

THE CHOCOLATE WAR

OVERALL OBJECTIVE: To provide teachers with instructional materials that will enhance their students' understanding of the novel through development of skills in the areas of vocabulary, reading comprehension, literary analysis, writing, and appreciation of Robert Cormier's novel, *The Chocolate War*, via a multi-level instructional approach.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THIS PACKET: To help students

1. build vocabularies based on the language used in the novel.
2. develop the reading comprehension skills of drawing conclusions and determining cause-effect relationships.
3. develop the literary analysis skills of recognizing theme and understanding characterization.
4. practice writing skills of writing to persuade and writing exaggerated description.

APPROACHES TO *THE CHOCOLATE WAR*

Reversing Robert Kennedy's aphorism, *The Chocolate War* sees adolescent life not as it should be, but as it all too often is. The book's grim realism, its unwillingness to let wishful thinking substitute for honest perception, persuades adolescents that they are being spoken to directly, without condescension. The book accepts young people's concerns as real, and acknowledges their ability to deal with harsh truths. Reading *The Chocolate War*, students know they are in the presence of a writer who respects them, and they respond in kind.

The Chocolate War explores several of adolescents' most crucial problems. Life at Trinity High School is a constant struggle to fit in, to belong, to find a way of being accepted — or at least unnoticed — by a system of peer and adult pressure. The system can crush anyone who dares disturb this little universe by being different. Students and teachers will recognize the familiar problems of discovering that authority figures often abuse their powers, or that success in sports or other forms of competition is hard to come by, and fleeting when obtained.

The Chocolate War displays many insights into the motivations and fears of adolescents. Jerry Renault worries about sexuality, longs for his mother and fears that he will grow up to be a dull, lifeless person. These concerns will strike responses in the minds of many students. The overriding struggle, however, is that between good and evil, which lies at the novel's core. What makes Cormier's book distinctive is that here good does not triumph; it is not even recognizable as good. In the face of such overwhelming depravity, it is difficult to be sure what, indeed, is good.

For young people concerned with making moral choices, and all too aware of how often they fall short of their own ideals, *The Chocolate War* offers an insight into the complexity of moral issues that can be reassuring as well as disturbing.

Everyone will be able to draw on personal experiences to illustrate the book's themes, and much effective writing can come from assignments based on this book.

Technically, *The Chocolate War* is a masterful piece of craftsmanship. Its short chapters and constant shifts of focus create almost unbearable suspense. The twists of its plot as Jerry appears first eccentric, then heroic, and finally a helpless victim, defeat the reader's attempts to anticipate its outcome. Cormier's balancing of events is extremely effective. In Chapters 11 and 12, for example, first Archie and then Jerry find their moment of triumph abruptly marred by new events. The climax of the story, when all the threads are pulled together, and when a last hope, in the form of the "black box," is offered and then withdrawn, is a model of plotting. In language, the book is crisp and straightforward, combining bluntness with challenging, but not excessively demanding, vocabulary.

Cormier excels in the art of characterization, even with his lesser figures. Goober, for example, reflects the tension we all feel between our intentions and our fears. Minor characters like Tubs Casper, Paul Consalvo, and Brian Cochran, each is revealed vividly through a glimpse of his inner workings. Tubs' infatuation with the "perfect" girl, Paul's fear of turning out like his parents, Brian's desire to hear the crowd cheer for him just once, all suggest whole lives in a few words.

A special quality of the book is its success in making the villains' motives understandable, without mitigating their evil. It is a relief and a learning experience to read of the inferiority and frustration that drive Emile Janza, the resentment that fills Obie as he goes about his unpleasant tasks, and the manic fear of falling from eminence that impels Archie to greater acts of ingenious wickedness.

The Chocolate War can be used effectively with many other works. The themes of youthful violence and of mob psychology can lead to such classics as *Lord of the Flies* and *A Separate Peace*. Graham Greene's story "The Destroyers" portrays a youthful anti-hero much like Archie, and also examines the lure of evil. Teachers may assign T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," given its use in the story; or they may use other works in a variety of genres that treat the problem of conformity and individuality: Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros*, Paul Horgan's novel *Things As They Are*, and the Marlon Brando film *On the Waterfront* are only a few of the many possibilities.

WHAT IS *THE CHOCOLATE WAR* ABOUT?

Jerry Renault, a freshman at Trinity High School, is trying to make the football team and to forget about the recent death of his mother. He is troubled by unfulfilled sexual desires and by doubt about whether his upright lifestyle will lead to anything better than the dead end he believes his father, a pharmacist, has reached.

Meanwhile Archie Costello, the "assigner" for The Vigils (a dominant, but usually nonviolent gang at the school), chooses Jerry for an assigner: Jerry is to refuse to participate in the school's annual chocolate sale. This year's sale is especially important, as both the number of boxes to be sold and their price have been doubled. The school's ambitious Assistant Headmaster, Brother Leon, has even enlisted The Vigils' aid, thereby acknow-

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Senior Editor:
 John F. Savage
 Professor of Education
 Boston College

Contributing Editor:
 Richard E. Barbieri, Co-Director,
 Milton Academy
 Writing Institute

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