

## Intimidation in Cormier's *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*, *We All Fall Down*, and *The Chocolate War*

Adolescence is an extremely difficult period in a person's life. It is a time of establishing identity and searching for independence. Adolescents go through many changes, physically, emotionally, and socially, and as developmental psychologist Sharon Stringer suggests: "Collectively, these changes make adolescents targets for psychological intimidation" (27). Adolescents are very vulnerable to intimidation, from peers, parents and other adults. Intimidation is a prevalent issue in adolescent development and literature.

Robert Cormier, a well-known author of adolescent literature, uses the theme of intimidation in many of his books. He once said, "I am very much interested in intimidation. And the way people manipulate other people." (Sutton 28) He follows this interest in *The Chocolate War*, *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*, and *We All Fall Down*, which clearly show the different types of intimidation adolescents face. Cormier does not evaluate intimidation in his books. He simply shows that it is prevalent and describes the many ways it is used. "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 comfort of a happy ending" (Random House, Inc., par 17).

Cormier's *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* depicts a haunting decision the protagonist is forced to make at the hands of his boss, who uses his love for his family to intimidate him into betraying a friend. This story follows Henry Cassavant and his family as they struggle to get over his brother's death. After moving to a new town, Henry's family has almost no money so he decides to help by getting a job. When he is hired to work at a store by the manipulative and prejudiced Mr.

Hairston, it turns out to be one of the worst decisions he has ever made.

In this new town, Henry begins building a friendship with Holocaust survivor, Mr. Levine, who is carving a replica of his home city prior to its destruction by the Nazis.

Henry makes the mistake of sharing this information with Mr. Hairston. "Henry was uneasy as he resumed work, as if somehow he had betrayed the old man" (47). His uneasiness was explained when Mr. Hairston came to him with a proposition. He wanted Henry to go into the art center, "take the hammer and smash the old man's village" (70).

Henry could have turned his boss down had Mr. Hairston not threatened him: "I will have to spread the word about you to other merchants. That you are not to be trusted. No one will ever hire you again" (72). He also threatened to have Henry kicked out of school, but the worst came when Mr. Hairston threatened to get Henry's mother fired. Henry was torn between protecting his family and his friend.

In this story, Cormier shows how people can be intimidated by threats. He makes Mr. Hairston's threats very real and very hard to ignore, illustrating how such people choose the things that matter most to their victims, in this case, Henry's mother and his own education, rather than things that have no consequence. Cormier shows how powerful this form of intimidation can be, so powerful, in fact, that Henry chooses to destroy the village.

The intimidation found in *We All Fall Down* is slightly different and perhaps a little more relevant to adolescents. In this story, the protagonist, Buddy, faces

intimidation from his peers. The dark story opens with Buddy and three other boys vandalizing a home. Cormier gives a vivid description of the damage being done. They are drunk and tear the house apart. During the process, one of the girls who lives there comes home and is injured. It had seemed like a good idea when Harry, one of the three, suggested it but not after harm befell the girl. Although Buddy does not act to harm her, neither does he attempt to help her; instead, he stands idly by and watches Harry push her down the stairs with his tacit approval.

Afterward, the vandalism does not seem nearly as fun and exciting. Buddy is overcome with guilt and shame. As they are driving away from the house, Buddy becomes angry with his friends and confronts them about what they did to the girl. Harry tries to convince him that maybe he had not seen exactly what he thought he had. "Although his voice was mild, it contained an undertone Buddy could not pin down. His eyes were dark and piercing as he looked at Buddy. All of which made him shiver inside, realizing that Harry somehow was giving him a message, telling him what to believe" (16).

Harry's gang thrives on intimidating others by participating in what they call "fun time," a chance to cause mischief., as Cormier explains, "And off they'd go. To the movies...guffawing, scuffling mildly, knowing that the ushers were high school kids, most of them easily intimidated, not too eager to notify the theater manager about the noise and distractions" (51-2). Intimidation is a way of life for these bullies, and Buddy is sucked into it with them.

In this story, Cormier describes perhaps the most common type of intimidation adolescents face, peer pressure. As adolescents desperately try to find a group to belong to, they become vulnerable. Stringer further postulates: "Fear and the threat of losing peer approval motivate young adults to perform acts for the group that they would never do alone" (Stringer 2).

Intimidation can also come in the form of alcoholism and related problems. Buddy comes from a broken home, his family having fallen apart after his father's departure, and Buddy has become an alcoholic. He has discovered that alcohol carries him away from his problems. The alcohol, along with the pain he feels as a result of his home life, make him incredibly vulnerable to a group of boys like Harry and friends. Harry knows Buddy is an alcoholic and plays on his

weakness. Harry never drinks but is always quick to offer a drink to Buddy. He uses alcohol to manipulate Buddy into doing whatever he wants him to. Cormier clearly shows the level of pressure Buddy feels from Harry and the other boys, again, illustrating the intimidating power of peer pressure.

*The Chocolate War* is Cormier's most overt depiction of peer intimidation as he focuses on the potential consequences of standing up to the intimidators, in this case, the Vigils— a group of students who run Trinity School, and Brother Leon— a corrupt teacher. The Vigils have a way of doing things at the school with which no one interferes. They get their kicks from coming up with "assignments" for other students to do. These assignments are usually simple pranks. The Vigils choose a victim and force him to accept the assignment.

The first assignment in *The Chocolate War* goes to a boy called Goober. He is told he must go into a classroom once the school is closed for the evening and unscrew everything in the room: desks, chairs, chalkboards—anything screwed down. Cormier describes Goober as "accepting the assignment the way all the others did, knowing there was no way out, no reprieve, no appeal. The law of the Vigils was final and everyone at Trinity knew it" (36). School psychologists George Batsche and Howard Knoff generalize: "[B]ullies will intimidate those who they believe can not, or will not, retaliate or those with whom they have been successful in bullying in the past" (Batsche 2). This group of students had intimidated the entire student population so badly that no one is willing to stand up to them, that is, until Jerry Renault comes along.

Jerry is fourteen years old and recovering from the death of his mother. He comes to Trinity hoping to play football and fit in. One day he, too, is given an assignment: to refuse to sell chocolates for the school fundraiser for 10 days, at which time he is to submit to Brother Leon and sell his share of chocolates. He accepts the assignment and does as he is asked for 10 days, but on the 11th day, he still refuses to sell the chocolates, defying both the Vigils and the school authorities. Jerry decides he will not give in, a healthy act for his own self-esteem according to experts in adolescent psychology: "individuals may resist intimidation. Their defiance of authority empowers their own sense of self, preserves their integrity, and promotes

their moral commitments to fairness and justice” (Stringer 3). He is even inspired by a poster in his locker which asks, “Do I dare disturb the universe?”

While standing up to the Vigils and Brother Leon is the right thing to do, it does nothing good for Jerry at school. He is threatened, and everyone stops talking to him. He is even forced to quit the football team, but, no matter what the Vigils do to him, he refuses to sell the chocolates.

What does standing up to the intimidation get him? He is harassed by all his peers and left realizing he may have made the wrong choice. The only thing Jerry can think about is telling his friend Goober to be careful: “They tell you to do your thing but they don’t mean it. They don’t want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing too...Don’t disturb the universe Goober, no matter what the poster says” (259).

The peer intimidation in *The Chocolate War* is more sophisticated than that in *We All Fall Down*. The Vigils are a large group, and they are very powerful. They not only intimidate students, but they also have the faculty living in fear. Even Brother Leon is intimidated by the Vigils. The intimidation Cormier uses here is more powerful because it is not simply a few delinquents going against the norm. The Vigils have the capability of pulling a few strings and making Jerry’s life miserable through ingenious strategies. The Vigils’ rules have become the norm at Trinity. Group or gang intimidation is much more powerful than a single bully making threats, and Cormier uses *The Chocolate War* as evidence of this fact.

Cormier paints a graphic picture of the forms intimidation can take and what can happen when people stand up to bullies. He uses the characters of Henry, Buddy, and Jerry to show how intimidation, including threats, humiliation, and physical harm, can affect people’s lives. These effects are not a pretty picture, but Cormier stands firm according to the Random House website dedicated to his work: “Cormier’s novels have frequently come under attack by censorship groups because they are uncompromising in their depictions of problems young people face each day in a turbulent world” (Random House, Inc., par 16).

Adolescents are victims of bullying and intimidation more commonly than might be expected. In their study of bullies and victims, Batsche and Knoff found “bullying affects 15% to 20% of all students in schools

today” (165). That same study suggested the violence that accompanies bullying should “be defined more broadly to include conditions or acts that create a climate in which individual students . . . feel fear or intimidation in addition to being victims of assault, theft or vandalism” (165). Cormier appropriates these conditions and climates to create the settings for intimidation in his novels, but although he writes some stirring and disturbing novels, he does not offer suggestions for combating or overcoming bullying.

Although readers will not find remedies for intimidation in his novels, Cormier’s work provides a practical use as a springboard for important discussions with adolescents. Problem-solving discussions on issues such as bullying will evolve from reading these novels in the classroom as students discuss the books, relate the characters’ problems to issues of real life and even receive advice from adults and peers without making their personal issue(s) public. In that regard, these novels are an invaluable resource.

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### Works Cited

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