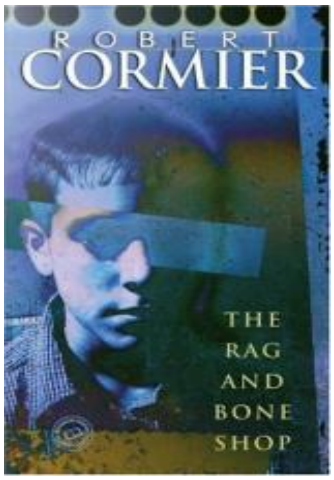
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Rag and Bone Shop

by Robert Cormier



About the Book

Twelve-year old Jason is accused of the brutal murder of a young girl. Is he innocent or guilty? The shocked town calls on an interrogator with a stellar reputation: he always gets a confession. The confrontation between Jason and his interrogator forms the chilling climax of this terrifying look at what can happen when the pursuit of justice becomes a personal crusade for victory at any cost.

Discussion Guide

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The title of this novel is drawn from two lines of a poem by William Butler Yeats, ?The Circus Animals? Desertion.? How does the phrase ?the rag and bone shop? (i.e., a place where the worst castoffs end up) sum up the essence of this novel? What is Trent saying about his life when he quotes these two lines? (p. 71) And when he shifts into the final phase of the interrogation and remembers the first line? (p. 123)

2. After Jason vanquishes the bully Bobo Kelton with one blow, ?he didn?t think he?d ever hit anybody again but he had proved himself capable of doing it.? (p. 26) How does the second part of that sentence become a weapon later for Trent? Why does hitting Bobo mean an end to Jason?s tears? Is the principal right when he says violence never solves anything?

3. Trent?s deceased wife Lottie had told him, ?You are what you do.? Why, coming from her, is this an accusation? How, coming from Trent himself at the end, is it a death sentence? Is it true that people are what they do, not only in their jobs, but in the sum total of all their acts, good and bad? Can this be changed?

4. Sarah Downes (and also Carl Seaton) compares Trent to a priest. How are Trent?s interrogations like what a priest does in the confessional? But what crucial differences in Trent?s intentions and capabilities make the outcome for his ?perps? entirely different?

5. The exact definitions of the following words are important to understanding the ideas that underlie Cormier?s themes of guilt, innocence, and forgiveness. Look up admission, confession, absolution, indictment, and remission and notice how their definitions overlap and where they differ. How are these terms central to this story?

6. What are the heavy external and internal pressures on Trent to get a confession from Jason? In real life, is it possible that this kind of pressure may result in hasty convictions of innocent people? Have you heard of any such cases? What might be done to keep this from happening?

7. Trent says he has ?rules and regulations? for interrogations. What are some of these strategies that relate to the preliminary scenario, the physical set-up of the room, and the subtleties of psychological intimidation? How do these interrogation techniques affect the suspect?

8. ?Thrust and parry? is a phrase Trent uses to describe the interrogation. From what sport does this expression come, and what image does it evoke? As the questioning proceeds, Trent suddenly knows irrevocably that Jason is innocent. How does he talk himself out of acting on this realization? What would have been the consequences if he had allowed himself to follow his conscience?

9. A stunning plot twist takes us by surprise when Trent emerges into the hall after he has tricked Jason into ?confessing? and is told by Sarah Downes that Brad Bartlett has just admitted to killing his sister. Suddenly everything is different. What are the present and future implications of this new situation for Trent? For Jason? What emotions might they each have felt at this moment that they didn?t feel?

10. In the end, Jason?s view of reality has been badly twisted by Trent?s perverse questioning and his own false confession. What does he tell himself to justify his plan to kill Bobo? How will this action restore his self-respect? If he carries through on this murder, who will then need to confess?

Discussion questions prepared by Patty Campbell, author of PRESENTING ROBERT CORMIER (Twayne, Dell) and 1989 winner of the ALA?s Grolier Foundation Award for distinguished service to young adults and libraries.

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.

The Rag and Bone Shop

by Robert Cormier

Publication Date: May 13, 2003
Mass Market Paperback: 176 pages
Publisher: Laurel Leaf
ISBN-10: 0440229715
ISBN-13: 9780440229711