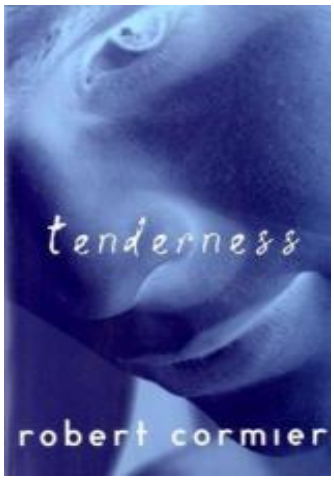
Tenderness

by Robert Cormier



About the Book

Eighteen-year-old Eric has just been released from juvenile detention for murdering his mother and stepfather. Now he's looking for tenderness--tenderness he finds in caressing and killing beautiful girls.

Fifteen-year-old Lori has run away from home again. Emotionally naive but sexually precocious, she is also looking for tenderness--tenderness she finds in Eric. Will Lori and Eric be each other's salvation or destruction? Told from their alternating points of view, this harrowing thriller speeds to its fateful conclusion with an irresistible force, and a final twist that will not be easily forgotten.

Discussion Guide

1.The word "tenderness" has at least two kinds of meanings. Robert Cormier has suggested some of these in the two quotes which open the book: "To know the pain of too much tenderness" and "A part of the body that has been injured is often tender to the touch." How many meanings can you think of for the word "tenderness?" What things or actions could be said to be tender? Which of these imply the potential for pain?

2. Both Eric and Lori have a desperate need for tenderness, and both of them are driven by their need to acts beyond their control. How does the shape and degree of their need differ, in terms of giving or receiving tenderness? How does this difference affect the way they act out their needs? Does Cormier tell us about any circumstances in each of their past lives which might be the source of this need? Would *any* circumstances be enough to explain Eric's extreme pathology?

3. Cormier uses the first three chapters of the book to introduce us to Lori. What passages illustrate her naivete? Her innocent voluptuousness? Her goodhearted generosity? Her resourcefulness and independence? Her lack of conventional morality? What other good and bad qualities does Cormier see in her? In what way is her mother's "bad luck with men" a model for her? Later we learn that "Lori" is short for "Lorelei"--a name taken from the German legend of a Rhine

maiden whose singing lured sailors to shipwreck on the rocks in the river. How is this an appropriate name for Lori? How is it not?

4. Lori's fixation on Throb is an example of our society's tendency to idolize celebrities, even when they are repulsive, like Throb, or evil, like Richard Ramirez, the Nightstalker. What celebrities do you admire? Why? To what lengths would you be willing to go to meet that person or to get their autograph? What do you think people are really looking for when they are fascinated with a famous person?

5. One of the most chilling passages in the book occurs on p. 29 when Eric remarks that kittens have "fragile bones as if they'd snap and break if you pressed too hard, caressed too hard. Which he did, of course, impossible to resist." Eric assumes that anyone would find the impulse to crush kittens as irresistible as he does. Have you ever wanted to hurt a helpless creature or person? What kept you from doing it? Or if you *did* do it, how did you feel afterwards? What are the elements missing in Eric's personality that keep him from having these controls?

6. In the first part of this book, Eric is released from the juvenile detention facility, even though he has admitted to two killings and is suspected of two others, because he has become eighteen and is no longer a minor. Do you think he should have been released? Should he have been executed for his parents' murders? As Eric knows, many states are now changing the law to make it possible to try juveniles as adults for adult crimes. Do you think this is right? Should children as young as five or six be tried as adults? At what age should people be required to assume responsibility for their actions?

7. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*, once said, "No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks." Does Eric consider himself evil? What does he tell himself about the cat-killing that makes it seem to him not only all right, but a good thing? Why does he need to justify his actions like this? How does this delusion of innocence allow him to go on without guilt to the much worse evil of serial murder?

8.The tired old detective whose life has become focused on catching a certain criminal is a familiar character in fiction and film, beginning with Javert in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. Jake Proctor, obsessed with convicting Eric Poole for his murders, is a clear example of this literary type. Like Eric and Lori, he is driven by an overwhelming need. What has happened to Jake in the past that makes catching Eric so important to him? What would the meaning of this conviction be for him and what need would it satisfy? In what two ways is he ultimately disappointed?

9. When Eric discovers Lori in his van, his first impulse is to tell her to get out. What are some of the other places in the story where she could have escaped but didn't? What effect does this have on the reader? Why does Lori stay with Eric? Why does he want to keep her with him? How does this shift and change as their relationship develops?

10. As a boy, Robert Cormier looked forward to an afternoon at the movies every Saturday, and afterward he went home and told the plots to his mother. Much of his early imaginative life was rooted in those films, and traces of their characters and situations show up often in his novels. In *Tenderness* the jail scenes in particular are full of allusions to the gangster films of the 1930s: the mess hall riot, the secret bully, the Irish guard, etc. Can you find other characters and scenes in the book that remind you of old movies?

11. Robert Cormier's novels have often been called "cinematic" by critics, meaning that the action proceeds in short dramatic scenes by dialog rather than description. Do you think *Tenderness* would make a good movie? Describe the

actors who would play the main parts and pick out five important scenes. Should the movie be X-rated or R-rated? What would make the difference between the two classifications? Which would make a more effective movie? Which would make a more popular movie? Which do you think would be closer to Cormier's intention?

12. This narrative is told from the point of view of three different people: Lori, Eric, and Jake. Lori's sections are told in first person, that is, in her own voice. The sections focusing on Eric and Jake are told in omniscient third person, that is, by an imaginary narrator who knows what they are thinking. Why does Cormier do this? Do you find this technique confusing or helpful in keeping track of the story? How would the story have been different if Eric spoke in first person?

13. Typically a novel is built around conflict, the suspense-creating tension that rises to a peak of excitement and is resolved at the climax of the story. In *Tenderness* there are not one, but three lines of conflict, with three different resolutions. What is the climactic scene for each of these conflicts and how do they resolve the tension: the question of whether Eric will kill Lori? Jake Proctor's stalking of Eric? The growing possibility of love between Eric and Lori?

14. How does the setting of the scene at the carnival contrast with what is going on with Eric and Lori? What kind of music would you put behind this scene? Why does Cormier have Lori ride the Ferris wheel, and not the carousel or the dodge-em cars? Lori urges Eric to go off with Maria, knowing what will happen. Why is her self-sacrifice for love both unselfish and self-serving? How is it admirable and horrifying at the same time? What is revealed about Maria from her expression and actions when the police arrive?

15. As Eric's humanity begins to break through under Lori's influence, a repressed memory of his mother surfaces: "He remembered dark nights, her long black hair enveloping him, her lips trailing across his flesh..." What does this reveal about his childhood? About his need to kill only dark-haired women? Does this new knowledge change your feelings about his murder of his mother?

16. Irony is defined as "an outcome opposite to what was, or might have been expected." There are multiple ironies in Lori's death by drowning and its outcome. Most obvious is that Eric wants desperately to save the life of the woman he has been planning to kill for most of the book. What other ironies can you think of--for Lori, for Eric, and for Jake?

17. At the end of the story, when Eric is in his cell awaiting execution, he cries for the first time in his life, remembering Lori's unconditional love. What do you feel toward him at this point? How have your feelings changed over the course of the book? How has Cormier built up our sympathy for this serial killer?

18. But in the last line Cormier says "the monster also cried." Jake has called Eric a monster many times, but Eric has always indignantly rejected the term. Why does he feel so strongly about this? In jail, he thinks "What did the old cop know about monsters?" What does this tell us about what Eric knows about monsters? Who, or what, is the monster that cries, and what does this imply about the darkness that is in Eric's psyche? How is this darkness transformed by the monster's tears?

19. In Robert Cormier's novels, the good that the author really endorses often appears only as a reverse image, the positive in the reader's mind in reaction to the negative on the page. For instance, Eric's "tender" killings are a hideous parody of love, but as negative examples what do they make us realize about the true qualities of tenderness and love? In the end, which do you think Cormier says is more powerful, Eric's boundless evil or Lori's selfless love?

Author Bio

Robert Cormier doesn't look like a man who writes novels of stunning impact about the monstrous and inexorable power of evil. A slight man with wispy gray hair and a crooked smile, his eyes gaze straight at you with kindly frankness from behind his big glasses. He was for many years a newspaperman specializing in human interest stories. Cormier and his wife Connie have lived all their lives in the little New England mill town of Leominster, Massachusetts, where he grew up as part of a close, warm community of French Canadian immigrants. His four children and many grandchildren live nearby and visit often.

Cormier's eleven novels for young adults have won him the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the American Library Association, the ALAN Award from the National Council of Teachers of English, the California Young Reader Medal, and many places on almost every honor list in the field. His novel *The Chocolate War* is regarded as the leading masterwork of adolescent literature. Cormier travels and speaks extensively, and loves chocolate, the late night, and reading--especially horror.

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