

# **We All Fall Down Short Guide**

## **We All Fall Down by Robert Cormier**

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## Overview

In his novel Cormier addresses problems which most of today's teen-agers have encountered in one way or another. Vandalism and violence play an important role in everyday life of youth, be it at home, at school, at leisure, or in visual media. Although these problems do not exist for all young people at the same intensity because of different economic and social backgrounds, they nevertheless provide important subjects for analyzing society. In *We All Fall Down* Cormier dramatizes the issue of vandalism and violence in a well-to-do, uppermiddle-class neighborhood rather than in an inner-city setting.

His characters are convincing and represent the consciousness of many young adults, thus offering manifold points of association and dissociation for the reader. Cormier again and again leads his reader to the question of why somebody could commit acts of violence, and at the same time provides different motives for such behavior.

The spectrum of explanations depicted in the novel is well designed and thought provoking. Cormier draws the reader in by creating a suspenseful plot with several unexpected twists as well as by providing vivid and believable characterization.

## About the Author

At the age of forty-nine Robert (Edmund) Cormier published his first novel for young adults. *The Chocolate War* (1974) was the beginning of his remarkable career in the field of young adult books, which started by coincidence. When Cormier submitted the novel his editor convinced him to publish it for young adult readers rather than for the adult audience he had intended. Although Cormier did not feel comfortable with the idea at first, he later admitted that he was grateful for the editorial suggestion.

Cormier was born on January 17, 1925, in Leominster, Massachusetts.

After graduating from high school he studied at Fitchburg State College where he published his first short story. Starting in 1946, he worked for a Worcester radio station for two years and then transferred to the Worcester Telegram and Gazette in Leominster where he stayed for seven years. In 1955 he started his career as a reporter and associate editor as well as a columnist for the Fitchburg Sentinel, which would last for over nineteen years.

During this time he was honored with several awards for his achievements as a journalist and published his first writings for adults.

After *The Chocolate War* was published, Cormier for the first time became financially independent from his job at the Sentinel and decided to concentrate on his writing career in the following years. His wife and four children supported his decision, and they inspired many of the themes and characters of his young adult novels. From 1974 to 1991, Cormier wrote nine novels and over a dozen short stories for young adult readers and thus became one of the most productive and distinguished American writers in this field.

Many of his writings were honored with prestigious literary awards. As a representative of the older generation of modern young adult novelists Cormier has made an outstanding contribution to the enhancement of American young adult fiction, and he serves as a model for many younger writers.

## Setting

In *We All Fall Down* the author creates a setting which is different to those in most of his other writings for young adults. He delineates as the locale the small suburban Burnside, a well-kept, upper-middle-class residential area at Cape Cod with "neat houses, with shutters and rose arbors, birdbaths on front lawns, and the lawns carefully manicured."

This area and especially Arbor Lane, the street on which the family of the protagonist lives, radiate an atmosphere of quietness, friendliness, and safety: "People waving hello to each other, evening barbecues in the backyards and the aroma of burning charcoal or wood smoke from chimneys. A neighborhood of station wagons and vans, family cars."

This kind of literary setting situated in contemporary times serves as a means to enhance Cormier's central theme by establishing a very obvious contradiction between setting and subject matter. It is this choice of setting which provokes interest and attention to what happens throughout the plot of the novel.



## Social Sensitivity

Cormier has often been criticized for being too blunt about the themes he depicts in his books. Some of his works have been censored in various school districts across the United States either for reasons of their subject matter or language or because they are not "optimistic." His books are nonetheless very popular among teen-age readers because they deal with questions which are relevant for their lives and help them to get a better understanding of their own problems.

In this novel the author addresses subject matters which many students might not have come across in their reading before: the major issues raised concern vandalism and violence toward people and their property. In connection with these issues he also discusses questions of attempted rape and alcoholism among teen-agers, as well as murder and kidnapping. In the case of Jane and Buddy he portrays a romance which is an example of a truthful and honest relationship between adolescents written in a nonsexist way.

It is one of the strengths of Cormier that he never uses his subject matter for the purpose of mere sensationalism but as issues to be honestly discussed with an intelligent reader. Teachers, librarians, and parents will find this novel a useful and ambitious text to initiate a fruitful discussion about questions that really concern adolescents. Young adult readers will like this book and keep turning its pages because it takes their worries and concerns seriously.

# Literary Qualities

According to his own understanding of literature, Cormier with his novels aims at the intelligent and sophisticated reader. This understanding is reflected in his literary technique which uses a third-person, non-omniscient narrator and thus provides alternating points of view. Such a technique enables the reader to really get involved in the conflict, to test his or her own attitude, and to shape his or her opinion more comprehensively.

The opening of *We AH Fall Down* is typical of Cormier's style. As in many of his other novels for young adults he intends to shock the reader and thereby get his or her attention. So the first paragraph—written in a news report style—provides the reader with the atrocious facts of the house trashing.

Throughout the text the author uses this technique several times in order to enhance the authenticity of his plot.

Cormier intentionally uses this artistic device to fulfill his own demand for truthfulness in young adult fiction.

The diction and tone of *We AH Fall Down* is similar to his former novels: The two chapters of the novel are written in a fluid language which becomes very controlled and subtle when he portrays his characters. Although there is no typical teen-ager slang, the language still conveys the atmosphere of an adolescent discourse.

Cormier delineates major strengths and weaknesses of his characters by letting them reflect their situation and value beliefs on their own in passages without dialogue. Here, he also makes use of italics to demonstrate the difference between actual behavior of his protagonists and their thoughts. In this way the reader is invited to participate in the characters' reflections.



# Themes and Characters

In this novel Cormier again focuses on subject matter that is very much part of the life of young Americans.

Despite the fact that violence, vandalism, and related phenomena are to a certain extent common experience for all Americans, Cormier in his text takes this experience out of its commonness and establishes it as an incredible and unique incident. In this way he is able to create a sharp focus on his theme.

The theme of the novel is developed out of the random act of violence committed against the home of the Jerome family and their daughter Karen by four high school seniors. The major questions discussed in the text include the motives of the trashers for such behavior as well as the consequences for the people victimized.

The title *We All Fall Down*—derived from an old nursery rhyme—highlights this theme by providing the possibility of several interpretations of the subject matter developed in the text. As in his previous novels for young adults, Cormier presents a sophisticated view of his theme by giving different connotations to one and the same image. In this case, Cormier with his title seems to aim foremost at a negative connotation symbolizing fear, pain, and death: First of all, it points to a criminal act of four high school seniors who vandalize the home of the Jeromes and threaten to rape their daughter Karen. In the course of the events, she is pushed down the steps to the cellar and is injured, causing her to go into a coma.

Second, the grandfather of Mickey Stallings falls down from his balcony when he is deliberately pushed by his grandson; and finally, Buddy Walker, one of the house trashers, falls down in the Wickburg mall when he misses the steps on the escalator. Although Buddy hurts himself this incident, it has a positive outcome. In contrast to the other characters, Cormier here uses the image to symbolize the beginning of something rather than the end. Buddy gets to know Jane Jerome which results in a special relationship. In a more general and philosophical sense, the theme of Cormier's novel deals with the moral responsibility of man towards his neighbors, and especially with the motivation of teen-agers for committing acts of brutal violence against people and their property. In his plot Cormier thoroughly develops the value system of each of the vandals upon which their behavior is based. In this way he enables the reader to get an insight into various value orientations of young adults determined by different socioeconomic as well as family situations.

With *Harry Flowers*, Cormier introduces the spoiled son of an architect who obviously is too busy to deal with his son and his problems. Harry's parents have no idea what their son is doing after school when he spends *We All Fall Down* 4227 "Funtimes" with his peers. They only seem to care about his report cards from school and try to compensate their own lack of time and interest in him by giving him money. Harry is the leader of the group of boys who vandalize the Jerome house; he is constantly looking for excitement, which includes harassing other people, driving around town in his car,





and drinking alcohol. He pretends to be Mr. Tough-Guy and animates the other boys to commit the acts he thought out.

Marry Sanders and Randy Pierce try very hard to imitate Harry and thus to impress him. They are basically obsequious and behave as if they were Harry's pets. Not so Buddy Walker. Even though he, as a part of the group, is very much under the influence of Harry he always feels that there is something wrong with their behavior.

Buddy is the only one of the four who has scruples about their Funtimes.

With these four characters Cormier depicts ordinary modern teen-agers and focuses on their inability to spend their leisure time in a meaningful way.

Besides Harry, the author especially concentrates on Buddy Walker, and the reader gets to know that Buddy's life changed dramatically when his father left home, the one person he admired most. After his father has left he starts to drink liquor and to hang out with Harry Flowers. His mother and his sister Addy are not able to make up for the loss of attention and love Buddy is longing for.

In the families of all four boys, there is a lack of communication and an unwillingness to address and solve problems of family members together, which Cormier depicts as the major cause for the wrongdoing of Harry, Marry, Randy, and Buddy. With the Jeromes, however, the author presents a totally different family situation.

Fourteen-year-old Karen, sixteen-yearold Jane, and their younger brother Artie, as well as their parents, seem to really care about each other. They are depicted as a well-functioning family whose members share common interests and values. With Jane's father, a business manager of the Wickburg telephone company, Cormier creates a character who in many ways stands as an example for the ideal parent, as someone Buddy misses much in his life. Mr. Jerome cares very much about his wife and three children and uses every minute he can afford after work to be together with them.

Jane and Buddy are the protagonists of the novel who represent the two different sides of the literary conflict.

Without knowing Buddy's involvement in the trashing of her family's house, Jane falls in love with him. Buddy for the first time experiences a deep relationship with a girl and begins to change his life. Jane means so much to him that he tries very hard to quit drinking.

Although this relationship is based on a lie from the beginning, the author is still able to portray it in an honest and convincing way. Through it, Buddy's characterization is developed with compassion, creating hope that their romance will work out in the end.

However, Cormier chooses to end this relationship in an unexpected way, which is nonetheless consistent with his characterization of Jane. Both the characters of Buddy and Jane are excellent examples of how the author transforms his theme into vivid literary images that are convincingly woven into the plot and conflict of the text.



In order to expand the scope of his theme Cormier introduces the character of the Avenger, who serves as a second perspective on the plot and conflict.

Only at the end does the reader learn that the Avenger is not an eleven-yearold boy but the mentally disturbed, forty-one-year-old Michael Stallings.

He observed what happened in the Jerome home and set out to avenge that act. The reader does not get to know what kind of plan the Avenger follows but can assume that it will be brutal and violent as in the cases of his grandfather and Vaughn Masterson, who were killed by him. The character of the Avenger adds a mysterious element to the novel and makes it a more sophisticated text.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What happens in the house of the Jeromes from 9:02 p.m. to 9:51 p.m. on April 1? How do the intruders get into the house? How do they treat Karen Jerome?
2. Characterize the four teen-age boys who vandalized the home of the Jerome family. What was their motivation for committing this criminal act?
3. Compare the characters of Harry Flowers and Buddy Walker. How are their similarities and differences important?
4. What kind of activities do the four teen-age boys pursue in their leisure time?
5. Why does Buddy have a problem with alcohol? Characterize his family situation and describe his relationship to his father.
6. What kind of person is Jane Jerome? Does she act like a regular teen-ager her age?
7. Describe the parents of Jane and characterize the atmosphere in the Jerome family.
8. Compare their family situation with those of Harry and Buddy.
9. How does Jane get to know Buddy Walker? Why do they feel attracted to each other?
10. Discuss the reasons which lead to an end of their relationship.
11. Who is the "Avenger?" Why does he kill Vaughn Masterson and his grandfather?
12. Why does the "Avenger" kidnap Jane and how does she succeed in getting away unharmed?
13. How do you interpret the title of the novel? What does it stand for?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Buddy Walker "falls down": Discuss the different sides of Buddy's character in relation to his participation in the house trashing.
2. Discuss the family relationship of the Jeromes with regard to your ideas of an ideal family.
3. Compare Jane's relation to Karen and Artie with Buddy's relation to Addie.
4. Discuss Jane and Buddy's relationship in terms of what it means to both of them and explain whether you feel that Jane is too hard on Buddy in the end.
5. Discuss your favorite character from Cormier's novel and explain why he or she sets an example for you.
6. Discuss the title of the novel with regard to its meaning to the protagonists as well as to yourself.



## For Further Reference

Campbell, Patricia J. *Presenting Robert Cormier*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989. The only book on one of the leading authors of young adult literature. It includes a critical evaluation of Cormier's life and literary credo and discusses his young adult novels from *The Chocolate War* to *Fade* as well as his early novels and short stories. The appendix provides a complete bibliography of his works both literary and critical and also gives a listing of reviews of his novels.

Cormier, Robert. "Forever Pedaling on the Road to Realism." In *Celebrating Children's Books: Essays on Children's Literature in Honor of Zena Sutherland*.

Edited by Betsy Hearne and Marilyn Kaye. New York: American Library Association, 1981. Responding to letters from his readers and to reviews of his first young adult novels Cormier outlines his literary credo with special regard to terms such as "realism" and "realistic novel."

Estes, Sally. "Cormier, Robert. *We All Fall Down*." *Booklist* 15 (September 1991): 137. A review of Cormier's *We All Fall Down* emphasizing the subject matter and quality of characterization.

Gallo, Donald. "Who Are The Most Important YA Authors?" *ALAN Review* (Spring 1989): 18-19. Presents the results of a survey among specialists in the field regarding the most important American, Canadian, and British authors. The final list of the top one hundred names (including Cormier's) was selected according to criteria such as importance in the genre and popularity with readers as well as teachers.

Isensee, Reinhard. "Literary Models in Young Adult Literature: Robert Cormier." *Studien Gesellschaftswissenschaften* 2,13 (1990): 98-103. Discusses the relationship of theme and narrative structure in five of Cormier's young adult novels and evaluates his contribution to the aesthetic enhancement of the genre. The text is in English.

Lenz, Millicent. "A Romantic Ironist's Vision of Evil: Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*." *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Conference of the Children's Literature Association, University of Minnesota, March 1981*. Assuming Cormier has a romantic approach to the creative process, the paper examines the ironic techniques and the way the author depicts the evil of betrayal of trust in *After the First Death* (1979). Lenz concludes that through Cormier's way of artistic representation the reader may rediscover the vision of the good.

Monseau, Virginia R. "Cormier's Heroines." *ALAN Review* (Fall 1991): 4043. In discussing the role of female characters in the male-dominated plots of Cormier's *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (1983) and *After the First Death* (1979), Monseau observes that Cormier's heroines come across as strong characters in determining the direction of the plots although they do not seem to be aware of their strengths. Ideas for teaching

and suggestions for general activities for dealing with both novels in the classroom conclude the article.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*. New York and London: Longman, 1992. Concentrating on the question of literary pleasure of children's literature, the book investigates the ways in which this literature is different from other kinds. Aimed at students and teachers, the book discusses four major aspects: understandings of children's literature based on contemporary reading practices; developmental psychology, media and perception theories and the history of childhood; techniques for teaching children literary appreciation; the impact of different literary techniques (historical and cultural analysis, psychoanalytical readings, archetypal structural and poststructural approaches) upon the way of reading literary texts; the relationship of literature to other social and cultural forces in society. The book is a valuable contribution to the debate on children's literature in the 1990s.

## Related Titles

In most of Cormier's young adult novels violence is the central theme.

Whereas the author in his earlier novels is particularly concerned with violent acts such as physical and psychological force created and exercised by adults over adolescents, he depicts a different kind of violence in his last novel *We All Fall Down*. However, the conflict in this novel arises out of a brutal act of vandalism committed by adolescents themselves.



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