



CHAPTER 2 A Brief History of Young Adult Literature

Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner (1991)

*Robert Cormier, Who Took It
to the Top*

The Chocolate War, *I Am the Cheese*, and *After the First Death* are the books that in 1991 Robert Cormier was honored for. Other exceptionally good books include *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*, *Beyond the Chocolate War*, *Fade*, *We All Fall Down*, and *Heroes*.

In 1967, when S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* was published, critics rejoiced because Hinton's novel was a giant step forward for the young adult novel. Its gritty realism and its willingness to take on a hitherto topic like class differences in the teenagers' world made *The Outsiders* a hit with critics and young readers. YA books had reached the top.

That euphoria lasted until 1974 when YA books reached an even higher top. Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* was published to critical acclaim, and readers soon followed the critics. Censors, never willing to let a fine novel pass unnoticed and uncensored, took note. *The Chocolate War* was attacked from almost every imaginable viewpoint and for almost every imaginable sin. When Cormier's next two novels, *I Am the Cheese* and *After the First Death*, were published to the approval of critics and readers, censors trailed not far behind.

What were Cormier's sins? The fact that Archie in *The Chocolate War* had taken a picture of Emile in a restroom stall with his "pants dropping on the floor, one hand furiously at work between his legs." Masturbation, as decent people knew, was not to be mentioned. Crude language was everywhere in Cormier's books, and the books were filled with pessimism and, as one censor told the authors of this text, the books were "unnecessarily realistic." Immorality prevailed, terror and evil abounded, corruption was everywhere, and worse yet, *I Am the Cheese* and *After the First Death* were unpatriotic, implying that the Witness Relocation Program was dishonest and that our government could not be trusted.

What were Cormier's virtues? He was honest, and he told readers what they already knew but were often afraid to admit—that corruption existed around them, not in some far-off place, and that bad guys and evil sometimes won and good guys and innocence could lose even at the end of a book.

Patty Campbell remembers in her *Horn Book Magazine* column for March/April 2003 what it was like in the seventies to hope for real maturity in the YA novel and then to read Cormier's first YA book.

Finally in 1974, all of this excitement and rich promise came to fulfillment with The Chocolate War. Oh, there had already been other YA books of lasting excellence. . . . But The Chocolate War was something else again—a book that shook us profoundly, a book that nobody could ignore. The critics went wild, some of them foaming at the mouth, others singing the book's praises extravagantly.

From that first simple sentence in *The Chocolate War*, "They murdered him," readers knew Cormier was different. And from the first inklings of the plot, readers had the essentials before them. Jerry Renault was not superhuman, Archie and the Vigils were in charge of Trinity High School, and Brother Leon, who was nominally the assistant headmaster of the school but who "served as a flunky for the Head," was corrupt and enjoyed manipulating and corrupting others.

Sylvia Patterson Iskander nicely summed up the matter for the 1999 *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers* when she wrote, "The novels of Robert Cormier have added a new dimension to young adult literature. Dealing with evil, abuse of power, and corruption, they present a dark view of humanity, but one tempered by an underlying morality."

Robert Cormier had never thought of himself as a writer for young people, but when his agent submitted *The Chocolate War* to Pantheon, the editor convinced Cormier that, as good as the book was, it would be simply one more in a catalogue of adult books. If it were published for teenagers, however, it might sell well, and it certainly would not be just one more in a long string of available adolescent novels. The editor's predictions came true and Cormier later acknowledged that although his initial reaction to becoming a *young adult* author was one of shock followed by a monthlong writer's block, he was grateful for the editorial help, which led to considerable attention from reviewers as well as his first financial success as an author. ●



Margaret A. Edwards Award Winner (1996)

Judy Blume, **Who Endures**

The Edwards committee honored Blume for her 1975 *Forever*, but other excellent books that young teens love include *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970); *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* (1971); *Deenie* (1973); and our favorite, which is *Tiger Eyes* (1981), all published by Bradbury.

When in December of 2004, Judy Blume was the first author of young people's literature to be honored by the National Book Foundation, for her "distinguished contribution to American letters," readers all over the country—in fact all over the world—cheered because they owned one or more of the 75 million Judy Blume books purchased by readers within the past thirty-five years. Blume was a young housewife and mother living in a New Jersey suburb when she began writing. On the morning after she received the award, she explained in a PBS interview with Jeffrey Brown that she wrote her first book about Margaret at age twelve because she had such vivid memories and warm feelings toward the thoughts and emotions she remembers from that time in her life. She loves the optimism and the faith that young readers have as reflected in a letter she quoted in her acceptance speech: "Please send me the facts of life, in number order." She was still pondering on just how to answer that letter, but in general she says that her approach to writing is to go from deep inside herself and to be as truthful and honest as possible.

From the beginning, young readers loved the books and loved talking to Blume, either in person or by mail. Increasingly, college teachers of YA lit began recommending Blume's books and assigning them for class reading and Blume became a welcome speaker at meetings of teachers and librarians. But the more successful Blume's books became, the more censors paid attention to them. Her book about Margaret was described as being negative or flippant toward religion, while one principal would not allow *Deenie* in his school because the female protagonist masturbates. The principal told the librarian that it would have been different if she had been a boy.

Another librarian came up with the idea of blacking out unsuitable words and inserting proper words. Some attacks focused on Blume's lack of moral teachings. Our favorite censorial story came when a mother, upset by two pages about wet dreams in *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*, accosted Blume and said that she had ripped them out of her son's copy. When Blume asked, "What if they had been about a girl's menstruation? Would you still have torn the pages out?" "Oh no," the mother replied, "that's normal." Everyone knows that sexuality sometimes comes into Blume's books, but as Faith McNulty writing in the *New Yorker* (December 5, 1983) observed "only to the degree that it enters most young minds."

Sex isn't Blume's sole topic. In *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, twelve-year-old Margaret is perplexed about what religion she should belong to. In *Then Again, Maybe I Won't*, Blume draws a devastating portrait of a family moving up in social class only to discover that the move may not have been a good thing. In *Tiger Eyes*, Davey has to accept the death of her father in a senseless act of violence. And in the most feared of all of Blume's books, *Forever*, Katherine struggles through the excitement of first sex only to learn that a first love may not endure. For the last edition of this textbook, Blume wrote that:

Fear has always made people anxious, and we are living in fearful times. . . . Book banning satisfies a need for parents to feel in control of their children's lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don't read about something, their children won't know about it. And if they don't know about it, it won't happen.

Blume is encouraged, though, by how many children and their parents and teachers are speaking out and defending children's right to read. Her message is that parents have "every right to decide what their child should read, but not what all children should read." ●