

# Circle of Revenge Short Guide

## Circle of Revenge by Michael French

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## Overview

When Robbie Cavanaugh, just fired from his part-time job and financially broke, reads this notice, he believes that this is the answer to all his problems. With this job, he can pay back his friend Carlos Montano, who recently moved to Beverly Hills from South America, and take his friend, Samantha Matthews, out for a date. Robbie decides to go for it. Thus, the author begins to set up the pattern that would pit evil against good through manipulation, mind control, terror, and murder.

Accepted for the position by Dr. Edward Salazar, a well-known psychologist, Robbie is introduced to the control room of Bungalow #66. It is on the screen in this darkened room that he is shown film of a young man about his own age who was in a dirty, cramped cell. It is obvious that he is terrified. In subsequent sessions, Robbie views the torture of the young man by a faceless officer called the Captain. Through his earphones, he can hear the boy's screams. No one is there to help him.

Robbie is frustrated by his helplessness. After each session, Salazar questions him concerning his feelings about the experiences, his life, and his friend Carlos. As the sessions become longer and more painful for Robbie, he can remember less and less of what took place in the control room. Disoriented and exhausted, he thinks of quitting, but he does not because he does not want to disappoint the man whom he has come to like and respect.

Sam, however, is concerned over the change in her friend and the influence Salazar has over Robbie. She sneaks into Salazar's office and discovers that Robbie is being brainwashed. Robbie, when told of this, is unconvinced of Salazar's treachery and continues the sessions. With the electrical current going through the electrodes placed on Robbie's head by Salazar, the sessions become more intense. The control room becomes the airless prison cell. The pressure of the ropes attached to the captive boy is felt on Robbie's body.

Robbie has become the victim. He is undergoing the victim's terror and is consumed with hatred against his torturer, the Captain. Salazar's methods successfully brainwash Robbie, for through a postsession suggestion he comes to believe Carlos is the hated Captain, and he shoots and wounds Carlos with a gun made available by Salazar.

Robbie is horrified and guilty over this and realizes that Sam had been right. Confronting his antagonist, Robbie learns that Salazar had been fired from his job in a South American country for failing to work on a government project that would lead to mind control abuses. Angered at this, his son David joined a secret radical group to protect the military regime. One day, he disappeared. Salazar's wife joined a prayer vigil group, and she, too, vanished.

They have become the "disappearing ones, desaparecidos." Salazar was unable to find any trace of them until the military was overthrown and General Couz and his family escaped to California under the assumed name of Montano. Both Salazar's son and



wife are dead. David had been betrayed by his school friend Carlos. Overcome with grief, and enmity, Salazar set about his plan for vengeance, with Robbie as the tool to bring about the death of Carlos Montano.

Puzzled and angered over Carlos's role, Robbie believes he must hear Carlos's side of the story. The repenting Carlos relates that, despite his efforts not to break under the torture, ordered by his father, he betrayed David Salazar. Robbie is faced with a dilemma.

What would he have done in Carlos's place? Would he have had the strength to defy his torturers? Since Carlos had not been found guilty by any court, what gives Salazar the right to be the executioner? Robbie forgives his friend.

He comes to believe that true friendship will often mean forgiving.

In the final suspenseful climax, Salazar, who murders Carlos's mother and father, demands that Robbie stand aside so he can shoot Carlos. Robbie meets the challenge, refuses, and he and Carlos escape to safety.

The circle of revenge is not broken, however, for Carlos decides to seek out his vengeance by killing Salazar.

Robbie begs him not to because two wrongs do not make a right. Carlos ignores his plea and disappears.

Robbie picks up his old life but with a more mature perspective. He is more appreciative of his home, parents, and country. He recognizes the importance of democracy and freedom, yet, mindful of the fact that to keep them calls for responsibility and commitment.

## About the Author

Michael French was born in Los Angeles, California, on December 2, 1944. The son of Dr. Richard and Marjorie Carson French, he attended Stanford University and graduated with a B.A. in English in 1966. A year later he received an M. S. degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

After a two-year stint in the U.S.

Army, French married Patricia Goodkind, and they have two children, Alison and Timothy. He and his family currently reside in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A man of varied avocations, French designs and builds adobe houses. Although he cites tennis and cycling as sporting interests, French is a serious mountain trekker who has walked interesting terrains not only in this country but in several remote areas in foreign lands.

Before resuming a professional writing career in 1977, French held positions in New York City in public relations and journalism. His varied career also included being the founder and manager of a day care center for four years.

While carrying on his work during the day, French began writing fiction at night and on weekends. Among his first efforts was a young adult novel concerning the trials of a high school athlete titled, *The Throwing Season*. Unable to get this work published, French turned to adult fiction. In this genre, his *Club Caribe* (1977), *Abengdon's* (1979), *Rhythms* (1980), and *Texas Bred* (1986) were successful efforts.

His work for young adults took off with the publication in 1980 of his first work, *The Throwing Season*, which was cited as one of the New York Public Library's Books for the Teenage, 1981.

French's second young adult novel, *Pursuit* (1982) was a finalist for the Young Reader Medal from the California Reading Association. These books and the others that followed emphasize dilemmas which main characters are forced to resolve through self-inquiry and experience.

# Setting

Although the story takes place in present-day Los Angeles and Beverly Hills, California, with events occurring in various locales such as the homes, high school, and leisure-time places of the teen-agers, it is the control room of Bungalow #66 of the University Psychology Department that is the integral setting for the Circle of Revenge.

In this small, windowless, soundproof room, Robbie Cavanaugh, with earphones on his head and sitting on a hard bench staring at a movie screen, undergoes hours of intense psychological stress as the subject of an experiment that attempts to control his mind through imagery and sound manipulation. Within the dark confines of the control room, Robbie takes on the personality of the victim presented on the screen, simultaneously undergoing his fear and pain. The room becomes Robbie's prison as well as the catalyst that will lead to a new understanding of himself.

## Social Sensitivity

French presents the concept of values in a sensitive, nondidactic manner. He does not preach nor talk down to the reader. This is quite evident in the relationship between Robbie and Carlos, teen-agers from different backgrounds and cultures. French allows Robbie to work through his dilemma over accepting or rejecting Carlos as a friend because of his betrayal of David Salazar.

Through clarifying his values, Robbie comes to his own conclusions about standards and importance of laws in a civilized society and forgives his friend.

Dr. Salazar's role is so sensitively presented that the reader can easily empathize with him. Despite calling forth feelings of revulsion over his insidious circle of revenge, the reader can understand his motives and feel pity for him.



# Literary Qualities

Circle of Revenge is a well-written, well-structured novel in which the author designs the events in an episodic fashion that leads to a suspenseful conclusion. From the moment that Robbie Cavanaugh reads the help-wanted notice, French brings the reader quickly into the conflict.

A person-against-self conflict pattern is used when Robbie, consumed with hatred of Carlos over his betrayal of David, fights the battle within himself to determine whether or not to forgive his friend. He works through his dilemma by clarifying his values and, in the end, not only forgives Carlos but saves his life as well.

Because Dr. Salazar comes to like Robbie and sometimes thinks of him as his own son, he appears at times to be dynamic. In the end, however, he does not change. He remains driven to carry out the vengeance for all the "disappearing ones." By portraying his sensitive and cruel qualities, French provides a chilling portrait of this man.

As Robbie's sessions in the control room build in terror and intense stress, the reader is emotionally drawn into the scene. French makes effective use of foreshadowing through the actions of the character Sam. When she breaks into the control room and discovers that Robbie is being brainwashed for an ulterior motive, the reader is assured that her intervention will awaken and change Robbie. The situation does not appear hopeless.

After the shocking climax, French ends the story on a positive note. Robbie weathers his personal storm and assesses his values and acts upon them.

He demonstrates growth and a more mature perspective of life.

This outstanding book keeps the door open to questions and further thinking about the topics presented by the author. The reader is left to ponder the resolution of the dilemma faced by the characters and to determine if the same course might be the one the reader would pursue.





## Themes and Characters

French structures his story upon four well-developed, very credible characters: Robbie Cavanaugh, Samantha (Sam) Matthews, Carlos Montano (Coriz), and Dr. Edward Salazar. Robbie is portrayed as having typical teen-age qualities. Much like his contemporaries, he often lacks confidence and self-esteem, feels anxious about the future, and is frustrated over his inability to succeed in and out of school. His relationship with his father is strained for he senses his father's disapproval over the things he does or does not do.

The young man is honest, sensitive, and empathizes easily with those less fortunate. Yet, he rejects any responsibility to commit to action, preferring to get lost in fantasy instead. A loner by choice, he often feels helpless and discontented and is searching for someone and something to believe in. Robbie is an ideal subject for the Circle of Revenge.

Carlos Montano is quiet, reserved and studious and is pleased with Robbie's attentions and friendship. He is tremendously interested in everything American. Although, he tries to sublimate them, Carlos is hiding feelings of guilt, fear, and sorrow. The beautiful house, so envied by Robbie, is a fenced-in, high security prison. When Carlos attempts to find out on his own about life outside, he is beaten up by his father. His life seems filled with disappointment and a sense of hopelessness. Yet, in the end, when the opportunity for a new life is given to him, Carlos rejects the notion. Although he hated his father when he was alive, he now feels that the family honor needs to be restored; his father's murder must be avenged. The Circle of Revenge is forged anew.

Dr. Edward Salazar is a round character who does not change. His pain over the loss of his son and wife keeps his quest for revenge at a fanatical high pitch. Although he presents a cool, professional exterior, Salazar hides an ulterior motive—the death of Carlos.

He rationalizes that the "desaparecidos" are entitled to their day of retribution.

He must use his professional knowledge to bring about justice. Although Salazar looks upon the manipulation of Robbie and the murder of the Montano family as altruistic and justifiable, his actions symbolize man's inhumanity to man throughout the years, including the taking of hostages in the Middle East and the Holocaust.

Termed an "activities rat" by Robbie, Samantha grew up under the guidance of activist parents and spent a great deal of time working for political causes such as Amnesty International. She tried to recruit Robbie into carrying placards and passing out pamphlets.

He was reluctant to do so. When it comes to her causes, Sam is adamant in believing one side is absolutely right or wrong. In the end, she comes to the realization that one needs to look at the nuances of the issues before making decisions. Despite her serious

advocacy for political causes, she is a fun-loving person who cares about people and Robbie specifically. It is this caring that eventually brings about the exposure of Salazar.

Friendship is a theme that pervades this story. One needs to work to keep a friendship alive. It demands trust and caring, even though sometimes under strained conditions. Like life, friendship does not always go along smoothly. Should disruptions come about, they need to be questioned and talked about. Only then can real or imagined injuries be forgiven and forgotten. Also significant in the book is the emphasis on looking over what one values, weighing the positive and negative consequences of these, choosing those most prized and committing oneself to acting on them.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Salazar notes that Americans have little sense of responsibility and are indifferent to anything that does not personally concern them, willing to close their eyes to the suffering of others. Do you agree or disagree with this view?
2. Do Robbie, Sam, and Carlos seem believable and real to you? Are they much like teen-agers in your locale?

How similar or different are they?

3. Identify the characteristics that made Robbie an ideal candidate for the experiment. Should he have continued on with his sessions after Sam's discovery of the brainwashing?
4. Relate the different parts of the story that show that Robbie is changing to a more responsible and committed person.
5. If you were in Robbie's place would you have reacted to Carlos in the same way? If not, discuss how you would have done things differently.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Two father-son relationships are depicted in the story. Compare and contrast the relationships of Robbie and Carlos with their fathers. Explain the influence of cultural differences in these relationships.
2. Write a different ending to the story and give your reasons for choosing this new approach.
3. Investigate and report on any South American country that may have taken desaparecidos in order to silence opposition to the government in power.
4. Survey the Latin American students in your class about their role in school and community. Determine if they, like Carlos, wish to be or are forced to be isolated in the culture in which they find themselves.
5. Design a model which students can follow to become more sensitive to cultural diversity and foster positive feelings between multicultural adolescent groups.

## For Further Reference

Andronik, Catherine M. Review. *Book Report* 8,1 (May/June 1989): 44. Although the reviewer finds the novel to be "intriguing, topical and fastpaced," she believes the work fails to present a "logical credibility." She notes that the author portrays values in an ambiguous and contradictory manner, while depicting adult authority figures as either uncaring or cruel.

Review. *Center for Children's Books Bulletin* 42,2 (October 1988): 35. Not only is French's work a "solid thriller," but the novel also engrossingly infuses an ingenious plot with some disturbing moral dilemmas that must be resolved by the protagonist.

Spencer, Pam. Review. *School Library Journal* 35,2 (October 1988): 161.

Spencer terms French a "good storyteller." She finds that he presents a suspenseful plot that heightens the reader's interest as the book unfolds the mind control experiment. According to the reviewer, French fails, however, to depict empathetic characters.

## Related Titles

Circle of Revenge is related to two other works written by French. His theme of young adolescent males, such as Robbie and Carlos, overcoming obstacles accompanied by suspense, betrayal and intrigue that is tinged with psychological overtones, is found in *The Throwing Season* (1979) and *Pursuit* (1982).



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