally, the underdog wins; but Jerry loses, in an impossible fight against a vicious bully. According to Sylvia Iskander, 'When readers complain about Cormier's hopeless pessimism, they mean that the novel's close defies their expectations.'⁴

Iskander assumes that the expectations the novel thwarts relate to the conventions of fiction rather than to those of reality; we may know that underdogs don't always win in real life, but still find a novel in which one loses unpersuasive. It's interesting, therefore, that Cormier himself sees his defiance of fictional norms as exactly

what makes his novels a more accurate representation of reality: 'As long as what I write is true and believable, why should I have to create happy endings? My books are an antidote to the TV view of life, where even in a suspenseful show you know before the last commercial that Starsky and Hutch will get their man. That's phony realism. Life just isn't like that.'⁵

Or is it? According to the novelist, *The Chocolate War* was based on a real situation. But in reality, Cormier wrote a letter supporting his son's decision not to take part in the school's chocolate sale: 'So, what happened is, he gave the letter to the headmaster, who read it and said, "Fine, Peter," and nothing happened.'⁶

Nothing happened: no isolated underdog like Jerry Renault, no villain like Archie Costello or Brother Leon, no corrupt secret society like the Vigils – and no unhappy ending. That Cormier imagined all this suggests just how much the book deviates not just from conventional stereotypes but also, despite Cormier's claims otherwise, from an accurate representation of reality. In fact, the essence of Cormier's genius in *The Chocolate War* is his masterful evocation of a nightmarishly intense atmosphere, a powerful and powerfully upsetting vision of hopelessness.

A first-time reader with knowledge only of the title of the book and its reference to war might well assume that the opening paragraphs do actually describe a battle:

They murdered him.

As he turned to take the ball, a dam burst against the side of his head and a hand grenade shattered his stomach.⁷

Only later does it become clear that the ball is a football, not gunshot, and that the grenade and the dam are metaphoric. The description of a perfectly ordinary football practice that follows contains comparisons to murder, mutiny, burning, gangsters, dams bursting and hand grenades exploding. Later in the book, paint peels 'like leprosy' (p. 13), leaves 'fluttered to the ground like doomed and crippled birds' (p. 114), and telephone dial tones explode or are 'like a fart in his ear' (p. 181). Cormier reserves the most loathsome similes for parts and products of the human body. Fingers are 'like the legs of pale spiders with a victim in their clutch' (p. 105). Eyes are like 'boiled onions' (p. 104) or 'like specimens in laboratory test tubes' (p. 82). Sweat is 'like small moist bugs' (p. 7), and the sound of vomiting is 'like a toilet being flushed' (p. 172). These continual ugly

or violent comparisons charge fairly mundane events with demonic force.

Cormier also carefully selects the events that we view through the filter of these obsessively ugly comparisons. We hear almost nothing about the characters' families or life at home. We don't know what sort of parents produced a fiend like Archie or a bully like Emile Janza. The only parent who appears significantly in the book is Jerry's father, a defeated widower who pays little attention to his son. Cormier explains his omissions by sayings, 'People can't say Archie did this because he was a deprived child or he was a victim of child abuse. I wanted him judged solely on his actions.'⁸ But he creates the impression that parents in general have little interest in their children, that most or even all children must face a hard world on their own.

What Cormier shows us is as carefully selected as what he leaves out. An omniscient third-person narrator tells the story, but always from the perspective of different characters; and there are frequent switches from one character's thoughts to another's, from how Jerry experiences his first football practice to how Obie thinks about it as he watches it from the stands. It seems logical to assume that during the course of events the book describes, many of characters whose thoughts appear in it would have had happy moments, or at least relaxing ones. But Cormier almost never allows us to experience such moments; as the focus of our attention switches from mind to mind, we track a carefully selected course of brutal or cowardly thoughts and actions, almost all obsessively concerned with the chocolate sale, and violent or despairing responses to them.

At one point or another in the novel, furthermore, we experience the perspectives of thirteen different people. The result of this constant switching between many different minds, only to discover that all the minds are thinking about the same subject and caught up in equally strong emotions about it, is the main source of book's intensity and of the distinctive claustrophobia of its atmosphere. It makes the events of the chocolate sale seem like the unswerving focus of everyone's attention.

It also creates a deep irony. We know what the characters do not know – that in the imprisoning isolation of each of their individual minds and deeply conscious of their isolation, they are all not only thinking about the same things but also having thoughts about it that are similar to each other.

Cormier magnifies this overall irony with detailed parallels and

contrasts between the characters. In the first chapter, Jerry worries about getting on the good side of a powerful person, the coach; in the second, Obie worries about keeping the powerful Archie happy. In chapter five, Archie gives a 'performance' for the Vigils, 'toying with kids, leading them on, humiliating them' (p. 31), and in the next chapter, Brother Leon does exactly the same thing with the students in his class: 'Ten minutes left – time enough for Leon to perform, to play one of his games' (p. 39). Leon plays the game of singling out a bright student and accusing him of cheating; immediately after that, we discover how Emile Janza 'found that people had a fear of being embarrassed or humiliated, of being singled out for special attention' (p. 48). Like Leon, Emile 'found that the world was full of willing victims' (p. 47); but before the chapter is over, this bully is himself humiliated by Archie.

Later in the novel, Jerry and Goober discuss evil as they run through the streets (p. 149); in the next chapter as Leon and Archie discuss the chocolate problem, 'Leon's breath filled the gaps between the words as if he'd been running long distance' (pp. 153–4) and a few pages later, Cochran says 'I think Leon's on the run' (p. 155). As in this last example, Cormier often cross-cuts specific images and phrases as well as situations. On one page, Archie perceives that Leon 'was someone riddled with cracks and crevices . . . vulnerable, running scared, open to invasion' (pp. 22–3); a little later, the tables are turned as Leon himself watches his class, 'probing for weaknesses in the students and then exploiting those weaknesses' (p. 25). Leon singles out Bailey, 'looking at him as if he were a specimen under a microscope, as if the specimen contained the germ of some deadly disease' (p. 40); again the tables turn as Goober perceives that Leon himself has 'moist eyes like specimens in laboratory test tubes' (p. 82). Similarly, Jerry's eyes 'burned with fire, fuelled by lack of sleep' (p. 118) soon after he observes that Leon's eyes offer 'a glimpse into the hell that was burning inside the teacher' (p. 116).

In all these instances, the use of similar language for apparently different people and situations forces us to make connections between them, to see them part of the same obsessively claustrophobic atmosphere. In the most blatant example of his insistence on connecting everything, Cormier and various of his character use the word 'beautiful' to describe the photograph of a girl (p. 17), Emile Janza's beastly behaviour (p. 48), Goober's running (p. 51), the sight of a teacher getting upset (p. 65), a football pass (p. 75), America (p. 98), the sight of Emile masturbating (p. 99), the idea of not selling

chocolates (p. 135), a girl (p. 149), the success of the chocolate sale (p. 187), Jerry's gullibility to Archie's final scheme (p. 169), Jerry's punch at Emile (p. 222), and Archie's final triumph (p. 150). With each further use, the word becomes more ambiguous – we can no longer be sure what it means, but we know it certainly isn't what we thought it meant before we read the book.

The intense atmosphere all this creates is hardly a balanced representation of reality. Some readers have suggested that *The Chocolate War* actually forces readers to *reject* its apparently negative conclusion. Sylvia Iskander believes that because of his divergence from fictional norms, 'Cormier makes his readers think long after they have closed his novels. . . . The climactic structure of his novels with their shocking, unhappy, but quite realistic endings reinforces not the temporary defeats or a bleak pessimism, but rather a longing for justice.'⁹ Less convinced of Cormier's realism, Millicent Lenz nevertheless insists that 'the reader can react only with revulsion for such evil, and so desolate a vision, [and so] calls up a counter-vision of a possible better world – a world that lies within human will and choice to realize.'¹⁰

But in insisting that the proper response to *The Chocolate War* is to move beyond its distorted vision of reality, these commentators neglect that fact that many readers seem to want to respond to it by saying something like, 'Yes, that's just the way things are.' I suspect Cormier intends us to respond in just this way – although not necessarily because he intended the novel to be an *accurate* representation of the way things are.

To accept the novel's vision is to share Archie's belief that 'life is shit' (p. 16). In psychological terms, having that belief and taking comfort in it can be identified as paranoia. I believe that the horrific world of *The Chocolate War* represents a distorted, paranoid vision of the way things are.

Paranoiacs assume, incorrectly, that they are the constant subject of the attention and hostility of others more powerful than themselves. In the real world, the fact that Cormier's son didn't want to sell chocolates was a matter of no interest; but in the delusional world of the novel, the refusal of one insignificant freshman becomes the major and only business of the school, the obsessive concern of everyone in authority. In other words, what is merely delusional in a paranoic is literally true for Jerry: everyone *is* out to get him.

According to Freud, a paranoic 'corrects some aspect of the world which is unbearable to him by the construction of a wish and intro-

duces this delusion into reality.'¹¹ On first consideration, Jerry's horrific world hardly seems more bearable than the boring but relatively safe one inhabited by Cormier's son and by most teenagers; but its advantage is that in it Jerry *does* in fact matter enough to deserve attack – that despite his apparent insignificance and lack of power, he is important enough to demand the attention of those with power.

In more conventional wish-fulfilment fantasies, of course, the deserving underdog and the values he stands for would triumph: that is certainly what happens in earlier school stories like Kipling's *Stalky and Co.* to supposed underdogs like the disobedient but always victorious Stalky. But while Jerry may seem to be defeated, the viciousness of the attack on him merely proves what the hostility paranoiacs feel being directed toward themselves always proves – that he is important enough, enough of a threat to those in power for it to become necessary for them to crush him. It also confirms Jerry's own inherent blamelessness: it's clearly the corrupt viciousness of those in power that keeps Jerry a powerless victim, and therefore not his own guilt or inadequacy. For these reasons, the paranoid vision, in its very hopelessness, is a source of intense pleasure for readers.

The paranoid satisfactions of the plot are intensified by the novel's unusual manipulations of point of view. Because we follow the action as it passes through different minds, we continually find out that each of those minds is centrally concerned with how events will affect itself. We constantly experience different people seeing themselves as the centre of attention, each one imagining himself to be the one person who is the target of everyone else's hostility. Every one of the characters seems paranoid.

According to Freud, furthermore, paranoiacs often 'complain that all their thoughts are known and their actions watched and supervised.'¹² The characters of *The Chocolate War* obsessively think about watching and being watched throughout the book – watch each other for signs of hostility, and often feel they are being watched and their secrets being found out. Jerry observes Leon's eyes, 'eyes that reflected everything that went on in the class, reacting to everything. . . . After Jerry had learned that the secret of Brother Leon lurked in his eyes, he became watchful, seeing the way the eyes betrayed the teacher at every turn' (p. 116). Similarly, Obie, observes 'something flash in Archie's eyes, like looking at a blank window and observing a ghost peeking out' (p. 140).

Each of the characters has a version of that ghost, a secret life at

odds with the appearance he presents to the world. Tubs Casper thinks lustful thoughts about his girlfriend as he presents 'his most innocent and sweetest smile' to chocolate buyers (p. 91), and we hear that 'Archie was careful to keep his poker face, intent on not betraying an emotion. But he was shaken inside' (p. 170).

This sense of a difference between what the characters feel and what they show is the source of their paranoia. Knowing his own dark secrets, each of them suspects the others have the power to see them also – that everyone else is always watching, getting past the facade, ferreting out hidden inadequacies. As a result, the characters treasure dark, hidden places where they can't be seen. Jerry thinks of his bed as 'dark and safe and quiet' (p. 204), and Jerry's friend Goober of his bed as 'a private world, a small, safe place without people' (p. 237). To be safe is to be beyond observation.

At one point, Jerry hungrily observes a photograph of a girl in a magazine, then guiltily glances around 'to see if he'd been observed.' (p. 17) Later, Howie Andersen speaks of 'watching girls and devouring them with your eyes – rape by eyeball' (p. 134); in looking at the photograph and feeling guilty, Jerry is a visual rapist worried about being raped. A few paragraphs later, he discovers he *has* been observed – not observing the girl, but observing the hippies in the park. One of them accuses him of staring at them, and he must acknowledge to himself that he has been, that his guilty secret of observing others has been found out.

And this is the essence of the novel's cleverness, and the main source of its satisfaction it offers readers: here as throughout the novel apparently paranoid delusions are almost always confirmed. In *The Chocolate War* it's not a paranoid delusion that others are always watching you and finding out your guilty secrets: it's merely the truth.

Archie's genius for evil (and for that matter, Leon's) is simply to watch others carefully enough to find their weaknesses – then threaten to reveal them. Archie's status as a dangerous observer is established a few pages after Howie Anderson discusses 'rape by eyeball,' as Archie thinks of a girls' school where 'you could let your eyes devour some luscious sights' (p. 137). It's not surprising that he keeps Emile Janza in his power through the threat of a non-existent photograph of Emile masturbating behind the door of a washroom cubicle, a photograph that Emile worries might be observed by others just as Jerry observes the photograph of the girl: he fears rape by eyeball. Nor is it surprising that Emile enrages Jerry by accusing

him of living 'in the closet' (p. 200), 'hiding that deep dark secret' (p. 201); Emile knows through personal experience that everyone likes 'in the closet' – hides dark secrets behind their facades.

Patricia Campbell describes the protagonist of Cormier's later novel *Fade* as 'a young boy on the verge of exploring adult sexuality, but with a penchant for voyeurism because he is by nature a shy observer. Quite early in the novel we see him setting a pattern of gratification from contemplating what is forbidden Because he is by nature a sexual spy it is no accident that the fade leads him to "dark and nasty secrets it was better not to know about."'¹³ Many of the characters in *The Chocolate War* are also young boys on the verge of adult sexuality, also observers – and also discovering nasty secrets they think it better not to know about. But more significantly, *The Chocolate War*'s insistence on allowing us as readers to observe what goes on inside its characters' minds forces us also to become like Paul. Like him, we are shy voyeurs, invisible observers observing dark secrets.

If we find it uncomfortable to do that, even while enjoying the pleasures of the paranoid visions we are allowed to share, we are doing nothing more than responding to an ambiguity in the novel that seems to be deliberate. For as well as confirming the pleasures of paranoia, *The Chocolate War* seriously (and just as pleasurably) calls them into question.

One way it does so is by asking a question that relates significantly to paranoia: who is a victim? According to Archie, 'The world was made up of two kinds of people – those who were victims and those who were victimisers. There was no doubt about Janza's category. No doubt about himself either' (pp. 100–1). Given what we know of their behaviour, we have to assume that Archie sees both himself and Janza as victimisers. But we've just seen Archie victimising Janza over the matter of the photograph. And if Janza is a victim, then what of Archie himself? And what of Brother Leon?

It may not be merely ironic that David Caroni concludes 'that Brother Leon had been the victim' (p. 107), with Jerry his victimiser. Leon and Archie's characters are such that they could respond to Jerry's actions only by indulging in ever more loathsome acts of malevolence. In effect then, Jerry has unintentionally done for Archie and Leon what Emile always intentionally does to his victims: create circumstances in which they will reveal their secret vices and moral weaknesses. In this sense, Archie and Leon have been Jerry's victims.

We might understand that in Christian terms: Cormier is a practising Catholic. Thinking about Archie's victory over Jerry, Obie concludes it 'proves that the meek don't inherit the earth' (p. 224). But as we've seen, in fact they do: like the apparently defeated Christ dying on the cross, the meek Jerry wins by losing – becomes a hero for readers by revealing the hopeless corruption of the world. And also like Christ, Jerry is not apparently meek. His unyielding refusal to do what he does not want to do implies strength rather than weakness, and we must conclude that it's the people who meekly go along with the corruptions of those with power who are actually the meek ones. If we think of the novel in this way, we can conclude two things: the truly meek do inherit the earth, to the extent that the meek conformists aren't the ones victimised by Archie and his like; but since the only apparently meek Jerry is so ruthlessly unyielding and since he really does win, Obie was right in a way he didn't intend: the meekly conventional don't inherit the earth after all.

And yet – All this assumes that the paranoid vision is correct, that Jerry's apparent meekness is actually strength. The novel also offers evidence to undercut the paradox and suggest that it isn't. We see Jerry constantly trying to hide, to fade, to be somewhere other than where ugly things are happening. According to Campbell, Jerry is inherently passive. His natural instincts are to do nothing. That is why the poster that challenges him to disturb the universe is so fascinating to him. The refusal to sell the chocolates only *seemed* like a heroic action because of the circumstances that led up to it. Actually, once the refusal is set in motion, Jerry's natural inertia keeps it in place.' (p. 70). In fact, Jerry's heroic action, his way of disturbing the universe, is a negative decision not to act rather than a positive decision to do something. Perhaps his meekness isn't heroic after all.

Furthermore, we're told that Janza 'had discovered a truth early in life. . . . Nobody wanted trouble, nobody wanted to make trouble, nobody wanted a showdown. The knowledge was a revelation. It opened doors. You could take a kid's lunch or even his lunch money and nothing usually happened because most kids wanted peace at any price' (pp. 47–8). Jerry's desire to be passive clearly identifies him with what Janza thinks of as 'willing victims' (p. 47). In a very real sense, he invites the trouble that lead to his defeat, by trying to avoid trouble.

Cormier says, 'I think the monstrous is so often disguised as innocence.'¹⁴ While he's talking about a character in *After the First Death*, this comment might well refer to Jerry also. Archie quite

rightly says, 'Everybody has to do things in this world they don't want to' (p. 164); without compromise there's only anarchy. But Jerry won't accept that: he does something anti-social, an essentially meaningless act of defiance, for no clear reason other than that it is anti-social, the opposite of what the world wants and expects him to do. We might argue that the book gives evidence that this particular society is corrupt enough to need to be defied; but we shouldn't forget that it's Jerry's act of defiance which elicits the behaviour that seems so corrupt. While there's no doubt that Archie and Leon are flawed beings, there's no evidence that their malevolence would have become so intense had not Jerry unwittingly created the situation that threatened their status.

In this sense, then, Jerry's innocence is monstrous, a tempting invitation to evildoers. We might even say that Jerry has victimised himself. Certainly he victimises himself in falling for Archie's scheme of fighting Emile; using physical force to get even with his oppressors merely confirms his fellowship with people like Emile.

Cormier insists we realise that. As Jerry punches Emile, he tells us that 'a new sickness invaded Jerry, the sickness of knowing what he had become, another animal, another beast, another violent person in a violent world, inflicting damage, not disturbing the universe but damaging it' (p. 242). The victim turns into another victimiser.

An earlier and even more ironic confrontation between victims and victimisers similarly insists on the degree to which the innocent might be guilty. After Father Leon mercilessly victimises one of his students, he confronts the others with their own inadequacy in not coming to his defence: 'those of you who didn't enjoy yourselves allowed it to happen, allowed me to proceed. You turned this classroom into Nazi Germany for a few moments' (pp. 44–5). The irony, of course, is that Leon is both right and wrong – it was he himself who turned the class into Nazi Germany, victimised the students by creating a situation which would allow him to say truthfully that they were the victimisers.

The richest irony of this situation is that one of the obvious villains of the piece enunciates one of its important themes – that those who go along with villains allow villainy to happen. Brother Leon enunciates another important theme when he tries to get Caroni to sympathise with him by telling him, 'teachers are human too. Human like other people' (p. 104). Instead of sympathising, Caroni understands Leon's less than perfect behaviour toward him to mean that teachers are not as superior as he had hoped, but disappointingly

'like everyone else' (p. 107). We are all capable of evil, and we must all live with what Caroni learns here: 'that there were no heroes, really, and that you couldn't trust anybody, not even yourself' (p. 87).

But Caroni concludes that therefore 'life was rotten' (p. 107), that the humanity of teachers means they are 'as corrupt as the villains you read about in books or saw in movies and television' (p. 107). For Caroni – and as we've seen, for some readers of the novel – the idea that all human beings are capable of evil is cause for despair or reason to indulge wholeheartedly in paranoid fantasy. In fact, *The Chocolate War* acknowledges the ever-present dangers of human fallibility without either being defeated by it or being content with the paranoia. As his insights into the dangers of Jerry's innocence suggest, Cormier actually seems to suggest that knowledge of that danger is exactly what best protects people from it.

For a long time, it seems, Cormier imagined his story to be complete. But in 1985, ten years after the publication of *The Chocolate War*, a sequel appeared. It often happens that the addition of a new item to a series changes the meaning of earlier items in the sequence, by making us think of them as causes for events we didn't at first have knowledge of. The mere existence of *Beyond the Chocolate War* implies that what seemed satisfyingly over was merely the incomplete prelude of further events that eventually lead to the *real* ending – that whatever we thought was the meaning of the events of *The Chocolate War*, particularly those aspects of meaning we based on the way the book concluded, was inaccurate; or more exactly, that Cormier changed his mind about their meaning enough to wish to change it.

In many ways, *Beyond the Chocolate War* does subvert the meanings of *The Chocolate War*. Jerry fights Emile Janza again and emerges, he believes, the winner: the underdog finally triumphs. Archie and Leon, who remained unscathed during *The Chocolate War*, both receive punishment; both are threatened with death, and while both survive they also receive the punishment of being made to appear foolish, one as the designated Fool on Fair Day and the other as the target of a ripe tomato.

Indeed, the new events of *Beyond the Chocolate War* might well be seen as an attempt to normalise the situation – to provide something more like the happy ending readers expect of children's fiction. In many ways, *Beyond the Chocolate War* is more conventional than its predecessor – its language less ornate, its focus and mood less

broodingly intense. There are fewer similes and metaphors. Our attention focuses on a smaller number of characters seen for longer periods of time, and a widening of scope dissipates the suffocating claustrophobia of *The Chocolate War*, as we learn that the boys have more connections outside the school than we were allowed to know about before. There are scenes involving Goober and his father, the new character Ray Bannister and his father and mother, David Caroni and his father, mother and brother. We find out that both Obie and Archie have girlfriends, and that the girls occupy surprisingly many of their thoughts. Many scenes take place in homes and on the street, away from the claustrophobic atmosphere of Trinity itself.

Furthermore, the novel is decidedly less paranoid. Instead of all the characters worrying constantly and ineffectively about the hostility of others towards them, we follow the thoughts of those bent on revenge – people thinking about actively responding to belligerence rather than merely expecting it and waiting for it to happen. During the course of the novel, Carter seeks revenge against Archie, Obie against Archie and Bunting, David Caroni against Brother Leon, Archie against Leon, Obie and Carter, Jerry against Emile.

As a result, the characters worry as frequently in the sequel as they did in the original about hiding their true thoughts from others; but whereas in *The Chocolate War* they wished to hide private guilt or inadequacy, here they often wish to hide their ill intentions towards others; as Obie fools Ray Bannister, he feels that his friendly smile is 'plastered' on, 'like a label . . . on a stick of dynamite,'¹⁵ and Carter and Obie both worry that Archie can see their guilt in turning against him.

But these apparent reversals actually reinforce the subtly ambiguous implication of the first novel. In fact, closer consideration reveals that *Beyond the Chocolate War* merely makes the meaning and significance of *The Chocolate War* more obvious.

We've already seen how Jerry Renault's apparent loss in *The Chocolate War* is a victory; in *Beyond the Chocolate War*, his victory is clearly proclaimed, as he refuses to lash back at Emile and then says, 'Janza was beating me up. But he wasn't winning. I mean, you can get beat up and not lose. You can look like a loser but don't have to be one' (p. 223).

At the end of *The Chocolate War*, Jerry has already realised that fighting back against a fighter is yourself becoming what you were fighting. In *Beyond the Chocolate War*, character after character makes similar realisations in a much more obvious way. In fighting Archie,

Carter concludes 'He had become one of the things he'd always hated' (p. 101); Obie too realises 'what had happened to him. What Archie had done to him. He had driven him to the point of murder' (p. 261). While David Caroni never realises it, he too clearly becomes what he hates in his attack on Leon; and his action of seeking revenge against Brother Leon and then destroying himself is a luridly intensified variation on Jerry's metaphorically suicidal decision in *The Chocolate War* to seek revenge against the brutal Janza, which results in Janza's 'murdering' him. (Furthermore, David's death ties the two novels together simply by happening – it is as inevitable and as unexpected a defeat of an underdog as was Jerry's loss in *The Chocolate War*.)

Beyond the Chocolate War most clearly insists that revenge against evil is merely going in to the evil by cleverly establishing situations in which we as readers must make the same realisation that Jerry and Carter and Obie do. Knowing the depths of Leon and Archie's corruption, and having some familiarity with the literary convention that evildoers deserve every punishment an author can think of giving them, we come to expect and even hope that David Caroni will kill Leon and Obie murder Archie. Then, as Obie perceives the ugly significance of his own wish to murder Archie and David's death emerges as an inevitable consequence of his attempt to punish Leon, we must consider the significance of our hope that they succeed in their vicious acts of revenge – the significance of what our own response to Leon's and Archie's evil has made *us* become.

Furthermore, Cormier makes clear here what Jerry only vaguely implies at the end of *The Chocolate War* – that people like Archie and Leon are not the ones who cause evil in the world. In *The Chocolate War*, as Jerry realises his own complicity in evil and thinks about 'what he had become,' he tells himself 'He had allowed Archie to do this to him' (p. 242). In *Beyond the Chocolate War*, when Obie asks, 'What have I become?' (p. 209) and Obie wonders 'what had happened to him' (p. 261), both merely blame Archie for it. Archie himself points out the more subtle truth that Jerry realised in the earlier novel; he tells Obie, 'You could have said *no* anytime, anytime at all. But you didn't. . . . Free choice, Obie, and you did the choosing' (p. 264).

Furthermore, despite Cormier's clever trickery in setting up these situations, we as readers didn't *have* to wish Leon and Archie dead, or even that Archie might suffer more in his role as the Fool; we *chose* to gave in to that easy triumph. We too are guilty – that is, human, and therefore capable of evil, just as we were implicated in the paranoid act of watching in *The Chocolate War*.

Nor is it accidental that it's Archie who makes this clear. In *The Chocolate War* also it was a villain, Leon, who enunciated the idea that the apparently innocent were not so innocent. In a particularly ironic repetition at the end of *Beyond the Chocolate War*, Brother Leon tells the students of Trinity that they in their lack of involvement are as guilty of David Caroni's death as he himself is. Earlier, when he told his class that they in their silence were as guilty for his brutalising of Gregory Bailey as he himself was, he seemed right. Now in retrospect we have to wonder if he wasn't being as self-indulgent then as he is now; in both cases he quite happily forgives himself. Just as Leon's comments can be turned against himself, so too can Archie's. He too has chosen to be who and what he is, and may be dismissed and reviled for making the wrong choice.

Finally then, *Beyond the Chocolate War* makes clear what *The Chocolate War* already implied – that the propensity of boys in school to do cruel blackguard things is merely the potential in us all to do evil. Singly or together, the two novels not only reveal what cruelty always has been and always will be done in schools, and wherever else human beings gather; they also provide readers with surprisingly subtle and highly entertaining insights into the meaning of that cruelty.

NOTES

1. Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, (1856; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Puffin, 1971), p. 64.
2. A *Junior Bookshelf* reviewer angrily complained that Cormier's story of the events surrounding Trinity School's fund-raising chocolate sale 'depicts a life without hope in which boys prey upon each other like prohibition gangsters, masturbate in the lavatory and drool over girlie magazines' (quoted in Patricia J. Campbell, *Presenting Robert Cormier* [New York: Dell Laurel Leaf, 1985, 1989], p. 53). In a review in *Booklist*, Betsy Hearne suggested that Cormier 'manipulates readers into believing how rotten things are by loading the dice while pretending to play fair' ('Whammo, You Lose' *Booklist*, July 1974, p. 1199). Norma Bagnall says, 'Only the ugly is presented through the novel's language, actions, and imagery; goodness and honour are never rewarded. Love and concern for other people is ignored, and hopelessness pervades the entire story.' She adds, 'We can teach hopelessness to our young if they are taught that no matter how hard they struggle they cannot win. This story teaches that hopelessness' ('Realism: How Realistic Is it? A Look at *The Chocolate War*,' *Top of the News* 36, Winter 1980, 214).

3. Campbell, p. 58.
4. Sylvia Patterson Iskander, 'Readers, Realism, and Robert Cormier,' *Children's Literature* 15 (1987), 12.
5. Paul Janeczko, 'In their Own Words: An Interview with Robert Cormier,' *English Journal* 66 (September 1977), 11.
6. Geraldine De Luca and Roni Natov, 'An Interview with Robert Cormier,' *The Lion and the Unicorn* 2,2 (Fall 1978), 109.
7. De Luca, 122.
8. Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), p. 3.
9. Iskander, 18.
10. Millicent Lenz, 'A Romantic Ironist's Vision of Evil: Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*,' *Proceedings of the Eight Annual Conference of the Children's Literature Association* (Boston: Northeastern University, 1981), p. 52.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 28.
12. Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 559.
13. Campbell, p. 153.
14. De Luca, 132.
15. Robert Cormier, *Beyond the Chocolate War* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 29.