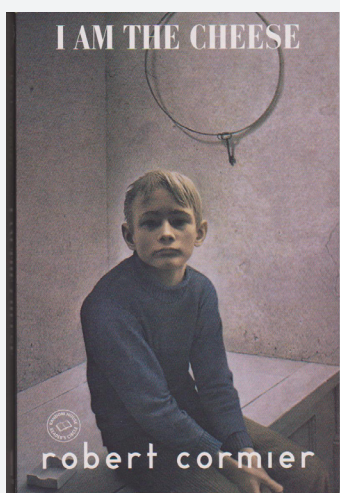


Second Reaction: Questioning Governmental Surveillance: The Enduring Political Commentary of Robert Cormier's *I Am the Cheese*

Cormier, Robert. *I Am the Cheese*. 1977.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf-Random House, 2007.

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Imagine hearing this news story lead-in on the news:

A major controversy involving the United States federal government and individual privacy rights has been brewing over the course of the last few months.

Depending on the year one heard this lead-in, a unique controversy would probably come immediately to mind. As I write in early 2014, this lead-in might refer to the National Security Agency's practice of collecting U.S. citizens' digital and phone communications. In the 1970s, when Robert Cormier wrote *I Am the Cheese*, this news lead-in might have referred to the growing worry over the increasing surveillance capability of information technology, which led to the U.S. Congress enacting the Privacy Act of 1974 (Flaherty). One could name other controversies over the intervening years, which maintain the relevancy of Cormier's story at any historical moment when readers first experienced the tale of Adam Farmer. As might be expected, the characterization of the government's manipulation of Adam has continued to raise concerns about exposing Cormier's novel to young readers.

Worries over Effects of Political Commentary on Adolescent Readers

The warning about governmental intrusion arrives early in Cormier's novel when Adam and an "old man" discuss the route of Adam's journey. The old man warns Adam about the "terrible world out there" with untrustworthy people:

Of course you don't [know who the bad guys are]. Because you can't tell the good guys from the bad guys anymore. Nobody knows these days. Nobody. No privacy, either. Next time you use a phone, you listen. Listen close. You might hear a click. And if you do, then somebody's listening. Even if you don't hear a click, somebody might be listening anyway. (18)

This character's conspiratorial tone about the role of government in citizens' lives has a familiar resonance, and could probably be overheard today at diner counters across the country. Due to this familiarity in theme and tone, the 21st century reader engaging in Cormier's novel could easily extrapolate what happens to Adam as a contemporary critique on security surveillance in the digital age. This political commentary caused *I Am the Cheese* to be challenged repeatedly over the years, most notably in a court case in Panama City, Florida, based upon its supposed anti-government, un-American messages (Karolides 223). Current criticism still questions the appropriateness of the use of a thematic paranoia about the State for young readers because of the possibility of reinforcing feelings of disenfranchisement amongst adolescents. For instance Clare Walsh has interpreted Adam's story as full of thwarted rites of passage, including Adam's inability to express his love to Amy, which she worries might "exacerbate young readers' anxieties about self-identity" (123). Her criticism is based upon the narrative devices—an unreliable narrator in the bicycle journey chapters, the shift in point of view in the taped sessions chapters—employed by Cormier that intentionally deceive the reader about the roles and freedoms of Adam, his family, and Brint.

Capable Adolescent Readers Producing Political Critique

Both worries, however, are grounded in a particular view of the capacities of adolescent readers. Specifically, fears over how fictional stories affect young readers are often based upon conceptions of adolescents as incapable of rational thought and reaction to stimuli because of psychological discourses about cognitive development. In other words, these challenges and critiques follow the notion that adolescents are passive consumers of social, cultural, and political messages, and lack the ability (or motivation) to question such messages for their veracity. According to this perspective, adolescents' passivity, then, pushes them toward an unproductive and idle citizenry.

However, if one takes a more productive view of adolescents as active architects of social, cultural, and political understandings and products, then *I Am the Cheese* becomes a particularly

useful novel in inciting both young readers' critiques of institutional power and behavior, and youth's own actions toward building a more socially just society. In my experience of working with youth for the past 15 years, I have been inspired by young people's drive to wonder about how society is constructed, to challenge the status quo, and to better their living environments. Cormier's novel exposes a government that views its manipulation of its citizenry as patriotic, while embracing political options such as "termination procedures" for its citizens as correct strategic policy. Adolescent readers' reactions to such a government could help them develop an understanding of the historical and contemporary muddled relationship between the State and its citizenry. In this way, *I Am the Cheese* endures as both a critique of political functions within a republic, and as a platform for youth to consider how such functions affect their own lives, as well as giving them the opportunity to consider how they can take action for change.

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About the Author

Mark A. Lewis is an assistant professor of literacy education at Loyola University Maryland. His research interests include examining evocative and imaginative frameworks for determining literary competence within secondary English language arts pedagogy, and analyzing how *young* adult literature functions to reify and disrupt sociocultural conceptions of youth and adolescence.