

Rundown Short Guide

Rundown by Michael Cadnum

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Overview

Rundown depicts the emotional breakdown of sixteen-year-old Jennifer Thayer during summer vacation. Falsely reporting an attempted rape to get attention and sympathy, Jennifer dramatically and deliberately manipulates her family and friends.

Jealous of her older sister, Cassandra, who seems perfect physically, intellectually, and socially, Jennifer wants her parents to focus on her instead of planning her sister's wedding. Initially, her faked assault is a game to Jennifer who pretends she has been attacked by a serial rapist whom the authorities have been looking for in the San Francisco Bay area. Jennifer claims that the rapist grabbed her and that she hit him and pushed him away, successfully fighting to escape from him. Although Jennifer's parents are wealthy and offer her every material need and desire without limits, she seems to be an ordinary, unfulfilled, self-absorbed, bored teenager who seeks excitement. Her accusations, however, result in unwanted probing by law enforcement authorities regarding her attack, and Jennifer's lies multiply as she becomes a pawn used to aid the police in incarcerating a suspected rapist.

When questioned about possible abuse by her mother, Jennifer denies that her mother has ever injured her, but readers cannot be sure if she is telling the truth. Jennifer's sense of reality seems flawed as evidenced by her defensive reactions to protect herself and her family. Overwhelmed by the kindness and concern displayed by others, Jennifer's self-esteem shatters as she discovers her dark side and cannot escape her internal angst. Tension heightens as Jennifer worries about her family, friends, and officials discovering her deception and feels alienated from her community. Exhausted by her deceitful actions and subsequent guilt, her sanity wavers as she psychologically falls apart and becomes emotionally and physically rundown. Cadnum's novel explores the meaning of truth as perceived by Jennifer, her dysfunctional family, and others and suggests how falsehoods and selfish choices can ruin lives. Jennifer sees her life as a drama that she is creating but quickly loses control of herself, her setting, and cast.

About the Author

Michael Cadnum strives to write books that he would have read as a teenager. A versatile author who has penned poetry, picture books, and horror and mystery novels for adults in addition to his young adult novels, Cadnum identifies himself primarily as a poet. Originally from Orange, California, where he was born on May 3, 1949, Cadnum moved with his family to nearby Costa Mesa, growing up in the Los Angeles area where he wrote and illustrated stories as a child. Cadnum read voraciously, believing that books offered answers to secrets he sought about life.

Graduating from the University of California, he earned a master's degree from San Francisco State University. Cadnum sets most of his young adult fiction in the Bay area where he lives in Albany with his wife, Sherina. His familiarity with his characters' surroundings and culture strengthens the realism of his storytelling.

Cadnum taught at an elementary school and also was employed as a data processor and shipping clerk until he could support himself as a writer. Producing poetry, suspenseful novels, and book reviews, essays, and short stories for anthologies, literary journals, and magazines, Cadnum gained professional acclaim in the 1980s. Critics praised his precise and vivid use of language and imagery. Receiving awards and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, Cadnum focused on fiction. He writes without outlining his plots, allowing the characters to develop unrestricted by preconceived expectations. Cadnum did not intentionally write for young adults, being surprised when his publisher designated his novel *Calling Home* as belonging in that category of which he had previously been unaware. He then chose to focus on that market. Regardless of the age of his readers, Cadnum avoids patronizing them by creating realistic depictions and characters true to teenagers' behavior. He recognizes the sophistication of modern teenagers and the extreme issues such as violence they encounter.

Often fictionalizing true stories from the news or his experiences, Cadnum writes in a first-person voice and surrounds himself with items from his characters' lives, such as similar clothing and food, in order to understand vicariously what they feel and sense. Many of his stories have a fairy tale foundation. He has traveled to Europe and the Middle East to visit medieval fortresses and historical sites to understand settings and cultures in which some of his characters might have lived. Cadnum understands that no matter when or where individuals exist, they share universal feelings and concerns. Answering phones at the Suicide Prevention Center in Alameda County, Cadnum realized that most despondent people think that no one listens to them. He began writing about people on the margins of society, including people who were affluent but felt unfulfilled, disassociated from their family and friends, or struggled with inner conflict, to give voice to these unspoken viewpoints. Although he is critical of his characters' actions, Cadnum stresses that he believes in the possibility of their ultimate redemption and salvation, recognizing their intelligence and abilities.



Writing with a parrot on his shoulder, Cadnum frequently incorporates bird imagery and information in his books. His popular culture references in his books about modern society appeal to young readers, helping them identify with the protagonists and their settings. A poetic novelist, Cadnum creates complex characters who encounter personal conflicts and societal problems typical of the latter 20th century. Most of his books have a macabre tone. Psychological tension propels Cadnum's plots, and his gift for language, sounds, and rhythm result in satisfying stories. Skillfully twisting expected character reactions, Cadnum often writes ambiguous endings, leaving readers unsure how resolution will be achieved if at all. His stories have been translated into several languages. Two of his books, *Calling Home* and *Breaking the Fall*, were nominated for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best young adult book presented by the Mystery Writers of America.



Setting

Several of Cadnum's characters are involved in theatrical pursuits such as set design and play production, creating scenes of dialogue and action occurring in settings that enhance the plot's drama. Describing characters' clothes like costumes, Cadnum paints the scenery with his lyrical sketches of the sunlight and landscape. Jennifer's body is the main setting of *Rundown*. Uncomfortable with herself, Jennifer runs anywhere she can on roads, the nearby junior high school track, and other paths she hopes will lead her to fulfillment and away from fear.

Rundown begins and ends in Strawberry Canyon where Jennifer initially stages her fake assault and finally returns preparing to commit suicide. She carefully chose the serene setting because she incorrectly believes it is in the jurisdiction of the University of California, Berkeley, police department. A vast, remote area on the fringes of the urban community, the canyon is described by Cadnum as a tranquil park frequented by joggers and bicyclists yet concealing possible horrors in the maze of vegetation and shadows. The canyon displays fairy tale elements, representing an enchanted forest where Jennifer loses then ultimately finds herself. Pricked by thorns which draw beads of blood like the spindlewounded Sleeping Beauty, Jennifer also succumbs to a period of metaphorical unconsciousness, waiting for others to rescue her.

She begins her deception at dusk and later begins to awaken when the police drive her through Strawberry Canyon one afternoon, emerging from her stupor several weeks later as dawn occurs in the canyon, ushering in a new day and awareness and selfaccountability for Jennifer.

Rundown 371 The Berkeley police station is the second set where Jennifer acts out her script. Being driven through the University of California, Berkeley, Jennifer does not realize that she will be questioned at the city, not university, station. She watches steam rise from grates and students gather around restaurants, envying their freedom and coziness as the police car moves away from campus.

The police station presents a stark contrast to her home and the canyon. Jennifer describes the station as looking like a prefabricated motel which could be erected anywhere. The lighting and furniture are drab and not welcoming, contributing to Jennifer's indecision of whether she should confess or continue her lies. Braced in a corner chair, Jennifer resolves to perpetuate her drama and resist intrusive questioning. She praises herself for fine acting until she is shown a wanted poster. "The shame of what I was doing shook me—swept through me, a physical force that rattled the paper in my hands," Jennifer confides. "Women had been brutalized by this assailant, and here I was, turning his crime into a trashy piece of theater." Yet she continues her story, elaborating by saying she heard the attacker speak, and "I hated myself for ad-libbing."

She realizes she makes a mistake: "My face went blank. It wasn't the shaken, nerveless face of a victim, but something else—the look of a self-conscious actress, unsure of her role." When her elegantly attired parents arrive from an opera fundraiser, Jennifer is



proud of them yet realizes they do not belong at the monotonous station with its pedestrian and worn decor. The police station is paradoxically threatening and protecting to Jennifer. The Cold War bomb shelter, housing unsolved case files, represents Jennifer's journey from icy indifference toward her community to earnest interest in helping others.

The Thayer's new house is the central stage for Jennifer's mental collapse. Recently purchased because her father, a gourmet chef, has been contracted to film a television show in addition to selling designer salad dressings, the Thayer's mansion is a vast, empty space somewhat like Strawberry Canyon. The "glamorous soundstage of a house" is so roomy that Jennifer and her parents rarely interact. Jennifer spends most of her time in her bedroom, an empty room furnished only with her bed and a television. The kitchen is common ground for the Thayers and their housekeeper because food is important to the family. Jennifer also runs on a treadmill in the exercise room.

The Thayers are protected from intruders by a huge iron gate which can be opened only by a code which is Jennifer's and Cassandra's birthdays. As Jennifer sinks deeper into her depression, her parents remodel the house, having the gardens weeded, metal polished, rugs replaced, and new furniture arranged, indicating their material metamorphosis from middle class to wealthy status. Ironically, Jennifer's room remains untouched except for paint samples and written suggestions of what she could decorate left by her father. This domestic stagnation expresses Jennifer's inability to change her own life. She sentimentally recalls a small apartment located by a creek where the family lived before her father's fortunes improved. In this space, which is only alluded to, Jennifer remembers the family communicating and cooking together. Her memories suggest that she would prefer a simpler, less materialistic lifestyle in a cozy, intimate apartment rather than the cold, alien mansion.

Jennifer momentarily finds exactly those qualities at her best friend Marta Emmitt's parents' beach house in Pacific Grove near Monterey Bay. The Emmitts' cottage is small and rustic, but the Emmitts enjoy working together to fix and clean the dwelling somewhat like fairy tale creatures preparing an enchanted house to welcome travelers. Jennifer hears the Emmitts talking together like she wishes her family could. She watches hummingbirds fly to an empty feeder, returning out of loyalty to a location as well as memories of being nurtured. An opossum also considers the Emmitts' cottage a safe home, freely waddling underneath the structure. The nearby pier with its stores, restaurants, and seal residents seems comforting to Jennifer. Diving beneath the adjacent water's murky surface should pacify her above-ground angst, but the bay instead distorts her thinking. Penetrating sunlight illuminates thick masses of kelp and crustaceans which appear discolored and misshapen by the refracted light, worsening Jennifer's perception of herself and the world. Her collision with a bull seal heightens her suicidal thoughts as she comprehends what being attacked really feels like, and she contemplates slicing her air supply with a knife and dying deep in the water where she thinks she belongs. Symbolically rising to the surface as if ascending to heaven or being reborn, Jennifer tries to find meaning in her renewed attempt at life. On the drive home, she admires the flowers and birds surrounding the Pigeon Point lighthouse. The

lighthouse is closed, signifying Jennifer's inability to clarify her thoughts and decide what she should do. "I did not want to ask myself why I had pulled the knife," she comments.

The set where Jennifer feels most content and attains some autonomy, responsibility, and respect is Animal Heaven, the pet store where she works part-time with Marta. Jennifer literally feels blessed when she cares for the birds boarded by traveling owners.

The store gives her a purpose to remain alive. In contrast, Sandalwood Ranch, where her horse lives, hires staff to care for the horse's needs, and Jennifer's presence is not required. The ranch is clean and shines in the sunshine, while the pet store is cluttered with seed and leashes. Sandalwood Ranch seems like a mirage to Jennifer and something she cannot grasp. Animal Heaven is a reality to her and suggests potential and possibilities for the elusive future.

Social Sensitivity

Rundoxvn reverberates with social and moral commentary about postmodern culture. Offering no solutions, only examples, Cadnum shows the stresses teenagers cope with and depicts different ways in which they react to societal excesses of materialism and expectations to conform to peer pressure. Perhaps Jennifer is telling her experiences to other teenagers in an assembly or support group as a warning to avoid selfdestructive behaviors. She may be answering questions asked by a newspaper reporter or responding to the forensic psychologist, assisting him in developing a profile to detect other high-risk adolescents. Cadnum touches on teenage violence and crime without deliberating such related issues as gun control or how the media portrays and distorts stories somewhat like the inconsistent information Jennifer discloses in her biased version. Knowing that teenagers endure intense emotions with which they are often unable to cope or express, Cadnum gives voice to their repressed anguish and exposes their often superficial grasp of the reality of socioeconomic conditions. Jennifer worries where she will go when the truth is revealed, fearing disownment by her family, yet she does not dwell on the plight of homeless citizens in her community.

Ultimately aware that falsely reporting a crime is not only punishable by time in a juvenile detention facility, Jennifer also knows that she has committed an unforgivable moral offense against herself and her community. Her conscience grows during the weeks she agonizes about her lies. She becomes more aware of the surroundings outside the affluent island of her neighborhood. Already exhibiting some empathy as shown by her work with animals, Jennifer responds to other humans in pain, recognizing their common bond of humanity.

For instance, she drinks her juice quickly so that she can give her bottle to a homeless man attired in similar but threadbare jogging clothes as hers. He is the only one who pays attention to her as she staggers dazed by pills.

Cadnum's depiction of people ignoring Jennifer's condition and not assisting her underscores the apathy and passivity of the fast-paced, narcissistic culture many young adults live in where service to others often is pursued only to obtain entrance in an elite college or win a beauty pageant. Sincere altruism seems as fantastic as Jennifer's acceptance of herself and her behavior.

The disconnectedness of individuals to their community and their responsibility to others accentuates why Jennifer feels unsatisfied with her life and runs away mentally. Jennifer can only reconnect with herself when she faces what she has done, admits that it was a terrible thing, and gives to society instead of takes by helping the police department. "I did not want to see, but it was too late," she profoundly acknowledges.

Literary Qualities

Cadnum's poetic talents result in wellcrafted prose accentuated with carefully worded metaphors and similes, such as a scab appearing like a comma on Jennifer's neck, and accurately phrased dialogue suitable for each character's age and sophistication. Subtle and insightful references illuminate details about intricate characters and scenes. Cadnum's writing invites readers to identify and empathize with characters who could easily be unlikable; for example, Jennifer says she bruises easily suggesting her vulnerability. Using short sentences that are abrupt like the characters' actions and which contain powerful images, Cadnum slowly builds tension. Jennifer aimlessly moves from one setting to another to emphasize her lack of direction. Cadnum develops scenes by slowly providing clues and information so the reader can consider these descriptions to decide who is telling the truth and what really happened. Dialogue is often incomplete because the characters are not entirely focused on their thoughts, and omissions of portions of conversation can reveal more about characters than their words. The first person narrative permits readers to experience Jennifer's impulsive behavior, her inability to communicate, her daily coping with the consequences of her accusation and gradual loss of control, and her ultimate breakdown. The readers feel drained of energy and Rundown as the pace quickens.

Perhaps one of Cadnum's most successful stylistic techniques is his use of a fairy tale foundation for his modern dramas.

Jennifer can be viewed as a Sleeping Beauty sleepwalking through life while waiting for a prince, either Quinn or her father or perhaps even the rapist, to rescue her from her unhappiness. Feeling frustrated and powerless, Jennifer acts almost anesthetized.

Other literary motifs reminiscent of fairy tales include Jennifer's lie magically summoning Quinn, her supposed hero, to return to her and possibly protect and save her. Jennifer resists wearing the maid-of-honor dress for her sister's wedding and hides the audiotape directing listeners where to find her in the toe of one of the outfit's matching shoes, somewhat like the shoe imagery in Cinderella to identify the heroine and outwit her stepsisters. Jennifer cuts her long hair, representing fairy tale heroines shearing their locks to disguise themselves as boys to gain power. She believes her shorn hair makes her appear "wide awake" even though she is still asleep emotionally. Jennifer's fall from her horse and dropping the knife while diving stand for her loss of innocence and the division of her life into adulthood and adolescence. She could be a mermaid, moving between land and water for survival, and her part-time employment emphasizes Jennifer's only being half-there.

The orange juice she buys to swallow the pills resembles a poison potion, and Jennifer considers pills to offer a magic solution.

Her mother wishes she could mystically erase the attack, and Jennifer suffers stiffness, reinforcing her unceasing emotional inflexibility, and unsuccessfully tries to clean berry-stained clothing, like Lady Macbeth trying to wash away blood, emphasizing the reality



of her drama. She describes the surf "huffing and puffing" like the fairy tale wolf threatening to destroy houses with his breath and says Marta reminds her of a "sea-dragon" that could be harmful or helpful. The canyon seems enchanted, full of strange noises and potentially sinister dangers. Nature is a powerful storytelling element, and birds especially are the harbingers of messages such as the hummingbirds symbolizing loyalty. Her maid-of-honor dress is robin's egg blue, and Jennifer comments that birds represent joy and harmony, finding their calls in the canyon to be consoling. Jennifer regards the blackberry thorns that previously tore open her skin as a safe place to shelter her body. She plans to ease, not plunge, into death, believing it will be peaceful and not horrifying. Jennifer describes her attacker as wearing a ski mask which alludes to the false facades villains rely on to disguise their true intentions and nature. The rapist's alibi for the night Jennifer claimed she was attacked is a metaphorical mask for her deception.

Cadnum skillfully provides visual and audible effects that enhance readers' awareness of the setting and plot and character development. Contrasting dark and light produces shadows that intersect the two spheres, symbolizing the obscurity of truth and the malevolent tone of both Jennifer's and the rapist's crimes. Most action occurs in the "predawn hush," at twilight, or the middle of the night. The absence of noise is another image Cadnum uses to show the Thayers' inability to communicate and Jennifer's self-imposed silencing of herself and her surroundings including the television.

Jennifer magnifies noises and hears echoes, even finding sound in complete quiet, indicating her increasing mental disintegration.

Her home is filled with "rustling, whispering sounds" like the canyon, and Jennifer comments that "Sometimes the quietest sounds carry best." Ironically, Jennifer received high verbal scores on standardized tests despite being so quiet and muted. She claims she can identify her attacker's voice, the only victim who heard him speak, which is ironic because her family does not talk.

She is fabricating a voice to speak and validate her honesty, and many women crime victims remain voiceless because they are afraid or unable to tell their tales. Jennifer also realizes that her parents and the authorities will only hear her if she relies on another voice instead of hers. At Animal Heaven, the parrot secures attention and approval by appropriating Jennifer's voice in the one environment where she is respected. Using a tape recorder to leave directions about her whereabouts, readers might wonder why Jennifer thinks her family will listen. Jennifer finally breaks her muteness when dialing the operator for help, afraid that her silence will condemn her to die.

Movement is another literary image Cadnum uses. Jennifer makes a transition from running freely to spending hours on a stationary treadmill, trapped physically because of her mental stupor. Having grown accustomed to restraining her body, she is unable to control her horse when it runs across the desert. Running means freedom to her and ultimately survival as she races to regain sensation in her drugged limbs.



She undergoes grueling, almost punitive, exercise sessions in an effort to discipline herself and only interrupts running during her interlude with the Emmits when she feels safe in one place. With only one foot on the ground as she strides, Jennifer's body and mind are suspended somewhat like being in purgatory. She may be physically strong but is spiritually weak. Jennifer uses running to describe people, such as the rapist looking exhausted like he had run a marathon. She even momentarily hopes that the rapist is on the run, eluding capture. In water, Jennifer treads water, almost running in place, because she feels immobilized. She reveals that her left foot overpronates, meaning it rolls in, and that she has to have shoes specially shaped for her foot symbolizing her imbalance, yet she does not refer to this condition again and seems accustomed to it.

Pain is a frequent metaphor. Significantly, Jennifer experiences severe migraine headaches for the first time after she fakes her attack, representing her unexpressed sense of shame and guilt. The bruise on her shoulder, allegedly caused by her attacker, symbolizes her wounded psyche. Foreshadowing Jennifer's future, her father reads the label on his pain pills that warns of possible seizures and comas caused by overdoses.

Jennifer often cannot breathe when she is overcome by emotions, gasping for air like she does for solutions. She is reminded of divers who purposefully shut off their oxygen supply because "When you almost die you supposedly feel great." At other times, she willingly breathes polluted air while running as if she is also impure and does not deserve better. The images of barrenness and sterile environments, such as the Thayer home, the police station, and the childless Margate, emphasize the emptiness of those places and people and their influence on others. The Emmits and the people at Animal Heaven, in contrast, do not restrict Jennifer from creating her identity as an individual and do not recognize her merely as Terry Thayer's daughter or Cassandra Thayer's sister.

Throughout the novel, Cadnum also uses food as a significant theme. Food is so important to the Thayers that it is almost an addiction, and characters feel an emptiness when their bodies and souls are not nourished. The fixation on food and body image, however, suggests that Jennifer, Cassandra, and Elizabeth may suffer from eating disorders. Clothing and curtains are described as shades of coffee, and cooking terms such as boil and bubble are used as verbs. Jennifer carefully feeds the pet store animals, paradoxically commenting that the sounds birds make may sound beautiful but reveal their hunger pangs. She seems capable of only being able to express herself through similar pain. Cadnum provides sensory details such as temperatures (people being cold and warm, the sun shining), taste (the gourmet food), and smell (the eucalyptus trees). Strangely, Jennifer remains observant of these external stimuli, while her own intuition is dulled.



Themes and Characters

The cast of *Rundown* stars Jennifer Thayer who narrates the events of her summer in past tense, almost as if she is confiding in a close friend or perhaps to a counselor in a hospital. Jennifer plays Sleeping Beauty in this tragedy. She is emotionally paralyzed by envy of her sister Cassandra, her frustration with aloof parents, and the loss of her boyfriend Quinn. Jennifer runs daily, trying to escape her mental anguish and her unhappy home and purge her emotions.

She believes that running may make her appear good enough for her parents and sister to consider her worthy of inclusion within the family's inner sanctum. Lacking self-confidence and afraid of maturation, Jennifer attempts to numb her feelings through rituals of exercise and work. She is obsessed with her body image and conforming to social expectations, even shaving her legs and applying deodorant before she departs to commit suicide. Like many teenage girls, Jennifer defines herself and others by their appearance. She admits that she's "easy on the eyes" but is critical of her brown hair and propensity to gain several pounds if she does not exercise, comparing herself to a rhinoceros. Jennifer says Cassandra is "dazzling" and photographs even prettier, hinting at Cassandra's illusionary nature. Jennifer thinks her parents and Cassandra are beautiful people and contrasts them disdainfully with Marta who has "mouseblond" hair and is somewhat plump like her mother.

Although readers do not see her using her abilities to improve herself, Jennifer displays intelligence in being able to concoct and maintain her lies. Determined to carry out her dramatic act, Jennifer carefully listens to her father's police radio to learn official procedures and rehearses every step of her alleged assault and how to describe it to sound accurate factually and emotionally. "I had sent the phrases through a series of mental rewrites," Jennifer states. "I wanted the drama of attempted rape, without any lurid and embarrassing details, and I knew exactly how far I would take this. I knew how to fake out my few lines." Jennifer envisions her encounter with the police and her concerned parents as acts in a play similar to games she played as a child pretending her dolls had been kidnaped. The police, however, have a procedure Jennifer does not expect in which her bruises and scratches are photographed; if she had claimed to have been raped, she would have been taken to a local hospital for a thorough physical examination and documentation of evidence. Afterwards, she endures sleepless nights watching animals maim each other on the muted Discovery Channel, looking in the distance to avoid seeing the reality of the painful attacks which parallel what she has purported happened to her. Jennifer does not like to scrutinize anything closely, avoiding close examination of herself and denying her culpability. Losing respect for herself and her family, Jennifer is appropriately named for Guinevere, King Arthur's disloyal wife, because she betrays everyone who loves her most. Themes of shame, guilt, remorse, failure, denial, and forgiveness of self and others permeate Jennifer's descent into darkness and reemergence to consciousness.

Ironically, Jennifer hoped to make her parents feel guilty for ignoring her and instead she intensifies her own sense of guilt. The reader does not learn much about Jennifer's



life outside her summertime lie and incessant running, being unaware of other aspects of her personality, scholastic interests, and social contacts.

Cassandra Thayer, Jennifer's older sister, is familiar with being the lead player of the show, having written and starred in a play which moved the audience to tears, and is displaced by Jennifer in this account.

A college graduate engaged to marry a diplomat's spoiled son and medical student named Danny Powell, Cassandra is the epitome of narcissism. Cruel and immoral, she verbally and mentally attacks her family. Although Cadnum subtly reveals that the Thayers were not always rich, Cassandra acts accustomed to affluence and expects to be indulged with a high level of comfort, mostly materialistic items and domestic services. She usually gets everything she desires, whether her goal is high grades, a society wedding, or her parents' uninterrupted devotion. A sports psychology major at Stanford University, Cass has intellectual insights into people's emotions, skillfully manipulating them. Jennifer considers her sister to be fearless and confident, depicting her as an almost invulnerable personality who survives every situation. Jennifer also reveals her sister's flaws and weaknesses, such as combining sleeping pills and wine, foreshadowing Jennifer's own suicide attempt. She blames Cassandra for striking her, causing the suspicious bruise on her shoulder, when Jennifer suggested that she did not want to be maid of honor which she feels emphasizes her role as the unimportant second daughter. Like the Trojan princess also named Cassandra, Jennifer's sister prophecies possible outcomes and events, such as their father's alleged affair, but no one completely believes her claims. Despite their differences, neither Cassandra or Jennifer can sing, and together they freeze like statues in the garden to evade their father, showing that a sisterly bond exists despite their feuding.

Among the supporting players, Jennifer's parents, Terrance Thayer, called Terry, and Elizabeth Eshelmann (who retains her maiden name professionally, hinting at du374 Rundown al role of independent career woman and dependent wife and mother), are so focused on their businesses and personal needs that they are unaware of Jennifer's emotional collapse and fail to intervene after her attack. Terry, whom Jennifer describes as a slightly pudgy, jovial man, lives to create and sell exquisite, flavorful food. By feeding his appetite for nourishment and money, Terry feels fulfilled and thinks he is providing for his family's needs. Suffering migraines, he relies on pills to numb his physical pain which he says was inherited from his mother. Terry represses his emotions, feigning happiness and concealing discontent. He denies having an affair, but Jennifer is unsure if he is telling the truth.

She remembers her father disarming an enraged neighbor and knows that he fears violence, preferring to ignore his daughter's assault than confront reality. Elizabeth is an elegant, golden-haired beauty who writes psychological tests for companies to detect possible crooks and people with risktaking personalities before they hire them; Jennifer learns how to disguise lies by taking practice tests for her mother. A cold, self-involved perfectionist, Elizabeth moodily criticizes everyone but Cassandra who not only resembles her mother but is replicating many aspects of her life. Like many of



Cadnum's characters, Elizabeth has a traumatic past. Her father died when he stepped on a land mine in Laos, and she witnessed a violent assault as a teenager.

Critical of authority figures such as the police, Elizabeth forces her opinions on Jennifer, insisting she conform. She promotes Dr. Yellin, a psychologist who writes about trauma recovery whom Jennifer distrusts because, like his name suggests, he is blatantly self-promoting and egotistical. A frustrated opera singer, Elizabeth does not like to hear the sound of her own voice, symbolic of the silence in the Thayer family. She also suffers stage fright somewhat like the paralysis that plagues Jennifer.

Detective Margate, the Thayer's housekeeper Bernice Heath, and Marta and Lynn Emmet represent Rundown's most empathetic heroines. Described as vigilant as a bird of prey, Margate persists in her pursuit of Jennifer's identification of the serial rapist.

The barren Margate is dedicated to her work and has a life purpose, choosing her sense of duty to the community over personal wealth unlike Jennifer's parents. Although she comes from a middle-class background, Margate believes in seeking and capturing elusive criminals so much that her socioeconomic status is unimportant to her. Idealistic, her sense of right and wrong is blurred by her emphatic pursuit of justice, and readers might wonder whether Margate or someone she knew was raped thus fueling her frenzied quest against rapists. She seems to want to save the world while saving herself in the process. Initially afraid of Margate because she is aware that Jennifer has been abused and filed a false report, the enlightened Jennifer ultimately respects Margate's intentions and perhaps will eventually consider her a mentor. As a surrogate parent, Margate gives Jennifer the attention she craves and sets limits to how she can behave, demanding obedience.

Bernice, whose name Jennifer emphasizes is pronounced "Burn-us," symbolizing how her intimacy with the Thayers could cause potential harm, is more of a family figure to Jennifer than her parents or sister. Bernice disapproves of Cassandra's hateful treatment of people, seeing through her deceptions, and is enthusiastic towards Jennifer. Recently employed by Terry, Bernice confides to Jennifer that she is grateful to him for rescuing her. Previously a successful gourmet restaurant owner, Bernice was also a Sleeping Beauty paralyzed by depression and unable to function until her prince recognized her dilemma and intervened. The novel's theme of redemption is perpetuated by her salvation through work in a job beneath her social and professional status, like Margate. As a cook and confidante, Bernice satiates Jennifer's hunger for emotional as well as physical sustenance. Jennifer meanly describes Bernice as militaristic and plodding perhaps because of her jealousy that her father helped Bernice but neglected her.

Marta (short for Martina) Emmet and her mother, Lynn, represent nurturing earth mother characters who strive to soothe and comfort Jennifer. In contrast to Jennifer, Marta knows what she wants to do, working at Animal Heaven and planning to become a veterinarian for exotic animals.



Although her car is shabby and she repeats statements for emphasis, Marta is self-assured and fully aware of herself despite being somewhat envious of the attention Jennifer receives. Believing that Jennifer fought off her attacker, Marta experiences momentary self-doubt that she could also be that strong physically and mentally. More capable than her friend, Marta arranged for Jennifer's employment. Lynn Emmit, a set designer, is Elizabeth's best friend. A potential duality between the female characters cycles through the book as each occasionally yearns to be liberated from the rigid roles expected of them, assuming that others have more satisfying lives. Lynn's husband Harold "Hal" Emmit and Terry Thayer admire each other professionally but would not be impelled to trade positions. Jennifer describes Hal, the artistic director of the East Bay Theater, as a temperamental man whose rage is controlled by tranquilizers much like her father who drugs his headaches. Marta and Hal dive with Jennifer, guarding her in the water and on the ground much like a knight or lady in waiting would watch over a princess.

Minor characters appear on stage or are mentioned to help transitions and present new information. Quinn McGowan, Jennifer's former boyfriend who moved away six months previously possibly triggering Jennifer's emotional chaos, returns to town to reassure Jennifer. His father, Andy, moved to Reno, Nevada, where he is a successful casino manager, leaving Quinn and Jennifer in limbo. Jennifer feels mixed emotions at seeing Quinn, knowing that he came only because he believed her lie. Quinn, a quiet but intuitive boy, is not a prince who can rescue Jennifer, a task only she can achieve. He summarizes Jennifer's problem, "You always want life to be more exciting than it really is." Quinn abandons her again, heightening her emotional downfall. Mr. Da Gama is Jennifer's primary male role model. Nursing sick birds and scrupulously conducting business, he is usually proactive and virtuous while Jennifer's parents are often passive and unethical. The ill cockatoo Byron represents Jennifer's sickness.

Other positive supporting characters include Officer Fountain and Detective Dave Ronert who guide Jennifer through police procedures and the unseen Duncan Pierce, a forensic psychologist, who probably works with Jennifer after she confesses without exploiting her like Dr. Yellin would have.

Impeccable cowboy Tommy Dixon cares more for Jennifer's horse Desert Flower than her. The horse is pampered like Cassandra and senses and takes advantage of Jennifer's fear. Jennifer refers to Miss Friday, the high school's strict track coach, alluding to her school activities that possibly sustain her emotionally in other seasons. Jennifer also mentions Maggie, her father's producer and possible lover, whose existence further clouds Jennifer's perception of and trust in her father. Of all the supporting cast, Jennifer's imagined assailant and the actual Jogging Rapist held in custody most symbolize her internal fears, despair, and helplessness in her quest for survival, identity, and autonomy. Most of the characters harbor a secret side which they hide from others, and readers often formulate more questions than answers because of the ambiguous text.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Cadnum told this story in first person? Do you have to accept Jennifer's viewpoint? Whom do you think she is telling this to?
2. Whom do you feel sympathy for, the teenage or adult characters and why?
3. Why do you think Jennifer is so sad? Why is Cassandra so angry?
4. How much do the characters really know and understand about each other? What stereotypes does Cadnum perpetuate? By the end of the novel, did you change your opinion about any of the characters?
5. What is the meaning of the word Rundown? Compare different definitions such as tired and worn down and similar wording such as round around and breakdown.
6. How do you think Jennifer was bruised? Who do you think hit her?
7. When did Jennifer's lies get out of control? Why did she not think her family, friends, and the police would immediately realize that she was lying and punish or press charges against her?
8. How typical is Jennifer of American teenagers?
9. What do you think is real in the story and what is imagined by Jennifer?
10. Why are Jennifer and Marta friends? Does Jennifer value Marta's friendship?
11. Why does not anyone help Jennifer when she is taking pills and staggering while walking down a public street?
12. How would Cassandra tell this story?

What would be the viewpoint of Bernice, Marta, and Quinn?
13. Was Detective Margate justified in forcing Jennifer to identify the rapist even when she realized Jennifer was lying?

Why do you think Detective Margate is so zealous to resolve unsolved crimes against women?
14. How does Jennifer feel about her body image? Do you think she suffers from an eating disorder?
15. Do you consider Jennifer to be an athlete? What does diving symbolize in Rundown? How are running and diving similar and different?
16. Whom does Jennifer respect and why?



Who respects Jennifer?

17. What do the different animals contribute to the novel?
18. At the novel's conclusion, are you sure that the truth has been told? What do you think happens after Jennifer calls the police in the final chapter? What do you think Jennifer's life is like one year later?
19. How does Jennifer's character develop? How do other characters change?
20. What other choices could Jennifer have pursued to improve her relationship with her parents?
21. How representative are Elizabeth and Detective Margate of professional women balancing careers, family, and personal development? What does Jennifer's introduction of them by maiden name and professional title reveal about their identity as perceived by themselves, their family, co-workers, and society?
22. What are the different characters' attitudes toward sexuality? Towards marriage? Why do Cassandra and Jennifer attempt to conceal their sexuality?
23. How are Jennifer and Cassandra alike? Do you think Jennifer ignores aspects of herself that resemble Cassandra? What do you think Cassandra would have done to get attention if the sisters' roles were reversed?
24. What are the various characters' opinion of psychology and therapy? Why is it ironic that the professional psychologists, Elizabeth and Cassandra, are unaware of Jennifer's mental illness and do not help her?
25. Discuss how the characters and settings in *Rundown* seem sterile and barren and what this indicates about their psychological and physical condition.
26. Identify similar stories about sibling rivalry in fairy tales, myths, movies, ballads, novels, poems, and other literary works.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the symptoms and causes of depression as well as treatments. Determine how individuals of different age groups and gender are affected by depression. What percentage of American teenagers do psychologists think suffer from depression? How do these statistics compare to adolescents in other countries?

2. Differentiate between bulimia and anorexia nervosa. Collect statistics about the age, gender, and socioeconomic status of Americans who have these illnesses. Are these conditions common in other cultures? Why do people develop these behaviors and what treatment is effective?

3. Why do people engage in self-mutilation? Differentiate between self-expression such as body piercing and selfdestructive acts. How does body image affect emotional well being?

4. Read nonfiction books about teenagers and American culture such as Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994), *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (1996), and *Hunger Pains: The Modern Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness* (1997) and Sylvia Rimm's *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women*. How would Pipher and Rimm interpret Jennifer's behavior as well as that of the other characters? What advice might they offer to help Jennifer heal and improve her life? How would they evaluate Elizabeth's relationship with her daughters? Terry's *Rundown* relationship with his daughters? How would they assess Bernice, Lynn, Detective Margate, and Mr. Da Gama as mentors?

5. How does peer pressure influence teenagers both positively and negatively? Is conformity necessary for adolescents to be accepted?

6. Discuss how parents' professions, ethics, and interests can affect their children's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Compare your ideas with theories espoused by child development authorities.

7. How has materialism and consumer culture benefitted and detracted from American society? How has emphasis on money changed family structures?

How have social relationships and friendships been altered by entrepreneurial ambitions?

8. Compare the meanings of conscience and conscious. How are they similar?

How do they differ?

9. Write a newspaper article based on an interview with Jennifer. Use *Rundown* as a primary source. What will you include or omit and why? What is most convincing about Jennifer's statements.



What is dubious? Who else would you interview?

10. Prepare a report about crimes committed by teenagers and against teenagers and how the media portrays and distorts adolescent violence, school shootings for example, to gain support for such issues as gun control.

11. Discuss the attitudes of citizens of different races and socioeconomic classes toward law enforcement personnel and how law enforcement regards different groups. Are certain minorities, socioeconomic classes, or genders discriminated against? How would Jennifer have been treated if she had been impoverished, male, or a member of another racial or ethnic group?

12. How are fairy tales used by scholars and journalists to make comparisons with current events and texts? Are these valid models to use to explain universal experiences, feelings, and symbols?

13. Script a one-act play showing the different characters' viewpoints as they react to the news of Jennifer's attack.

14. Examine statistics regarding how many rapes are reported annually nationally, regionally, and in your state and town.

How many rapes are not reported according to authorities? Profile the victims by age groups, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. What percentage of rapists are captured and successfully prosecuted? How many elude identification and arrest? Profile the rapists according to age groups, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Are there any cases of fraudulent reports? By whom and for what reasons? What happens to both the accuser and accused legally, psychologically, and socially as a result of those allegations?



For Further Reference

Budin, Miriam Lang. Review of *Rundown*.

School Library Journal (August 1999). Commends *Rundown* because "Deft characterization and adroit descriptions of setting and motivation raise Cadnum's writing above the commonplace." Budin recognizes that "Readers may not always like the people who populate this book, but they will believe they are real."

"Cadnum, Michael." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Volume 23. Detroit: Gale, 1998, pp. 7-15. Features a list of Cadnum's publications, including short stories in anthologies and magazine pieces, and includes interview excerpts, book synopses, and bibliographical sources.

"Cadnum, Michael." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 87. Detroit: Gale, 1996, pp. 32-34. Provides biographical information, discussion of Cadnum's work for both adults and teenagers, and a list of resources.

Campbell, Patty. "The Sand in the Oyster."

Horn Book 70 (May-June 1994): 358-62.

Compares Cadnum to Robert Cormier for his literary presentation of deviant adolescent behavior, emphasizing how his word choices, pacing, and description create believable characters coping with a violent society.

Cart, Michael. "Young-Adult Novels Mirror At-Risk Lives." *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 30, 1999): 7. Praises Cadnum's novel in commentary about works written by prominent young adult authors.

———. Review of *Rundown*. *Booklist* 95 (June 1 & 15, 1999): 1812. Generally supportive of this novel, Cart states that "Cadnum demonstrates his usual mastery of mood and characterization in this acutely observed portrait." He warns that "Those expecting a fast-paced novel of suspense will be disappointed" because "Cadnum seems to be less interested in plot than in creating an atmosphere of foreboding and exploring subtle nuances of character." Cart concludes that Cadnum is "wonderfully successful at both, but reading *Rundown* is ultimately like watching a Hitchcock movie in slow motion."

Jones, Patrick. "People Are Talking About . . . Michael Cadnum." *Horn Book* 70 (March-April 1994): 177-80. Discusses several of Cadnum's young adult novels, analyzing his literary techniques to develop complex characters and horrifying situations, emphasizing his use of first person narrative to depict emotional turmoil and indecision.

Kooser, Ted. "A Few Attractive Strangers."

Georgia Review 44 (fall 1990): 503-5. Praises Cadnum's poetry for his original observations and perceptions of familiar ideas and imagery such as dreams. Especially



commends Cadnum's word choices to create mood and energy and extols his non-clichéd endings which surprise readers.

Rosenberg, Liz. "Of Counting and Bedtime, Lightning and Lying." *Boston Globe* (June 6, 1999): N4. Briefly reviews *Run down*, recommending it along with several other books for younger readers.

Review of *Rundown*. *Kirkus Reviews* (May 1, 1999). Recommends *Rundown*, stating "Once again, Cadnum . . . has dissected the mind of one of society's troubled young people, who has everything on the surface but is desperately trying to fill an unnamed emptiness." The reviewer summarizes that "Deep, dark, and moving, this is a model tale of adolescent uneasiness set amid the roiling emotions of modern life."

Review of *Rundown*. *Publishers Weekly* (June 21, 1999). Although this review lauds *Rundown* because "The author uses bold, dramatic strokes to paint a haunting portrait of his protagonist and, in his characteristically elliptical style, leaves plenty of blank space for readers to fill in," the reviewer notes "while the pacing is as taut as ever, the narrative lacks the cohesion of Cadnum's best works—readers may wish that the author had shaded in some of the gaps." The reviewer concludes that *Rundown* is a "sometimes confusing psychological drama. Cadnum . . . shows rather than tells."

Related Titles

Cadnum writes about teens living on the periphery of their families and wealthy communities and dealing with emotional issues and moral crimes in such books as *Heat* (1998) and *Taking It* (1995). Similarly ostracized characters appear in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), in which Holden Caulfield is a jaded, deceitful, and disturbed predecessor to Jennifer, and S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), which emphasizes that emotional despair occurs in all social classes. Miracle McCloy in Han Nolan's *Dancing on the Edge* (1997) is reminiscent of Jennifer, 382 Rundown dancing instead of running to prove she exists somewhat like the protagonist in Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese*, (1977) bicycling on his metaphorical journey toward a mental breakdown. Rob Thomas's *Rats Saw God* (1996) chronicles the mental collapse and restoration of an affluent, disillusioned teenager, while Lisa Rowe Fraustino's *Ash* (1995) depicts schizophrenia from a sibling's point of view. Robin D. Jones's *No Shakespeare Allowed* (1989) features a theatrical teenaged protagonist who tries to script her life to control her domineering parents much like how Jennifer dramatically attempts to assert her autonomy.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996