

It's a setting familiar to any modern YA reader: a school, this time Catholic and boys-only. An innocent freshman going through personal trauma; a cynical senior; a corrupt adult leader with his own agenda. Cormier's YA debut paved the way for a new kind of teen novel, joining the likes of S. E. Hinton and Paul Zindel in crafting realistic, tragic fiction that kids could embrace while their parents shuddered. Per an introduction to the novel written by Cormier in 1997, the manuscript was rejected by seven major publishers before finding a home, criticized for being too dark, too complicated, too far from the mainstream, feel-good stories of the time. Rich descriptions of the inner workings of the school's hierarchy make for gripping, unexpected political drama, a standout among earlier novels that focused almost solely on individuals of the reader's age. The titular chocolates remain a familiar concept to any student of a financially strapped institution that all but demands fundraising from its pupils. There is brutality in conformity, Cormier tells us, a requirement to abandon the self for the cause, the school, the institution. "They tell you to do your thing but they don't mean it," Jerry tries to explain. "They don't want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing, too." What most struck publishers as unacceptable, what grabbed initial readers in 1974, what invaded the mind of this reviewer both now and twenty years ago when I first encountered it, is the lack of punishment for those who caused Jerry's destruction: the corrupt teacher retains control of the school, the bully has more power over the student body than ever before; Jerry is destroyed physically and psychologically, perhaps will never make a full recovery, and no one takes the blame. As Jerry says, it's a laugh, a fake. "Just remember what I told you," he says to his friend, referencing the required conformity of the school and the world. "It's important. Otherwise, they murder you."

- *Kiri Palm, Reviewer*