

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier

Book Information

Robert Cormier, The Chocolate War

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Book Level: 5.4

Interest Level: UG

This powerful novel is about a young high school student who refuses to be intimidated by society and the people around him.

Award: ALA Best Book for Young Adults; Margaret A. Edwards Award; SLJ Best Book

Topics: Community Life, School; Emotions, Misc./Other; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, NY Times Editor's Choice

Main Characters

Archie Costello the "assigner" of the Vigils; he comes up with the pranks the students need to carry out

Brian Cochran a student "volunteered" by Brother Leon to be treasurer of the school chocolate sale

Brother Jacques a history teacher at Trinity who is aware of the Vigils' games

Brother Leon the power-hungry assistant headmaster at Trinity High School, who asks for the Vigils' support in the school candy sale

Carter the president of the Vigils and the muscleman of the group

David Caroni an honor student who Brother Leon blackmails for information

Emile Janza an intimidating student who tries to get on Archie's good side to become a Vigil someday

Goober a friend of Jerry who is emotionally traumatized by the Vigils' games

Jerry Renault the main character of the story, a freshman high school student who stands up to the Vigils and the school administration

Obie the secretary of the Vigils, who needs to see that the assigned pranks are carried out

the Vigils a group of boys who intimidate others through psychological games

Vocabulary

brother a member of a men's religious order who is not in the priesthood but takes vows to live in community and carry on the work of the order

languidly slowly

power of attorney the legal authorization to act in another person's behalf

sinews tendons

Synopsis

As the story begins, Jerry Renault is trying out for the football team as a freshman at Trinity High School. He is observed by Archie Costello and Obie, members of the Vigils, a secret school society that intimidates students and faculty by assigning pranks for students to perform. Archie targets Jerry as a student who will be made to carry out an assignment. Obie protests because Jerry recently lost his mother to cancer, but Archie insists an assignment will be "therapy" for him.

Brother Leon, the assistant headmaster at Trinity, has committed the school to sell twenty thousand boxes of chocolates as a fund-raiser. He nervously asks Archie for help, thereby acknowledging the power the Vigils hold. Archie agrees to help, knowing Brother Leon will "owe them one."

The nature of the Vigils is further revealed when Jerry's friend Goober is "assigned" to unscrew all the screws in Brother Eugene's classroom. The only check an assigner faces is choosing a black marble from the box, indicating that the assigner himself must carry out the assignment. Archie's luck has held for two years, and all the assignments have had to be carried out by the student who was chosen as a victim. Goober carries out his assignment and even gets help from other Vigils when it becomes apparent the task is overwhelming. Both Goober and Brother Eugene come out of this incident distraught, and Brother Eugene leaves the school because of a nervous breakdown.

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Meanwhile, Brother Leon intimidates his students and singles one out to humiliate in front of the class.

When the chocolate sale begins, Jerry is the only student who refuses to sell the chocolates. By blackmailing a student, Brother Leon learns that Jerry is only carrying out an assignment given him by the Vigils and will accept the chocolates after ten days. When the required time is up, though, Jerry still refuses to take the chocolates to sell.

At first, Jerry's fellow students look at him with admiration. Chocolate sales begin to decline as more students personally question their desire to sell. Archie learns from Brian Cochran, the "volunteered" treasurer of the chocolate drive, that Brother Leon is worried because he illegally funded the chocolates. But after Brother Leon reminds Archie of his promise and tells him Jerry is making the Vigils look bad, the Vigils jump to action. At first they try intimidating Jerry, using Emile Janza to lure him into a fight. When that does not have the expected effect, the Vigils go into full swing, organizing sales groups and making it popular to sell chocolates, reasoning Jerry will look like the loner. This strategy seems to work, and the school's chocolates get sold.

As a reward for their efforts, Archie organizes a student rally in the athletic field to which no brothers are invited. The rally is a front for a confrontation he has organized between Emile and Jerry to face each other again. The observers in the stands, however, orchestrate the fight, where they have paid for a chance to write down a boxing move on a piece of paper. When an illegal punch is read, Jerry moves to protect himself, and all the rules fall apart. Jerry is beaten badly by Emile, and the fight is stopped only when an observant Brother Jacques turns off the stadium lights. Tipped off by Archie, Brother Leon has been quietly observing the whole event and comes to Archie's defense when Brother Jacques begins to question him. Goober, meanwhile, emerges from the stands and cradles Jerry. As the ambulance siren sounds, Jerry tells Goober that he was wrong to think that he could dare to disrupt the status quo. He urges Goober to do whatever

someone wants of him.

The story ends with Obie warning Archie that someday he will get his due, but Archie brushes off the warning and slides into his slick ways of maintaining control.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Jerry continue to refuse to sell chocolates even though his "assignment" is over?

Even Jerry has a hard time defining his reasons. It may stem from the time Brother Leon went into his "act" and humiliated a student in front of the class. Jerry hated Brother Leon at that moment and may hope his refusal of the chocolates somehow shows Brother Leon how it feels to be humiliated. The issue quickly becomes larger than an individual confrontation as Jerry stands up for his principles rather than backing down to a crowd. He answers "yes" to the question that was stated on his poster, at that point believing it is okay for a person to challenge the universe.

Literary Analysis

The Chocolate War is written in short episodes. How is this an effective means of relating the story?

Each of the episodes can stand independently and revolves around a particular individual, conversation, or event. The story is then woven by stringing these episodes together. This method of storytelling is particularly effective because it keeps the pace of the story lively. Hints are dropped at the ends and readers can expect a character to resurface later, which adds suspense. In many ways the episodes parallel the fight that comes at the end, each episode being a move or countermove between the Vigils and Jerry or people who are sympathetic to their respective causes.

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Inferential Comprehension

At the end of the story the reader finds Brother Leon now "owing" the Vigils. If the story were to continue, what would the dynamics within Trinity High School be like?

The Vigils would most likely have even more control of the school. Often in groups such as the Vigils, there is a sense of one-upmanship, and subsequent pranks may have to be more daring. Now that Brother Leon is their stooge, they may begin to resort to more violent pranks and immediately squelch any sense of rebellion. Anyone who hopes to stand up to the Vigils would probably need to have some support from others. However, since Brother Jacques is aware of the wrongdoings, he may do his part to keep Brother Leon and the Vigils under control.

Constructing Meaning

In *The Chocolate War*, Brother Leon uses his power in a detrimental way. Many people find it disturbing when a person in authority abuses his or her office, especially those in visible public positions such as religious leaders, teachers, public servants, and law officers. Do you feel some people should be held to a higher standard of behavior because of their positions? Why?

Answers will vary. Some students may feel these people should be held to a higher standard because their position is one of trust, and the abuse of power by those whom people trust becomes all the more disturbing and causes more damage due to their positions of authority. Others may feel there are those who abuse power in every position and people need to be wary until an individual shows trustworthiness. Distinctions may be made between the individual's public and private life.

characters, groups, or places. Then, using a name book, a written interview with the author, or the student's own perceptions, have the students write down the symbolic meaning of the word and why they think that name was chosen. Cite all sources. An example is as follows: The symbolic meaning of "Obie" is to obey. His name was probably chosen because Obie carried out Archie's plans.

Comparing and Contrasting Have the students choose another novel that deals with the adolescent years, such as *The Outsiders*, *Lord of the Flies*, or *The Catcher in the Rye*. Using a chart, have them draw the parallels and note differences between characters, setting, events, theme, conflicts, etc.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning *The Chocolate War* is filled with many similes. Have the students go through the book, choose five similes, and illustrate them.

Identifying Persuasive Language Cormier's writing has been denounced as being bleak and fatalistic by some critics, while others have praised him for dealing honestly with the presence of evil in the world. Have the students evaluate how they feel about this issue. Then have them choose a position and defend their analysis using specific examples from the book. The class may wish to debate this issue.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft When asked during an interview if the Vigils stood for the vigil lights in a church, Cormier said the name was actually chosen to represent vigilante. Go through the book once again and list the name of