

# **In the Middle of the Night Short Guide**

## **In the Middle of the Night by Robert Cormier**

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## Overview

In *In the Middle of the Night* is a study in the self-destructive power of the lust for revenge. Two young people have had their parents murdered by unidentified "wise guys" when they were two and three years old. With lives already burdened by this loss, they are involved in a tragedy at a theater where they have gone to see a Halloween magic show that is an annual event for impoverished children. An unused balcony collapses on the audience officially killing twenty-two children, but actually "killing" Lulu too, although she is revived after her near-death experience. She and her brother Dave had settled in to enjoy a show: "Ten minutes later, Lulu was dead./Then the nightmare began."

Bitter, crippled, and deranged, she devotes her life to revenge; when the theater owner commits suicide, the only person left on whom she can vent her rage is John Paul Colbert, then only a teenager. Although Jean Paul did something very stupid while on the balcony, it is plain that he was not at fault for the tragedy—but people want someone to blame, and he is vilified by his community. He spends his life thereafter trying to escape the past that haunts him by moving from town to town, but wherever he goes Lulu follows, calling him in the middle of the night to tell him that he is a murderer. Then Denny, John Paul's sixteen-year-old son, who is about the age his father was when the tragedy happened, decides one fateful day to take on some adult responsibility and answers the telephone, although his father has forbidden him to do so, and Lulu discovers a new victim for her sick fantasies of revenge.

## About the Author

Robert Cormier was born on January 17, 1925 in Leominster, Massachusetts, where he continues to live.

He was a precocious writer who knew he was to be an author by the time he was in the seventh grade. Cormier recalls being supported in his writing by the teachers at the Catholic schools he attended. He went to Fitchburg State College for only a year, while working in a comb factory. Cormier worked from 1946 to 1948 as a writer of commercials for a radio station, and then left the station to write for the Worcester Telegram And Gazette, where he earned a living while writing fiction. He had published three novels for adults before writing *The Chocolate War* (1974; see separate entry, Vol.1), a novel he originally intended for an adult audience, but which his editor thought would be best published as a book for young adults. The reception of *The Chocolate War* was as sensational as the themes dealt with in the book; its pessimistic study of thuggery and totalitarianism at a high school not only thrilled the collective nerves of its audience but seemed realistic enough to cause nightmares in young readers and adults alike.

The success of *The Chocolate War* enabled Cormier to give up his longtime job at the newspaper and to write fiction full time.

Since then he has staked out a distinctive territory as the most controversial, hard-hitting, and emotionally demanding writer of fiction for young adults.

*The Chocolate War* opened new vistas in subject matter for fiction for this age group, and each new novel seems an effort to extend the limits for subject matter and point of view. This alone would make him a noteworthy author, because numerous other writers have taken advantage of the opportunities he has created to explore previously taboo subjects and to examine characters in severe emotional crisis. Yet Cormier is more than a ground breaker; he is a very skilled artist whose books feature complex structures and vivid metaphorical imagery; his works challenge his readers and their success suggests that a large young adult audience exists for fiction that is as complex as any written for adults. In 1991, Cormier received the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Award for his career as a writer for young readers. He and his wife have four grown children and a number of grandchildren. He continues to write and, as *In the Middle of the Night* shows, he has lost none of his edge.



# Setting

The novel has three important settings: the Globe theater, Normal Prep School, and Barstow, a town of about thirty thousand people. The Globe is an old movie house that once featured uniformed ushers and lavish motion pictures; as was the case with many such theaters, business suffered when motion pictures began to be broadcast on television, and the theater's owner Mr. Zarbor has taken to presenting live stage shows to draw audiences.

Paying most of the expenses out of his own pocket, Mr. Zarbor puts on a free magic show for poor children each Halloween. An immigrant from Hungary, he sympathizes with John Paul, who accompanied his parents when they migrated from Canada in order to find economic opportunity they thought was being denied to them in their home country because they spoke French. He employs John Paul as an usher, and then makes John Paul the leader of a group of teenage ushers on the day the balcony collapses.

Cormier, in describing the theater, emphasizes details that highlight both John Paul's foolishness and his not being at fault. When John Paul and Mr. Zarbor hear an odd noise coming from the balcony, the usher is sent to investigate. Mr. Zabor has given John Paul a book of matches so that he may light one and look around for the cause of the sound, but he carelessly fires the entire book of matches which then ignites some debris on the balcony. After the balcony collapses, it initially appears that the fire may have contributed to the disaster, yet it turns out that the fire had nothing to do with the balcony collapsing. The real cause of the tragedy was structural weakness pinpointed by building inspectors earlier who warned that the balcony was in danger of falling, but their admonitions to fix the balcony were ignored by Mr. Zarbor. John Paul appears to be at once culpable because of his carelessness and innocent because the collapse had been long foreseen. This dichotomy of two opposites seeming to be simultaneously true is important to the rest of the novel; opposites being true repeatedly appear in the narrative, and sorting out what is really factual is very hard to do.

Normal Prep is not as important to the plot as the Globe is, but it helps to develop the themes of the novel. When Jimmy Burke urges Denny, the son of John Paul, to join the student council, he puts Jimmy off, noting to himself that he wanted to be left alone: "I've declared a separate peace," he thinks.

But school is a day-to-day test of that separate peace: "He liked being alone and didn't like it, which was true of his entire life. Being pulled two ways."

He also comes to realize through his experiences at school that he was not only running away from his problems but away from people who could be his friends. He makes himself lonely at school by his withdrawal from everyone there; this sets him up as a very susceptible victim for Lulu's schemes.



The town of Barstow is the Colbert family's latest refuge from the relentless harassment for the events at the Globe that had occurred twenty-five years before. The family would very much like to settle down permanently in the community, but Lulu's calls continue, and there are indications that she is only one of many others who follow the movements of the Colbert family with the intent to cruelly harass them. News media interest increases as the twenty-fifth anniversary of the deaths of the twenty-two children approaches; the Colberts seem to be besieged to the point of possibly having to move again. What they do not know then, but which Denny eventually learns, is that the people of Barstow themselves are willing to accept the Colberts as ordinary people; the harassment creates an illusion of ill will, but it is not part of the Barstow community. This is another of the dichotomies of opposites in *In the Middle of the Night*.



## Social Sensitivity

*In the Middle of the Night* is a psychological study of the effects of harassment and revenge on victims, principally Denny and his father John Paul.

One of the effects is a splitting of personalities; the novel has divisions such as John Paul's seemingly infinite patience and his domineering attitude and Denny's desire to have both friends and to be left completely alone. Their miseries are created by a desire for revenge that is sickening; Lulu consumes her life and that of her brother in a pointless effort to avenge herself for her personal suffering.

Cormier takes pains to motivate her actions so that they seem plausible, resulting in many unpleasant and disturbing passages of raw emotions.

The disgusting, vile behavior of a telephone harasser is traditionally not a subject for literature for young adults, but Cormier not only presents it, he presents it in graphic detail. He takes this graphicness to its farthest point when he shows Denny being sexually aroused by Lulu's sick telephone seduction—to the point that he loses his rationality and agrees to meet with a woman he knows hates *In the Middle of the Night* his father. These aspects of the narrative are intended to and most likely will upset readers, but they are orchestrated effects put into the service of a moral vision. Cormier offers an unremittingly unromantic view of revenge that is an antidote to the many works of fiction such as *The Count of Monte-Cristo* (Alexandre Dumas the elder, 1844) that glorify revenge (motion pictures, too, such as *Death Wish*, 1974).



# Literary Qualities

Lulu begins as a very good older sister then becomes a very bad one.

The tragedy at the theater distorts her character into the twisted opposite of her intrinsic good nature, and her warped personality highlights a novel of opposites. Cormier has created a tale that disturbs because those who are good often commit actions that are bad, and nearly every person and event is unsettling because they contain opposites of themselves. This makes the novel thought-provoking to an unsettling degree; for instance, when Dave kills his sister he does a good deed by saving Denny, but he also commits the heinous deed of murder. Was the murder necessary? Was there no alternative? The questions may be many, but answers are only found after much thought. This presentation of complex opposites is the novel's great strength because Cormier uses it to enrich his characters, whose very contradictions make them seem human in the same confused way many people are, and to make the events of the novel telling explorations of right and wrong, moral and immoral actions, as well as of how events completely out of people's control can shape their lives. The universe of *In the Middle of the Night* is a merciless one, and good only gets done if people choose to do it. Being able to do good in life often depends on what stance you take to the world around you. Is involvement in life or detachment from it the best attitude?

Which is better for the individual?

Which for the group? The development of dichotomies suggests that to live one must choose to live. Lulu makes the choice of a life of perpetual death: "'I'm the one who died,' she said."

Denny chooses the riskier course of active involvement in life when he answers the telephone, and by doing so he repudiates the passive avoidance of life that often characterized him before. That this choice almost kills him does not invalidate it as a fruitful stance to take on life. Other situations in the book support this belief.

By choosing to involve himself in life in the incident of breaking up a scuffle at the bus stop, he ultimately wins the affections of a fine young woman he meets then. Seeking her out at the store where she works pleases her; the inaction of not calling her almost loses her. This echoes his father's experience twenty-five years before; by choosing to involve himself in life by going back to school he wins the love of his future wife, whose dedication to him seems to help make his tortured life worth living. On the surface this is a very negative novel that emphasizes the darkest aspects of human nature, but underneath is the idea that for good or ill positive action rather than inaction is essential to having a good life. Look at what happens to Lulu who avoids life and wallows in self-pity; look too at what two unhappy men win when they take the risk of actively participating in life.

In addition to dichotomies, monsters show up throughout the novel.





Just in case anyone otherwise misses this, Cormier has Denny name the children at his bus stop for fictional monsters, and the one he calls Dracula is a particular pest, constantly pointing out to him his weaknesses— something few people like. There seem to be degrees of monsters in the novel; for instance, the bullies who beat up Hanson seem, if only for the moment, to be minor monsters, but Lulu seems to be all monster, "with bitterness pulling at the edges of her lips and a cold glitter in her eyes." What all the monsters seem to have in common is choice: Every monstrous action, from fighting to murdering, is chosen by the monster. The monstrous people actually make themselves into monsters. Even Denny's passivity is a choice, and because of it he stands a strong chance of becoming a monster himself, if for no other reason than he tolerates the monstrous behavior of others.

Another interesting aspect of the novel is the shifting point of view of its narration. The scenes featuring Dave and Lulu are told in the first person by Dave, who explains that he is keeping a diary. The scenes featuring Denny are told in the third person by an omniscient narrator. One would reasonably expect the two narrative voices to clash, but instead they harmonize throughout most of the novel, coming into conflict only at the end when the third-person narrative dominates the first-person one. Cormier typically experiments with the narratives of his novels, and the two different voices are in keeping with his evident interest in how a story can be told. In *In the Middle of the Night*, the shift in point of view from a limited first-person to omniscient third-person creates tension, giving a broad view of life in the third person while graphically reminding of a very specific danger in the narrow scope of Dave's diary. It is somewhat like camera shots in a motion picture, with the camera first offering a closeup of someone—in this case, Dave's introducing the novel with his diary—and then with the camera focus pulling back, expanding what it shows to reveal large vistas as background against which the person in the closeup stands. In the case of *In the Middle of the Night*, the vistas are of human relationships—Denny's family and school as opposed to Lulu's small part in Denny's life.



## Themes and Characters

Well-presented and thoroughly believable characters are essential to the success of the story of *In the Middle of the Night*. Lulu, although offstage for most of the novel, is crucial to events unfolding as they do. Lulu begins as a bright and playful child who makes up plays based on books or motion pictures, but her playing Cathy dying in *Wuthering Heights* presages the lifelong role she eventually chooses for herself. The accident at the Globe is the key event that motivates her character and most of the action of the novel. "I still dream after all this time of the way she stared at me out of the wreckage," writes Dave; her eyes were blank, her heart had stopped— she was for a moment dead. The experience terrified her: Becoming a blank! A Terrifying blank! Unable to think and yet aware, knowing that I was a cipher or a zero. And, worst of all, my brain not working, only my awareness alive. That was the horror—knowing that I would be like this forever, for an eternity.

What motivates her are not the deaths of the other children and her crippling injuries, but the profound belief that her life has been shown to amount to nothing, to be a blank. This is why she hates her life, why she ruins her devoted brother's life, and why she fixates on John Paul as her killer, "the boy who killed me."

She is not alone in her obsession .

John Paul apparently receives harassing phone calls and letters from other people, especially near Halloween, the anniversary of the catastrophe. Someone even threatened to bomb his home. This venomous outpouring makes Lulu's sickness seem more broadly grounded in a general revulsion engendered by the sudden, horrible, and incomprehensible deaths of twenty-two children which have brutalized many lives. Through his traumatized character Lulu, Cormier takes an unblinking look at the universal desire to hold someone responsible for tragedies that kill loved ones and wound the self, the obsessive search for someone to wreck revenge upon.

The real guilty party, if there is one, would be Mr. Zarbor, but he kills himself before retribution could be exacted from him. Thus a teenage usher becomes the focus of hatred and blame. There is scant sympathy in the narrative for the revengers; John Paul feels pain for them and listens to all their bile, telling Denny that there are a multitude of people connected to the twenty-two dead children who need to express their anger. Those who recover from the hurt of losing loved ones and who move beyond their hatred are not depicted; but Lulu represents those who continue to hate, and she makes her loving brother's life miserable and her own life unbearable. She is ultimately victimized by the disaster once and by herself forever after.

John Paul and Lulu have nothing to do with each other except their shared experience at the theater. He was also badly injured, although his body recovers. Without the chance happening at the theater—the balcony could have fallen the day before—their lives might never have become entangled with one another. The universe of *In the*



Middle of the Night is an uncaring one, indifferent to people, where accidents happen and people are hurt for no reason.

This indifference is more than Lulu can bear, but John Paul's response to it is to try to live his life as best he can.

He marries one of the ushers he met at the theater and has a son. He finds jobs and cares for his family. Even so, for all his strength of character he is oddly passive in the face of hatred misdirected at him. He is a man with deep understanding of other people's suffering, and his sympathy for them leads him to listen to them, even in the middle of the night.

"I'm not my father," mutters Denny, yet he seems like his father in important ways. He is passive in the face of hatred and he has great sympathy for others; he knows that his father is tormented, and he forgives his father's stern parenting because of that torment. Also like his father, he is introspective, "But certain silences, he'd found, could be worse than yelling and shouting." There is wisdom in that idea which indicates that Denny is a thinker. He also has the important teenage quality of being rebellious.

His father lost his zest for life after the disaster, but sixteen-year-old Denny is torn between his father's calm acceptance of life and his own desire to change his life. Rebellion in teenagers is a difficult subject to handle in fiction; often the rebellion is followed by a mature wisdom that recognizes the rebellion as natural but foolish, perhaps motivated by excess hormones, but in this novel the rebellion is itself a kind of wisdom. Yes, Denny's picking up the phone is somewhat foolish, and his talking with Lulu certainly is foolish, but if he takes no action his life will stink like the human waste he finds on his home's doorstep—it will be like that of the spineless Dave O'Hearn, who knows his sister's behavior is wrong but who does not take action to solve it. A passive Denny will lose his already shaky self-respect, the affection of a fine young woman, and the esteem of his schoolmates; further, like Dave, as his experiences with Hanson suggest, he will be without friends. Rebellion in a good heart seems to be a good trait in the novel; Denny's very teenagerness is essential to his becoming a good man, making him an exceptional fictional creation.



# Topics for Discussion

1. Why is Lulu characterized as Lazarus? Why does she dislike being called Lazarus?
2. In what ways did Lulu die during the novel?
3. Is John Paul actually responsible for the collapse of the balcony?
4. Is *In the Middle of the Night* more suited to grownup readers than young ones?
5. Is Denny Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde? 6. Should Denny be made to suffer for what his father may have done?
7. How would you feel about John Paul if one of your close relatives had died when the balcony collapsed.  
  
Would you be satisfied with the investigation into his involvement in the tragedy?
8. Igniting the matchbook was stupid. Dropping the matchbook where it could start a fire was also stupid.  
  
Should John Paul be punished for stupidity? Should anyone be punished for stupidity?
9. Why does Denny not help Hanson when he sees Hanson being beaten up?  
  
Is his response typical of most teenagers?
10. After he did not resist them the first time why would the bullies not continue to beat Hanson up?
11. Why does Dave go along with his sister's cruel schemes?
12. Lulu is crazed by her lust for revenge. Is this enough to have her judged insane and perhaps be hospitalized?
13. Why do people care about the twenty-fifth anniversary of the theater tragedy? Is it not old news?
14. What does Hanson mean when he says to Denny, "You're worried about being exposed"?
15. A common aphorism is "time heals all wounds," but John Paul tells Denny that "for some, time does not heal." What does he mean? Are there wounds that time does not heal? What are they?
16. Lulu's scheming is sickening and Denny's sexual conversations with her are perverse. Are these suitable topics for a novel intended for young adults?



What age would be too young for a person to read *In the Middle of the Night*.

17. In one of the novel's dichotomies, "Denny was both dismayed and elated to find out how easy it was to lie." Why would he be dismayed? Why would he be elated? Is it possible for him to be both dismayed and elated for the same reason at the same time?

18. How much suffering is enough for involvement in an accident that killed twenty-two children?

19. Mr. Zarbor commits suicide.

Why does John Paul not do the same?

20. What is the point of the line, "How do you say good-bye to someone who never existed"?

21. Why does Cormier wait until near the end of the novel to hint at who Dave is? Why not just say who he is when Denny first meets him?

22. Why does Dave kill Lulu and himself rather than Denny?

23. Dave and Lulu seem to have miserable lives of almost unrelieved horror from beginning to end. Does this happen in real life? What are our moral obligations, if any, to such people?

24. Why does Lulu not follow and harass the "wise guys" who murdered her parents instead of following and harassing John Paul?

25. Does John Paul make himself a willing victim?

26. Why does John Paul put restrictions on what Denny is allowed to do?

Is he overprotective?

27. Why is it important to Denny that he "scored a triumph over his father for the first time in his life"?

28. Why does not Cormier reveal how physically disabled Lulu is until the end of the novel? Why does Denny have a misconception of how she would look?

29. Why does the phrase "cleared of responsibility" not satisfy people about John Paul's innocence?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. At one point, Denny notes about a child that "he was a monster all right, but still just a kid." How many times are monsters mentioned in *In the Middle of the Night*? Who are actually monsters in the novel? What makes them monstrous?

2. Calling people on the telephone and harassing them is usually against the law. What are the laws governing such harassment? Who enforces them?

How are they enforced? Could John Paul and his family have been helped by any of the laws?

3. What are the effects on young people who move from town to town frequently? Does Denny manifest any of these effects? Are any of them good?

4. Currently in the real world, counselors are brought in to help people, young and old, cope with terrible tragedies, but when Lulu was a child this was not the case. How do counselors help people cope with great tragedy? How might counselors have helped Lulu and Dave?

5. An interesting aspect of *In the Middle of the Night* is that its young people tend to get along with authority figures, especially those who raise them. Denny may rebel against some of his father's rules, but he plainly loves both his parents and feels for them when they suffer. John Paul's parents were apparently loving and were loved in return. According to Dave, "Aunt Mary was our mother and father and all our aunts and uncles put together," and even near the end of the story she is regarded with affection.

Compare these relationships with the ones in such novels by Cormier as *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (1983; see separate entry, Vol. 1) and *Tenderness* (1977; see separate entry, Vol. 9), are there any echoes from *The Chocolate War's* relationships?

6. Is *In the Middle of the Night* a daring novel? What qualities make it daring? Is it sensational? What qualities make it sensational? Be sure to present and explain examples of what you mean.



## For Further Reference

Campbell, Patricia J. *Presenting Robert Cormier*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989 (first edition 1985). (Twayne United States Authors Series, 496.)

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Cormier, Robert. "Creating *Fade*." *Horn Book* 65 (1989): 166-173. Cormier explains how he wrote one of his novels for young adults, from inspiration to difficulties shaping the story.

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MacLeod, Anne Scott. "Robert Cormier and the Adolescent Novel." *Children's Literature in Education* 12 (1981): 74-81. MacLeod uncovers some of the major issues in Cormier's fiction as exemplified by *The Chocolate War*, *I Am the Cheese*, and *After the First Death*.

Monseau, Virginia R. "Cormier's Heroines." *ALAN Review* (Fall 1991): 4043. Monseau analyzes Cormier's characterizations of females in *After the First Death* and *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*.

Self, David. "Writing Dangerously: David Self Talks to the Novelist Robert Cormier." *Times Educational Supplement* 11 (November 1988): 53.



An interview that covers the ethics of the subject matter of Cormier's novels for young people.

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Stines, Joe. "Robert Cormier." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Writers for Children Since 1960: Fiction*. Edited by Glenn E. Estes.

Detroit: Gale, 1986, pp. 107-114.

Covers Cormier's early career.

Sutton, Roger. "'Kind of a Funny Dichotomy': A Conversation with Robert Cormier." *School Library Journal* 37 (1991): 28-33. Cormier talks about his characterizations, as well as his career.

Veglahn, Nancy. "The Bland Face of Evil in the Novels of Robert Cormier." *Lion and the Unicorn* 12 (1988): 12-18. Evil is an important theme in Cormier's writings and this article examines how evil is presented in Cormier's fiction for young adults.





## Related Titles

Cormier's fiction often explores the psychology of misfits and unhappy people, even including people who are downright evil. His fiction also has the disturbing quality of giving evil characters deep-seated and plausible motivations for what they do. Cormier also is an experimenter who tries out new ways of presenting and organizing his plots. In *In the Middle of the Night* has two narrative strands; Cormier utilizes this same technique of presenting a narrow view with a first-person narrative and a broad view in a thirdperson narrative in the 1997 novel *Tenderness*. The technique is somewhat more effective in the latter novel, creating a breath-taking rush of events at the end of the narrative.



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