Robert Cormier and the Postmodernist Possibilities of Young Adult Fiction

by Patricia Head

"My God, I know it's complex and ambiguous and everything, but why not try to have young people reach?" — Fabio Cohen, publisher of I Am the Cheese, quoted in Sutton 30

This study of Robert Cormier deals with a positive view of children's literature: its possibilities not its impossibilities. For Jacqueline Rose, the impossibility of children's literature stems from those adult readers and writers who desire a literature that returns us to "something innocent and precious which we have destroyed" and who, consequently, impose their wishes upon the literature they produce for children (45). Cormier's works challenge this imposition by denying his readership a romantic view of society and by subverting a unitary view of childhood through the content and form of his work. Fiction such as Cormier writes interrogates the boundaries of children's literature as a genre, and the presence of his adolescent audience brings a further challenge to any notion of a unitary childhood that is the "Other" of a unitary adulthood.

Peter Hunt's opening to "The Text and the Reader" provides a useful summary of the tradition of viewing children's texts as monological—interpretable on only one level. Hunt describes First Term at Trebizon as such a text: "It is very familiar, it is predictable; because it involves little deduction, it can be read easily...it is not so much implying a readership as prescribing the level of reading." (82). He goes on to say that the problem with texts that "challenge these assumptions" is that they "commonly find themselves in the no-person's land between writings for adults (so-called) and writings for children (so-called)" (84). This no-person's land often goes under the heading "Young Adult" or "adolescent" fiction. Adolescent literature often embraces cultural references that do not make for a safe read: violence, suicide, and sexuality, not conventional topics in the genre of children's literature. Moreover, the security of the text is often destabilized further by the narrative form, which tends to foreground the instability of the narrative through fragmented or cyclical narrative structures and multiple narrators. Nevertheless, it is important to align adolescent fiction with the genre of children's literature, rather than to discuss it on a purely literary and theoretical level as popular fiction, because it operates as a "supragenre" that at once moves beyond the generic expectations of much children's literature and is dependent upon it. If the term "children's literature" refers to a genre housing non-peer texts (that is, texts with an adult as implied author and a child as implied reader), Cormier, and other writers of adolescent literature, operate within this genre because even while they work on the cutting edge of children's literature, they still maintain a non-peer relationship with their readers.

Rose describes books written for the child-within-the-adult; what I am describing are books written for the adult-within-the-child. The latter type of writing challenges the construction of childhood that is the concern of Rose's book. Her depiction of the impossibility of children's fiction comes from a definition in which "children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) but where neither of them enters the space in between" (2). The postmodernist features of Cormier's writing bring new possibilities to reader and critic, because the relationship between author and reader is foregrounded, and the implied adult author and the implied child reader can enter the space in between.

The name "Cormier" conjures up descriptions of violent acts, shifting narratives, institutional power, and lonely protagonists. Cormier's work interests me in two contexts. First, his writing of adolescent fiction extends the possibilities for fiction within the genre of children's literature. The challenging aspects of his stories are not just his coverage of taboo subject areas but also what may be called the postmodernist features of his writing: his uses of metafiction and multiple points of view, his destabilization of the reader, and his questioning of the boundaries between fiction and reality. Second, any extension to the genre of children's literature through adolescent literature extends the critical schools associated with that genre.

Cormier claims that he did not begin writing with a specific audience in mind and did not know that such a thing as a young adult audience existed until he discovered it through the success of The Chocolate War (1975). In an interview with Roger Sutton, Cormier admits that he was afraid his young adult following would reject the complexity of his second novel, I Am the Cheese (1977). From the start, he has received a mixed critical response. He is often viewed as a "conspicuous oddity in his chosen field," as Anne Scott MacLeod puts it, because he has "departed from standard models and broken some of the most fundamental taboos" of adolescent fiction (74). Cormier has been accused of brutalizing the hopefulness of children's fiction (Inglis 280-81; Lukens 42; Townsend 340; Young 195) and at the same time been praised for his challenging use of form and his "new realism" (DeLuca 143-44; Nodelman 103; Crouch 216). Cormier accepts the uncompromising stance that has been articulated by these critics, stating that his books "are an antidote to the TV view of life...phony realism. As long as what I write is true and believable, why should I have to create happy endings?" (qtd. in Schwartz 115).
Cormier's early work would not have disturbed so many critics if those critics had not been working within a tradition of viewing children's literature as a sort of cultural touchstone that could, or should, comfort its readers or reinforce certain cultural codes. Such descriptive rather than analytic discussions of the genre of children's literature have played a role in mythologizing the genre and reinforcing notions of what children's literature should be like. For example, Sheila Egoff's book *Thursday's Child: Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature* provides a perceptive commentary on the relationship between literature and culture in children's literature (each period, Egoff notes, has coded into its children's literature what may be described as a public or consensual view of the young and therefore their books [3]), but subsequently fails to recognize the critical/cultural relationships present in specific texts. In her chapter on "Realistic Fiction," Egoff is critical of formal experimentation when it undermines content—but her criticism is often driven by an uneasiness with the content itself. In her discussion of *The Chocolate War*, Egoff falls back on a mythical rather than a theoretical articulation of the text when she writes that "the Devil is in control rather than God" (44). Accepting Cormier means accepting two premises: that it is possible to present a disturbing view of society's so-called secure institutions in a piece of children's fiction, and that the field of children's literature is one such institution.

On a superficial level Cormier's work is famous because it alerts readers to the presence of deception in the currently accepted standards of social morality: family, school, and government. But to restrict analysis of Cormier to the content and character of his stories would mean that his fiction has meaning only in a narrow, contemporary context. If a reader finishes a Cormier novel aware of the deceptive nature of fiction itself, however, this recognition would confirm the author's postmodernist stance. Cormier's work subverts the assumption that literature should present a straightforward, schematic view of the world. The contemporary world can only appear unified if discordant voices, those not representing the dominant ideological view, are marginalized. The foregrounding of the untrustworthy adult voice—for example, Brother Leon in *The Chocolate War*, Adam's interviewer "T" in *I Am the Cheese*, Artkin and the General in *After the First Death* (1979)—reinforces the manipulative power of fiction and implicitly inculcates the habit of asking the reader to question any authoritative narrative voice. In these early novels, Cormier also makes use of disrupted narratives to alert readers to the fictionality of their reading experience, and it is sometimes difficult to unravel the relationship between what is being narrated and who is in control of the narration. The confusion of viewpoint is used to greatest effect in *I Am the Cheese* and *After the First Death*, where Cormier presents a contemporary world that can no longer be conveyed through more ordered narratives. In the sense that Cormier's early novels try to articulate a world that comprises a multiplicity of interpretations, they can be said to be postmodern.

This same confusion about what is "real" occurs elsewhere in Cormier's oeuvre. In *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (1983), Billy the Kidney, a terminally ill hospital patient, has his own fiction of himself as a joy-riding and car thief, and he constructs other fictions as he tries to escape the confines of his disease and his wheelchair. In this same novel the protagonist, Barney, finds a fake car, which he later names "The Bumblebee." Like fiction, the model car apes reality but is not real; it only operates when Barney's imagination turns it into a real car. Thus, like fiction, it is only credible because someone's imagination transforms it into "reality." The questioning of reality and fiction continues with Barney's dilemma about his own sense of self: "Sitting here in this forlorn room, he felt almost as if he didn't exist. But at least he could cling to his identity, his name, and do something about it. 'I am Barney Snow,' he said aloud, enunciating carefully. His voice echoed in the air. There was no answering voice to say: Yes, you are Barney Snow" (67). This questioning of identity is a common theme in Cormier's narratives. As the identities of the characters are foregrounded, so the reader is encouraged to rethink the possibility (or the impossibility) that any unitary or stable sense of self can exist.

Metafiction is fiction about fiction, stories that reflect on the nature of storytelling and, in so doing, draw attention to their fictionality. In *Postmodernist Culture*, Steven Connor defines metafiction as a "link between text and world." This link is forged not by masking a text's fictionality or by "an effacement of the text in the interests of a return to the real, but by an intensification of the textuality such that it becomes coextensive with the real" (127). Metafictional discourse manifests itself in several ways in Cormier's writing. First, his characters often construct stories about themselves within the novel as a whole, for example Adam's fictional journey within the mental institution in *I Am the Cheese*, or Ben's therapeutic writing of his experiences in *After the First Death*.

*Fade* (1988) is arguably the most metafictional of Cormier's novels to date. Metafictionality is made explicit here, as "fiction" is the central subject of this novel, which is structured so as to collapse the boundary between fiction and reality. The first 120 pages of *Fade* are about a young boy, Paul, who learns he has the power to become invisible—a familiar fantasy topos. But after this opening narrative, the Susan section of the novel begins, and the fictionality of the preceding story is thrown into question. Although the three fictional readers of Paul's story, Susan, her grandfather, and a literary agent, Meredith, agree that Paul's story must be a fantasy, by the end of the novel, Cormier has so successfully blended a fantasy-reality, a conventional fictional-reality, and intertextual references to his career as a writer and his fictional community of Monument and Frenchtown that the reader may be forgiven for beginning to believe that Robert Cormier, the real author, has
Paul's power to "fade." Cormier alerts his readers to the unreliability of a notion of reality by foregrounding the unreliability of his fictional realities. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale states that it is a postmodernist tendency to write "fictions about the order of things, discourses which reflect upon the worlds of discourse" (164). McHale goes on to say that postmodernism is about "unmasking the constructed nature of reality" (164). This exposure is exactly what happens in *Fade*.

The initial narrative sequence of *Fade* is set in 1938. In 1967 its writer, Paul, dies, and his manuscript is passed to an attorney. The manuscript is kept, as per Paul's instructions, until 1988 when it is passed to Meredith Martin, Paul's literary agent. The manuscript is found by Susan, a distant relative of Paul's, in Meredith's apartment. Together they read the manuscript and analyze it, debating its validity as fact or fiction. The character Susan exists in the contemporary world, 1988. The temporal sequence crosses three generations of faders; in 1938, Paul, then 13, learns from his uncle that he is a fader; in 1967 Paul finds Ozzie, his lost nephew who is the fader of the next generation; and in 1988 Paul's manuscript is made public to Meredith and Susan, when the next fader, if there is one, is due to reach maturity. *Fade* is self-conscious in asserting itself as fact not fiction, in an attempt to make readers aware of the act of fiction in which they are participating.

Apart from the timescale, *Fade* self-consciously reinforces its own validity by returning to Frenchtown, the neighborhood in Monument, Massachusetts, that Cormier has established in his other books. Paul's father works in the comb factory, and his family is part of the Frenchtown community. This is the world of Cormier's short stories and the setting for *The Chocolate War, I Am the Cheese*, and *After the First Death.* Reading the embedded manuscript in *Fade*, Susan and Meredith reflect on Paul's use of his community in his writings: "Some critics accuse him [Paul] of being an autobiographical novelist, but he really wasn't. I mean, he employed his familiar surroundings, the Franco-American scene, but his plots were fiction" (128-29). Although this comment is about the fictional author Paul, it reflects on the real world of Cormier's writing. Cormier admits that Monument is "a thinly disguised Leominster...I've changed the name and everything and I've moved the streets around but it's the same. Yes I'm lucky that I can take a ride down to Frenchtown anytime and there it is" (qtd. in Sutton 31). This self-conscious insertion of autobiographical elements asks the reader to question the boundaries between fact and fiction.

In its multiple narratives and fictional readers, *Fade* also reflects on writing and reading as activities. Through the fictional writers we, as readers, can recognize often unreliable narrative perspectives, and through the fictional readers we can see into the process by which meaning is constructed by a reader and naturalized by that reader's previous experiences and expectations of reading. Paul writes from his own experience. This fact is foregrounded by his comments upon his initial efforts at writing: "I submitted the story I had written about the boy and his father and the shop to *The Statue*, leaving it on Miss Walker's desk. I had titled the story 'Bruises in Paradise,' pleased by the contrast of those two nouns linked uneasily by the plain preposition" (90). This story, "Bruises in Paradise," resurfaces in the Susan narrative sequence as Paul's first successful novel. Paul reflects on how his own past seems to be a fiction: "With my Uncle Adelard gone, the events at Silas B. [Paul's school] consumed me completely and the fade became part of the past summer and its witchery, along with street games and garden raids and the battle of Moccasin Pond" (90). Cormier's own assertion in *Eight Plus One* (1980) that the "stuff of actuality is transformed into the stuff of fiction" cannot be ignored (13). The dynamic of the "real author" is present here.

McHale's analysis of postmodern fiction has led him to conclude that it was a modernist tendency to make the author invisible: "The modernists sought to remove the traces of their presence from the surface of their writing, and to this end exploited or developed various forms of ostensibly 'narratorless' texts" (199). This process seems to be what happens in *The Chocolate War* and *After the First Death* when the shifting first person narratives displace a dominant, potentially *authorized*, narrator. Although *Fade* is far from the experimentalism of more recognizable postmodern fictions that McHale describes, such as those by Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Italo Calvino, Cormier has here performed the postmodernist exercise that McHale identifies: he has "brought the author back to the surface...free...to break in upon the fictional world" (199). By advertising himself as author within the text, Cormier reminds readers that even an apparently real author is a constructed feature of fiction.

The metanarrative of *Fade* has metatheoretical implications, not just in the presence of the multiple critiques of Paul's manuscript (from Meredith, Susan, Jules, and the actual reader) but also in terms of the metanarrative's foregrounding of the theoretical continuum of *Real Author/Implied Author/Narrator/Narratee/Implied Reader/Real Reader*. The transfer between Paul's roles as Narrator and Real Author interrogates authorial intentionality and foregrounds the author as a controlling force. This issue of narrative power and the role of the author is particularly important in adolescent literature, for in this genre, we are dealing with non-peer texts and, therefore, a non-peer author/reader relationship is the norm. Hunt highlights the relationship between adult author and child reader when he states that in "peer-texts the adult reader (real or otherwise), can adjust to the degree of control which the author appears to be exercising" (84). In children's, and I might add in adolescent, literature, however, "the audience is created by the writer much more directly than with a peer-text, in the sense that the text does more than display its codes, grammar, and contracts; it suggests what the reader
must be or become to optimize the reading of the text” (84). By exposing the roles of author and reader in *Fade*, Cormier allows the reader to interrogate the production of a fiction from both ends of the continuum, from the perspective of producer and from that of receiver. By making this transferral of textual responsibility explicit, Cormier may be developing a more mature and knowledgeable readership. The reader is not meant to be a passive receiver but an active and involved critic. If the supragenre of adolescent literature makes the adult-within-the-child a possibility, then postmodern adolescent novels such as *Fade* encourage the development of the critic-within-the-reader.

As Susan and Meredith become readers of Paul’s story, they undermine its validity for the real reader, and, perhaps, challenge the construction of the implied reader. The initial Paul sequence is erased as part of the novel, instead becoming a manuscript that exists only within the frame of the novel as a whole. Ironically, the discourse of the Susan sequence positions itself within the conventions of young adult narratives by employing the first-person voice, by relying on phrases such as “Let me introduce myself,” and by using slang and hesitant digressions:

Shit.

This isn’t the way I want to begin. What I want to do is keep things plain and simple and direct. Professor Waronski in Creative Writing 209 says that the best way is to plunge in, make a beginning, any beginning at all, as long as you start. Most of all, he said, be yourself. (123)

Because Cormier does not frame the Paul story as a story within a story from the beginning of the novel, the reader has, by this stage, become comfortable in Paul’s world. The effect of suddenly being catapulted into an apparently conventional YA novel is that “the reader clings to the ‘lost’ erased sequence as he or she might not to one less highly charged” (McHale 57). Further the change in narrative voice from Paul to Susan allows the reader to evaluate the nature of the fictional act and the implications of relying on a single narrative point of view. The abrupt shift from Paul’s narrative to Susan’s section throws into relief the potential for any reader to settle into an unquestioning relationship with a prescribed narrator.

Thus far, I have established two discourse types in *Fade*: the magic realism of Paul’s story and the YA new realism of Susan’s story. Within the story, Susan and Meredith continue to evaluate the truth of Paul’s manuscript, so they call upon Jules Roget, Paul’s cousin and Susan’s grandfather, hoping that he will be a reliable arbiter: “He’s a detective. An investigator. His job is finding facts, the truth. So, I went to Monument, two weeks ago. Took the manuscript with me. Asked him to read it, to give me an opinion” (131). Jules’s discourse is that of a third discourse type, the formal police report, and through it Jules mirrors all the episodes that have been described in the preceding narrative. Apart from Jules’s personal knowledge of Paul’s family and his alternative perspective on the events described by Paul’s manuscripts, his overwhelming justification for not believing in the power to fade is the presence of such a power in other fictions:

The fade—as Paul called it—is impossible to accept as fact. . . . Paul always dealt with realism in his novels and never showed any tendency towards science fiction or fantasy. However, he was addicted to the movies like so many of us who were members of the double-feature generation of the thirties and forties. There was a film that was impossible to forget, which had a definite impact on viewers, both young and old, of that era. The film—*The Invisible Man*, starring Claude Rains. It’s possible, I believe, that Paul received the idea for the fade from the movie and waited several years before using the idea. The fade, all by itself, proves that the narrative is fiction. (132)

I have quoted at length in order to exemplify the role of the reader that is being exposed here. In his roles as both narrator and narratee, Jules shows how fictions and interpretations are constructed. The assumption about the fictionality or unreality of the fade comes from Jules’s own reading experiences. Jules is what Roland Barthes terms the “I that approaches the text” (10), and he is influenced by the film-texts that he uses to make sense of the fictionality of the fade. His role in constructing an acceptable interpretation of the manuscript is undermined by his own exposure of how he believes fictions are created.

If Jules can be interpreted as an individual reader, he is also an unreliable narrator. Earlier in Susan’s story, she has suggested that she has learned something from her grandfather, Jules: “something my grandfather had told me during one of my visits to Monument” (130). Jules had admitted to an episode in a library as a child when Paul seemed to have disappeared. After reading her grandfather’s critique of Paul’s manuscript, she wonders why her grandfather hasn’t mentioned this in his report to Meredith: “had he refused to acknowledge Paul’s disappearance because it would lead him to enormous conclusions that he could not accept?” (242) The potential unreliability of narrative is also part of Paul’s story. Paul is fascinated by the idea of his Uncle Adelard, who is a traveller:

“He’s back,” my father announced as he entered the kitchen in a cloud of celluloid and banged his lunch pail on the table. I leapt from the chair where I had been reading the latest issue of *Wings* magazine, eager for details. “When did she arrive?” my mother asked. She?
I realized that my ears had fooled me into hearing what I wanted to hear. (7-8)
The readers in the book—Meredith, Susan, Jules—all want to hear something that will give them more comfort than accepting the fade as fact. The fictional readers, in other words, are afraid of the potential reality of the apparently fantastic, a fear that forces the reader outside the novel to reexamine the possibility of achieving escape (“fading”) through literature. Thus the self-reflexive Susan sequences undermine the escapist function of fantasy or science fiction, the genres that have most in common with the Paul and Ozzie sequences. Cormier’s juxtaposition of two types of fiction draws attention to the possibility of fiction in general, as when Susan voices the cyclical impact of *Fade*: “I have a theory,” I said, not certain whether I *did* have a theory at all. ‘Maybe Paul had to create a real world so that the reader would be forced to believe the fantasy. But that doesn’t mean the fantasy was real’” (145). Cormier layers fictional reality upon fictional reality, constructing a narrative world that relies upon increasingly distant and disappearing foundations. As the character Susan has suggested above, the truth or lack of it is not the real issue; what is significant is that the reader questions the construction of fiction. Cormier educates his readers, not by presenting a schematic view of their world, but by revealing its constructed nature.

Much of my preceding analysis has been devoted to the liberating qualities of Cormier’s narrative forms, for it seems clear to me that narrative and critical advances are extending the possibilities of children’s literature. Although much of the preceding analysis has been devoted to *Fade*, the principles apply in one way or another to most of Cormier’s novels. I am critical of Rose’s insistence on the impossibilities of children’s literature, but it must be said that her book does not deal with the new realist practitioners of children’s literature, as she admits in her conclusion (140). Her work, however, is of direct relevance to my study, as she successfully articulates the limitations of the genre and the difficulties in defining and discussing children’s literature. Rose views the appropriation of children’s literature as a repository for an innocent, closed world as a form of colonialism: “childhood is seen as the place where an older form of culture is preserved” (50). The desire for children’s literature to be a safe haven from the cultural decay that surrounds us is reflected by some of the criticism that she notes:

The development of children’s fiction has followed that of the novel . . . but what seems to have happened in recent discussions of children’s books is that, in response to the breakdown of the realist aesthetic in the modern adult novel, writers have been arguing with increasing vehemence for its preservation in writing intended for the child. (60)

Rose claims that the commentaries of John Rowe Townsend, Marcus Crouch, and Geoffrey Treske, for example, situate “children’s fiction [as the chief battleground in the attempt to preserve our culture from imminent decay” (61).

Cormier is exactly the kind of author who disturbs a secure and conventional tradition of children’s literature, and because of this challenge his work is marginalized, consciously or not, into a border country of children’s literature called adolescent fiction. In refusing to be the kind of adult author that some critics of children’s literature expect, Cormier also denies the construction of a conventional child (or adolescent) reader. Many negative critical readings of Cormier stem from an anxiety that the author as adult is absent from his more brutal and disturbing books. But in fact what Cormier does is to provide levels of narration that remove many of the constraints of children’s literature, allowing the implied author to be mediated through the literariness of the disturbing narratives.

Earlier in this article, I mention critics who are disturbed by the content of Cormier’s work. Any critical approach that privileges a discussion of the content of a text and does not deal adequately with the form of narration only tells half the story. What is positive and valuable about Cormier’s adolescent fiction is that unlike more closed children’s literature, the adult voice is not implied through reductive narrative forms (for example, with a plot of resolution) but through the polyphony of the text. What would seem to be the death of the author and the abandonment of the reader to a sometimes brutal fictional world is actually what liberates the adult author/child reader dynamic, allowing author, reader, and genre to mature into adolescence.

NOTES

1 Adolescent literature has a dialogic relationship with its parent genre, children’s literature. It is true that adolescent literature can be analyzed in isolation without any reference to the wider issues of children’s literature studies. Close textual analysis of adolescent literature encourages the development of an effective critical language. If adolescent literature is studied with no reference to its relationship to the genre of children’s literature, then the critic misses the opportunity to reappraise the hegemonic constructions of childhood and adulthood.

2 Since the publication of *Fade*, Cormier has written other books set in this context—for example, *Darce* (1990) and *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* (1992).

WORKS CITED


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