



About the Author
ROBERT CORMIER
1925-2000

Robert Cormier (pronounced kor-MEER) lived all his life in Leominster, Massachusetts, a small town in the north-central part of the state, where he grew up as part of a close, warm community of French Canadian immigrants. His wife, Connie, also from Leominster, still lives in the house where they raised their three daughters and one son—all adults now. They never saw a reason to leave. “There are lots of untold stories right here on Main Street,” Cormier once said. A newspaper reporter and columnist for 30 years, Cormier was often inspired by news stories. What makes his works unique is his ability to make evil behaviour understandable, though, of course, still evil. “I’m very much interested in intimidation,” he told an interviewer from *School Library Journal*. “And the way people manipulate other people. And the obvious abuse of authority.” All of these themes are evident in his young adult classic and best-known book, *The Chocolate War*. A 15-year-old fan of his said, “You always write from inside the person.” Cormier travelled the world, from Australia (where he felt particularly thrilled by putting his hand in the Indian Ocean) and New Zealand to most of the countries in Europe, speaking at schools, colleges, and universities and to teacher and librarian associations. He visited nearly every state in the nation. While Cormier loved to travel, he said many times that he also loved returning to his home in Leominster. Cormier was a practising Catholic and attended parochial school, where in seventh grade, one of his teachers discovered his ability to write. But he said he had always wanted to be a writer: “I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t trying to get something down on paper.”

Robert Cormier’s first novel, *Now and at the Hour*, was published in 1960. Inspired by his father’s death, the novel drew critical acclaim. In 1974, Cormier published *The Chocolate War*, the novel that is still a bestseller a quarter century after its publication. *I Am the Cheese*

followed in 1977 and *After the First Death* in 1979. These three books established Cormier as a master of the young adult novel. Robert Cormier’s other novels include *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*, 1983; *Beyond the Chocolate War*, 1985; *Fade*, 1988; *Other Bells for Us to Ring*, 1990; *We All Fall Down*, 1991; *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*, 1992; *In the Middle of the Night*, 1995; *Tenderness*, 1997; *Heroes*, 1998; and *Frenchtown Summer*, 1999. All his novels have won critical praise and honours.

Cormier’s novels have frequently come under attack by censorship groups because they are uncompromising in their depictions of the problems young people face each day in a turbulent world. Teachers and librarians have been quick to point out that his novels are eminently teachable, valuable, and moral. His novels are taught in hundreds of schools and in adolescent literature courses in colleges and universities. Though many of his books are described as written for young adults, in fact people of all ages read and enjoy Cormier’s work. His themes of the ordinariness of evil and what happens when good people stand by and do nothing are treated seriously, and he never provides the easy comfort of a happy ending. Cormier’s gripping stories explore some of the darker corners of the human psyche, but always with a moral focus and a probing intelligence that compel readers to examine their own feelings and ethical beliefs.

It wasn’t until he was in his late 40s that he produced his first novel for teenagers. Thereafter, in his 13 books, Leominster became fictionalised as Monument and French Hill as Frenchtown, the latter most memorably in Cormier’s last book, *Frenchtown Summer*, an elegiac account of a paperboy’s journey to self-awareness as he walks the streets of his home town 50 years ago. As in all of Cormier’s books there was a darkness lurking beneath the sunlit surface.

One of Cormier’s greatest strengths as a writer, besides a rhythmic flow and brilliant use of simile and metaphor, was his ability to take ordinary American suburban life and show it from the perspective of the child who sees all the things that the adults have missed or prefer to ignore.

Cormier's adults are often rather complacent, blissfully unaware of their offspring's' angst or the dangers they are facing.

The loneliness and sense of being an outsider that Cormier had experienced as a bookish child, who was picked upon in the street, became translated into a series of main characters who were all loners. "I have always had a sense that we are all pretty much alone in life, particularly in adolescence," he said.

Despite this, Cormier, a genial man with a birdlike inquisitiveness, had a long and happy marriage to his wife Connie and raised four children. It was the experiences of one of his teenage sons, who refused as a matter of principle to take part in his school's annual fund-raising sale that was to inspire *The Chocolate War*.

When Cormier sent the novel to his agent he was surprised to be informed that he had written a book for teenagers. It was an approach that was to stand him in good stead. "I simply write with an intelligent reader in mind. I don't think about how old they are."

The result was a rare writer who appeared to have a direct line to the hearts and minds of his young audience and made sure that they also had one to him.

- Robert Edmund Cormier, author, born January 17 1925; died November 2 2000.

Reviews of the novel *Heroes*

Francis Cassavant, now 18 and the recipient of the respected Silver Star for heroism, returns to the Frenchtown section of Monument following World War II intent on murdering his former mentor and fellow Silver Star winner, Larry LaSalle. With a face ravaged by shrapnel from the grenade he fell on--ostensibly to save his comrades, but in reality to take his own life--Francis walks the streets of his old hometown. Wearing a silk scarf to mask his disfigurement, he remembers his childhood in the pre-war days and searches for his nemesis, whom he feels sure will also return. Memories of his innocent years at St. Jude's Parochial School are sardonically juxtaposed with the present horror of his desolate existence. Expert at nothing as a boy, Francis was empowered by the encouragement of Larry, the acrobat, dancer, teacher, and coach at the town's recreation centre. Francis's dreams and youth were shattered when the man, home on leave, raped Francis's girlfriend, and he failed to intervene. Disillusioned, the boy forged his birth certificate, enlisted to die an honourable death, and ended up living a nightmare. Cormier takes the notion of heroism and deconstructs it. The hero is epitomized by Francis: a white scarf, no more than a veneer, hiding an appalling reality of hypocrisy and betrayal. The thread of Catholicism is woven throughout the narrative. Characters are not absolutes, but capable of great and evil acts. This lean, compelling read may not rank among the most popular of Cormier's works, but it is a powerful and thought-provoking study.

The irony of the title will haunt readers of this novel as they delve into the mind of a WWII veteran whose face has been blown off by a grenade. After winning a Silver Star for bravery, 18-year-old Francis Cassavant could return home a hero, but he keeps his identity secret in anticipation of murdering a personal enemy and wanders the streets of his hometown as a lone, grotesque figure (*People glance at me in surprise and look away quickly or cross the street when they see me coming*). The man Francis seeks is Larry LaSalle, who was once his mentor and who has

also earned a Silver Star. Cormier offers two levels of suspense in this thriller. His audience will tensely await the inevitable confrontation between the two men while trying to extract Francis's motive for murder from flashbacks revolving around his high school sweetheart and the Wreck (Recreation) Centre, where they spent many happy hours under the direction of LaSalle.

Eighteen-year-old Francis Joseph Cassavant returns to Frenchtown, hideously wounded after falling on a grenade in World War II. His face has been destroyed and he awaits reconstructive surgery that may not be successful. Cormier's dark, mysterious style projects a sense of impending doom, and the reader soon learns that Francis has returned in order to carry out a mission involving the talented, handsome founder of Frenchtown's recreation programme, Larry LaSalle, and Francis's young girlfriend, Nicole Renard. LaSalle, already considered a hero for his dedication to the town's youth, has earned a Silver Star for bravery at Guadalcanal. Through flashbacks, Cormier reveals that it was Larry LaSalle who helped Francis overcome his shyness and gave him the self-confidence to win the love of the beautiful Nicole. However, Larry, the shining hero, is a tragically flawed human being. After a party celebrating his heroic return from the war, Larry rapes Nicole, and Francis, hiding nearby, is too frightened to intervene. Overwhelmed by guilt and shame, Francis fakes his birth certificate, enlists in the Army, and finally attempts suicide by falling on a grenade. This desperate act saves the lives of his company and earns Francis a Silver Star. Cormier explores the meaning of heroism and the hidden motivations for what may appear to be heroic acts. Teens will understand Francis's adulation of Larry, who helped Francis realise his potential, and then his bitter feelings of betrayal when Francis learns the truth about his idol. The theme of guilt and revenge is also powerful and readers will identify with Francis's final desperate attempt to assuage his guilt by killing Larry LaSalle. But when the two heroes finally come face to face with each other after years of war, death, and despair, the answer is not so simple.

Interviews with Robert Cormier

Q: When I wrote *Presenting Robert Cormier*, I summed up the central question in your novels as "How can we confront the utterly implacable and still remain human?" But this doesn't apply so neatly to your work since *Fade*. I see several other motifs or themes becoming even more important. Hidden and concealed identity, for instance ... which showed up very early in your work: ...now in *Heroes* you've given us Francis, whose identity is completely concealed because his face has been destroyed. Why is this theme so attractive to you?

Cormier: I don't sit down and say, "I think I'll write a series of books about identity"--I'm just drawn to that idea. I really believe that most people hide who they really are, and I think we all have hidden lives.

Q: Another theme you seem to be exploring a lot lately is guilt and forgiveness.

Cormier: You know, I think our lives are driven by guilt. With me it all goes back to the nuns--making us feel so darn guilty about everything.

Q: But your characters have serious reasons for feeling guilty. For example, in *Heroes*, Francis prays in church for Larry but doesn't relinquish his sinful intention to kill him. He's asking God to forgive the man, but he's not willing to forgive him himself.

Cormier: That's a terrific point. God is always there to forgive you, but it's harder forgiving yourself. You go to confession, get absolution, get it wiped away, your soul is clean, and yet you can still be bothered. They're almost separate things. One is psychological, the other is religious.

Q: Another theme related to this is the sins of omission--the good not done.

Cormier: Yes, that haunts me even more than the other.

Q: I think this theme emerges earlier in your work, and it seems you're saying the bad things that happen in your books happen because of the collective passivity of the people who could stop it. Some people characterize your work as projecting a world without hope, and I think that's a misunderstanding. You're not saying that because a particular situation ends hopelessly, life is hopeless.

Cormier: No, I've never said that; I just try to be truthful to the situation I'm writing about. Life does have unhappy endings. These people are trying to deny the reality of life. The world that kids are living in today--my God! I'm sustained by the letters I get from kids. They say, "You tell it like it is."

Q: Roberto Rossellini said, "To perceive evil where it exists is, in my opinion, a form of optimism."

Cormier: Oh, yes! It's people who deny evil that there's no hope for. Once you know about the existence of evil, then you can start to fight it. Evil doesn't come out of a cave at night--it wears the bland face of the man who belongs to the Rotary Club, or the grocer. In *Heroes*, Larry appeals to Francis, saying, "Does that one evil thing I do take away all the good things?"

Q: Another question you've raised with this book is "What is a hero?"

Cormier: I wanted to write *Heroes* to express how I felt about heroism. The impetus came from two areas--the 50th anniversary of D-day, which recalled those war years, and the obituaries in the local paper of men and women who had fought World War II, telling of what they did in that war, stuff that surprised me even with people I had known. My heroes are the ordinary people who do their duty quietly, without fanfare, whether it's fighting a war or going to work every day. I feel that we are surrounded by heroes and saints in our daily lives. My father worked 44 years in the shops, provided for his family, even in the hard times. When he died, I realised that he would have given up his life for me.

Q: Do you think in some sense that what you're writing is horror?

Cormier: Yeah, I really think so. Not the midnight vampire kind of horror, but I think my books are horror stories because they reflect what's going on in the world today, and so much of life today is a horror story. I refuse to look at the news at 11 o'clock at night, because who wants to go to bed with those stories in their head? You know that old saying, "If it bleeds, it leads."

Q: You did write a happy ending to *Heroes*! A hopeful ending, anyway.

Cormier: Well, I really love ambiguity. But you've got to deliver a climax. So the reader has a satisfying click. You must have an epiphany of some kind. I think that's a way that fiction doesn't reflect life. There's that morning after and next week that you don't see in a novel, and I try to hint at that in my books.

Q: Who do you feel makes up the audience for your books?

A: I find that my adult audience is steadily increasing. Maybe it's because the teenagers who read *THE CHOCOLATE WAR* or *I AM THE CHEESE* back in the seventies are now in their thirties and, like so many readers, are loyal to the writers they like. Yet, I know that teens are my larger audience and, frankly, I cherish them. I can write with all the craft available to me and yet have this responsive young readership.

Q: You portray both good and evil in your books, sometimes graphically. Do you feel that young adults need to read about the darker side of life?

A: In a lot of instances, young adults are living that darker side of life or are aware of it through television, movies or what they see and hear on school buses or in the school corridors. For some reason, many people think teenagers live in a kind of vacuum. They don't. And when they read about the dark side of life in books, it gives an affirmation to what they see and hear every day. For the more protected and isolated teenager, the books give them a dose of reality, of what's really going on in the world out there that's waiting for them. One of the sentences that occurs all the

time in letters I receive is: You tell it like it is. And that's affirmation for me and keeps me going.

Q: Your books are often considered dark. Why do you choose to write about the dark side of life?

A: I think they are probably shadowed but not completely dark. On the surface they may look dark, but a closer reading reveals moral values. I am fortunate that teachers teach the books, because more than a casual reading will reveal those things. However, I must contradict myself and say I'm not in the business of creating role models or sending out lessons. I am a storyteller trying to write believable stories with believable characters. For instance, in *The Chocolate War*, the main character Jerry gets defeated because nobody comes to his rescue. The implicit lesson is that bad things happen when good people don't do anything. All the books tend to have these values if people care to look.

Q: Do you think young adult themes in novels mirror contemporary society, or are they influencing kids to grow up more quickly?

A: A bit of both. Realistic novels, of course, reflect what's going on in the world --- and it's hard to tell whether they influence kids to grow up more quickly. My hope is that they make children wiser in the ways of the world without making them cynical.

Q: How do you begin a novel?

A: I usually start with an emotion, something that happens that really affects me. Then I devise a character because I think that characters are the keys to the books, they are the beginning point. The reader must be able to picture the characters. Then there is a natural progression of having them overcome conflicts and reach goals.

Q: What comes first when you start a novel --- character, setting or plot?

A: Character. Until I "hear" the voice of the character, I can't proceed. I think characters are the most important element in a novel. You can have

a clever plot and fine writing but if the reader doesn't believe in the characters, doesn't love them or hate them or doesn't identify with them, then the story won't work. But before the writing begins, I must be emotionally involved with the novel I'm about to write.

Q: When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

A: At the age of 12 in the seventh grade when I began to write down my feelings (emotions again) --- on paper in what must have been very crude poetry. My teacher, Sister Catherine, read one of my poems and declared that I was a writer. I've been a writer from that day to this.

Q: Which writers influenced you the most during the years you were a young adult?

A: Thomas Wolfe (who wrote about the "hunger" of youth for love and fame and fortune), Ernest Hemingway, William Saroyan. I wasted a lot of time trying to write like Wolfe with his thousands of adjectives and adverbs and bless the day I discovered Hemingway whose prose was like a clear cool stream that I could navigate and emulate.

Q: What was the biggest obstacle that you had to overcome in your writing career and what was your solution?

A: My background is very modest. My father, my uncles and aunts were factory workers or store clerks. I knew no writers, thought you had to be a genius, well educated, must travel the world. And there I was a skinny kid in a three-decker neighbourhood, filled with longings and urgings, with few resources. I was rescued by teachers, as I mentioned earlier; and, in particular, my mother who praised my early writings and told me I was sure to succeed. And I was always willing to spend long hours writing.

Q: Why do you choose to write young adult novels?

A: I don't think of them that way. When I write I write to the fullest of my ability and I usually have an interesting and intelligent person in mind with whom I can be subtle. That person often turns out to be 14 years old, but that reader can also be 45.

Q: The main characters in *In The Middle of the Night*, *The Chocolate War*, and *I am the Cheese* are all loners. Why are you so interested in the loner?

A: As an adolescent I always felt like an outsider and I think a lot of kids feel that way. They want so much to belong to the group but there is something shouting in each of them that they are really alone. I have always had a sense that we are all pretty much alone in life, particularly in adolescence.

Q: None of your characters have intimate relationships with their parents and there are many secrets between parent and child. Why is that?

A: I think that is typical of adolescents. I believe that there is chasm between young people and adults. Kids are looked down upon by adults and are not recognized as separate, individual human beings. Kids lead very separate lives from their parents. They are really secretive and parents are secretive towards their kids too. That division of age adds up to loneliness I don't dwell on the parents in my books because I like to have the characters judged for themselves on their own actions. I didn't want people to say, well Archie comes from a broken home or a too wealthy home or a dysfunctional family. I didn't want him to have any cop-outs.

Heroes – Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1

Francis describes in stark and brutal detail his injuries sustained during the war, and how after the war he came to lodge with Mrs Belander in Frenchtown where he lived as a boy. He visits the church and says prayers for various important people in his life; thus we are introduced to some major and minor characters: Enrico, his mother and father, whom we learn are dead, and Nicole Renard and Larry LaSalle. Tension is created- he states his intention of killing Larry, but at this stage we do not know why. A flashback to the war introduces the theme of heroism- Francis has a Silver Star Medal, although he refuses to believe himself heroic – and reveals his love for Nicole.

Chapter 2

Leading on from the last chapter, Francis reminisces about meeting Nicole for the first time, and his adolescent desperation to talk to her. This leads to a description of his childhood in Frenchtown.

Chapter 3

Francis disguises himself to walk through the town he grew up in- he fears recognition. He visits the building where Nicole lived as a child. In a flashback, he recalls discussing Nicole with a soldier from his hometown during his time at war. We learn that he joined the army at 15, lying about his age. Back in the present, Francis is told that Nicole's family left the area some time before. Back in his lodgings, Francis talks with Mrs Belander who feels sorry for his injuries. Francis goes to bed and dreams of his wartime experiences- describing them in graphic detail. His description of the time of losing his face is particularly stark and brutal.

Think about the following:

Language use – how does Francis' simple language help convey the horror of his wartime experiences?

Structure- particularly the use of flashbacks

Themes

Chapter 4

Francis introduces the Wreck Centre- a key place in his childhood and in this story. Francis meets Arthur Rivier who buys him a drink, and he describes the conversation with the local men, who reminisce about their school days. None of them recognises him, and he talks very little, wanting to glean information about Larry LaSalle. At the end of the conversation he heads for the Wreck Centre, despite having told himself that he will not go there.

Characters- what is the importance of introducing some of the minor characters?

Chapter 5

Francis describes the Wreck Centre- it is now boarded up and run down. In reminiscence he recalls the 'tragic story' that caused the Centre to be closed down, before Larry LaSalle started activities for the local children there. The flattering description of Larry comes as a surprise and wrong-foots the reader, as we know Francis' intention of killing him. Further surprises come- Larry, it transpires was an inspirational figure to the children and helped to bring out the best in each individual. Note however the **foreshadowing**- there are rumours that Larry has "gotten into trouble in New York City". This raises questions in the mind of the reader as to his past. Back in the present, Francis recalls that Joey LeBlanc felt a sense of doom about the place, and that he died in the war. He now feels that Joey was right about the place- again creating suspense and raising questions in the mind of the reader.

Chapter 6

Francis has now been in his hometown for a month and he watches for Larry. He asks about him in the bar he frequents, and we learn of Larry's heroism during the war and the medal he was awarded for bravery. The concept of heroes is further explored as Arthur declares Francis a hero for his actions in the war. The themes of **disguise** and **appearance and reality** are explored- Francis wishes his identity to remain secret while Larry's actions have made headlines. The chapter closes by introducing Francis' skill at table tennis.

Chapter 7

In a flashback, Francis recalls Larry's encouragement of his ability as a table tennis player at The Wreck Centre. Larry allows Francis to win a competition in a totally selfless act, and tells him that he and Nicole are "special" to him. Nicole is delighted to see Francis win and they appear to be becoming closer.

Characters- note how Larry is set up as a very appealing character

Themes- particularly Appearance and Reality

How does the language of the match create suspense?

Chapter 8

Francis finds Arthur drunk; he comments that no one will talk about the war. The theme of heroism continues as Arthur states that there were no heroes in the war- just scared, homesick boys. The cold weather mirrors the sombre mood of this short chapter.

Chapter 9

Again in the past, Francis describes that Larry was one of the first men to enlist in the war. This again creates conflict in the

reader's mind as Larry is once again described in glowing terms. Thus the theme of appearance and reality is touched upon once again. With Larry gone the Wreck Centre is closed and preparations for the war are stepped up. Francis becomes closer to Nicole as the townspeople discuss the war's progress. Nicole tells Francis of Larry's heroic actions; in contrast to Francis' later hiding of his face, Larry's stares out at them from a cinema screen on a newsreel.

Chapter 10

Francis describes how he came to hide his face, after realising the horror it caused those who saw it. He doesn't care about healing- his only concern is to track down Larry LaSalle. Touching on the theme of **Appearance and Reality**, Francis stares into the mirror and sees only a stranger. This symbolises the changes in him owing to the war, and furthers the theme of **War's Consequences**. This theme is further explored as we learn of Enrico's decision to commit suicide as a result of his appalling injuries. Francis creates suspense by commenting that Larry's homecoming "changed our lives for ever."

Chapter 11

As Francis reminisces, Larry is described in a heroic manner as he comes home for his first leave. He wishes to spend time with his "Wreck Centre gang", and he plays table tennis with them. But then Larry expresses his wish to have one last dance with Nicole. He dismisses Francis and rapes Nicole, who feels Francis has betrayed her by leaving the room.

Chapter 12

Still in the past, during a heat wave, Francis waits for Nicole outside her house for three days, wracked with guilt that he did nothing to protect her. When he finally sees her, Nicole is disgusted with him and tells him to leave. He goes to church,

instead enlists in the army. Note how the concept of heroes is referred to increasingly often. The themes of **Love and Hate** and **Guilt** are touched upon.

What prevents him from carrying out his suicide attempt?

Chapter 13

Back in the present, Francis finally tracks down Larry by eavesdropping into a conversation between Mrs Belander and a neighbour.

Chapter 14

Francis finds Larry and confronts him. Larry is initially pleased to see him, and they discuss the idea of heroes. Francis dismissed the idea of himself as a hero as 'fake', and quickly confronts Larry with his actions against Nicole. Larry attempts to explain his actions, but Francis (and the reader) finds his explanation repugnant. The idea of heroes takes on a different slant as we are reminded that Larry was not just a war hero, but also the children's hero. Larry wipes out any chance to redeem his heroic status by remaining unrepentant – he thinks that his many good points outweigh his sickening actions: "Does that one sin of mine wipe away all the good things?" Francis does not kill Larry, who tries to assure him that he is indeed a hero. It seems pointless, when Larry frequently contemplates suicide.

Chapter 15

Back in the present, Francis attempts to discover Nicole's whereabouts by asking at the convent he attended as a child. He lies about the severity of his injuries to a nun who gives him her address.

Chapter 16

Francis finds Nicole and again lies about his injuries. She apologises to him for the way she treated him on the day she was raped, and Francis tells her that Larry is dead. Nicole has

not told anyone about the rape, and she appears damaged by her experience. Nicole calls him a hero, although Francis again denies it. She urges him to write about his experiences. The two part and he knows that they will not meet again.

Chapter 17

Francis is at a railway station, watching soldiers and reminiscing about his old platoon. He considers that many of them who received no honours were the real heroes. The novel ends on a positive note as Francis considers the possibilities of recovery and of a future life.

Narrative Structure

By telling the story through a series of flashbacks and memories, Robert Cormier can reveal details a few at a time.

The first chapter gives enough detail for the story to move on. By the end of the first chapter we know:

- That Francis has been to war
- That he is horribly injured
- That he has returned to his hometown
- That church is important to him
- That he loved Nicole and still does
- That Larry LaSalle is an enemy
- That he wants to be anonymous
- That he has a sinister plan.

The remaining chapters give clues and reveal details gradually. Why do you think Robert Cormier chose to structure the story in this way?

Understanding the characters

When Larry LaSalle returns home from the war the first time he is considered a hero. While on leave, he attacks Nicole. From that point on the lives of Nicole, Francis and Larry are changed forever.

How did Francis feel after he failed to do anything to stop Larry attacking Nicole? Why didn't he do anything?

Larry

What made Larry behave as he did? Did he give any thought to how it would affect Nicole? Did he know that Francis had not left the building? How long had he been planning the attack for?

The Setting Time

The story is set during the Second World War. Larry LaSalle joined the army to fight in the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Use the Internet to find out when the Americans became involved in the war and why the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Find the answers to these questions.

In what year did World War II start?

When did the Americans get involved?

Why did the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor? Why did so many young Americans rush to join the army after Pearl Harbor?

Place

The Wreck Centre

Before the war, the "wreck" centre is the centre of the lives of Larry, Nicole and Francis.

Larry LaSalle is an inspiration to the young people; they look up to him as a role model and a hero even before his wartime bravery. He is sophisticated and confident. He helps Francis to believe in himself and teaches him to play table tennis although he "fixes" the championship so that Francis wins. He encourages Nicole's dancing.

At the end, he tries to defend himself with the memory of all the good things he did for the kids at the centre. He wonders, "Does that one sin of mine wipe away the good things?" **What do you think?**

The name of the centre is a pun. Shortened from 'Recreation Centre' to 'Rec Centre' and then 'Wreck Centre'. The lives of the three main characters are wrecked because of their association with the centre. The building has a history – a rejected lover shot his love and his rival at their wedding reception. How does this foreshadow what happens in the novel?

Themes and Ideas

Heroism

Look up the word *Hero* in a dictionary. Write down the definition.

The title of the book could be meant ironically. (Irony is when you say something but mean the opposite e.g. If you say "That was really clever" to someone who has done something stupid).

This may be a book about "heroes" who are not true heroes. Which characters could fit this description? Explain why and find some examples from the novel to back up your ideas.

(p7, p33, p47, p64, p66, p75, p76, p87, p89)

Francis Cassavant – Hero?

Francis says he feels a fake because he wanted to die but was "too much of a coward to kill himself". When he jumped on the grenade he did not do it to save his platoon but to kill himself. In doing so though, he did save the lives of many soldiers. Is a heroic act still heroic even if it's done for the wrong reasons?

Arthur Rivier says, "We weren't heroes. We were only there". Why do you think heroes in war don't think of themselves as heroes? Look on page 89; Francis lists the people he thinks are heroes, do you agree with him?

What makes a true hero? Is Francis a hero?

Religion, Sin and Forgiveness

In Chapter 1, Francis goes to St. Jude's Church to pray for the souls of his parents, his wounded friend Enrico, Nicole, and Larry LaSalle, the man he intends to kill.

In Chapter 2, we learn that Francis attended a Catholic school and was taught by nuns (like Robert Cormier himself).

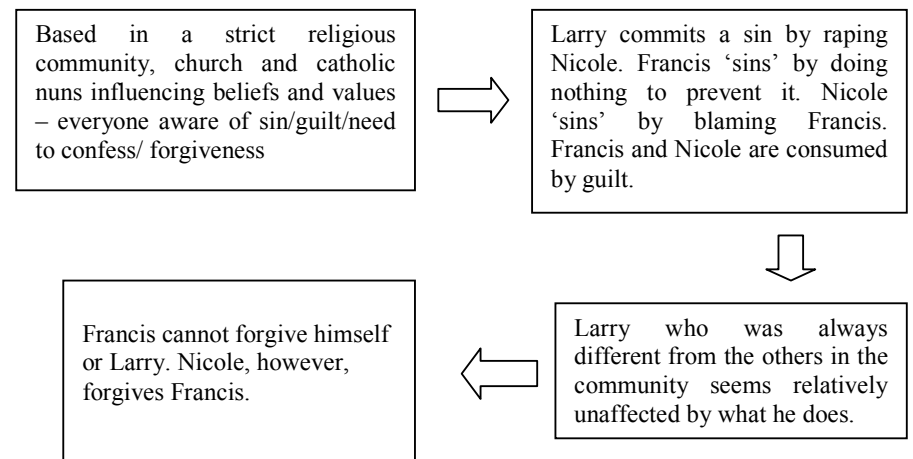
In Chapter 12 Francis goes to Confession in the church and then climbs the steeple intending to kill himself, "*the worst sin of all*".

In Chapter 14, Francis tells Larry to say his prayers before he shoots him.

In Chapter 15, Francis goes to see the nuns to ask where Nicole is. Sister Mathilde says she will pray for him.

The church is often referred to in the descriptions of the town. Why do you think it's always there in the background?

(p5, p8, p31, p32, p51, p53, p58.)



Past and Future

Francis and Nicole find it hard to deal with the events that have happened in their past.

Francis/Nicole – facing up to who you are

The scarf that Francis uses to hide his face is symbolic. Francis hides who he is from the public, but he also hides who he is from himself. He finds it hard to face up to the things that have made him the person he is. Nicole talks of learning who she really is.

There is also a mystery surrounding Larry when he arrives back in Frenchtown to open up the Wreck centre.

What do we know about Larry LaSalle's background and where he came from?

Love

"The terrible thing is that we love our sins. We love the thing that makes us evil. I love the sweet young things."

'That isn't love,' I say.

'There's all kinds of love, Francis.'

'Then didn't you know that we loved you?' 'I say. 'You were our hero, even before you went to war. You made us better than we were...' p76

What kinds of love are there in the novel? Find evidence of as many kinds of love as you can.

Some things to think about:

1. Why did Francis stand by while Nicole was being raped?
2. Why does Francis walk away from Larry in the end without killing him?
3. Why did Francis burn Dr Abrams' and Enrico's addresses?
4. Did he feel any differently at the end?
5. Francis's disability goes deeper than the physical injuries to his face. Explain how his facial disfigurement symbolizes how he has been disabled inside.
6. How does the author use characters and settings to foreshadow the events that take place?
Think about:
 - The characters' backgrounds
 - The settings – the wreck centre and the church
 - The backdrop of the war.
7. "The gun is like a tumour on my thigh" p72. Why do you think Cormier used this image to describe the gun?
8. What does the novel have to say about what it is to be courageous?

9. How does the author prepare the reader for the shocking truth about Larry LaSalle? Think about:

- Where he has come from
 - The way he behaves
 - The way he treats the young people at the 'wreck' centre
 - His actions after the rape
 - His reaction to Francis at the end of the book
10. What are the things that motivate Francis to want to kill Larry LaSalle?
 11. Choose **two** incidents in the novel that you think reveal a lot about **one** of the main characters and explain how they are used to develop character.
 12. When Francis meets Nicole several days after the attack, he wants to ask her if she is torn apart. Show how the incident at Larry's party affects Nicole and Francis.
 13. *"Don't say it Francis,. I know what he (Larry) was. For a while there he made me feel special. Made us all feel special. Made me think I was a ballerina. Now I'm starting to find out what I am, who I really am."* P85. Which character in the novel do you think learns the most about him/herself? Explain what that person learns.
 14. *Why* is the structure of the novel important to its impact on the reader?
 15. At the end of the novel, Nicole forgives Francis and says he is her "Silver Star hero". Why does she consider him a hero after all that has happened?
 16. Is Francis a hero?