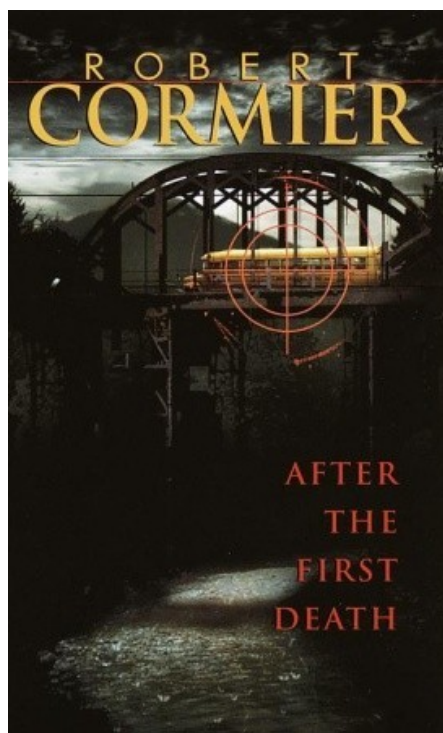




After the First Death

Robert Cormier

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Who will be the next to die?

They've taken the children. And the son of a general. But that isn't enough.

More horrors must come...

After the First Death Details

Date : Published February 1st 1991 by Laurel Leaf (first published 1979)

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Author : Robert Cormier

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Genre : Young Adult, Fiction, Academic, School

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From Reader Review After the First Death for online ebook

Gina Baik says

Oh wow. Ok. I just finished this book at 11:08 pm and I'm sad. I'm like really sad but like I'm not crying. It's a weird feeling. Tbh, I didn't really like this book in the beginning because it was quite boring. But after a while, it became a thriller. So much death, shooting, surprise attack, torture, guns, hanging, and yeah, I guess you get the point. Anyways, this was a nice short book (233 pages) and I quite enjoyed it. There are some Aha! moments and stuff like that and the book uses lots of metaphors and similes. If you're looking for a book that's short and has some action to it, I really would recommend this book for you to read.

Sivan N. says

"Who was guilty, then: the monster or the world that created it?"

First off, y'all gotta know, I'm pretty biased towards Robert Cormier because he wrote my fave book so him and I are basically homies.

Okay, first I'm going to talk about some themes within the book. I don't mean like textbook, how-you-learn-in-school, full-sentence themes. I mean looking-up-on-Sparknotes, one-word-themes-that'll-have-to-do-even-though-my-teacher-asked-for-a-full-sentence themes.

So I've recorded some of the themes throughout the book, and yes, trust me, they have something to do with how I viewed the book.

Theme 1: Identity Crisis-- this theme goes hand-in-hand with Theme 2 which is perception. No one in this book seems to really know who they are, like they know who they are but not WHO THEY ARE, y'know? I guess it makes more sense in the book. Like they're unsure of their identity. For that reason, the characters are often (Theme 2) concerned with how they are perceived and wonder how people see them.

Theme 3 is patriotism/nationalism and theme 4 is bravery. I will not go deeply into these because I don't want to spoil anything, but the themes are mentioned to give you a taste of the book.

These themes tie directly into characterization in the book. There is one female character in the book, Kate. In the other books I've read by Cormier (The Chocolate War, Beyond the Chocolate War, and Heroes), the girl characters are often flat. This is my first instance of seeing Cormier really develop a girl character. Originally, I did not like Kate and I wished that Cormier had simply not bothered characterizing her. But then I realized that I probably did not like Kate because her character was part of themes 1 and 2 (identity crisis and perception). Towards the middle/end of the book I began to like Kate more and it was a good time. So I guess good job with characterization?

The plot was pretty interesting. I felt the book kind of dragging in the middle but that may have been my fault and not Cormier's (because of how and when I read). The ending was really awesome, the book kept pulling me until the very end. Now to do a 180, the beginning was really well done. All the reader knows is that the characters are all somehow involved in this incident with the Bus and the Bridge, and that is the premise of the book. There were two perspectives in the book, which can be generalized as Ben's perspective and Miro's perspective. I preferred Ben's perspective but his was less prevalent in the book and I guess I can understand why.

In conclusion, the book was pretty good. It's only getting four stars because it kind of dragged in the middle, Kate was semi-badly characterized, and nothing can ever top Cormier's The Chocolate War and Beyond the

Chocolate War.

Carrie-anne says

Mark Haddon, author of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, said in an interview with *Horn Book Magazine*, “Most teenage fiction has an invisible ring of safety built into it. However sticky situations get, however dark the material, little signals here and there give off the message that this is ‘only’ a kids’ book. Don’t worry. Nothing too bad will happen. Things will come right in the end” (Wynne-Jones, 2004, p. 265). Indeed, *Curious Incident*, though about a teenage protagonist, was published as an adult novel. One reason for that, Haddon said, is that he “didn’t want that invisible ring of safety” that young adult novels provide (Wynne-Jones, 2004, p. 266).

There is no ring of safety, invisible or otherwise, in Robert Cormier’s young adult novel *After the First Death*. The title itself clues the reader in to the fact that something very bad will happen. Even so, Cormier’s unhappy ending—in which two of the three teenage protagonists die and the only one who remains alive is a murderer—comes as a shock to the reader. Unlike Haddon’s novel, which has a relatively happy ending, in Cormier’s book, things don’t come out right in the end. What does this say about young adult fiction?

For one thing, it says that authors don’t always think of their teenage readers in the same way—if they think of them at all. Cormier wrote his first young adult novel, *The Chocolate War*, thinking it was a book for adults, even though it has a high school-age protagonist. It was his publisher who convinced him to publish it as a young adult novel. Interestingly, throughout his career, Cormier continued to insist that he was writing about, rather than for, adolescents—even as his novels continued to be published for a young adult audience (Trupe, 2006).

I first read *After the First Death* as an eighth-grader and hated it. Weaned on young adult offerings like Joan Lowery Nixon’s *Babysitting is Dangerous Job*—in which the teenage protagonist outwits her kidnappers and saves herself and her charges from certain death—I had come to expect the invisible ring of safety about which Haddon writes. Throughout Cormier’s novel, I never once doubted that Kate would escape her captors or that Ben would, if not reconcile with his father, at least be prevented from killing himself. When the novel ended with those characters dead and the terrorist Miro on the loose, I was angry. In fact, I told anyone who would listen just how much I hated this book.

Half a lifetime later, I again found myself angry at Cormier’s bleak and hopeless ending. But, this time, I had the suspicion that that anger was precisely what Cormier wanted me to feel. Often, it’s not just young adult fiction but all fiction that has an invisible ring of safety around it. Fiction has the ability to give meaning and shape to what, in the real world, would be meaningless and random experiences. But when it’s the intent of the author to point out just how meaningless and hopeless life can be—despite a few individuals’ best efforts to the contrary—the reader is bound, obligated even, to feel anger. Not at the author or the book, as I did in eighth grade, but at the world—in this case, at the political structures at the root of the meaningless tragedy. It’s healthy anger—the kind of anger that drives a person to greater awareness and to action. It’s the same anger I felt, for example, at the end of John le Carre’s critique of the post-Cold War West, *Absolute Friends*.

But how to get students to understand that? How to get them from point A to point B in a span shorter than the decade and a half it took me? The answer, I think, has to do with respect. Haddon’s comment implies that most young adult fiction doesn’t respect teenage readers, that it doesn’t trust them to be able to handle unhappy, realistic endings. Because “realistic” is key here. At a writing conference I attended a couple weeks ago, a writer asked the editor leading a seminar on plot if it was true that children’s book publishers won’t take novels with unhappy endings. The speaker had been talking about balancing surprise and believability

in a plot, and he pointed out that an unhappy ending that's the believable consequence of the events of the story respects the reader far more than an unbelievable, *deus ex machina* happy ending.

A post-reading writing assignment for *After the First Death* could ask students to reflect on the book's ending as believable and to consider that ending in the context of the debate over young adult fiction. A question might look something like this: "Some people say that young adult fiction should always 'come out right' in the end. But Robert Cormier's novel, *After the First Death*, doesn't have a happy ending. In a clear and well-organized essay, explain whether you think the ending of *After the First Death* is realistic consequence of the characters and events of the novel and discuss what the book's ending suggests about Cormier's attitude toward teenage readers."

To scaffold the skills and ideas necessary to write this essay, I would build up to it through post-reading discussions about the book and its ending, asking students to consider if there might be any other way—any other realistic way, that is—that the book could have ended. In that discussion, I would ask them consider how a different ending (for example, in which Miro repents, spares Kate, and turns himself in) would have changed the message that Cormier is sending. The idea here is not just to prepare students to write the essay but to prompt them to make connections to the real world—particularly, to see how the decisions made by the general and the policy of the military overall played as big a role (or bigger) than the terrorists in determining the ending of the book.

At the same time, I would share with them the Horn Book interview with Haddon and begin a discussion of the parameters of young adult literature. (It might also be interesting to pair this book either with Haddon's novel or with one of the "safe" YA novels that Haddon critiques.) By the time they reach eighth or ninth grade, most students don't want to be seen as children, and the implication that certain writers are babying and protecting them is more likely to spur them to reconsider Cormier than any lesson focusing solely on the novel's "literary" elements could.

The real purpose of this writing assignment—and, I suspect, the purpose of Cormier's book—is to get students to do what Kate does, albeit too late. To look beyond the surface, to resist complacency, and to start thinking for themselves. In evaluating the assignment, I would, of course, assess my students' essays on the clarity of their writing, the organization of their ideas, and their use of supporting textual evidence. But my real focus, in both creating and in evaluating the assignment, would be on students' communication and development of their own original thoughts in response to the book and the ideas it introduces.

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Jessica says

Woah. I know I just said I was going to go do my homework, but that gorilla-girl book got me thinking about some of the most bizarre and disturbing YA fiction I've ever read, and then of course Robert Cormier popped, guns blazing, into my mind.

The *Chocolate War* books were intense, but this one was the real doozy!

The images in this book were seared permanently into my brain, and whenever I'm prompted to imagine what it might be like to be held hostage by terrorists -- as I increasingly have been, by various parties, over the past few years -- I'm at pains to remind myself that this isn't something I've actually experienced. This book made it seem so scarily, viscerally real: I remember the feeling of having to pee, then tight, wet jeans, of the fear, and the kids -- not just the fear of the girl who's watching the kids (what is she, a camp counselor?) but also the thoughts of the boy, not much older, who's pointing a gun at them all.

This book was extremely well-written, and likely responsible for vicarious PTSD symptoms in a measurable percentage of YA-aged readers.

Chrissie says

I thought this book was magnificent. It has a twist at the end that will make you want to turn around and read it again, and when you do you will be mystified by the brilliance of Robert Cormier. I was, at least. As I was reading it, I found the narrative of the general's son to be the most interesting. The story of the high jacked bus with the children was, of course, incredibly suspenseful and unpredictable, and I felt that was well done. The character development was very interesting, especially when considering the time in which the novel was written (1979). The typical gender roles were not necessarily what I expected them to be, but I also saw the ideals of the time reflected in that aspect of the story.

This was a truly well-written book, and it will be shocking and emotional in many areas. I was torn in a lot of ways, because I tended to identify with the "good" guys, but that line is very blurry in this story. I would absolutely recommend this novel, and I actually look forward to having an opportunity to reading it again.

Violence: Children are kidnapped, several deaths in various ways, torture

Sex: A young man walks in on a girl with a naked lower-half, the girl adopts an attitude of seduction

Language: Mild

Drugs/Alcohol: Children are drugged to keep them under control

Josiah says

When Robert Cormier won the Margaret A. Edwards Award for young-adult literature in 1991, an award that generally cites a specific portion of an author's library of works as deserving of commendation, three of his novels were cited: *The Chocolate War*, *I Am the Cheese* and *After the First Death*. But what caused the committee to select these three novels in particular? Why not *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway*, *Beyond the Chocolate War* or *Fade*? Ten years later, would the Margaret A. Edwards committee still have chosen to highlight the three books they did? Might there have been other titles, instead, or perhaps additional cited works to reflect a further ten years of distinguished literary contributions by Robert Cormier? No one can know the answer to that, of course, but I am convinced the passing of years and introduction of more titles from The Master, Robert Cormier, could never have wiped *After the First Death* from the list. For in my hand I hold a book that is more than a book; I hold the epicenter of heartbreak so utter and profound the most agonized wail in the human chromatic scale could not express it. I hold a monster that does not know it is a monster, and is all the more dangerous for it. I hold the raw weeping, angst and inner blackness of despair that cannot be relayed all at once, could never be taken head-on that way and understood for all its haunting depth by a human being. And so The Master sits you down and agrees to tell the story, to lower you down the well into the companionless depths of darkness where the remains of the human heart can scarcely be recognized as such. To reach that point, the journey is long, the wait while being lowered is unnerving and

accompanied by a sickening sense of foreboding that never lightens, never feels any better. To understand it all, the horror of plain, unretouched truth must be presented to you piece by piece, consideration by consideration, moment by moment and answer by answer so unacceptable you wish there were an escape to be had. But there is no escape here; only the heartbreak when it finally hits, when you understand the truth, at last, for all its dizzying import, the devastation as palpable as a bullet tunneling through your chest. When you can hardly breath for the point-blank impact of the truth, you'll know you've arrived. God help those who do.

Freedom fighting is a dangerous business. As the rich get richer with no fair way to spread the wealth to all citizens in every nation, revolutionaries come together on common ground in underground schools, where the frills of the wealthy's education are tossed away in favor of more serious, focused drilling toward specific tasks. What does it matter if a young man can do calculus if his only purpose in life is to strap a bomb on his torso and die? What need has an indoctrinated soldier fighting for his country and people to learn the intricacies of world literature, or recognize the philosophical attributes of characters such as Oliver Twist or Hamlet? Freedom fighting is alive and well, and surely always will be in one form or another, and the trainees taught at underground schools preparing for the bloody upheaval of revolution are capable, in the end, of causing more destruction in even the world's most stable government systems than leaders and laymen can dream.

Miro and his group leader, Artkin, are ready for what is to come when they board the bus full of kids, routed to take more than a dozen five-year-olds to summer camp. The two revolutionaries have done their homework and know the bus's schedule, know the best location to board the bus and take control from the driver, and do so without incident. But immediately there are unforeseen wrinkles to work around, as there are with even the most airtight plans. A young woman driver, instead of the man who usually drives the bus? Miro, only a teenager himself, was ready to blast a bullet into the head of the man, but a woman? He's almost never even looked at a woman. How is he supposed to execute one? But no matter, the plan goes ahead with no need to kill Kate Forrester, at least not right away. As the bus's tires squeal to a halt midway across the towering bridge where Artkin had planned to stop all along, hanging high over the gushing waters of the river below, more than a hundred feet up and inaccessible by any straightforward method of rescue, the standoff has begun, even if the authorities have not yet been notified of the impending crisis.

Don't let your mind linger too long on what happens now; it will be dangerous for your mental health. The government is drawn into the deadly game of negotiations and bargaining, of course, and not apart from Artkin's will. His intent was always to place himself, Miro and the bus of panicked children in just this situation, literally high and dry and no more than a few feet from grisly death for the kids and their innocent driver. It was Artkin who alerted the authorities of something big going down involving a bus full of kids taken hostage, and now SWAT teams, special units, military officers and high-ranking generals are in on the crisis, pacing where solid land holds the promise of safety for all those children vulnerable to the blast of a madman's firearms should the mood strike him. If the government is to believe Artkin is serious about his demands, then lives must be sacrificed on the continuously bloody altar of revolution, and the only lives on hand to ritually bleed are those of the five-year-olds, scarcely aware they are sheep treading toward the slaughter. How many nightmares can the murder of a single child set off, mercurial ripples of death and destruction lapping against other lives that then ripple out and poison still others, circling back with no end to the suffering? What damage, then, can multiple murders of the innocent inflict, bullets tearing through tiny chests and hearts and heads, young human matter never meant to rend and splatter, not intended to fray at the seams until the indifference of old age arrives, and with it the slow withering of natural death? The potential energy of a million dreams cut short, more than a dozen individual futures smashed into shards of useless brokenness like glass panes dropped from a skyscraper, is what sits on the bridge keeping the world in unmoving dread, a symbol of the suffering that may be coming, the suffering that *is* coming. There is no negotiating with terrorists, but there is no leaving a bus of children to be tortured and killed by an enemy of the state, either. There is only official operations hiding under cover as renegade movement driven by lawmen and military who won't bow to protocol when it's children whose lives are on the line, the men

instigating the action the only ones whose reputations will be on the line should it fail. But how can that ever work? How can it ever work without innocent bloodshed?

It isn't the threat of young blood spilled to appease the demands of another country's radicals that holds *After the First Death* together, pushing the narrative forward swiftly and unobtrusively. It's the strong, sturdy content the author writes into the story, like heavy-duty girders designed to keep aloft the weightiest external matter. It's the lesson Miro learned as a child in the refugee camp when the only toy he owned, prized as a gift from his older brother, was stolen in the night while he slept. Who would lift a toy from a sleeping child that has not a single other possession to his name? That didn't matter for Miro, because they were never going to find it. What matters is the lesson he learned from it: "Do not seek to own anything, do not try to make anything belong to you, do not look for pleasure in anything. It will be taken from you sooner or later just as you must take from other people." Living in a land of affluence, the loss of a cherished toy, no matter by what means, can almost always be made right. What does a minor exchange of money for another toy mean in the larger scheme of things if it can soothe a small worried brow, or cause to cease the tears of a boy or girl missing their favorite plaything? But Miro doesn't come from that world; his thinking is different, it *had* to be different if he was to survive. It's a big part of the mindset that has led him to this terrible day on the bridge, holding a gun both proverbially and literally to the heads of children like he once was, but of much more privileged backgrounds. Having always the mindset of never taking ownership over anything in this world, living only for the homeland that has been disrespected internationally but can finally be compensated for its travails, is what it takes to lead a busload of youngsters to the tipping point, knowing death most likely awaits.

What hope does Kate Forrester, the bus driver, have to go on now? The writing is on the wall for her; it isn't hard to figure out her life is most expendable of all the hostages, and she has been lucky to be allowed to live until now. It's the children, in truth, who keep her alive, for Artkin, Miro and their cohorts have no knowledge of young ones and even less awareness of what American kids need in order to remain calm in a tense situation. If Kate can help assuage a few fears temporarily and keep the hostages docile, then she's worth the trouble of allowing her to live a few more hours. But Kate is no fool. She knows her elimination could be given the go-ahead at any time; her time is borrowed, and with that awareness comes the desperation of needing to stay alive no matter what, the instinct that if all others die the world can still prevail, but if oneself dies it is the end forever. There is a bus of unmined assets sitting around her, however, little hands and brains whose capabilities in some respects, at least, are beyond those of adults, and though it may be a wan hope, it is a hope nonetheless in the midst of pessimism stretching otherwise to the four corners of the earth. "Sometimes a kid could do something an adult couldn't do, squeeze into a place an adult couldn't squeeze." This is true at all times, in all places, but what can that understating do for Kate and these tiny wards she never signed on to look after for more than the time it takes to drive a bus to camp? Is it of any importance at all?

Kate Forrester's most interesting thoughts in her hours of sitting and staring, unable to do anything but pat a few downy heads and stroke a tearstained cheek or two when the kids' distress grows especially intense, are about her burgeoning realization that the moments of deepest despair in dreading the death that likely awaits her come right before she is buoyed by unexpected surges of hope. It's the hope of desolation, she knows, when she has accepted things can't get worse and she's going to die, so she knows she has nothing to lose. In those moments, unseen options come to light and crazy stunts she could try begin romancing her affections, even if they would put her and the children in great peril. Without fear of causing her or anyone else's death needlessly, convinced they will probably all perish anyway, it frees Kate to hope again, though it is hope born not of reason, but fatalism. "She caught her breath, pondering a new thought: the possibility that hope comes out of hopelessness and that the opposite of things carry the seeds of birth—love out of hate, good out of evil. Didn't flowers grow out of dirt?" Such thinking prods Kate to count and recount what assets she retains aboard the deathtrap bus, and there are more than she knew she had when the voyage began that morning. Isn't there always room for a little cautious hope? But Kate hits the nail on the head when an audacious plan she constructs can't seem to get going because she's having a hard time forcing herself to

commit unreservedly to decisive action. Why can it be so hard to act even when we've reasoned endlessly about it and know we're doing the right thing, that the risks are worth the reward even if both are extreme? As Kate reflects, "...she wished there were a way she could rehearse her bravery." It's the one component of any plan that can't be rehearsed or trained: the gumption to move at the point of entry and get the action started, regardless of consequences. But even with all the bravery you'll need, plans fail so easily. Yes, they do...

Told in two primary alternating sections, *After the First Death* feels, at first, like a disjointed story, pieces not fitting together properly as in a normal book. That's because there's so much the reader doesn't know, so many horrors to be revealed. You can be thankful you don't know the truth before you do, a short-lived mercy among atrocities, like drugged chocolate bars as prelude to a bullet in the skull. The pieces will coalesce soon enough, and you, as I did, will reel from the heartbreak that accosts your soul like a militant nationalist on a suicide mission, knowing full well it will take you both down in the end. There's no escaping the haunting nature of a break in the human psyche when it comes, when the tragedies we could have prevented and the guilt feasting nonstop on our soul are too powerful to keep at bay any longer, and the miracle of lucidity crashes down around us like the destruction of a priceless palace. It blows our minds because we cannot imagine bearing the guilt, either, the weight of unintended consequences crushing us, at last, when the one we can't live without is snuffed out like the dying flicker of flame on a wilted candle wick. This is the horror Robert Cormier writes about. This is the horror above all others, the last refuge of empathy in a world desensitized to everything else. It is why *After the First Death* is a story you will never be able to let go of. And why, no matter how hard you try to shake it, it will never let go of you.

And there it is; I have now read the last of Robert Cormier's young-adult suspense novels, barring future posthumous releases. The Master is gone, now, a casualty of pervasive lung cancer at age seventy-five in the year 2000. No more novels to strike our souls with unrelenting grief, make our hearts ache and mourn so strongly for people we never knew that we feel like we are going to pieces, too, like we are breaking apart and there's no way we can ever be put back together again. It's a feeling of being completely, indivisibly alive that not everyone can understand or appreciate, being part of the universal pain of a life in which the "good guys" don't always win, yet it doesn't prevent us from trying our luck and hoping for something better. *After the First Death* and Robert Cormier's other novels remind us indelibly that hope isn't to be trifled with, and isn't to be taken for granted as if it will wait there for us whether we embrace it or not. Hope is a fleeting entity, disappearing so easily if we take our eyes off it for a second, and *After the First Death* will have you holding it closer than ever, as you might a beloved friend or family member after experiencing a realistic nightmare about their death. You won't ever read another book like *After the First Death*, of that I am sure. I could never adequately express its greatness with my words, but then, I don't need to. The story explains itself better than I ever could. Prepare yourself, though, because after reading this book, you will never be quite the same.

Michelle says

In a word, amazing. Perhaps even more relevant today than when it was originally written. There's not much I can say about this one - the book speaks for itself.

Bobbie says

The truth is, I'm not sure how I feel about this book. As I was reading it, I turned page after page - drowning in the words and the action. I felt like I was there. My blood pressure skyrocketed; I felt like I was in one of my all-too-vivid nightmares - and yet, I kept reading. At least I didn't pee my pants...

But then it ended. The ending left me reeling, caught in that no-man's-land between hating and loving, unsure how to feel or what to make of the book. Who was the biggest victim? Who was most to blame? How does something like this happen? And I guess that really is the beauty of After the First Death. This book is metaphorically accurate in its portrayal of terrorism - a war that brings out the worst in all of us - a war that nobody wins.

Violence: All things considered, this was not the goriest book I have read recently. The premise made it seem like it might be a bit bloody. What it lacks in blood, it makes up for in terrorism against children. The violence might not be graphically described, but it is disgusting enough without the blood. Be prepared.

Language: There are a couple of cuss words in the book.

Sex: There is some partial nudity described. A guy thinks about masturbation and sex. A girl attempts to attract a man in order to make him see her as more human. A couple characters think about prostitutes. While this isn't really about sex, it does relate to the body so I guess I'll put it here - my professor said a student was offended by the fact that a teenage girl wet herself multiple times throughout the book. Personally, I did not find this offensive; I think I would probably wet myself in that situation too.

Alcohol/Drugs: There is talk of tranquilizers.

Kate says

Sixteen children are held hostage on a schoolbus, and three teens will determine their survival. Kate wasn't meant to be the bus driver that day, she was just filling in for her uncle. Ben wasn't meant to be there either. He got involved because his father is a general in a secret government organization. And Miro - well, Miro meant to be there. It is his mission. He doesn't expect to survive the day. His death will help the cause.

I need to start keeping track of those blog posts where these books are recommended to me! The description of this one sounded intriguing, a little like *Ransom* by Lois Duncan. But it is quite different, because it's clear in this case that the hijackers of the bus are Middle Eastern. There are sections in first person, which seem to be Ben's diary, alluding to past events of the bus hijacking on the bridge. Ben is distraught about how the day turned out and is considering suicide. Then we get the third-person narrations of Kate and Miro. Kate is focused on survival, even though she is the most likely to die. In fact, Miro was supposed to kill her immediately, but because she is a young woman instead of the older man they expected to be driving the bus, they allow her to live to care for the children. Miro is presented yes, as a terrorist, raised to be part of this movement. He has known no other life. He is accustomed to women who wear burkas, and Kate's American style of dress makes him suddenly aware of sex. The tension is great throughout the story, leading up to the end which surprised me somehow. As always with Cormier, gray areas are explored. Who is good and who is bad, manipulation is key for nearly every character.

I had to check the copyright date on this one - 1979. There has been unrest in the Middle East for a long time, and I knew that these hijackers were not ISIS but were likely instead Israeli or Palestinian, and yet it felt so current. It's rare when a vintage YA novel holds up so many years later, because so many deal with "trendy" topics. This was more about the psychology of three different characters in an intense situation, and that will always stand the test of time.

Tristram says

An Unpleasant Book – Which is Definitely Worth Reading

It is hard to believe that Robert Cormier wrote “After the First Death” as early as 1979, as you would think the plot was inspired by some of the gruesome events of the last few years, but Cormier’s pessimism was apparently well ahead of its time – if pessimism can ever be that.

Cormier’s fable is terse and yet complex, as it offers us a variety of different perspectives, often changing ones within one paragraph, which makes the novel quite a demanding treat. The story is about the hijacking of a bus of pre-school children on their way to summer camp by a group of four terrorists from an unspecified country somewhere to the south. Miro, the youngest terrorist, is about to pass his initiation by killing the bus driver the moment the bus is parked on an old railway bridge. The original driver, however, has been stood in for by his teenage niece Kate Forrester, and Artkin, the terrorists’ ringleader, decides to spare her for a while in order to have somebody to calm down the children, who are also being drugged by the hijackers, which causes the death of one little boy. The terrorists demand the release of some of their accomplices, a large amount of money for the continuance of their cause and the disbandment of a secret government organization to do with countering terrorist attacks. The government, of course, is unwilling to concede, especially in this latter point, so that the military decides to take the bus by force.

Cormier’s novel is more than just a book about the roots and motives of terrorism, although the figure of Miro can teach us something about how young people are recruited for terror organizations in poorer countries. It is, as far as I see it, basically a book about how adolescents are influenced by their parents. Kate, the bus driver, seems to be an insipid American teenage girl at first sight, but in the face of danger she discovers a potential for bravery and determination inside herself and yet all the time stands in need of somebody, preferably her parents, acknowledging this new quality. Ben Marchand, a general’s son, is also willing to please his father – and his country – and therefore accepts his father’s suggestion to go and negotiate with the terrorists. The most unsettling thing about the general is that he knows his son will be subjected to torture – the general actually preferring more clinical terms like “intensive interrogation” or “methodological intervention” – and that he therefore makes his son pick up false information, which he will deliver during “intensive interrogation”. There is still another father-son relationship, namely that between Miro and Artkin, who at least is some kind of surrogate father to Miro. Equally eager to please his father figure as Ben is, Miro is yearning to earn his full acceptance into the circle of terrorists by killing Kate, although he also feels fascinated by her.

Both the general and his terrorist adversary, Cormier seems to say, manipulate the younger generation for their own aims, deftly using emotional bribery to achieve this aim, and justifying their cause by tagging the label of patriotism to their actions. “Either you are a great patriot or a great fool”, Artkin says to the general when Marchand sends off his own son as a bo-between, and we might ask ourselves where the difference between these two possibilities lies. Reading this book made it clear to me that I doubtless have many character faults, but that, luckily, I am completely innocent of patriotism.

Cormier’s book is extremely well-written – with a disturbing use of metaphors bordering on the insane* – and it provides ample food for thought. However, it is full of sordid realities and does not have a happy ending, which makes it quite unpleasant to read. But then eating your greens is not always pleasant, either, but good for you!

* To give you one example: “The lantern fell from his hand but continued to shine on him where it fell.

Blood gushed from the faucet that had been his mouth a moment before. The blood spilled across his chest like scarlet vomit. “

Rjurik Davidson says

I don't usually give books a 5 star rating. Only for the greatest books, really. This was great. I'm kinda speechless after it. It makes most contemporary YA seem thin and empty by comparison. This is something else.

Emily Tchorz says

I think this book was very well written, although it could be slow at times. It was also kind of predictable, but I really like Robert Cormier and he is a great author, his books just start a bit slow and can be confusing at times. The plot itself is suspenseful, and the characters are well developed, you really feel for the people in the book.

Trevor says

Published first in 1979 (one of my prized books is a signed first HC edition), it reads as if it were a hostage crisis unfolding right before us. A school bus full of kids is taken hostage by young men fighting for their country and religion. There's some major Stockholm syndrome, and some very unsettling plot twists revealed as the book progresses. There's a general in charge of anti terrorist activities, who ends up putting his own son in the hostage takers' paths. All the decisions made by the characters here are unbelievably difficult. It's one of the grittiest YA books I've ever read.

Maciek says

But how many times is a person allowed to die?

First published in 1979, *After the First Death* can be seen as a spiritual precursor to his later novel, *Heroes* - both are concerned with the same themes: devotion to a cause, courage, fear and guilt, the cost of sacrifice. Both books present them in different ways - *Heroes* approaches them through the eyes of Francis Cassavant, an 18 year old soldier who has just returned home from World War 2, while *After the First Death* focuses on a group of terrorists who hijack a bus full of children heading for a summer camp and take them hostage.

Similarly to Cormier's earlier work, *The Chocolate War* features several points of view: it begins with a narration from Ben Marchand, a teenager who was drawn into the hostage situation as a third party, and for whom the experience has changed everything, most notably the relationship with his father. As Ben tells his story from a hospital bed, the novel shows how the hijacking happened from the point of view of Miro - the youngest member of the terrorist group, a sixteen year old teenager. The bus is Miro's first mission - the group's leader, Artkin, promised Miro the killing of the bus's driver, the ultimate act of proving himself worthy. The bus driver, Kate, is herself a sixteen year old teenager who was just standing in for her uncle just

for this one day. Frightened to the bottom of her soul, Kate knows that her time is short and quickly running out, but is desperate to remain alive - hopeless in desolation.

The horrors of *After the First Death* emerge slowly from these alternating narratives, but they gain traction quickly, spiraling down to an unavoidable tragedy. What is notable is the fact that the book does not take an easy way out and demonize the terrorists - both Miro and Artkin are completely convinced that their actions are benefiting their homeland - a place that Miro has never seen - and to protect and fight for it they're willing to kill and sacrifice their own lives. Miro is both a frightening ideologue in his devotion to the cause, but at the age of sixteen is also a confused teenager - someone whose feelings and desires emerge at unexpected times. Miro's personal philosophy is one of never owning anything for himself - and to live and act only for his homeland, an ideal place of striking beauty which suffered much harm, destruction and exploitation at foreign hands. Miro has no knowledge of what American children need to remain calm, and he needs Kate to keep them in that state - and she, a young teen just like him, tries to understand his feelings and motives to try and win his confidence, or at least make him see her as a human being. Each of the decisions that the characters have to take is incredibly difficult, and the consequences are deadly.

The title of the novel takes several meanings throughout the text, and the ending is particularly sad and shocking, with a twist that I didn't see coming. Like other Cormier novels that I've read, *After the First Death* is a powerful book, difficult in its bleakness - but one I can't not recommend. Just bear that in mind when you'll read his works - there are no easy ways out and easy answers to hard questions, just like in life.

Cory Hernandez says

Holy cow! This book blew my mind! Now I know why Robert Cormier is cherished in the eyes of Young Adult Literature. The book is one that will really make the reader think, which is why I primarily loved the book; it really made me think. The book tells the incredible story of terrorists hijacking a bus of five and six year old children, as well as a young woman who is the bus's driver. The book is told through the eyes of Miro, one of the hijackers, Kate, the bus driver, and Ben, the son of a general. The reader sees different view points and is forced to sympathize with all of them.

I thought this book was very well written. In the beginning, it was a little hard to know what was going on, but as the book kept going, it was easier to figure out; that is, until the end and then it was a little harder. It was very real and most of the characters were believable for the most part. Caution! There is violence, including the death of two children, and also many swearing scenes. Overall, great book and highly recommended. Should be taught in the higher grades of high school.

Scale 1-5

Violence: 4 (child death, guns, explosions, and some minor torturing)

Sex:3 (sexual fantasy)

Language:3.5 (there are cuss words; due to the nature of the book, expected)

Drugs:2 (children are drugged with unknown drug)

Alcohol:0 (none)

Charlotte says

bleak

After I finished this book I just sat there on the couch for a solid ten minutes not doing anything but thinking. I'm a champion for bleak literature, but I still don't know how to respond to this book. I've never read anything like it. Telling the story of a bus of children taken hostage by terrorists, this book is packed with emotion, but I didn't even know what emotions I was feeling or how to respond to them. Several times I felt punched in the stomach and had to catch my breath. *After the First Death* is tragic: there's no other word for it. I was so full of unexpected emotion that I couldn't even cry.

The writing is beautiful, genius--that's no surprise, though, given that we are talking Robert Cormier here. I don't even know how to recommend this book. It's a good book: brilliant writing, real characters, real emotion. But I don't even know how to define the emotion in this book. This book is provocative and intense. I'd recommend this book because it's good literature, truly good literature, but I take no responsibility for how you'll feel or respond.

Jessica Reid says

Cormier was a genius. His writing is absolutely outstanding and never ceases to amaze me. His books are - in many ways - terrifying and so unflinching in their approach to their topics. This novel deals with terrorists who hijack a school bus.

It's been many years since I first read this novel and it still haunts me. Absolutely incredible.

Catherine says

This is not an adventure story, like one might expect of a YA novel. There is great tension but little action as most of the the book deals with the thoughts and emotions of three teens' caught up in a hostage-taking incident -- they are inexperienced, ideological and lacking in forethought, yet expected to function as adults by the adults who are in control.

While this story is told from multiple perspectives, it is a very close third person - sometimes in the head of the teen terrorist, sometimes the teen hostage, and also the teen sent in as messenger - none of it meant to be comfortable or comforting. Overall, one of the most powerful YA books I've read this year, as relevant today as when it was written in 1979.

Ryne says

[Note: Spoilers ahead!]

After the First Death is certainly a grim read, and I'm not sure why that suprised me. I don't know WHY I

assumed that a book about terrorists and hostage situations would be happier. It was a powerful read, but it was ultimately too disturbing for me to finish.

In the novel, terrorists from an unnamed country hijack a school bus in order to further the liberation of their homeland. Things get complicated when the bus driver (who was supposed to be killed within minutes of the hijacking) is an 18-year-old girl. And when the military intervenes, things get scarier yet. The novel's story is mainly told from the viewpoints of three teenagers involved in this terrifying situation: Miro, one of the terrorists; Katie, the bus driver; and Ben, the son of a military general who is chosen to act as a liaison in the negotiations between the government and the terrorists. The novel is grim and graphic and sometimes gut-wrenching; much of the action takes place on the school bus, which becomes hot and smelly and eerie, filled with moaning drugged children and the terrified Katie.

After getting 3/4 of the way through the novel, I decided that I couldn't handle it anymore (or that even if I could handle it, I still shouldn't keep reading it). So I stopped. Truth be told, Robert Cormier is actually a really skilled writer. He describes characters very realistically, making me care about them (especially the little children and the 18-year-old, Katie, who are taken hostage by terrorists in the novel). The book was actually very gripping and character-driven: there is relatively little action in the novel, in fact, but you're kept moving along by its excellent writing. But while I know that the overall premise of the novel is a "good" point (i.e. "terrorism = EVIL, and also sometimes the 'good guys' who are supposed to protect us can do pretty bad things too"), I'd argue that Cormier is not using his powers in a good way. The reason the novel disturbed me so profoundly was in fact because it was so well-written. It might seem pretty silly for me to have stopped the book with only 59 pages left, but I don't need to see any more. The book has done its work for me; I've seen enough.

I understand that not everyone will have the same reaction I did to *After the First Death*. I have noted some of the good in the novel, and the most impressive thing for me was the heroism of Katie--she is a realistic and frightened young woman who does the best she can and is a true and brave hero. But for me, personally, having read as much of the book as I did, I feel a little bit like Marlow at the end of *Heart of Darkness*: this book was just "too dark [for me] — too dark altogether." I don't really feel that this is a work meant for young adults, though it's often classified as YA fiction; I would only recommend it to adults, and *perhaps* to high-school-age teens. If there were separate ratings for "how much I liked a book" and for "quality of writing in the book," I would give the book a low "like" factor (as I have here), but a high "writing quality" factor.

Ash says

Three teenagers caught at the center of a terrorist hostage situation involving a bus-load of children on their way to a camp. All three face their different choices, but inevitably they are faced with the possibility of death, firstly there is Ben, the son of an army General who becomes the go-between between the Army and the Terrorists, he does so upon his fathers orders despite being somewhat unwilling. Next there is Kate, the bus driver, filling in for her uncle she becomes entangled in the plot when she is forced into driving upon a bridge and left to sit and wait until the demands of those holding her hostage are met, having to face the possibility of watching the children being killed one by one. And finally, there is Miro, the terrorist, whose mistakes and desire for freedom lead him to the bus where he is forced to witness murder and potentially be given a role in this himself. All three of these teenagers share the fact that they are joined by death, Kate knowing that from the moment they allowed her to see their faces she would never have been allowed to live, Miro through the knowledge that it was his role to murder the bus driver and Ben, through his role in the protection of the children who unwillingly walked into the situation.

There is really only one word to describe this book - bleak, and believe me I generally like books of a bleaker nature. But perhaps it is how this one is handled which interests me most. There are very few books which you'll find portrayed a terrorist operation from the perspective of the terrorist himself, and in some ways Miro is made to almost seem human before he stepped aboard the bus. It is here that he loses this and becomes a man driven by the mission he has been give, one which would inevitably lead him to trouble, particularly as his interest in his would-be victim - Kate causes him more trouble than he would ever have anticipated. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Miro is he is the only of the three teenagers to murder another and in many aspects it is clear that he does not feel guilt for this, he takes solace in the fact that he has done what he had to and for reasons which become apparent he felt that it was something that he had to do. Although perhaps it is the fact that he is the only of the three narrators to come out of this book alive which peeves me so. He was in fact the only of the three I was hoping would die, but it is this shock twist in the ending which really gives the book the impact it has in the end.

Kate's ending too came as a shock to me, in particular how it came about which all contributed to the impact this book had upon me, I must admit it was one of those books that left me sitting there for some time once I had completed it, Kate just seemed to show so much strength and bravery in the fact of everything and yet to have it taken from her so quickly and brutally was heartbreaking, likewise with Ben, whose discovery that he was used by his father to deliver a false message to the terrorists causes him to commit suicide. Neither of these characters in my opinion deserved to or should have died, however it showed that in some cases these things could not be avoided, there was nothing that could have stopped it from occurring. It is clear likewise that Miro did not understand the consequences of what he was doing almost as though he did not understand the difference between right and wrong, which makes sense considering he was brought up this way.

This book focuses primarily on the very complex relationships built up during the siege and in particular explores the boundaries of Young Adult literature, and to me it really does this well. It is not every day that a book such as this finds it's way into my hands one which depicts something so horrific in such a blunt way. There is no sugar-coating the situation, and that's just the way the novel is. I highly recommend this to older teenagers and above, it will leave you with more questions than you can find answers for, but at least the journey to those questions involves one of the greatest and most shocking books I have had the pleasure of reading.

5 Stars.
