

# Tenderness Short Guide

## Tenderness by Robert Cormier

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## Overview

The *Chocolate War* has been characterized as the most uncompromising novel ever written for young adults, but *Tenderness* challenges that distinction. *Tenderness* is the account of the dissolute life of a teenaged girl and the murderous trail of a despicable serial killer. The novel is a scathing view of how America's legal system treats young criminals, as well as how society seems to aid, sometimes even admire, the most vile and evil people.

## 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 young adult fiction. *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 *Tenderness* shows, he has lost none of his edge.



# Characters

Eric Poole and Lori are about as nasty a pair of characters as one is likely to find in literature. Poole is a psychopath—he feels nothing for anyone and lives entirely for his own self-gratification, which includes being "tender." He begins by finding "tenderness" with kittens. He breaks their fragile bones and eventually kills them. He takes it upon himself to rid his neighborhood of felines, killing them with his special brand of tenderness. He eventually takes to tormenting and killing other animals. When they no longer satisfy him, he turns to killing young women. He sees this as entirely logical; when animals will not suffice, then human beings must.

He gets away with his seemingly intolerably cruel crimes because much of society conspires with him, helping him succeed. Even his victims help. When a little boy, people would comment on what a pretty and fine-looking youngster he was. As a young adult, he found that his pretty face, lovely blond hair, sparkling eyes, and winning smile charmed people into believing him good and trustworthy. He called this combination of deceiving looks The Charm; when he used The Charm, he would be absolved of any crime. For victims, he sought out girls who would see The Charm and be willing to do anything he asked. There were people who would see into his eyes past the charm and know that the was evil in him, but he avoided such people.

Besides, most people bought The Charm, and he could have as much "tenderness" as he wanted.

Perhaps it is how other characters respond to Poole that is most disturbing, although his lust for murderous sex is itself heinous. Serial killing is notorious in twentieth-century criminality. The victims are usually, but not always, young women, and the killers are usually, but not always, men—especially young men. Indeed, some criminologists believe that when a serial killer hits middle age, he loses interest in killing people. In *Tenderness*, Cormier offers insight into why a serial killer murders, why he is able to find easy victims, and why he is able to get away with the killings. In real life, when they are caught, some serial killers become objects of affection for young adult girls, who send them love notes and presents and even offers of marriage. When Poole receives these things, Cormier is not fantasizing—this actually happens. Thus young women, those who are Poole's favorite victims, not only help him but even glorify his atrocious crimes. Lori, as one such girl, makes it plain that she does not mind that he murders people for pleasure.

Lori is a troubling figure from the first.

She has a convoluted attitude toward sex in which she wants it but is proud of being almost a virgin. She uses her slim body and large breasts to get what she wants out of men; she is shown seducing a man who picks her up while she is hitchhiking and then stealing his wallet after demanding and getting money from him. Her narrative is a distressing account of her self-degradation and her manipulation of others, all seemingly motivated by a yearning for love and a secure relationship. She claims to feel remorse,



but she does not act upon it; her almost complete lack of self-respect ("Sometimes I am a real bitch") results in repeated self-destructive behavior. Paired with Poole, she forms half of a nightmare couple for the 1990s—rootless and unhappy destroyers of other people's lives. Cormier has created in them a savage masterpiece of characterization: plausible, well motivated, horrifying, and too evil to be pitied. They resemble antisocial figures whose faces and stories flash by during the evening news, though he has endowed his heartless couple with far greater depth and complexity.

A counterpoint to Poole and Lori is Lieutenant Proctor, a man who seems hard-bitten but who is actually sensitive—but he is not sensitive to Poole's faked suffering and phony tales of being abused. Instead, he feels for the victims.

He is haunted by a string of murders that occurred in Oregon decades earlier; he thinks that he let the serial killer get away.

In Poole, he recognizes the same traits that he saw in the suspect in the old Oregon cases: a superior attitude, wellrehearsed alibis, high intelligence, and no sense of remorse. What Poole calls The Charm, Lieutenant Proctor recognizes as the mask of a ruthless murderer, someone who regards human beings as animals, to be killed at his pleasure. A wellrounded character, Lieutenant Proctor is no saint. He uses subterfuge of doubtful legality to try to get Poole to reveal his true nature prior to release from prison, so that Poole may be transferred to an adult prison. First, a young man tries to pick a fight in the cafeteria, but Poole has been warned by someone who owes him a debt, and he refuses to take the bait.

Then a riot in the cafeteria is contrived, again to get Poole to reveal his lust for murder, but Poole again escapes because he is forewarned. These efforts by Proctor are underhanded, even though his motive is to save lives: He is certain that Poole will kill again once out of prison.

The use of a decoy is a somewhat more commonly accepted police practice, although by having the decoy write to Poole and invite him to visit her the use of a decoy comes close to entrapment, which would be against the law.

When Poole is finally caught after apparently killing Lori, Lieutenant Proctor faces a tough moment. He says, "It was an accident. The girl wasn't his type.

That wasn't his method of operation."

Another police officer asks, "But it's all over, right, Lou?" Proctor thinks of the girls Poole has murdered and says, "Right," even though he knows that this time Poole will go to prison for something he had not actually done. Cormier is ruthless with his characters in *Tenderness*, and not even Proctor is allowed escape from torment. "Maybe I can sleep again" he thinks after Poole's capture, but he cannot. He is still sleepless, still haunted by the dead Oregon girls whose murderer outwitted him: "He knew it was not all over, would never end. Like the phantom pain after a leg is amputated."



## Setting

Lori and Eric Poole travel through much of New England in *Tenderness*, with the prison for juvenile criminals, Eric Poole's aunt's house, and parks being the principal locations for the novel's action. Eric Poole, as the institution's lone murderer, is housed on a floor separate from the one where other inmates are incarcerated. He keeps himself aloof from the other inmates, so he knows something is amiss when he sees another young man on his floor. While Poole is not characterized as a model prisoner, he does seem to stay out of trouble until he passes juvenile status, is released with a clean slate, and assumes the privileges of a free adult. He is periodically interviewed at the prison by Lieutenant Proctor, a specialist in serial killings who is worried by Eric Poole's utter lack of remorse for the murders of his mother and stepfather.

These interviews are fun for Poole; he enjoys verbally toying with the police *Tenderness* 4899 officer.

When Poole goes to his aunt's former home after leaving prison, he behaves much more like a caged animal there than when jailed, perhaps because he knows that he could leave his aunt's home anytime, whereas he had no choice but to remain in prison until his eighteenth birthday. He can see from the windows of this house signs held by his loving supporters—mostly girls, for whom he has great contempt—as well as the signs of those who despise him. News reporters also station themselves outside the house. Eventually, he sees Lori, someone from his past that he cannot quite remember, watching for him from beneath a willow tree.

Poole's murders tend to occur in bushy or wooded areas, relaxed settings where he can be "tender" with his victims. These tranquil settings and the scenes in peaceful parks at the end of the novel only intensify the horror of the gruesome deeds he commits and hopes to commit in them. He and Lori watch a couple in a canoe languidly float about while he contemplates killing Lori. He even buys her food from a hot dog cart, an act traditionally associated with serene interludes for romantic couples. Later, at another park, Lori enjoys a ride on a Ferris wheel, again an activity associated with carefree fun, while Poole stalks a woman he plans to kill and then, if he follows his pattern, have sex with. Poole and Lori, at the end of the book, again visit a park where they paddle about in a canoe. Here, in the midst of a traditionally romantic activity, Lori—ever the fool—takes off her life jacket and in the process tumbles in the water and drowns.



## Social Sensitivity

Tenderness is socially sensitive from beginning to end as it touches on teenage sexuality, prostitution, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, thievery, envy, betrayal, alcoholism, men beating their girlfriends, faking child abuse, torture, killing trusting pets, murdering young women for sexual pleasure, and sex with dead girls. The novel has plenty in it to offend people. Cormier could with some fairness be accused of using teenage sexuality to attract readers; parts of the book seem titillating. The actions and rationalizations of both Lori and Eric Poole travel beyond disturbing into the nightmare realm of the utterly sickening. Looking at this graphic brutality from another perspective shows that Cormier has chosen to discuss important topics in an honest and forthright way. The young adult audience for which it is intended often craves honesty over genteel good taste. Cormier treats the minds and emotions of these readers with great respect, and this novel is an example of his trying to communicate to them critical aspects of undisguised human experience. The primary interest of a book such as *Tenderness* is not really sensational depictions of depravity, but rather the ruthlessly honest presentation of real-world issues and problems unclouded by condescension.

As for whether *Tenderness* is appropriate reading for any particular young person, that person's maturity and interests are probably the best guide. If a reader of any age cannot understand Poole's vile rationalizations for what they are, the book may be no more than a nightmare or the inspiration for them. For a reader who is becoming more independent-minded and worldly though, the graphic detail on how a young adult's life can be ruined or even destroyed by misplaced trust may help he or she to make somewhat wiser and more intelligent judgments of other people. Literature for young adults often makes the point that an ugly exterior may harbor something beautiful, but possibly a greater danger comes from the common response to physical beauty—that the spirit clothed by gorgeous flesh is beautiful too. This is a valuable lesson in a society in which young people are sometimes murdered for their shoes or raped by a glib and good-looking acquaintance. Behind the handsome face, fine hair, and twinkling eyes of a friendly stranger may be Eric Poole or one of the real-life serial killers who prey on young adults. It would be bad if the novel made someone paranoid, but caution and good sense are far from paranoia.

If the novel helps even one youngster make a life-saving decision, even without knowing how close the danger was, then *Tenderness* was worth the reading.





## Techniques

Tenderness features hard-minded, realistic presentation. Lori's unvarnished revelations about herself and her sex life are but preludes to the harsher realities of the novel; her comments shock, like a slap on the arm before being given an injection.

What follows, the examination of the thoughts of a serial killer is appalling in its verisimilitude.

Tenderness has two narrative voices, one in the first person and limited to one character's point of view and the other in the third person, able to move from one character's thoughts to another's. The first-person narrator is Lori, who at one point notes that a favorite teacher had told her "that I had a talent for writing and should keep a journal." This is to explain her vivid, although disjointed, writing style. Her narrative slowly dovetails with the third-person narration until the two accounts breathlessly race along together.

## Literary Qualities

If explicit, hard-minded, realistic presentation is a literary quality, then *Tenderness* has plenty of it. Lori's unvarnished revelations about herself and her sex life are but preludes to the harsher realities of the novel; her comments shock like a slap on the arm before being given an injection. The subsequent examination of the thoughts of a serial killer is appalling in its verisimilitude.

As in *In the Middle of the Night* (1995; see separate entry, Vol 9), *Tenderness* has two narrative voices, one in the first person and limited to a single character's point of view and the other in the third person, able to move from one character's thoughts to another's.

Lori, the first-person narrator, notes at one point that a favorite teacher had told her "that I had a talent for writing and should keep a journal." This is to explain her vivid, although disjointed, writing style. Her narrative is used to greater effect than the first-person narration in *In the Middle of the Night*; it slowly dovetails with the third-person narration until the two accounts breathlessly race along together.

# Themes

The major theme of this novel is one which is present in most of Cormier's works—the failure of adults, and the larger society, to nurture and train their children. Clearly society has failed these characters. The significant adults have failed and continue to fail these children.

Eric has not been taught about conventional "tenderness" and seeks it by killing young women. Lori has been failed by the men in her life who try to take advantage of her. In order to survive, both of these characters take what they know about human nature and use it to gratify themselves.

The co-existence of good and evil in each human is another theme of this powerful novel. All the characters are both monsters and victims. Cormier shows them navigating through life trying to establish their own identities, being confused about their sexuality, and trying to find a "little tenderness." Cormier does not let his characters off lightly. Although they are flawed through no fault of their own, he still holds them accountable for their actions. Each character is made to assume responsibility and suffer punishment before becoming a real human being and a "real adult."



## Key Questions

Tenderness is a powerful novel that confronts significant issues and is an excellent vehicle for discussing the problems of contemporary society. It presents a complex look at a morally bankrupt society that has failed to help children become caring, moral, reasonable, and balanced individuals who can connect with others as they try to enrich their lives. However, this same society holds all citizens responsible for their actions.

Cormier also suggests that everyone is both monster and victim in this type of environment.

1. Why does the work start with Lori talking to the reader? What do you learn about her in this section and how does it set up the action for the rest of the novel?
2. What does the author's use of a different voice for Eric tell us about him? How do you feel when you read the first "Eric" section?
3. Describe Eric's relationship with his mother and the "women" in his life.
4. Describe Lori's relationship with the "men" in her life.
5. Are there differences between the type of relationships Eric has with women and Lori has with men? What are these differences?
6. Who are the good characters and who are the bad characters?
7. What is tenderness? Why does Cormier feel it is important?
8. Does Cormier evade the real issue of who are the victims in this novel?
9. Why does Jake obsess on bringing Eric to justice? What do you think he does at the end of the book when he knows that Eric is not guilty of Lori's death?
10. What does Cormier mean when he ends the book with the sentence, "Later, in the deepest heart of the night, the monster also cried"?
11. Are Eric and Lori transformed during the course of the novel? Why do you think that?
12. Is it just to send Eric to prison for the murder of Lori? Why or why not?



## Topics for Discussion

1. Are the characters of *Tenderness* interesting? What traits makes them interesting or uninteresting?
2. Do you actually like any of the characters in the book?
3. What does Eric Poole mean by the word tenderness? What does Lori mean by it?
4. "Eric Poole did not dream." Why is this significant?
5. "Without emotion, without feeling, we're animals," says Lieutenant Proctor. This is an interesting turn of phrase. Don't writers usually associate emotions with the animal in people, rather than the other way around? Is Lieutenant Proctor right?
6. Is there anything likable about the novel's protagonists, Eric Poole and Lori? Why would Cormier make two villainous figures the focus of his novel?
7. Does Lori change Eric Poole? If so, how and in what way?
8. What is *The Charm*? How does it work? Why do people fall for it? Why do others not fall for it? What is Cormier saying about human nature with *The Charm*?
9. In the end, "the monster also cried." What does this mean? Why would Cormier end his novel with it?
10. Is serial killing an appropriate subject for a novel intended for young adults?
11. What is the point of Lori's sexual discussion at the start of the novel? What does it tell us about her?
12. Would the novel be better if either Lori or Eric Poole were a good person? Would it be more enjoyable?
13. Is the novel, in Lori's sexual behavior and Eric Poole's murders, merely trying to shock for shock's sake or is there a serious purpose to the story beyond these horrifying aspects?
14. Why does Lori not care that Eric Poole murders women?
15. Is Lori a fool? 16. Would Eric Poole have been caught had Lori not interfered?
17. Would Eric Poole have continued murdering young women had Lori not died? Would she have helped him?
18. Is Lori's life redeemable?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. "Kill Your Parents and Become the Victim. What a wonderful country," thinks Eric Poole. What does he mean? Does this actually happen in the United States? What are some examples that support or contradict Eric Poole's view? How do these examples affect your perception of whether or not the characterization of Eric Poole is realistic?
2. What is a psychopath? What qualities does Eric Poole possess that would make him a psychopath, as Lieutenant Proctor asserts?
3. Serial killers are dreadful people who have committed appalling crimes. If you feel capable of dealing with the emotions raised by such a frightful topic, research a serial killer and compare him or her to Eric Poole. How are they similar? Has Cormier done his homework and created an accurate portrayal of a serial murderer?
4. "Yet what I think I want most of all is someone who would be tender with me." How important is tenderness to relationships? What do psychologists say about its importance for young people?
5. What are sensible precautions people should take to protect themselves from predators like Eric Poole? What does law enforcement recommend? What do psychologists recommend? How much caution would be too much?
6. What social services are there for young adults like Lori? Is it inevitable that some young adults like her will not get the help they need? How could she be persuaded to get help without infringing on her personal liberty (the old practice of putting runaways in juvenile jails seems ineffective and perhaps unethical)?
7. How does law enforcement identify murders as serial killings? How does it identify and track down serial killers?
8. Tenderness has two narratives, one first person and the other third person. What is each like? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? Do they clash with each other or work together to develop the themes and characters of Tenderness?

## Literary Precedents

There are probably hundreds of books about serial killers and misunderstood youths, but one of the most chilling stories is nonfiction. Ann Rule documents the hunt for a brutal serial killer in her true crime book, *The Stranger Beside Me* (1981). The killer turns out to be the seductive, cunning Ted Bundy, Rule's friend and co-worker.

The recent fiction work that comes closest to this novel is Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1993). It is the story of Francie Brady, an Irish schoolboy from a dysfunctional family whose mother eventually commits suicide. When Francie begins to feel that all his problems are the result of prying and disapproving neighbors, he strikes out against the adults who he feels have terrorized him. Francie's loss of innocence and escalating brutality make him a soul mate of Eric Poole.



## For Further Reference

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

Campbell offers analyses of Cormier's writings for young people through *Fade*. It includes an extensive bibliography.

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.

Gallo, Donald R. "Reality and Responsibility: The Continuing Controversy over Robert Cormier's Books for Young Adults." *Voice of Youth Advocates* 7 (1984): 245-247. (Reprinted in *The VOYA Reader*. Edited by Dorothy M. Broderick. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1990, pp. 153-160.) Gallo explores the elements in Cormier's fiction for young adults that make it controversial.

Iskander, Sylvia Patterson. "Readers, Realism, and Robert Cormier." *Children's Literature* 15 (1987): 7-18.

Iskander covers the reasons Cormier's books for young readers have been censored.

"Robert Cormier." In *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography: Broadening Views, 1968-1988*. Edited by Laura Ingram. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989, pp. 193-195.

Discusses Cormier's life and the reception of his writings.

Isensee, Reinhard. "Literary Models in Young Adult Literature: Robert Cormier." *Studien Gesellschaftswissenschaften* 2 (1990): 98-103. Analyzes Cormier's typical themes.

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: 40-43.

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.





Silvey, Anita. "An Interview with Robert Cormier." *Horn Book* 61 (1985): 145-155 and 289-296. This interview covers influences on Cormier's fiction.

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 for young adults tends to push the edge of what society deems acceptable reading for them.

*Tenderness* pushes the edge very hard, the way the unrelenting cruelty and stripping away of young people's civil rights pushed the edge in *The Chocolate War*. Much of Cormier's writing is nightmarish, peopled with characters who have been abandoned by society and characters who are antisocial predators. Cormier also is noted for his experiments with structure and other elements of the novel. *In the Middle of the Night* has two distinct narratives similar to the ones in *Tenderness*—the first an account of a demented exacting of revenge by telephone and the second an account of a young person trying to hold himself together while under extreme psychological pressure.



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