

Airframe Study Guide

Airframe by Michael Crichton

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Plot Summary

Airframe by Michael Crichton is a suspense novel that will keep the reader guessing until the final pages. Once again, Crichton brings to life the issues that haunt Americans in their everyday lives, this time tackling air safety. Flight 545 has just landed with three dead and more than fifty injured passengers. Casey Singleton, Quality Assurance executive for Norton Aircraft, has one week to find out what happened to Flight 545 or lose a deal with China that would move her company into the black for the next two decades. Casey fights her own employees, reporters, and bosses to find the answers. *Airframe* is a fascinating defense of the aeronautic industry that will influence potential airline passengers for years to come.

A young couple is flying on TransPacific Flight 545 to Colorado with their small baby. The mother is a nervous flyer, but the flight is nearly over and she is beginning to relax. Suddenly the plane goes into a dive, sending her husband, video camera in hand, and flying through the cabin. The plane then begins to rise, screams filling the cabin. On the ground in Los Angeles, the pilot radios the tower and asks for forty ambulances. Word gets out, emergency personnel rush to the airport. Casey Singleton, an executive at Norton Aircraft, gets a call informing her of an important meeting scheduled earlier than expected. The aircraft involved in Flight 545 is a Norton N-22 airframe.

Casey is assigned to a group of engineers given the task of finding out what happened on Flight 545. This case is of particular importance to Norton Aircraft because it comes less than a week before the president is due to sign a large deal with China. The China deal will put Norton Aircraft in the black for the next two decades. If, however, word of the accident gets out and China believes it proves a safety issue against the N-22, the deal will not go through and Norton Aircraft could find itself in financial difficulty. Casey and her team have less than a week to prove the accident was not caused by a design flaw in the N-22.

To top off the pressure Casey is under to solve the mystery of Flight 545, she also has to take on a new assistant at the request of her boss, John Marder. This young man, Bob Richman, follows Casey around as she travels to LAX with her team to inspect the plane. On immediate inspection, the team knows that something catastrophic, bigger than turbulence, affected this plane. The damage tells a story in itself, showing the experienced investigators that passengers were thrown around the cabin like rag dolls. Richman is disgusted by the sight, but wonders why the investigators rule out turbulence so readily. Casey explains that there have been no cases of severe turbulence in years due to the use of computer navigation and weather radar technology.

The investigators search the plane for clues to the incident while Casey and Richman go to the hospital to interview a handful of survivors. One passenger tells Casey a story that sounds clearly as though the slats deployed mid-flight. The stewardess confirms this story when she tells Casey that the pilot told her there had been uncommanded slat deployment. This concerns Casey because there was a problem with uncommanded



slat deployment four years ago when the N-22 first went into service. However, the engineers on her team prove to her satisfaction that this could not have occurred in this situation due to the fix Norton Aircraft designed for the N-22.

While Casey runs the investigation, collecting recorders and attempting to get information from them, a rumor spreads through the plant that the China deal will mean sending the wing to China. This deeply disturbs the workers because it will mean layoffs in the United States. The workers begin manufacturing a work slowdown by purposely allowing tools to break. Casey is warned several times to be careful because it is also possible the workers will attempt to scare her into backing off the investigation in hopes that news of the incident on Flight 545 will stop the China deal. Casey ignores these warnings, finding herself twice running from workers who appear to mean her harm.

At the same time, the press begins to get word of the accident. An ambitious television producer sees a video taken on board Flight 545 by a passenger and decides to design a news segment around the assumption that Norton Aircraft is responsible for the incident through poor airframe design. The producer, Jennifer Malone, finds several people willing to say that Norton knew the N-22 had problems with slat deployment and that they were irresponsible in allowing the airframe to remain in service. The report is sure to end the China deal if it airs. When Marder places Casey in a position where she is faced with either ruining the China deal or lying, Casey is forced to find a third option.

Casey has located a video recording that focuses on the cockpit during the incident on Flight 545. Casey realizes that the video holds the answer to the incident. After an interview that makes Norton Aircraft look responsible for the incident on Flight 545, Casey invites Malone to participate in the test flight of the aircraft. Malone becomes violently ill during the reenactment of the incident on Flight 545. Afterward, Casey shows her the video she found and tells her how the accident happened. When it appears to have been a faulty part and pilot error, Malone realizes there is no story. Malone drops the story, therefore saving the China sale.



Monday

Monday Summary

Airframe by Michael Crichton is a suspense novel that will keep the reader guessing until the final pages. Once again, Crichton brings to life the issues that haunt Americans in their everyday lives, this time tackling air safety. Flight 545 has just landed with three dead and more than fifty injured passengers. Casey Singleton, Quality Assurance executive for Norton Aircraft, has one week to find out what happened to Flight 545 or lose a deal with China that would move her company into the black for the next two decades. Casey fights her own employees, reporters, and bosses to find the answers. Airframe is a fascinating defense of the aeronautic industry that will influence potential airline passengers for years to come.

A young woman is on board TransPacific Flight 545 with her infant daughter on her lap. The woman is relieved that the long flight from Hong Kong to Colorado is almost over because she is a nervous flyer. The woman's husband wakes and begins filming his wife and daughter with their video camera. In the middle of movie making, the plane suddenly begins to dive. The woman's husband is tossed from his seat and the camera lost. Then the plane begins to climb. The woman is hit in the head with flying luggage. The woman pulls her baby to her chest and begins to pray.

The air traffic controller Los Angeles gets a call from the pilot of Flight 545. The pilot says the plane hit severe turbulence and needs to land. The pilot requests forty ambulances meet them on the runway. Concerned about the number of casualties and the report of three dead, the air traffic controller calls over his boss who in turn calls an FAA official. The official arrives while the plane is being evacuated. The official wants to talk to the crew immediately and orders his people to keep them on board. When the official boards the plane himself, he discovers a scene that suggests something more serious than turbulence occurred on Flight 545.

Casey Singleton, head of Quality Assurance for Norton Aircraft, sends her daughter off for her scheduled visit with her father before going in to work. As Casey watches her daughter drive away, she gets a pager message calling her to a meeting earlier than originally scheduled. Casey quickly leaves, calling her secretary as she makes the long drive. The secretary normally knows everything that goes on at Norton, but does not know anything. However, the secretary warns Casey that she has a new assistant waiting for her in her office. Casey has forgotten that a member of the Norton family has been assigned to intern with her for a time.

Casey meets the new assistant, Bob Richman, in the parking lot as she rushes to her meeting. Casey quickly introduces Richman to the people assembled for the meeting, including her boss, John Marder. The meeting is then called to order. Marder tells the engineers assembled about Flight 545. The airframe involved in the incident is a Norton N-22. This airframe is the centerpiece of a deal about to be signed with China for more



than twenty planes. Marder explains to the team that they have less than a week to find out what happened on Flight 545 in order to keep China from getting cold feet and going with another manufacturer.

The engineers and Casey discuss the obvious possible causes of the incident on Flight 545. The first obvious cause could be turbulence, but weather reports suggest that the flight had clear weather at the time of the incident. Next, they discuss pilot error, but when they learn the pilot was Captain John Chung, a pilot who is over qualified and has received training at Norton Aircraft for the N-22, they rule out pilot error. Other possibilities are slats deployment, an electrical malfunction, a problem with autopilot, or a problem with thrust reversers. The team ends the meeting to go see the plane and begin downloading information from the various recorders on board.

When Casey and Richman arrive at LAX, they find the plane waiting in a hanger. Casey boards and is immediately overwhelmed by the damage she sees on the plane. It is clear to her that the plane did something called porpoising, quickly diving and climbing numerous times. The worse of the damage is in the aft cabin. There are many broken chairs, toys and luggage strewn all about, and blood on nearly every surface. There is also a dead man stuck in an overhead compartment. Casey surveys the damage, grabbing a video camera she finds wedged in the cockpit. Casey and Richman leave the plane and speak to the FAA official, who informs Casey that several of the passengers are still at the airport infirmary.

Casey and Richman interview the passengers. An American woman with a baby tells her that she heard a noise on the wing seconds before the incident occurred. Casey thinks the woman may have heard the slats deploy. The slats, she explains to Richman, are flaps on the wings that change the shape of the wing during takeoff and landing to help with lift. These flaps are not supposed to deploy during flight and if they do, it could present a dangerous situation for the plane. The N-22 had problems with uncommanded slat deployment four years ago when it first went into service, but Norton designed a fix for the problem and there have been no further problems since.

Casey and Richman interview a stewardess also still at the airport infirmary. This stewardess tells Casey how she went to the cockpit after the incident and was told by the captain that the incident was caused by uncommanded slat deployment. Casey returns to the aircraft and tells the engineers this news. The engineers, when questioned by Richman, have him demonstrate an uncommanded slat deployment. Richman tries to make the slats deploy by hitting the control, but he cannot make it move into position no matter what he does. This appears to rule out uncommanded slat deployment. However, the idea that the slats were deployed purposely seems unlikely as well.

The team begins to pull the various recorders on board Flight 545. Casey explains to Richman how a plane does not have just one recorder, the black box that is often talked about in the press after a plane crash. Planes have multiple recorders that keep track of mechanical systems as well as the cockpit voice recorder that records conversations in the cockpit on thirty minutes of tape. Since the incident happened more than thirty



minutes before the plane landed, the cockpit voice recorder will be no help in this investigation. However, Casey hopes the flight data recorder will help them reconstruct the flight on the computers at Norton. Casey also hopes to find a Quick Access Recorder, a recorder used mostly by mechanics for a quick review of the systems on board an aircraft, but this equipment is optional and it appears Flight 545 did not have one.

Back at Norton, Casey runs into Don Brull, the president of the local worker's union. Brull tells Casey that he has heard rumors that the China deal includes the offset of the wing. If this is true, it could mean massive layoffs at Norton. Casey insists this is untrue because the offset of the wing would be devastating to the company and she does not believe Harold Edgerton, the president of Norton, would allow it. Just the same, Brull warns Casey to be careful because the workers are not happy about the rumor and might take action to be sure the investigation in to Flight 545 is not completed before the China deal is signed. Casey visits Marder and asks about this rumor. Marder assures her there is no truth to it.

Back at her office, before tackling the normal paperwork that comes with her job, Casey talks to her secretary, Norma. Norma tells Casey to be careful around Richman. Norma says there are rumors at the plant that there is something strange about Richman. Apparently, Richman worked in marketing before coming to quality assurance, but spent little time there. Richman traveled frequently and wracked up huge travel expenses. Casey finds all this suspicious, especially since she found Richman going through her desk moments before.

Casey reviews the messages that have come in through the day, most referring to the incident on Flight 545. Casey then begins reviewing the data that has already been gathered on Flight 545. After a time, Casey goes home to an empty house. Casey notices a strange car parked in front of her house. Inside the car are two men. As Casey watches, these men leave the car, one walking across her front yard while the other goes around to her back yard. Casey becomes frightened and calls the police. When they arrive, the police inform Casey that the men are security personnel from Norton assigned to protect her. Casey makes a few phone calls and learns that all the members of the investigation team have security on their homes. This information makes Casey wonder if there is more to this investigation than she knows.

Monday Analysis

A nervous mother is just beginning to relax on board a long flight from Hong Kong to Colorado when the plane suddenly begins to dive and climb. The woman's husband flies out of his seat, the video camera he was holding falling out of his hands and making its way to the cockpit. It is this video camera that Casey will find later, suggesting the film inside the camera will prove to be important later in the investigation. The incident on board the plane is called in to the air traffic controlling watching the plane in Los Angeles. The severity of the incident, including many injured and three dead, causes the flight controller to believe that something worse than turbulence, as



the pilot suggests, took place. The experience flyer in many readers will also question this assessment because turbulence does not create the horrible roller coaster ride that the mother describes at the beginning of the chapter.

Casey Singleton is introduced in this chapter. The writer chooses to introduce her as a single mother sending her child off on a visit with her father. This shows Casey's vulnerability in the fact that she is an important part of her daughter's life and needs to remain a part of her life. It also shows the complications of Casey's daily life even before the reader learns who she is in her career and the stresses involved there. Casey works for Norton Aircraft and the reader quickly finds out that this is the company that manufactured the airframe involved in Flight 545. Casey is called to an early meeting where she learns about Flight 545 and is placed on a team charged with investigating the incident. Stress is added to this assignment when Casey and her team are told they must absolve Norton Aircraft of responsibility in this incident before the weekend.

An important fact is revealed during this initial meeting of the investigative team. The reader learns along with Casey and her team that a deal has been outlined with China involving the sale of more than twenty N-22 airframes. This is the same model of airframe that was involved in the Flight 545 incident. This deal is extremely important to Norton Aircraft because they have had a lack of orders recently. The China deal will keep Norton Aircraft in the black for the next two decades. This deal represents a persuasive motive for all the people on the investigative team. If the team can prove, before the Chinese find out about the incident on Flight 545, that it was caused by something other than a design flaw on the N-22 they can bypass any question as to the safety of the airframe.

The China deal also represents motivation for another group of characters. The workers in the local union have learned that the wing is being out sourced to China. It is typical in these deals for a section of the plane to be manufactured in the purchasing company. However, this section is always something minor, such as the tail. This time, rumor says, the wing will be our sourced. The wing is a vital section of any plane. If the wing is out sourced to China, this will mean huge layoffs at the Norton plants in the United States. The workers at Norton are very concerned about this and it is suggested to Casey it might motivate the workers to stop Casey and her team from learning the cause of the incident on board Flight 545, touching on the theme of sabotage. This situation also adds tension to the plot as Casey is warned that her personal safety might be in question.

As the investigation into Flight 545 begins, the reader learns a great deal of information about avionics. The most important information learned in this chapter is about slats and slat deployment. The reader learns what slats are and how the N-22 has a history of accidental slat deployment. This problem was resolved four years before, but due to passenger interviews, Casey begins to believe that slats deployment was a part of the incident on board Flight 545. Due to Casey's concern about this situation, the reader is given the impression that this could be an answer that is not what Norton wants to hear. If the slats deployed accidentally and China learns this, it could possibly end the China sale. This also adds tension to the plot development and leaves the reader worried what



will happen if these concerns become public, possibly foreshadowing this real possibility. Finally, Casey goes home and discovers a security detail has been dispatched to watch the homes of all the members of the investigative team. Casey and the reader both wonder if this means someone expects trouble.



Tuesday

Tuesday Summary

Casey begins her day uneasy, worried that Marder has ordered security on the investigative team because of the rumors that the wing is being sent to China. Marder must believe the team is in danger from disgruntled employees worried about losing their jobs. However, Casey goes to work determined not to let that situation affect her determination to solve the mystery of Flight 545. At the plant, Casey learns that the information on the Flight Data Recorder is corrupt because of a dysfunctional sensor. This means that the flight cannot be reconstructed by the computers without some time consuming manipulations that Casey simply has not got the time to wait for. Casey has the data sent to flight simulations, hoping they can use what information they have to reconstruct the flight with their equipment.

Casey meets up with Richman outside Hanger 64. Casey questions him about his time in marketing, remembering Norma's suspicions about him. Richman claims to have spent the majority of his time skiing since it seemed he was only in the way in Marketing. As Casey and Richman make their way across the hanger to where their morning meeting is to be held, Casey sees a massive tool being moved for transport. Suddenly Casey notices the escorts have disappeared and the tool is going to fall. Chaos erupts when the tool crashes to the ground. It seems to be the beginning of the work slowdown, the workers' way of showing their displeasure in the rumors about the wing going to China.

During the meeting, Casey and the investigative team receive reports that underscore what they already suspected about turbulence. The weather was clear and other planes in the area did not experience turbulence, meaning it was impossible that turbulence caused the incident on board Flight 545. The team also discusses the tapes they have received of the conversation between the pilot and air flight control. The captain sounds confused, unsure of himself. However, the team knows the pilot of this flight is highly experienced, having trained on simulators there at Norton Aircraft. On the surface, it seems it cannot be pilot error. They also discuss the autopilot that should have taken over during the incident and stopped the roller coaster effect. It is agreed that the autopilot should be examined closely during the next phase of the investigation.

After the meeting, Casey goes to Flight Simulations and talks with the man in charge. Casey asks him if it is possible slat deployment caused the incident. The man, Felix, has a pilot in a simulated version of the N-22 and decides to show Casey what would have happened. Felix has the slats warning go off on the simulator. The pilot deploys the slats and shows Casey how the nose goes up, but the autopilot kicks in and rights the plane. Casey asks what might happen if the autopilot is not functioning. Felix has the autopilot turned off and proceeds to deploy the slats. The pilot immediately takes the controls and is able to right the plane without any of the aerobatics that occurred on Flight 545. Felix tells Casey that the slats could not have possibly caused the incident



on Flight 545 if the pilot was experienced and knowledgeable of the N-22, which they know he was.

As Casey leaves Flight Simulations, she gets a page to get to a television as quickly as possible. Casey discovers news coverage of an accident at a Miami airport involving an N-22. The engine has exploded. Kenny Burne, a co-worker, becomes enraged when he sees the news footage. Burne tells Casey that he was on a committee involved in helping the airline involved in this accident and warned them not to buy the engines they wanted to buy. Norton does not provide engines, only the airframe, but makes recommendations. The airline in this case refused to take Norton's suggestions and bought faulty engines, leading to this accident. While saddened by the situation, Casey is not concerned about the impact of this accident on Norton Aircraft. However, Casey is concerned that the press coverage of this accident might bring into the open the incident on Flight 545, which has thus far not been mentioned in the news.

The airplane from Flight 545 has been brought to Norton. Casey and Richman go to Hanger 5 where the plane is being inspected by various engineers and mechanics. Doherty, a member of the investigative team, brings Casey over to one of the wings and shows her a locking pin. The pin is used to keep the slats in place during flight. This pin has clearly been replaced recently. The pin is in poor condition and is a counterfeit. This pin could have caused a slats disagree warning during flight, perhaps putting into motion the incident that occurred on Flight 545. Casey tells Doherty to pull the part so she can have it analyzed. On her way out of the hanger, Casey runs into Brull again. Brull insists that the wing is going to China and tells Casey he has bills of lading that show the tools to build the wings are going to Korea. Casey tries to reassure Brull, but instead Brull warns Casey to watch her back if she decides to stick around Norton Aircraft. A minute later, Casey runs into Jack Rogers, a reporter for a local newspaper. Rogers wants to know about Flight 545. Casey puts him off, assuring him that the N-22 has a good safety record and that it could not have been the slats that caused the catastrophic incident. As she is leaving, Rogers suggests to Casey that the trouble in the plant, the rumor of the wing going to China, stems from tension between Marder and Edgerton. Marder had expected to be made president of the company and instead found himself pushed aside for Edgerton. Rogers suggests that the rumor is a result of Marder attempting to angle for the job.

Casey leaves Rogers and makes an appointment to speak with Marder. Casey then crosses the parking lot and goes to speak with Amos, a metallurgy expert employed by Norton. Casey asks Amos about the locking pin. Amos says the pin did not cause the incident on board Flight 545. However, Amos tells Casey she should find out why the pin was replaced in the first place. Amos suggests the plane suffered some damage at some point and that further investigation will most likely find more counterfeit parts. Casey then goes and checks Norton's records on the original locking pin. Casey discovers that the original pin was a genuine part that had clearly been replaced. Casey then returns to her office and checks the maintenance records of the aircraft. Casey learns that the year before, the aircraft was flying from Bombay to Melbourne and experienced radio trouble. The plane landed in Java, Indonesia where the radio was repaired. While on Java, the plane was refueled. When the plane later landed in



Melbourne, it was discovered that the Java ground crew damaged the wing while refueling. Rather than repair the wing, the plane continued on to Singapore where there was some question about the replacement parts, then returned to Hong Kong where the work actually took place. Casey also discovers that several other parts were replaced at this time as well.

While reading the maintenance log, Casey also notes that an associated equipment package was checked. Casey returns to the records area to find out what that would entail. Casey realizes that the proximity sensor is deep within the wing and might not have been inspected. Casey wonders if perhaps a defect in this sensor could have caused a problem during Flight 545. Before Casey can leave to investigate this possibility, she discovers two employees coming toward her. Casey is afraid these men mean to harm her, so she quickly runs deeper into the building. Casey tries to call security on her phone, but cannot get a signal. Casey decides to climb into the plane being constructed in the middle of the cavernous building. Casey hopes to run into other workers who might offer her protection. However, it is shift change time and Casey does not immediately see anyone. Casey finally sees three men working at the top of the plane on a rudder. Casey makes her way toward them, but they do not see her and by the time she reaches their position they have gone. Casey can still hear the men behind her. Casey begins climbing down the scaffolding. Now the building is filling with people and her pursuers back off.

Casey has a meeting with Marder later that night and warns him about Rogers' desire to do a story on Flight 545. Marder agrees to talk to Rogers, with hope that he will back off. When Casey returns to her office, Norma tells her that she discovered Richman racked up a large expense bill when in Marketing and that his expenses were approved by Marder. Norma promises to get more information later. Casey decides to call it a day. Casey takes a bunch of paperwork home and spends the evening with Teddy Rawley, a test pilot at Norton and Casey's on again, off again lover. After Teddy leaves, Casey studies sheets of data from the faulty data recorders. Within the data, Casey finds a problem with the proximity sensor, confirming her earlier suspicions. A warning light would have come on in the cockpit, telling the pilot that the slats on one side of the plane were deployed while the others were not. Casey believes this is the beginning of the story of Flight 545.

Tuesday Analysis

The rumor that the wing is being outsourced to China shapes Casey's day. The day begins with Casey feeling uneasy about the security detail Marder has assigned to her home. When Casey gets to work, a tool is purposely allowed to fall, causing a work slow down in order to sabotage the movement of the tools to China, touching on the theme sabotage. Later in the day, Casey is working on the investigation when she becomes convinced that several workers are out to harm her. Casey runs from these men and finds herself hanging from scaffolding three stories above the ground. Casey visits Marder again, after being visited herself once more by the union president, Brull, and is again told that there is no truth to the rumor. However, it seems the men working at



Norton Aircraft believe this rumor, leaving the reader wondering if Marder might be lying to Casey. When a reporter, Jack Rogers, suggests that perhaps Marder is scheming to get rid of the current president so that he can take the position himself, the reader sees in this motivation for Marder to encourage the rumor and ruin the China deal. If the China deal falls through, the current president, Edgerton, would look like a fool and Marder might seem like a better candidate for president. When Casey also learns that Richman took many trips during his time in marketing, that he rang up a large expense bill, and that Marder approved all his charges, the reader begins to suspect that Richman is also involved in whatever Marder might be up to. Casey does not seem to be suspicious at this point, but the reader is weary, feeling a new tension that Casey has yet become aware of.

This same day, Casey sees a news report about an engine that exploded on another N-22. Casey knows the explosion is not Norton's fault because they only provide airframes, they do not provide engines. Casey also learns that this particular airline knew these engines were faulty and chose to buy them anyway. All of this seems like good news for Norton, absolving them of any blame in the incident. However, the incident brings Jack Rogers to Norton. Rogers is a reporter who wants to do a story on both the rumors circulating the plant and the incident on board Flight 545. Casey puts him off, but this shows both Casey and the reader that the press is beginning to get wind of the incident on Flight 545. This is a potential time bomb for Casey because any bad press at this point would surely ruin the China deal, especially since Casey does not have a definitive cause for the incident on Flight 545 yet.

As Casey continues the investigation, she learns that the flight data recorder will be of little or no help. Casey then learns that a locking pin on one wing that holds the slats is not only defective, but it is counterfeit. This makes it seem that once again the slats are to blame for the incident on Flight 545, placing blame once more at Norton Aircraft's door, exactly what Casey does not want to happen. Casey does more investigating and realizes that the locking pin was replaced. Casey also learns that the wing was damaged at one time. This leads Casey to the conclusion that when the damage occurred, possible damage may have occurred to a proximity sensor located near the pin and that this sensor may have been malfunctioning. In Casey's mind, a malfunctioning sensor could be the beginning of a set of circumstances that led to the incident on board Flight 545. Finally, Casey has found a clue to the cause of the incident and is highly motivated to continue investigating despite the drama playing out around her at Norton Aircraft.



Wednesday

Wednesday Summary

Casey wakes Wednesday morning to a terse phone call from her daughter and a faxed press release claiming JAA, the European version of the FAA, is refusing to certify N-22s due to airworthiness concerns. Marder catches Casey outside the war room when she arrives for the morning meeting and asks her to put together a press release about Norton and the N-22 to satisfy requests from various media outlets in response to the JAA press release. Casey agrees, especially when Marder informs her that he has requested she receive a larger bonus for her efforts. At the morning meeting, the investigative team discusses the progress they have made thus far. The various systems on the aircraft have all checked out, leaving the team at a loss for what happened on board Flight 545. Marder encourages them to continue, warning them that one accident killed the DC-10 and he does not want that to happen to the N-22. Richman asks about this statement afterward and Casey explains that an engine on one DC-10 aircraft was not removed and replaced properly and subsequently fell off during takeoff, causing a combination of events that ended in the plane crashing, killing everyone on board. Passengers refused to fly other DC-10 aircraft, consequently ending that model of aircraft's usefulness.

In New York, Newsline producer Jennifer Malone finds out that one of the story segments scheduled to air on the show that weekend has been cancelled. Malone needs to find another story she can throw together quickly to fill twelve minutes on the weekend broadcast. Malone comes across the fax about the N-22 and realizes it might be a viable story. Malone begins making phone calls, first to the source of the press release, then the FAA and Airbus. From Airbus Malone learns about the China deal Norton hopes to make. Malone makes more calls, to the NTSB where she learns the plane is basically safe. At the same time, Casey is in Hanger 5 when Kenny Burne discovers another counterfeit part on the Flight 545 aircraft. Burne suspects there might be more problems inside the engines, but they do not have enough time to tear them apart in order to look. Richman comes into the hanger and Casey sends him back to her office with a list of documents for Norma to assemble for the press packet.

Casey meets the members of the investigative team at a local restaurant for lunch. While they are waiting for their order a news report comes on the television over the bar. The report shows video shot on board Flight 545. The footage is disturbing, even to the investigators who are aware of the devastation that took place on that plane. The report includes interviews with two men, one an ex-FAA agent and the other a lawyer who specializes in aircraft litigation, both people the Norton team knows to be vengeful liars. Malone is watching the same report in New York. Malone does more research, gathering newspaper articles on Norton and the N-22. Malone calls Jack Rogers and learns that Norton has internal problems with their union. Malone then calls Fred Barker, the ex-FAA agent, and learns about the trouble the N-22 has had with slat deployment. Malone begins to imagine a news segment with Barker as one of the central characters



and becomes excited. Malone takes the story idea to her boss and is given the go ahead on the promise that it not turn into a faulty parts story.

Casey returns to her office where Norma tells her that she learned Richman has been to Korea five times in the past few months and that he has been reporting in to Marder several times a day. Norma warns Casey to be careful around Richman, so Casey sends Richman on an errand to pick up some paperwork from their offices in El Segundo. Casey then locates the film she took from the broken camera wedge under the cockpit door of the Flight 545 airplane. Casey takes the film to a video store and watches it with one of the technicians. The footage is equally disturbing to the film shown on CNN that morning. However, the images are jumbled and move too quickly for Casey to get much detail. Casey asks the technician to slow down the images for her. Casey then takes two copies of the tape with her when she returns to Norton. Casey gives one copy to a woman from accounting and asks her to translate the conversation audible at the end of the tape in the cockpit. The second Casey takes to the audio interpretation lab. Casey wants the technician to isolate a sound at the beginning of the incident on Flight 545 and determine if it is the slats deploying.

That evening, Casey returns to her office. Norma gives her a fax of a magazine page that includes a picture of John Chang, the pilot of Flight 545, and his family. The picture is fuzzy and the purpose of the page is unclear. Casey has Norma find out if she can get a copy of the actual magazine. Casey goes through the rest of the paperwork on her desk before deciding to call it a night. Once home, Marder calls Casey and tells her a news crew from Newsline is coming to the plant the following day to interview him and he wants Casey present in case they have questions about the Flight 545 investigation.

Wednesday Analysis

The one thing that Casey and her investigative team have feared all along has occurred, injecting tension into the plot. A television producer has gotten wind of the incident on Flight 545 and has decided to do a story about the fatal flight. The producer has also decided, before doing much research that she will do the story from the standpoint that the N-22 is a dangerous airplane, placing the blame for the incident on Flight 545 at Norton's feet. This is exactly what Casey and her team have been attempting to avoid for fear that this type of publicity will ruin the deal with China, thus leaving Norton's financial future in question. Not only this, but Casey has been put in front to deal with the publicity. First Casey is ordered to come up with a press packet to give to any news agency asking for information. Then later Casey is asked to attend an interview between Marder and the producer from Newsline.

Casey also learns that Richman, her new assistant, is working closely with Marder. Casey has no idea what the two men are doing together, but she learns that Richman has not been skiing as he said he has, but has made several trips to Korea. The fact that Richman made these trips while supposedly working in marketing seems suspicious because marketing would have no reason to send Richman to Korea. Not only this, but the fact that Marder has approved all these trips and Richman reports in to

Marder several times a day suggests that the two men are involved in something bigger than training a new employee. These situations, combined with Marder's insistence that Casey do most of the publicity even though Norton has a separate press department, leaves the reader suspicious that something may be going on with Marder and that he might be setting Casey up for a fall.

Even as video of the events on Flight 545 is shown on CNN, Casey takes a video she found herself in the cockpit to be analyzed. This video shows the cockpit for a moment, but the camera moved around the plane so rapidly that Casey has to ask the video technician to slow it down so she can make out detail. This request suggests to the reader that the video will be important to the investigation as Casey continues to investigate. Casey also takes copies of the video to employees of Norton. First Casey asks a woman in accountant, a woman who speaks Chinese, to translate the conversation taking place in the cockpit. This seems important because, first, the cockpit voice recorder was of no help since it had already recorded over the thirty minutes of conversation that took place during the incident. Second, it is important because the conversation between the pilot and co-pilots could reveal what they knew of the cause of the incident since Casey was never able to speak to them since they left LAX before they could be detained. The other copy of the video Casey gives to an employee of Norton who specializes in sound. Casey wants to have confirmation that the slats deployed and believes the sound of this deployment was caught at the beginning of the video. These things together give the reader the impression that Casey has an idea about the events that led to the incident on Flight 545.



Thursday

Thursday Summary

Jennifer Malone is in California, staying in a local motel, anxious to begin the pre-interviews that will make up part of her segment on Newsline. At Norton, Casey arrives at her office before seven only to discover that Richman is already in his office. This is suspicious to Casey since Richman has appeared lazy and unmotivated until now. Casey wants Richman out of the office, so she sends him to retrieve copies of the in-flight magazine that featured the page faxed to her the day before. At the morning meeting, the investigative team reveals they have learned nothing new except the possibility that one of the proximity sensors may have malfunctioned. The investigation appears to be going nowhere fast and there is only one more day to come up with answers.

Malone interviews Barker first. Barker puts on a performance for Malone and her cameras showing that he is clearly used to being in front of cameras. Malone does not mind this, in fact, it makes her job easier. Barker talks about the problems the N-22 has had with slats, implying that the problem has been much more dangerous than it really was. Barker also makes the accusation that Norton knows about the problem with the slats deploying mid-flight and has chosen not to do anything about it, thus making Norton responsible for what happened aboard Flight 545. The next interview Malone does is with Jack Rogers. Where Barker was almost a professional interview, Rogers is a weak subject. Rogers answers in monosyllables and is clearly nervous, causing him to appear unintelligent on camera. Rogers talks about the China sale and tells the camera that Norton is a trouble company, although he is never really allowed to explain why.

Casey arrives in Marder's office just a few minutes before his interview with the Newsline producer. Marder has arranged the interview to take place in his office, which is small and a less than desirable locale in Malone's mind. When the interview begins, Marder is quick to become angry. Malone asks Marder about the incidents of uncommanded slats deployment when the N-22 first went into service. Malone suggests that the incidents continued to happen because Norton did nothing to fix it. Marder offers proof that Norton did issue a service bulletin with instructions on how to fix the problem and that the FAA issued an Airworthiness Directive forcing domestic airlines to implement Norton's fix. However, the FAA has no power over foreign airlines and that those incidents that took place after the Airworthiness Directive was issued were with foreign airlines. Malone continues to question Norton's actions, however, causing Marder to explode and leave Casey to explain the situation a little better to Malone. In the middle of Casey's explanation, Marder announces that Norton will issue a preliminary report regarding the incident on Flight 545 the following day and that the interview was over.



Casey is floored by Marder's suggestion that there will be a preliminary report since the investigative team had yet to come up with a cause for the incident on Flight 545. Marder tells her, after Malone has left, that he will come up with something and that she should not worry about it. Marder then speaks to Edgerton and assures him of the same thing, promising to put Casey in front of the cameras the following day, hoping she will be able to keep her cool and make Norton look like a responsible company. At the same time, Malone is unhappy with the way the interview went because she was hoping to force Marder in to putting Edgerton in front of the cameras. Malone calls her boss to check on the reporter's schedule and is warned once again not to give him a parts story.

Casey is beginning to suspect Marder is putting her in front of the cameras because he is trying to distance himself from the investigation and any possible fall out from the news coverage. Casey talks to Norma about it and is advised to find out the truth. Richman shows up during this conversation with the magazines Casey wanted. Norma sends him to pick up some press packets while Casey looks through the magazines. Casey finds the page that was faxed to her. The picture is of John Chung with his family, his wife, a grown son and a grown daughter. Casey still cannot figure out why someone wanted her to see this photograph. Casey goes back to audio and speaks with the technician she left the video with. The technician has isolated the sound Casey was concerned about. It is definitely the sound of the slats deploying. Casey is called back to Marder's office. Marder tells Casey that he is going to have her take the interview with Malone and her reporter. At the interview, Marder intends to have Casey release a preliminary report that says the incident was caused by a counterfeit thruster cowl. Marder then has Norton's lawyer explain to Casey how important it is to have an answer for the press since they cannot do anything to stop the story from airing, good or bad. Casey agrees to do the interview, but still hopes to have a truth to present rather than Marder's lies.

Casey goes back to her office and calls the simulation department, only to learn that the information from the flight data recorder is such that it will take more than a year to put together a simulation of Flight 545. Casey calls the lady in accounting who is translating the conversation on the video only to learn she worked from home that day. Casey calls Vancouver where the injured co-pilot from Flight 545 is being treated in a local hospital, but she is told her contact is not available until the following morning. Casey looks through the paperwork on her desk, reading the flight crew list and the transcript of the conversation between the pilot and flight control at LAX. Several aspects of the conversation bother her since it seems the pilot is confused and making odd decisions. However, Casey thinks that the situation on board the flight might be explanation to the pilot's confusion.

Casey then looks at the data from the faults printout before deciding to go home. In the elevator, however, something she saw among the data jumps out at her. Casey returns to her desk and realizes that the data on the faults printout indicates that there was a QAR even though one was not found in the typical location. Casey grabs a service manual for the N-22 and begins looking for possible locations for the QAR. After a few minutes, Casey decides this might be a good time to try out the virtual manual she was sent a few days ago. With the goggles of the virtual manual on, Casey goes to Hanger 5



to search for the QAR. The plane is undergoing electrical testing, but Casey boards it carefully. After checking several places and coming up empty, Casey thinks she hears footsteps. Casey takes off the goggles and looks around, but does not see anything. Casey returns to her search, but hears footsteps again. Casey checks a possible location near the door and finds the QAR. Casey suddenly becomes aware that there is someone in the plane with her. Casey looks out the door and sees Richman on the hanger floor. Casey waits until the hanger becomes dark and then slides out the door. Casey falls into the protective webbing under the plane and then rolls onto the floor, striking her head on the floor. Casey runs out of the hangar into Teddy's arms. Teddy takes her home.

Thursday Analysis

Malone's story is beginning to take shape. First Malone interviews Barker and then Rogers. From the tone of the questions and answers in these preliminary interviews, the reader becomes aware that Malone intends to concentrate on the trouble with slats that the N-22 had when it first hit the market, making it seem that Norton knew uncommanded slats deployment was a problem with the N-22 and did nothing about it. Malone has convinced herself that slats deployment caused the incident on Flight 545, without really researching the possibility, and has decided to build her story around this assumption. The reader knows this is untrue and the reader knows that a story of this type is sure to ruin the China deal, so Malone's tenacity injects a great deal of tension into the story.

When Malone interviews Marder, she twists everything he says in such a way that the reader becomes frustrated by the implications of all she has to say. It is not surprising that Marder would get upset by Malone's implications, but his explosion seems a little over the top to both the reader and Casey. Casey finds herself having to play mediator, making her uncomfortable and annoying Malone who was hoping to interview the president, not a low level executive. When Marder then announces that there will be a preliminary report on the investigation into Flight 545, the reader knows something is going on. The reader knows that the investigation has not uncovered anything definite yet, so it seems unlikely that there is anything to release at this point. However, Marder's insistence later in the chapter that they have to release something since they cannot stop the story makes the reader feel uncomfortable for Casey since she is the one who is supposed to lie to a camera. The suspicion that Marder is setting Casey up for a fall becomes stronger at this point, leaving the reader wondering what Marder is hiding. Marder's behavior is a clear underscoring of the theme of secrets since the man clearly has a secret that is going to hurt Casey.

Casey's character motivation becomes clear here, as she needs to find the truth before the interview with Malone and her reporter the next day. However, every avenue Casey either tries to explore leads her back to slats deployment or gives her nothing new. Casey becomes excited when she discovers there is a QAR, a quick access recorder, on board the aircraft because this recorder could provide the information the flight data recorder lacks. When Casey goes to recover the QAR, she is followed by several men,

one of whom she discovers to be Richman. Casey has suspected Richman of being in cahoots with Marder for some time now, and this seems to underscore this belief. Casey gets away, but now the reader knows she has more to fear than just disgruntled employees do. This changes the overall tone of the novel, adding intrigue that might have been missing before.



Friday

Friday Summary

Casey wakes the next morning stiff and sore. There is a large bruise on the side of her face from falling from the security webbing under the airplane the night before. Casey shakes off her discomfort, however, because she has less than ten hours before her interview and she still needs to find the truth. Casey takes the QAR to Norton and has Wong hook it up to the computer. The computer is able to tell them that there was a slats warning before the slats deployed. The deployment was not uncommanded, but commanded. Now Casey knows the first two steps in the chain of events that led to the incident on Flight 545. Casey also learns that the plane exceeded its designed G-load, leaving it vulnerable to breaking apart in flight. Finally, Casey learns that the pilot fought the autopilot while the incident was taking place on board Flight 545, but that when the autopilot finally kicked in the plane stabilized, suggesting pilot error.

The QAR has confirmed some things Casey had begun to suspect. Casey goes to the morning meeting, but nothing new has been discovered. Casey then goes to video lab to see if the technician has been successful in slowing down the video. On the way, Casey talks to the lady from accounting who was transcribing the video. The woman is clearly disturbed by what she heard, but Casey assures her she already suspects she knows what the conversation entailed. Casey arranges for the woman to bring her the transcript that afternoon. At the same time, Malone's reporter, Marty Reardon, is interviewing Barker. Reardon, a hard-nosed reporter, questions Barker about his credentials, making Malone's prize source look like a crackpot. Malone does not say anything, however, already planning how she will edit the segment to make it appear less questionable. Afterward, Marty questions Malone's choice of interviewees, telling her that Barker left the FAA under suspicious circumstances. Marty is beginning to question if Malone really has a story.

Casey arrives at the video lab. When Casey sees the video, she discovers that she now has a good look at the pilot in the cockpit. Casey is excited, until the technician tells her how one of the secretaries at the company wants to leak the video to the press because she is so disturbed by what it shows. Casey excuses herself to make a few phone calls. When Casey returns, she takes a copy of the video and warns the technician that he signed a non-disclosure agreement when he took the job. Casey returns to her office angry only to find a woman waiting for her. The woman is a media trainer sent by Marder to instruct Casey on how to behave during the interview. Casey insists she has no time for this, but finds herself listening to the woman's kind guidance. The woman knows Marty Reardon and instructs Casey to remain calm and relaxed during the interview because Reardon likes to jump on a person's stress to make them appear uncertain and confused. Casey takes this advice to heart and promises to utilize it.

Marty is becoming agitated and convinced that Malone does not have a good story. However, Malone shows up with a copy of the video Casey recovered from the plane.



Clearly, the secretary from the video lab turned over the video just as she threatened to do. Marty is reinvigorated when he sees the footage, suddenly anxious to interview Casey. At the same time, Casey gets a phone call from her connection in Vancouver. Casey is told the man in the hospital there has died. However, there has been some confusion as to his identity. Casey instructs the man not to tell her over the phone, but to send her a report by telex. When Casey hangs up, she gets a call from Marder telling her the interview with Newsline has been moved up and she is needed immediately. Casey rushes to the war room where the interview is to take place. A makeup woman begins work on her while Malone explains the process. The makeup woman sees the bruise on Casey's neck and mistakenly believes she was abused a lover.

The interview begins slow and relaxed, with Casey explaining who she is and what she does at Norton. The interview quickly begins to turn, however. Reardon begins asking about the safety of the N-22, suggesting that the list of uncommanded slats deployment suggests that there is a defect with the N-22. Reardon also asks about the video footage Malone obtained from the video lab, questioning whether Norton wants the footage released, suggesting their desire to hide the footage is due to their guilt in causing the incident. Finally, Reardon presents Casey with a report mistakenly put into the press packets that describes the results of an investigation into the unstable flight characteristics of the N-22. Just the name of the report seems bad, but Casey is quick to point out that the committee found the N-22 to be safe.

Casey is asked if she has a preliminary report as to the incident on Flight 545. Casey has been given a report by Marder's office, but she hesitates to offer it. Before Casey can decide what to do, the cameraman calls a break to change film. Casey sees Richman standing at the back of the room. Casey grabs Richman and accuses him of putting the flight stability report in the press packet. Richman does not deny it. In fact, Richman tells her that he and Marder purposely put her in front of the cameras with the hope that the news report will end the China deal so Marder can go to the board with a deal he made with Korea. The Korea deal includes more planes, but it also entails sending the wing to Korea. Marder hopes the deal will move him into the president's office. However, sending the wing to Korea will eventually mean the downfall of the company.

Casey is furious. Casey also knows that what she does next could mean either saving Norton or ending her career. Rather than commit to one truth, Casey tells Reardon that Norton will release an official cause of the incident on Flight 545 the next day after a test flight. Richman and Marder are shocked, but Marder believes Casey cannot pull Norton out of the fire at this point. Casey has a meeting with Teddy Rawley, Norton's lawyer, and Malone. Malone wants to have cameras on board the plane when Teddy runs a test flight. The lawyer is concerned with safety, but it is finally agreed that Malone can be present during the flight and that she can personally position two of the cameras on board the plane during the flight test. However, in exchange Malone has to sign a paper that says she did not get the video footage of Flight 545 from a Norton employee, disgruntled or otherwise.



Friday Analysis

Casey has the QAR. The QAR is not as good as the flight data recorder, but it gives Casey enough information to determine what happened on board Flight 545 in the moments leading up to the fatal incident. From that moment on, it seems Casey is on the trail of something important. The reader tags along as Casey gathers other information, almost all of it having to do with the video she found in a broken camera on board the plane. There is something on the video that tells Casey what happened, but the reader is not given this information at this point, adding to the suspense that has been building throughout the novel.

Casey is interrupted in her investigation to attend an interview with Newslite. This interview is crucial to the future of Norton Aircraft. If the interview implies that the N-22 is unsafe, it is possible that China will back out of their purchase of more than twenty N-22s. If China backs out and other buyers are scared off, Norton may go out of business. This is not something Casey wants to see happen, especially based on an interview she did. Casey holds her own during the interview, remaining calm and relaxed, answering the questions as clearly and concisely as she can. However, Reardon is a tough interviewer and he has information he should not have.

Richman shows his true colors during this interview. Casey realizes that Richman released an internal report that was never meant to be seen by anyone but Norton executives. This report is actually a positive report, but the title makes it seem like Norton believes the N-22 to be unstable in flight. Casey confronts Richman and finally learns his secret, touching on the theme of secrets. Marder has orchestrated a larger deal with Korea to take the place of the China sale. However, the Korea sale is contingent on them being able to build the wings. Outsourcing the wings will not only mean a loss of work force at the plants in the United States, but it is a major part of the airframe and gives away the biggest part of Norton's production. It will mean the end of Norton. Marder does not see it this way. Marder only sees the sale as his ticket to the president's office.

Casey's motivations are now clear. Casey has to save Norton. The tone of the novel reaches a peak of tension as the reader wonders how Casey will do this. When Casey tells Reardon that she will release the investigation results after a test flight the following day and then allows Jennifer Malone to be present, the reader wonders where she is going with this. The situation suggests Casey knows what happened on Flight 545.



Saturday

Saturday Summary

Malone and Casey are at Norton's Test Facility in Yuma Arizona. All the cameras are on the plane and Casey is showing Malone the views. Malone is not satisfied with the cameras and asks if she can be on board the plane during the test. Casey resists, but finally agrees. Casey and Malone board the plane. Malone is unhappy with the harness that is placed on her, but is told that the harnesses are necessary. The flight begins. Casey and Malone go into the cockpit to talk with Teddy. Casey explains that they have to fly for about two hours in order to simulate the conditions the aircraft was under when the incident on Flight 545 took place. While they wait, Teddy shows Malone what happens when the slats are deployed mid-flight. Malone is skeptical but surprised to find that the slats do not affect the plane as she expected.

Casey explains to Malone that they believe the events on Flight 545 began with a bad part. Casey tells Malone to be patient, that she will see. Soon enough, the cockpit is given a disagree warning, telling Teddy that the position of the slats does not agree. Teddy sends the ladies back to their seats. Teddy then talks to ground control and begins to reenact the incident on board Flight 545. The plane goes into a steep dive and then climbs sharply. This happens again and again. Malone becomes ill and begs Casey to end it. Finally, Casey instructs Teddy to stabilize the plane and land.

On the ground, Malone attacks Casey, suggesting that Casey took her up in the plane in order to scare her out of airing the news segment. Casey makes Malone look at one of the monitors where she has cued up the video she found on the plane. Casey stops the footage when it shows the cockpit. Casey points out the pilot, his short hair and earring. Casey tells Malone that the man flying the plane is not John Chang. Casey then shows Malone two different crew manifests and points out that one lists Thomas Chang as a first officer and the other as an engineer. Casey tells Malone that Thomas Chang is John Chang's son. Thomas is a pilot, but he is not certified to fly an N-22. However, John Chang left the cockpit to get a cup of coffee and left his son in charge. While Chang was gone, the disagree warning came on. Thomas Chang attempted to clear the warning by deploying the slats. When the slats caused the nose to rise, Thomas took control of the plane in order to regain proper attitude. Thomas continued to manually fly the plane, causing the wild diving and climbing, fighting the autopilot, until finally someone convinced Thomas to let go of the controls and allow the autopilot to take over. Casey shows Malone proof of all this when she shows her the transcript the lady in accounting made of the conversation in the cockpit on the tape and a telex from Vancouver confirming that John Chang was the man who died in a hospital there.

Malone's boss is not happy when he learns the truth about Flight 545, canceling the segment for that weekend's show. When Newline does not air the story, Edgerton calls Casey and thanks her for her part, asking her to have lunch with him when he returns



from signing the deal with China. Marder takes a consulting job, Malone moves to Hard Copy, Richman is arrested on drug charges, and Casey Singleton gets a promotion.

Saturday Analysis

Casey meets Malone in Yuma, Arizona where the test flight is to take place. Malone insists on being on the plane during the flight. Casey warns her that it will not be an easy flight. Malone continues to insist so Casey allows it. On board, Teddy allows Malone to witness first hand what happens when the slats deploy mid-flight. Just as Casey saw when she visited the simulation department earlier in the week, nothing significant happens. The reader thinks perhaps this will prove to Malone that the slats did not cause the incident on Flight 545, but Malone is stubborn. Malone sees this story as a stepping-stone to her future as a brilliant television producer, touching on the theme of ambition.

Teddy and Casey explain to Malone how most of these incidents are caused by a series of events and that they are waiting for the series of events in this case to begin. Casey then has Malone sit back in her seat and prepare for a reenactment of the incident on Flight 545. As the reader has already figured out, the diving and climbing that happened on that flight was not pleasant and proves to not be fun for Malone. Malone becomes ill and begs that the flight end. Casey seems self satisfied, having gotten a measure of revenge on Malone during the flight.

On the ground, Casey gathers all the evidence she has been collecting and shows it to Malone. Casey proves beyond any doubt that the incident on Flight 545 was caused by pilot error as a result of a faulty part. Malone has been warned not to come back with a parts story, however that is exactly what she has. The reader can almost hear the severing of her career with Newsline. The story does not run and as a result, the deal with China is salvaged. Marder finds himself looking for a new job, as does Malone, but Casey gets a nice promotion.

Characters

Katherine 'Casey' Singleton

Casey Singleton is a divorced mother of a six-year-old daughter. Casey shares custody of her daughter with her unemployed ex-husband, a man who goes out of his way to cause tension in Casey's relationship with her daughter. Casey is also the head of quality control for a major airframe manufacturer, Norton Aircraft. As head of quality control, Casey is a member of a select group of engineers and investigators who are charged with learning the cause of malfunctions and/or accident involving Norton Aircraft. On the morning the book opens, Casey has just sent her daughter to stay the week with her ex-husband when she gets a message that she is needed in the office immediately. It seems one of Norton's airframes has been involved in an accident that has claimed three lives and injured dozens of passengers.

Casey rushes to the office and sits in on a meeting where she learns a pilot radioed the tower in Los Angeles claiming to have hit severe turbulence. On initial examination of the plane, however, Casey and her team discover that something more deadly than turbulence occurred to the flight. Casey is concerned that the plane suffered a slats deployment, a problem this model of airframe has suffered in the past. This is a difficult conclusion because it could endanger a sale the company is about to make with China that could move it into the black for many years to come.

Casey is put under pressure to learn the real cause of the accident and to prove Norton Aircraft was not at fault. However, as Casey begins to probe the case, the workers at the plant begin sabotaging her efforts due to the fact that they believe the company will be outsourcing the wing of the airframes to be purchased by China. This will cause many layoffs at the California plant, something the union and the workers want very much to avoid. Casey finds herself running from angry workers and narrowly avoiding falling tools and machinery. However, Casey continues on the case, determined to prove Norton Aircraft builds safe airframes. Soon the press gets wind of the story and begins pressuring Norton for a statement. One producer in particular grabs on to the story, determined to make Norton look as though they purposely put people in danger through faulty airframes. Casey is assigned to do the interview and attempt to protect the company from this bad press and save the China sale.

Casey soon learns that her role in the producer's story was set up in order to cause her to take the fall when the China sale falls through. Casey takes matters into her own hands and decides to persuade the producer into dropping the story. Casey takes the producer to the test flight and allows her to fly while the test pilot reenacts what happened during the fatal flight. The producer is then shown evidence of pilot error, the true cause of the crash. In light of this, the producer drops the story and Casey is vindicated.



Bob Richman

Bob Richman is a young lawyer who is interning at Norton Aircraft. It is rumored that Richman is somehow related to the owner and his family. Richman has worked at the company for several months, but is only this week assigned to Quality Control and to Casey. Casey is annoyed to have the young man following her around, but has done this sort of thing before and finds it somewhat routine. However, Richman's laziness and lack of interest in aircraft technology soon causes her some concern. When Casey is warned by several co-workers that there is something odd about Richman and she catches him going through her desk, Casey begins to suspect Richman is not a simple intern.

Casey begins sending Richman on extended errands, removing him from the office so that she can freely continue her investigation into the fatal flight without him being aware of her actions. Casey also has her assistant begin to look into Richman through the office grapevine. Casey soon learns that when Richman interned in Marketing, he was rarely on site and appeared to have made a very expensive trip to Seoul. This further causes Casey to mistrust Richman. One night, Casey goes into a hanger to look for a special recorder on board the plane under investigation. Casey becomes aware of someone with her on the plane even though the hanger should be empty. Casey tries to run away and in the process catches sight of Richman. Richman appears to be attempting to stop her from finding the recorder. Casey later learns that Richman has been working with her boss, John Marder, in sabotaging the China sale in order to oust the current president of the company so that Marder can take his place.

John Marder

John Marder is vice president of Norton Aircraft and is married to the daughter of the owner. Marder was the project leader on the N-22 airframe, the same airframe that was involved in the fatal flight and is a major part of the sale to China. Marder appears anxious to prove the N-22 is not a dangerous airframe and that the fatal accident was not caused by the N-22's design. If the sale to China falls through because of this fatal accident, it could mean bankruptcy and closures for Norton Aircraft. For this reason, Marder puts a great deal of pressure on the investigative team to solve the mystery of the accident. When the press gets a hold of the allegations surrounding the accident, Marder instructs Casey to talk to them, instructing her to do everything she can to make them understand that the N-22 is not dangerous, even if it means lying.

Casey is not comfortable with lying, therefore she finds her own way to deal with the press. However, Casey finds herself in a position where anything she says will make her look bad and will make Norton Aircraft look bad. Casey also begins to realize that Marder has alternative motives for placing Casey in front of the press. Marder is using the fatal accident to destroy the China sale so that he can move in and present a sale he has made with Korea. Marder hopes this move will push the current president of the company out and put him in his place. However, this will also mean Casey will be out of



a job as well. In order to save her job, Casey has to prove the accident was not a direct result of poor design by Norton Aircraft and she has to stop the press from presenting any bad publicity about Norton Aircraft. Casey is successful in this. Marder finds himself out of a job soon afterward.

Doug Doherty, Nguyen Van Trung, Ron Smith, and Mike Lee

Less than an hour after TransPacific Flight 545 lands at LAX, the vice president of Norton Aircraft assembles a team to investigate the cause of the fatal flight. This team includes Casey Singleton, head of Quality Assurance. It also includes several engineers. Doug Doherty is in charge of structure and mechanical. Doherty will inspect the airframe to determine if a defect exists or was caused by the accident and how this fits in to the investigation. Nguyen Van Trung is in charge of avionics and will try to reenact the accident with the help of the many recorders on board the plane during the flight. Ron Smith is in charge of electrical. Ron is an introvert who is brilliant and will be a great help to Casey when it comes to interpreting some of the data they will take from the flight recorders. Finally, Mike Lee is a representative of TransPacific, the airline that owns the N-22 involved in the flight. Lee is a liaison between the team and the airline. However, Lee has his own agenda, mainly protecting his employer, and Casey often finds him more of a hindrance than a help.

Harold Edgerton

Harold Edgerton is the president of Norton Aircraft. Edgerton is a competent businessman who has engineered the deal with China. Edgerton is deeply concerned that TransPacific Flight 545 could cause bad press that will make China choose another aircraft company over Norton. Edgerton places a great deal of pressure on Marder to make sure this does not happen. However, Edgerton is not in California during the investigation because he has flown to China in order to get the paperwork signed. Due to Edgerton's absence, Marder is able to maneuver behind his back. Marder believes he should have been made president due to his relationship with the owner's daughter, but was passed over because the board liked Edgerton better. Marder wants to make Edgerton appear to be incompetent and hopes to cause the loss of the China deal, a failure that would devastate the company. However, thanks to Casey's determination to learn the truth, Marder is foiled and Edgerton secures the China deal. As a result, Casey is given a promotion and a raise.

Captain John Chang and Thomas Chang

Captain John Chang is the TransPacific pilot who was flying Flight 545. Immediately upon learning the identity of the pilot, the investigative team from Norton Aircraft dismisses the idea of pilot error. The team knows that Chang is a well-qualified pilot. Not only this, but Chang has gotten training at Norton Aircraft, proving his expertise using



their simulators. No one can believe that Chang would have been capable of behaving in such a way that he might have caused the tragic events that killed three passengers and a co-pilot on board Flight 545. However, when Casey learns that the person believed to be a co-pilot dies in a Canadian hospital is really John Chang, she begins to realize that Chang was not piloting the flight. Casey then looks closely at a video tape recovered from the flight and realizes the identity of the person sitting in the captain's chair. It is not John Chang, but his son. Casey realizes that Chang left the flight deck to get a cup of coffee and left his son in charge. His son, while a pilot, is not experienced with the N-22. When a warning light appears regarding the slats, the young pilot attempts to clear it, only to make a fatal decision to attempt to correct an altitude problem himself rather than allow the autopilot to take over. This is what caused the roller coaster affect that injured so many of the passengers.

Jack Rogers

Jack Rogers is a reporter for a small newspaper. Rogers' beat is the aircraft industry. Casey, as well as other executives at Norton, knows Rogers. Casey likes Rogers, but is always careful about what she says around him because at the end of the day, he is still a reporter and he might publish what she says to him. Shortly after Flight 545, Rogers comes to Casey and asks her about the flight. Rogers is aware that the N-22 has had problems with slats deployment in the past and wants to know if this is the cause of the accident. If so, it could mean bad press for the N-22 and the possible loss of the China deal. Casey denies that the slats caused the accident, but she has no proof or an alternate explanation for the accident. Rogers then asks about the work slow down that has begun due to rumors that the wing is being sent to China. Rogers has spoken to the union boss and learned that the tools that are used in building the wing are being sent to Korea. Casey denies this as well, not able to believe that the company would willingly allow such a major portion of the plane to be built outside the company. However, Casey's denials do not satisfy Rogers and he allows a producer from a major television news show to interview him and discuss his suspicions about the N-22 and Flight 545.

Scott Harmon

Scott Harmon is an employee of a video company Norton Aircraft often uses when analyzing video tape. Casey goes to Harmon in order to analysis a video tape found on board Flight 545. This tape is a personal video belonging to a couple on board the flight. During the incident, the video camera was recording and fell out of the owner's hand, landing in the cockpit. Casey asks Harmon to slow down the tape so that she can get a closer look at the cockpit. In the process of doing this, Harmon allows other people in his shop to look at the tape. The tape so disturbs one of the secretaries that she threatens to release it to the press. When Casey learns this, she uses the situation to allow the tape to come into a television producers hands in order to help her prove the innocence of Norton Aircraft.



Jennifer Malone

Jennifer Malone is an ambitious television producer. Jennifer finds herself needing to find a story to fill an empty spot in the show that will air that weekend. Jennifer comes across a press release from a rival aircraft company to Norton suggesting that the N-22 was unsafe. While reading this release, Jennifer sees a news report about the Flight 545 incident. Jennifer jumps on the story, designing the story in such a way that Norton Aircraft will look as though they purposely put planes in the air when they know they are unsafe. Jennifer interviews several people who claim to know the N-22 is unsafe, based on past safety issues with the lever that releases the slats. Jennifer also interviews Jack Rogers who tells her about these past issues and about the union unrest.

Jennifer then arranges to interview an executive at Norton. Jennifer is not happy to be forced to interview Casey rather than the president, but goes to the interview armed with a great deal of information that looks bad for Norton. Casey comes to the interview and is blindsided by Jennifer and her information. Including among this information is a study Casey lead that addressed flight problems with the N-22. Jennifer manages to make Casey and Norton look as though they are purposely putting airline passengers in danger. As a result, Casey agrees to allow Jennifer to attend a test flight of the aircraft involved in the Flight 545 incident. Jennifer bullies Casey into allowing her to ride on the plane while a test pilot reenacts the events of Flight 545. Jennifer becomes ill during this experiment and becomes angry with Casey. However, Casey then shows her proof that the incident was not caused by the plane, but was pilot error. Jennifer drops the story.

Teddy Rawley

Teddy Rawley is a test pilot employed by Norton Aircraft. Teddy is the pilot who agrees to reenact the events of Flight 545. Teddy jokes with the crew before hand, giving the impression that the flight is normal and will be uneventful. However, when Casey gives him the go ahead to reenact the flight, he begins a roller coaster ride that leaves Jennifer extremely sick. The flight is difficult, causing Jennifer a great deal of anger toward Casey, believing it was a set up that Casey manufactured with Teddy. However, the flight was an exact replica of the original. Not only this, but the flight helps prove Casey's belief that the incident was caused by pilot error. Teddy is a minor character, but he is important to the plot because he is the pilot who helps Casey save Norton Aircraft.



Objects/Places

N-22

The N-22 is the widebody airframe that Norton Aircraft manufactures. The N-22 is the airframe model that is involved in the TransPacific Flight 545 incident.

TransPacific

TransPacific is a Hong Kong based airline that owns and operates Norton Aircraft airframes.

Flight 545

Flight 545 is a charter airplane flight that experiences an episode of severe roller coaster type diving and climbing that causes many passengers to become injured and four people to die.

Cockpit Voice Recorder

The cockpit voice recorder, or CVR, is a device that records thirty minutes of conversation in the cockpit on a loop. The CVR is useless in investigating Flight 545 because the incident took place more than thirty minutes before the end of the flight.

Flight Data Recorder

The flight data recorder, or FDR, is a device that records the state of an aircraft's system during flight and can be valuable in learning what happened prior to an accident. However, FDRs often fail during flight and are notoriously unreliable. In the case of Flight 545, one of the sensors stopped working, and the team is unable to recover the information they need to determine the cause of the accident.

Quick Access Recorder

The quick access recorder, or QAR, is an optional recorder on aircraft that mechanics use to determine problems with the various systems on board a flight in use to maintain the aircraft. Casey finds a QAR on board the airframe used in Flight 545 and is able to determine the events of the incident that occurred on Flight 545.



CNN Video

A few days after Flight 545, CNN airs a video taken on board the plane during the incident. The video shows passengers being thrown around the cabin like rag dolls.

Casey's Video

Casey finds a smashed video camera on board Flight 545. Casey uses the video to learn the identity of the man piloting the plane at the time of the fatal incident. Jennifer Malone gets a copy of this same video and threatens to use it on her news show to prove that Norton Aircraft purposely lied to the American public about the safety of their aircraft.

Internal Review Action Committee Report

Richman sneaks a copy of an internal review action committee report in with the publicity packet Casey sends to the news agencies interested in the incident on board Flight 545. This report is entitled, Unstable Flight Characteristics of N-22 Aircraft. The title alone seems to suggest that at the time the report was written, Norton Aircraft was aware of problems with the N-22 aircraft. The fact that this report clears the N-22 of problems does not change the potential impact it may have on the flying public.

Service Bulletin

Whenever an aircraft company determines there is a problem with their aircraft that requires action on part of the airlines using their airframes, they issue a service bulletin recommending these actions. However, the aircraft company cannot force airlines to heed their advice.

Airworthiness Directive

When an aircraft company issues a service bulletin and the airlines do not implement the suggested action, the FAA will issue an airworthiness directive, forcing airlines to comply. However, the FAA has no power over foreign carriers, only domestic carriers.

Autopilot

Most modern aircraft are run by computers. Computers keep track of the various systems on board a plane and warn the pilot when something is not working correctly. Computers also fly planes with the use of the autopilot system. In the case of Flight 545, if the pilot had allowed the autopilot to take over, the fatal incident would not have occurred.



Social Sensitivity

A bizarre accident aboard an airliner bound from Hong Kong to Denver leaves three people dead and scores injured as the plane makes an emergency landing at Los Angeles International Airport. Everyone associated with the airline industry wants to know how a new airplane, being operated by an experienced crew in mild weather, could possibly injure so many people. Or do they?

Casey Singleton, a vice-president at Norton Aircraft, which built the plane, is in charge of the Incident Review Team, a group of engineers that the company assigns to examine the aircraft for clues to the malfunction. As her team's investigation of Flight 545 begins within hours after the accident, Casey discovers herself in the center of a storm of controversy that threatens to destroy any chance of finding what all concerned claim they want, the truth.

The protocols for investigating operational troubles on an airplane are well established at Norton Aircraft of Glendale, California, and although Casey is newly promoted to be the Quality Assurance Division's liaison with the press within the team, she is nevertheless well experienced within the industry and the plant. She knows the personality of each engineer on the team and how to work with members of that profession; not an easy task for most managers, but she does it well. This particular investigation, however, promises to be a baptism by fire.

The accident comes at a bad time for Norton Aircraft: The company has so far survived hard economic times that have forced all but a few major commercial manufacturers out of business, but they desperately need a pending contract with the Chinese that will allow them to work at full capacity for years to come. The chief operating officer at Norton, John Marder, believes that this incident with a new aircraft model, the N-22, may frighten the Chinese off, and he has ordered the team to come up with results in a fraction of the normal time it usually takes, to save the sale.

In addition to her duties on the Incident team, Casey is also obliged to take on a new assistant, a young man named Bob Richman, who apparently does not know the first thing about aircraft or their manufacture, unlike nearly everyone else with whom Casey works. She figures him for a Norton family member, not long out of college, getting his feet wet in the family business and rather blasé about the experience. He is extra weight rather than extra help, but with the wide-ranging freedom of her executive position also comes extra responsibilities, not all of them welcome ones. She is obliged to explain a great deal and tolerate his occasionally adversarial style of posing questions, something that one does not usually have to endure with a supposed subordinate. Casey begins Richman's education on the run, as she interviews hospitalized passengers and crew, discovers that the uninjured members of the crew have already left the country, climbs around inside the damaged plane with the Incident team, and keeps one eye out for Marder and for union "goons."



A new president, Harold Edgerton, is at the helm of Norton and the union that represents the mechanics who actually assemble the planes does not want the China deal to go through, believing that Norton's management is getting ready to sell them down the river by exporting their jobs as part of the deal.

Even though Casey is widely liked at the plant, even by the blue-collar workers and the president of the union local—an exception as executives go—she is still a target, one of "the enemy" because of the China sale issue. The union leadership above the local level has sent some "enforcers" to the plant and is not above applying pressure in the form of nearmisses: staged "accidents" that damage expensive tools being shipped out as part of the China deal and very nearly damage Casey herself. But Casey cannot afford to give up her investigation, even in the face of such danger, because too much relies on getting to the truth of what is or is not wrong with the N-22. People have been killed, and it is imperative to find out why before any more lives are lost.

The press enters the fray in the form of television news, generating more heat than light by emphasizing the visual element over the content of the story, unlike the local newspaper which still emphasizes the word over the picture as a holdover from a previous generation of journalists. Without an immediate answer to the question of Flight 545, television news keeps the pot boiling with sensational film footage of an exploded engine on another Norton aircraft of the same model, flown by a different company, without noting that the engine was not manufactured by Norton at all. When a previously unknown tape of the 545 accident made by a passenger is made available to a cable news channel shortly after, it is quickly aired before informing anyone investigating the accident that it even exists. The ghastly tape is seen by Jennifer Malone, a pitiless young producer with the television magazine *Newsline* in search of a sensational story. She becomes one more cross for Casey to bear as it becomes quickly obvious that she has already decided to cover the story as a case of an aircraft manufacturer that has built a bad plane and is trying to conceal the fact from the flying public.

Casey's task becomes Herculean when she begins to suspect that young Richman is not what he seems to be, which raises the question of who he is working for and what plans they may have for Casey. Is she being set up to take a fall? If she loses her job, what will become of her and her seven-year-old daughter; her unemployed, alcoholic ex-husband, with whom she shares custody of the child, cannot be relied on to provide for them.

Although this novel is a thriller, a story of intrigue, it is set in the world of industry with many elements that the readers may recognize from their own work experiences and personal lives. If Casey Singleton goes under, how many other people's careers could go with her? How many other families could face personal disaster if the company suffers a crippling blow in place of a desperately needed lift?

The author's task has been to take a highly technical industry and make its problems comprehensible to an audience with a limited scientific background.



Crichton has astutely chosen an industry within a crucial sector of the economy—the transportation sector—which moves important but delicate items to their destinations—human beings. Air travel is now commonplace for a citizen of the industrialized world, yet it is still new enough in the human experience to test the nerve of many people who would not hesitate to travel in a car, train, or boat. Travel by commercial airline, statistically, is safer than most modes because those who operate these aircraft in our nation's airways are a highly select group, unlike the average operator of an automobile. Yet an accident in the airline business, even one without injuries, dominates the airwaves in this country like little else. Is the country well served when this happens?

Crichton, whose previous book, *Jurassic Park* (1990; see separate entry), hinges on the premise that lack of publicity encourages corporate mischief now examines the issue of publicity itself. While we cannot have oversight without information, that does not mean that any presentation of information is good. In fact, a slick, dramatic presentation that lacks depth or genuine understanding of the problem it is supposed to cover may be even worse than absence of fact; it may deceive us into believing that we are seeing reality when in actuality we do not come close. When that reality is as important as the transportation system upon which our national prosperity relies, we could be in real trouble. So when Casey Singleton takes on her investigation of a tragedy in the air, she is in pursuit of a truth that is vital to everyone in the book.

Other social concerns mentioned in the plot but not fully developed as elements in the story are such subjects as the single female executive, the importance of the aircraft industry and its survival, aircraft safety standards, and foreign trade. Casey's vocation as an executive is not a matter of controversy in *Airframe*, as it had been in Crichton's earlier novel *Disclosure*, in which promoting a single female to such a powerful position in a company is a major concern for both the characters in the story and society at large. The importance of the aircraft industry as part of America's industrial base is not given the direct scrutiny in the novel that the computer industry and other valuable American assets got in Crichton's novel *Rising Sun*. Norton's importance is given a more personal focus by allowing the reader to meet representatives of its many divisions, from the top executives to the engineers who design Norton's product, the shop people who actually assemble the plane, the technicians who test its systems, the pilots who test-fly them, and even the secretaries whose work allows these diverse groups to communicate with each other. It is these characters, stand-ins for many real Americans, with whom readers can identify, who most stand to lose if the American airline industry fails. Airline safety standards are a subject that would require a book of its own to adequately address, and *Airframe* is already a complex novel just in its dealing with the manufacture of airliners; one can see why this complex issue is not more fully developed in this case.

Foreign trade is more important in this novel than in any of Crichton's others: it is to foreign markets that Norton must turn if it is to survive, and the burgeoning economies of Asia are their best likely customers. TransPacific of Hong Kong, the fictional airline which flew Flight 545, is an example. But any negotiation that hinges on contracting part of the airliner's construction to the nation that is buying the airliner must be handled with care; the China deal is fraught with both hope and peril. Crichton does not present the



action overseas firsthand; what the reader sees is the effect such an anticipated trade has on the American side of the deal. The author's strength is in making scientific ideas and high-tech hardware comprehensible and meaningful to his readers. A more thorough presentation of Norton's overseas negotiations would have much more to do with economics and geo-politics than science, and Crichton has left those areas to those writers who specialize in such matters.



Techniques

The book opens with a strange and frightening incident in the air from the perspective of a young American family on their way home to the United States.

Crichton is master of the thriller, and to pull in large numbers of contemporary readers and to successfully compete with other forms of entertainment, the thrills must begin immediately. It also helps greatly to have these events happen to sympathetic characters, to people with whom the reader can closely identify, to someone who is intriguing by the nature of his or her job or situation, or to vulnerable characters such as the young couple with a baby.

The technique of placing the sympathetic and interesting character in danger is continued in the person of the heroine, Casey Singleton. As a divorced mother of a seven-year-old, and as a woman who cannot rely on child support from her exhusband, Casey has many counterparts in today's world. But her job is the really intriguing element in the story, along with her struggle to hold on to it in the face of overwhelming odds. Not many people ever get to tackle a puzzle on the order of the magnitude of Flight 545. That element of the plot alone would make an interesting story. But a thriller must do more. To the challenge of a technical mystery is added a pressure-cooker deadline and a high-stakes contest that includes the element of physical danger to test the bravery of the main character.

Her very name evokes the tomboy grown up into a woman with the athlete's resilience in the face of mental pressure and physical risk, the baseball batter standing alone at the plate in the bottom of the ninth inning, the last in the lineup who alone can salvage the team's hopes of victory. Casey must endure hazards from all sides, psychological as well as physical without taking out the abuse on others.

Another important aspect of the author's task is the transmission of a great deal of technical information about the airliner in question and the airframe manufacturing business without making that information too dry. A combination of two techniques works well. The first is to parcel out the necessary information over several chapters, intermixing it with "human interest" parts of the story such as the interviews with the hospitalized passengers and crew of Flight 545 and Casey sneaking into the airplane to get a critical flight recorder. The second is to have the characters explain the technical information, each in his own personal style: Engineer Kenny Burne is particularly effective because his speaking style is blunt and outrageous.

Verisimilitude is an important part of making a techno-thriller work. Because the situation that the heroine finds herself in is so exceptional—the company could not survive if it had to rely on such heroism every week—the other parts of the story must be based in reality. Incidents like the one on Flight 545—passengers injured by unexpected turbulence, the trashing of the DC-10, even instances where pilots have allowed their unlicensed children to fly commercial aircraft with unknowing passengers aboard—are all based on actual occurrences. Even Norton Aircraft seems to be based



on a real airframe manufacturing company; it bears notable resemblance to Northrup of southern California, and its competitors, Boeing and McDonald-Douglas, are or were real companies. Although Newline is not a real television tabloid, it is similar to several real news magazines.

Intermixing the real with the fictitious draws the reader easily into the story and helps sustain its believability throughout.

Supporting characters, even those mentioned only briefly, are an integral part of this novel, and a key to keeping them all differentiated in the reader's mind is linking their names with their key characteristics. Richman is a natural title for a pampered young male in the founding family of a large company; John Marder has a strong and hard sound, standing for the ruthlessness of a formidable man who "looks like a cobra about to strike."

Jennifer Malone's surname is similar to the term "malign." Hot-headed engineer Kenny Burne expresses himself in "hot" and profane language; Marty Reardon's name decodes to "smart-ass," and so on.

While the author does not resort to this technique in every book he writes, neither then do most of his novels have so many characters to keep separate from each other.



Themes

Secrets

A terrible incident has happened aboard an airplane making its way from Hong Kong to the United States. Many passengers have been injured and even a few have died. The pilot tells the tower that they have suffered from extreme turbulence. However, the same pilot tells one of stewardesses that there was an uncommanded slats deployment. Casey Singleton is charged with trying to make sense of the tragedy and learn what has really happened. In the process, Casey discovers there are many secrets surrounding the case, including a few she is accused of keeping.

The media gets wind of the tragedy aboard Flight 545 and begins to investigate. The assumption is that something is wrong with the aircraft, a Norton Aircraft N-22 widebody. The widebody has had trouble in the past with the design of the slats controls and therefore the idea of a slats deployment is a possibility. Due to this history, the news media believes that Norton has covered up the design flaw to protect themselves and have allowed the N-22 to continue flying despite the danger. The news media believes this to be a secret Norton has kept that they have a responsibility to expose. However, this secret is not really a secret. The design flaw was taken care of several years before.

Another secret Casey runs into is a business deal with China that will keep Norton Aircraft in business for the next twenty years. However, word leaks out to the union that the wing is to be built in China rather than in Norton's own facilities. This is a major section of the plane and will mean the loss of many jobs in the United States. Casey does not believe these rumors. Soon Casey will learn, however, that the wing is being sent overseas, just not to China. One of Casey's bosses has made a deal with Korea for many more aircraft than the China deal calls for. The only problem with this deal is that Korea has demanded the wing. Casey's boss has given it to them, assuming the bad press over Flight 545 and the loss of the China sale will place his Korean deal in a position of necessity and give him the coveted president's chair. This is one secret Casey is determined not to help keep. Casey blows her boss out of the water and protects Norton Aircraft from the news media, exposing all the secrets that threaten her livelihood.

Sabotage

The worker's at Norton Aircraft believe that the wing is being sent to China and therefore their jobs are at risk. These workers make a conscious effort to stop this from happening. First, they alert their union, the leader of which works in the background trying to prove the China deal will send jobs overseas in order to use the law to stop it. Second, the workers begin sabotaging their own work in order to force a slowdown at



the plant. Casey is on the floor one afternoon when a crate containing a large tool falls and breaks.

Later, Casey has the impression that a few of the workers are out to hurt her. Casey is warned several times not to go out into the hangers alone, especially while the workers are around. Casey ignores these warnings, believing that the workers will not hurt her. Casey is wrong, however. The closer Casey comes to solving the mystery of Flight 545, the more often she finds herself running for safety. Twice Casey feels that two large workers are following her, with dark intentions. At one point, Casey climbs to the top of a plane under construction in order to escape these men. A second time, Casey falls off a plane and into a safety net, bruising her face in her attempt to get away. Casey believes these men are attempting to stop her from solving the Flight 545 mystery so that China will come to believe the N-22 is dangerous, therefore refusing to go through with the purchase of these planes. These men do not succeed.

Ambition

Ambition is a healthy aspiration in most people. Ambition is what makes a child want to be a doctor, what makes a salesman want to be a chairman, and what makes a janitor desire to write the great American novel. However, in some people ambition can blind them to the harm they bring down on others. In this novel, Jennifer Malone is an ambitious television producer. Jennifer gets wind of a story about an aircraft manufacturer that produces faulty planes and allows people to fly in them with no regard to their safety. Jennifer begins to put together a story to expose this company without regard to whether the story is true or not. Jennifer stacks the story against the company, Norton Aircraft, by only interviewing people she knows will say that Norton is irresponsible. When Jennifer interviews executives at the company, she turns their words around in such a way that the normal viewer at home will believe they are lying through their teeth. Jennifer has no idea that what she is doing is tarnishing the reputation of a good, strong company with an impeccable safety record.

John Marder is also ambitious. Marder wants to be president of Norton Aircraft and will attempt to achieve this goal by any means possible. Marder believed that by marrying the daughter of the owner of the company, he was a sure bet to be president, but the board disagreed and appointed someone else. Now the new president is on the verge of signing a deal with China that will put Norton Aircraft in the black for the next twenty years. Marder has to ruin this deal in order to make his own deal with Korea seem more appealing. When the incident takes place on Flight 545 it seems like a dream come true. While Marder is telling the investigative team to find out the cause immediately, he is secretly hoping the media will get wind of the situation and that they will believe the N-22 is unsafe. If the media announced that the N-22 was unsafe, China would not sign the deal. Marder nearly reaches his goal, but is stopped when Casey figures out what he is doing, learns the real cause of the incident on Flight 545 and stops the media from going forward with a story that makes the N-22 seem unsafe.



Significant Topics

The truth is a delicate matter, easily pushed aside in a rush to judgment. Essential to civilization, it is nonetheless not highly regarded by everyone, especially those who find it inconvenient to their ambitions. One who would search it out in a hostile climate had better be nimble of mind and sturdy of soul. Casey Singleton puts these attributes to work to live up to the responsibilities of a corporate officer when survival of that corporation and the professional lives of the people in it are threatened by the intrigue surrounding an investigation. Her reward, if she is successful, will not be an open acknowledgment, of heroism; it may be nothing more than a moderate raise and the quiet appreciation of those co-workers whose future she has saved.

Truth-seeking in a corporate venue— especially in such unstable times with mergers and downsizing being the business fads of the nineties—may seem like a contradiction in terms. In these days of "spin doctors," "golden parachutes," and vast differences in pay scales between CEOs and everyone else in America's companies, little emphasis seems to be placed on something so redolent of morality as "truth." It almost sounds quaint, but it is not as outmoded as Casey, who got her bachelor's degree in journalism, believes. The truth may yet save Norton Aircraft, if it can be revealed quickly enough. With expertise in engineering, aided by black boxes and skilled re-construction techniques, the answer to the problem of Flight 545 must be found, one would think.

But a large modern aircraft is a highly complex object, composed of several subsystems, each of which is designed by different engineering teams. In addition, it is also a vehicle that must be operated by human beings—highly skilled people—who are in themselves complex creatures governed by psychology, a discipline almost antithetical to engineering. Its passengers are by and large people who are expert in neither of these fields, completely dependent on the skill and wisdom of professionals, whom they may never see, to get them safely to their destination. The answer to the tragedy aboard Flight 545 resides somewhere within these three communities: the people who designed and built the plane, the people who operated it, and the people the plane was meant to serve. Any inquiry that hopes to be successful must involve all three.

Getting to the airplane is the easiest part, since it is fortunately intact. The Incident Review team is able to examine the plane in detail, go over recordings of readouts for all the different subsystems—avionic, electrical, hydraulic, and so on—for that particular flight, and see for themselves if any parts or built-in safeguards against pilot error failed. Getting the testimony of the operators of the craft directly turns out to be impossible in the case of Flight 545, however. With the exception of a dead co-pilot and two injured stewardesses, only one of whom speaks English, the entire flight crew has returned to Hong Kong, apparently on orders from TransPacific, the airline for which the plane was flown, to deal with legal problems at the flight's point of origin—or so they say. With most of the crew unavailable, the Norton team's remaining source of witnesses are passengers, not all of whom are willing to talk to Casey. None of these has the technical expertise to describe what happened in more than the most general terms: a "rumbling"



or vibration just before the plane pitched into a series of steep dives and climbs that threw unsecured passengers, crew, and objects violently around the cabin like peas rattling in a can.

Photographs or video recordings taken by the passengers around the time of the accident, particularly if they include shots of the cockpit, would be extremely helpful if the team could find any. Such a video record does come to light—in the worst way, in terms of an orderly investigation. It is shown on a national cable network, supplied by and commented on by an ambulance-chasing lawyer who specializes in lawsuits aimed at the air industry, backed by a former FAA employee "expert" who is considered a fraud by those in the practice of aerospace engineering. Truth is once again in danger, this time from a group whose aim is supposed to be the revelation and dissemination of truth in the form of broadcast news. Not everyone who calls himself a journalist is worthy of the title. If a pretty face, youthful energy, and relentless arrogance were all that being a journalist required, Jack Rogers would be out and Jennifer Malone would be in. These two characters represent the profession, and the contrast between them is marked.

Jack is a reporter for the local newspaper, a veteran who has earned the respect of the aerospace industry while maintaining his independence. A product of the East Coast, Jennifer Malone knows nothing about the industry but regards it with the same cynicism she has for any established group, and she is ruled by what kind of story her boss wants to air rather than a desire to know what actually happened. As a producer for a nationally televised show, even one not highly respected among television news magazines, she is in a position to do a great deal of damage to Norton's reputation by showing a riveting video before Norton can prove that the plane design and manufacture did not cause the horrifying events seen on that tape. While an interview with Jack Rogers is no walk in the park, his line of questioning is fair, unlike the reportage of Newsline's professional hatchet men. Rogers has no hidden agenda, unlike Newsline's executive producer, Dick Schenk, who has garnered a great deal of undeserved celebrity by trashing the innocent along with the guilty on his program.

Casey has to coax truth into the light while fending off Jennifer Malone with one hand and Bob Richman with the other. Some of what Richman claims is his work history does not seem to square with his ignorance of what happens on the shop floor of a manufacturing plant and how engineers behave. He seems to have almost an adversarial attitude towards Casey, although that could just be the result of legal training. Norma, Casey's savvy secretary, has kept a keen and discreet eye on the young man's activities in the office when Casey is elsewhere at the plant. For a junior member of the Norton clan he is certainly spending too much time in Marder's office and far too much time near the copy machine with sensitive documents. Norma advises her boss that a set-up may well be in progress with Casey as the likely victim. Casey respects Norma's decades of experience with the company and heeds her words, unlike many executives who regard a secretary merely as a walking extension of the office machines. Casey also has an unknown ally at TransPacific Airlines: a person, possibly one of the flight crew, who is unable to risk helping the Norton investigation openly, but obviously shares Casey's conviction that the truth must come out. Someone has sent



her a picture of Flight 545's pilot John Chang, known to Norton Aircraft as a superb pilot, and his family, implying some connection with the accident that she cannot quite grasp at first. Casey goes to a specialist who enhances videos for close analysis and finally glimpses the truth, but a single tape made by an amateur photographer is not enough proof for the legal system.

As the novel nears its climax, a direct confrontation with the enemies of truth occurs within hours of each other. Casey faces unethical tactics by Marty Reardon, one of Newsline's "reporters," a man who is no more knowledgeable about the aerospace industry than Jennifer Malone but who has a couple of tricks that are quite effective on the unwary. Casey gets a little coaching and some reassurance from an expert in media before the interview, but she is unprepared for the "ace up the sleeve" that Marder and Richman have slipped into Reardon's file on Norton "accidentally": an old internal report on the N-22's "flight instabilities" with Casey's name on it. If she were dealing with a real journalist instead of a human attack dog like Reardon she'd be able to explain why the report was not as damning as its title suggested.

Indeed, this seems to have been Marder's intention, suggesting that he is an old hand at the game of setting up his lieutenants to take such falls, and he leaves nothing to chance. A fortunate break in the supply of camera film in the middle of the interview gives Casey, unlike Marder's other probable victims, the opportunity to confront Richman in private, confirm her suspicions about him and Marder, and have a few precious moments to think of a strategy that might yet save Norton Aircraft and her career.

For, indeed, the same union that sent "enforcers" after Casey was right about one thing—someone in top management was planning a move that would, in effect, take their jobs away and give them to Asian workers. Marder seeks to quickly gain the presidency of the company at the expense of any future for Norton Aircraft and its many American employees by selling the Koreans the wing design, proprietary information that is crucial to the company's survival.

Casey realizes that the only way left open to save Norton's reputation is to use Newsline's "newsbreaking" orientation against itself. Newsline's producers cannot afford to be contradicted by the other network-news programs earlier in the evening. If Norton can prove its case no later than mid-morning of the next day, Saturday, the magazine will be forced to scuttle the plan to make its attack on the company its lead story that weekend. She schedules a flight test aboard the actual plane that carried Flight 545 for early Saturday morning, and in an unprecedented move, she invited Newsline to have its own cameras on the plane along with Norton's. However, as the plane is getting ready to take off over the Arizona desert, Jennifer suddenly decides that the arrangement is not "immediate" enough for her and demands to be on the plane during the test. This is hardly out of character for her, even though it is foolish: there is nothing to be gained by her action because Newsline's own camera will gather all the necessary footage the program will need. Besides, there is still some danger that the plane may have suffered undetected structural damage, since during the accident the airframe was put through stresses well beyond what an airliner in normal service has to withstand.



Because of the accelerated rate of this particular investigation, the standard structural ground tests which measure this damage before the plane is ever flown again have been dispensed with, understanding that this hidden damage just may cause it to come apart in midair.

Nobody in the company is paid to take such risks with their lives, and even the test pilots who will be conducting the flight test know that they're taking on an abnormally dangerous task, even for an occupational group considered to be a bit crazy by the rest of the company's personnel. Casey, in a moment of silent rage, decides to give Jennifer exactly what she asks for, even volunteering to come along herself. Perhaps the strain of what she has undergone in just a few short days has gotten to Casey, or maybe she has decided that this is the one instance in her life that she is not going to be a "good girl," as Richman so rudely put it the day before during their confrontation.

Jennifer Malone is about to have a rude introduction to Truth, and Casey wants to be there to enjoy her revenge.

As she did for Richman, Casey answers Jennifer's questions during the first part of the flight—she and Jennifer even go to the cockpit while the pilot, Teddy Rawlings, does part of the testing in Jennifer's presence. The eye-opening part of the test, however, only takes place when the two women have returned to the passenger cabin and are secure in heavy-duty harnesses just like the pilots are wearing, watching the cockpit on a monitor. Then Teddy tries to reproduce what happened to Flight 545 and is successful. Jennifer now has all the immediacy she could ask for, as she and Casey alternately experience hurtling down through space for what seems like forever, then double gforce (feeling twice their normal weight) as the plane reaches the bottom of its dive. As the plane goes into a steep climb they seem to be riding a rocket, a sensation that is followed by weightlessness as the cycle starts again. Jennifer knows genuine terror for the first time in her life, then nausea followed by helpless vomiting. After the second dive, far before the ordeal would have been over for the passengers of Flight 545 she is begging for mercy. Casey coolly reminds her that the complete simulation is not over, but decides it is time to make her point.

She asks Teddy to let go of the controls in front of a wide-eyed Jennifer who now believes this hideous ordeal is about to end in death. Instead, they have smooth, level flight—just like that.

Once back safely on solid earth Jennifer makes one last effort to ignore the truth that has just been demonstrated to her; her arrogance tries to make a comeback, bolstered by her humiliation at having gotten herself in such a frightening and helpless position in front of the very people she has been bullying. She bellows at Casey, not unlike a brat having a tantrum, that the story is going on the air anyway, only to be stopped by a simple question: How did Jennifer get hold of the enhanced version of the tape that Newsline would be using for its segment?



Answer: Norton gave it to her through one of their attorneys, so Jennifer can hardly claim now that the company tried to bury evidence. The young producer is so taken aback that she finally starts paying attention to the remaining evidence.

Casey shows her two versions of the flight crew roster, a letter confirming the recent death of John Chang in an Orange County hospital, a translation of an audio recording made in the cockpit as the accident was happening, then the last moments on the video showing the person at the controls of Flight 545. Jennifer can see for herself that it is not Captain John Chang at all, but his son Tom, who is a pilot but not rated to fly the N-22. All the pilot would have had to do to end the incident on the fatal flight was to simply let go of the controls and allow the autopilot to take over, but Tom did not know that and his father was not in the cockpit where he belonged. John Chang was at the other end of the plane, getting himself coffee in the galley, when the accident happened and he was wedged headfirst into a break in the ceiling, sustaining massive injuries. "He let his kid fly the plane," concludes a stunned, disbelieving Jennifer.

The truth has saved Norton, and Casey's job; however it will not save Jennifer Malone's. Her boss wants no less than a story about the N-22 being a flying deathtrap, and the truth, that the incident was caused by the combination of a bad sensor and an unqualified Chinese pilot, is not "politically correct" enough for a man who survives on manipulating public opinion. In the epilogue it is noted that John Marder is given an insincere congratulatory sendoff on his way out of Norton Aircraft to work for the company's European competitors. Bob Richman ends up in a Singapore jail on drug charges, where he is about to discover that the "global economy" he so casually mentioned to Casey as a rationale for his betrayal of his family does not translate into a global standard for sentencing drug peddlers or their customers. Unlike the United States, Singapore executes such people. Considering the grief and dislocation of thousands of people employed by Norton, the stress of which might kill a few of the more vulnerable, Richman's fate does not seem at all unjust. It is worth noting that the revelation of truth does not guarantee the equal distribution of justice in this realist novel, or Marder's fate would be far more uncomfortable than a quiet boot out of the company into a similar job elsewhere.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view. This point of view is omniscient in that it allows the reader to not only see the story through the narrator's eyes, but also feel the narrator's emotions and see the narrator's thoughts. The narrator of this novel switches between several minor characters, Casey Singleton, and Jennifer Malone. This switch in narrators allows the reader to see more of the story than might be possible with only one narrator. The story begins on board Flight 545 and the reader is allowed to see the incident through a passenger's eyes. However, this passenger is never used as a narrator again. In fact, this narrator is seen only one other time, underscoring the fact that she is a minor character.

The point of view in this novel works well because it allows the reader an intimate relationship with a major character that is the motivating force within the developing plot. If the reader did not feel intimately connected to Casey Singleton, the reader might not care if Casey is caught by the angry workers who stalk her or if she learns the truth behind the incident on Flight 545. The point of view also works when Jennifer Malone is the narrator because it shows the reader Jennifer's motivations and makes her less of a villain and more of a victim of her own ambition. This point of view allows a connection between the reader and the characters, giving the reader a reason to care how the plot develops.

Setting

The novel is set in California. While the novel moves from Hong Kong, to Las Angeles, to New York, the bulk of the novel takes place on the West Coast. California is a warm, sunny place that greatly contrasts with the dark tone of the novel as it begins with the deaths of three people on board an aircraft. The majority of the novel takes place at the property belonging to Norton Aircraft. This property contains many buildings, including an office building and many hangars where aircraft are built, tested, and studied. The reader follows the characters through these buildings, learning about the world of aircraft manufacturing while being entertained by the plot of the novel.

The setting of this novel is important because the setting is almost a character in itself. The novel is centered on Norton Aircraft, an airframe manufacturer. The main character is an employee of Norton Aircraft who is investigating an incident involving one of their airframes. Due to this plot, it is important that the setting be in a place in sync with the plot, such as the hangars where the planes are built. The plot would lose some of its authenticity if the characters never encountered an aircraft or never visited an area where airplanes are manufactured. Norton Aircraft is the spine of the novel, the motivation for the main character, and therefore it becomes a character within itself for

that reason, making the plot work in a way that it would not have if set in a different place.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is precise English with a slant toward a more educated use of the language. The novel includes many abbreviations and other words associated with the aircraft industry. Throughout the novel, the reader runs in to unfamiliar words that are not widely used outside of the aviation industry, including such phrases as black box or cockpit voice recorder. These words, while not difficult to understand on their own, are used in a way that the average reader may not be familiar with. The author uses these words in dialogue mostly, giving the reader an easy explanation within the same grouping of dialogue that helps the reader follow the plot without getting lost in complicated jargon that is unfamiliar and difficult to decipher.

The language of this novel works because it is clear English that most all readers are familiar with. The language is a little more educated than the average best seller, but not educated enough that a reader with little education will not be able to follow. The use of technical terms associated with the aviation industry are not difficult words to understand and those that need to be explained are explained within the text in a natural way that does not impede the flow of the prose. Overall, the language of the novel is easy to understand for most average readers and complimentary to the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into six chapters, each chapter named for a day of the week. The novel begins on Monday and ends on Saturday, with a small section dedicated to Sunday. Each chapter is then divided into small, one or two page sections, each named for the location and time of the events that take place in that section. Each chapter is about sixty pages long and covers the events of the days for which they are named. The sections within these chapters help break up the large chapters and makes scene changes much easier to anticipate and follow.

The novel is told in both dialogue and exposition. The dialogue tends to be curt and to the point, keeping the story flowing toward its conclusion. The novel contains only one main plot and several sub plots. The main plot follows the incident on Flight 545 from the moment it occurs, through the investigation, and to the conclusion of the investigation. One of the subplots follows a television reporter as she investigates Norton Aircrafts and accusation that their N-22 is not safe. Another subplot involves the workers' belief that the wing of all N-22s manufactured in the future will be done in China, causing potential layoffs at the Norton plants in the United States. These subplots interact with the main plot and come to satisfactory endings as the main plot climaxes and ends.



Quotes

"Emily lowered her head, clutched her infant daughter to her chest, and for the first time in her life, began to pray." Monday, pg. 5

"It looked as if a giant hand had smashed the interior. Seats were crushed flat. Overhead bins hung down, almost touching the floor; ceiling panels had split apart, exposing wiring and silver insulation. There was blood everywhere; some of the seats were soaked deep maroon. The aft lavs were ripped apart, mirrors shattered, stainless-steel drawers hanging open, twisted." Monday, pg. 35

"No matter how she put the evidence together, that was the conclusion she came to. They had nothing solid so far. The pilot had said it was turbulence, but it wasn't turbulence. A passenger gave a story consistent with slats deployment, but the slats deployment couldn't explain the terrible damage to the passengers. The stewardess said the captain fought the autopilot, which Trung said only an incompetent captain would do. Flex said the captain was superb.

Nowhere.

They were Nowhere."

Tuesday, pg. 91

"It was the television reporters you really had to watch out for. They were the really dangerous ones." Tuesday, pg. 110

"Something had happened to that wing, causing it to be repaired, sometime in the past. But what?

She still had more work to do.

And very little time to do it."

Tuesday, pg. 119

"Those endless stories about air traffic control, how they were using 1960s computers, how outdated and risky the system was. Stories like that just made people anxious. The audience couldn't relate because there was nothing they could do about it. But a specific aircraft with a problem? That was a product safety story. Don't buy this product. Don't fly this airplane." Wednesday, pg. 155

"The video image began to slide, gaining speed, moving past seat after seat. But it was going aft, she realized: the plane must be climbing again. Before she could get her bearings, the camera lifted into the air.

Weightless, she thought. The plane must have reached the end of the climb, and now it was nosing over again, for a moment of weightlessness before—

The image crashed down again, twisting and tumbling rapidly. There was a thunk! And she glimpsed a blurred gaping mouth, teeth. Then it was moving again, apparently landed on a seat. A large shoe swung toward the lens, kicked it." Wednesday, pg. 185



"Jennifer had no illusions about what she was watching. This wasn't an interview; it was a performance. But a skilled approach was not rare these days. More and more interview subjects seemed to understand camera angles and editing sequences. She had seen executives show up in full makeup for an interview. At first, television people had been alarmed by this new sophistication. But lately, they'd become used to it."
Thursday, pg. 210

"And John Marder, she knew, never damaged himself." Thursday, pg. 228

"She had not promised to say what Marder wanted her to say; she had only promised to do the interview. She had less than twenty-four hours to make significant progress in the investigation. She was not so foolish as to imagine she could determine what had happened in that time. But she could find something to tell the reporter." Thursday, pg. 239

"She had only ten hours until her interview with Marty Reardon. Between now and then, she had only one thing she wanted to do.
Clear up Flight 545."
Friday, pg. 266

"Jennifer vomited explosively into the bag. It spilled out over her hands, dribbled onto her lap. She turned to Casey, her face green, weak, contorted.
'Stop it, please...'
The plane had started to nose over again. Going down.
Casey looked at her. 'Don't you want to reproduce the full event for your cameras? Great visuals. Two more cycles to go.'" Saturday, pg. 333

Adaptations

An abridged version of *Airframe* has been made into a sound recording for Random Audio. Read by actress Blair Brown, the recording has received good reviews from critics. Motion picture rights were sold before publication to Touchstone, an adult division of Disney Studios.

Key Questions

Casey Singleton's dilemma reminds us of the complicated world we live in, which becomes much more so for those who take on high-profile jobs and families. Several possible avenues for discussion can be taken from subjects explored in *Airframe*. Novels about troubled aircraft have been around since *The High and The Mighty* (Ernest K. Gann, 1953; see separate entry) and *Airport* (Arthur Hailey, 1968; see separate entry). Groups can discuss whether *Airframe* follows the traditions laid down by such novels or follows those for a different genre entirely. The portrayal of journalists, especially as stand-ins for the larger society they serve, can also be discussed—how different are the journalists in *Airframe* from the heroic image made popular for a generation by the Watergate reportage of Woodward and Bernstein? The difficulties of being a responsible parent, particularly the mother of a small child, while also having to work a highly responsible job makes Casey's situation a particularly meaty subject for debate.

The difficulty many people, particularly critics, seem to have with novels that involve technology is definitely worth exploring. Since the advent of the personal computer, high technology has become part of our daily lives and may become even more essential to our children's generation. Can we afford such a continued reaction?

1. *Airframe* is an unusually complex novel in terms of subject, plot, and number of supporting characters. Did you find it difficult to follow at times? Why?

Would you change anything to make the novel easier to read?

2. Casey Singleton takes much in stride on the job at Norton: the rough manners of the men around her, the job-actions that almost send her to the hospital, the burden of shepherding the Norton family's little darlings through an acquaintanceship with the operations of her division—all without shedding a tear, although she does become frightened of the guys watching her house until she realizes they are Norton security. Granted that she may have to be exceptional just to survive in a thoroughly male-dominated industry, do you think she is a realistic female character? Why does the author chose to make Casey female rather than male, a more obvious choice given the environment?

3. The villains in this novel, unlike most of Crichton's works, are not identified as such until well past the middle of the book (with the exception of Jennifer Malone). What advantages does this change in technique offer?

4. Why did Marder decide to go to great lengths to get the presidency of Norton? He is only in his mid-forties—surely there is still plenty of time to achieve his goal, and he did after all marry Charley Norton's daughter, which must give him extra influence with the found ing family. Why resort to intrigue and betrayal of the family trust?



5. How does Jennifer Malone see herself? A crusader for justice? A real comer in a glamour industry? Or someone who is just trying to keep her job? Do you think her experience with Casey has taught her anything, or noting that at the end of the book her new job is with a tabloid-style magazine just like Newsline, does she seem unchanged? Where will she be ten years from now?
6. How would you describe Jennifer's boss, Dick Schenk? Would it be as obvious what the author thinks of this character if he had a different name? How do you explain Schenk's getting an award at the end of the book?
7. What motivates Bob Richman to become Marder's agent? Note that in his confrontation with Casey he rationalizes gutting Norton by mentioning a "global economy." Is he just spouting the first phrase that comes into his head, or has he conned himself into believing that what he is doing is merely adjusting to changing times? If you have read previous Crichton novels such as Jurassic Park (1990; see separate entry) or The Lost World (1995; see separate entry), what does the author have to say about rich people? Is Bob Richman typical of such characters, or something else altogether?
8. Does Casey's relationship with testpilot Teddy Rawlings have a future? Do you think she will no longer need the security of a "teddy" at the very end of the book when she is promoted to head of her division? Why?
9. Do you agree with Casey's neighbor Amos that standards in public life, as in the practice of journalism, business management, and politics have deteriorated so much in the last thirty years that the only way to survive is to fight fire with fire, that is, lies with lies? Is Amos suffering from the "golden age syndrome" where everything seems better in the past than it does today? If you do not agree with Amos, what evidence can you provide to refute him?
10. How do you reconcile John Chang the superb pilot with John Chang the overindulgent father? Did it simply never occur to him that something in the cockpit could go so wrong so quickly, or is there another reason?



Topics for Discussion

Who is Casey Singleton? Why does the writer introduce her first as a single mother? Why did Casey go to work for Norton Aircraft? Why is this job important to Casey? How did Casey's childhood bring her to this job, this life? What are Casey's motivations? How does Casey's relationship with Teddy Rawley describe her personality? Why is this affair important to the overall plot?

Who is Jennifer Malone? What are Jennifer's motivations? How does she compare to Casey? How does she contrast to Casey? Why does Jennifer not seem interested in the truth? How does Jennifer's ambition cloud her decisions? Does Jennifer make the right decisions in pursuing the Norton Aircraft story? Why or why not?

Discuss the China deal. Why is this deal important to Norton Aircraft? What will happen if it falls through? How does this deal motivate Casey? How does it motivate the workers at Norton Aircraft? How does the China deal affect the investigation into Flight 545? How does the China deal affect Marder?

Discuss Marder. Who is John Marder? How is he important to the plot? What is Marder's involvement in the investigation into Flight 545? How does Marder influence the investigation? What is Marder's true motivation in the investigation of Flight 545? How will it help or hurt Marder should the investigation become public? Why does Marder put Casey in charge of publicity for the Flight 545 investigation? Is this good or bad for Casey?

Discuss Richman. Who is Richman? What is his purpose in the overall plot? Why is Richman assigned to Casey's office? What is Richman supposed to do in Casey's office? Does Richman achieve his goal? Why or why not?

Discuss air safety. What does this novel say about air safety? Is it safe to fly? Could the incident on board Flight 545 have been prevented? If so, how? What should happen as a result of the incident on Flight 545? If you were a passenger on this flight, what would you expect to happen next? How real is this situation? How do you believe the incident would be treated if it was a true story?

Discuss the structure of this novel. Why are the chapters divided the way they are? What is the purpose of this structure? How does this structure add to the tone of the novel? What is the tone of the novel? How would the tone be different if a more traditional structure were used? How would it change the novel if it were structured differently? Discuss the pros and cons of the structure.

Literary Precedents

There are numerous examples of novels about life in modern corporate America, from *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (Sloan Wilson, 1955) to novels about women's introduction to the upper levels of management, such as *The Women's Room* (Marilyn French, 1977; see separate entry). Crichton's novel, even though it features a female executive subject to the machinations of a male boss, is really not about sexual politics or "boys-only clubs." It is basically a fast-paced adventure involving a mystery, and physical and financial danger that the heroine conquer.

In this regard, Casey could have been a male character without substantial change to the plot.

Airframe is most closely akin to classic political thrillers like Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey's *Seven Days in May* (1962), which involved a plot by top officers in the Pentagon who have created their own units within the Armed Services in order to seize power from the President in a lightning coup. Their plan is uncovered by a loyal officer who must offer definitive proof of the plot in order to convince the President to act against the conspirators. Crichton's novel has an extra element, not common to the typical thriller, of social criticism along with a high level of techno-scientific sophistication. Not even Robin Cook, a medical school graduate like Crichton, makes social commentary so intrinsic to his medical thrillers that the book would be significantly altered without it. Knebel's novel had the problem of patriotism gone mad, while Crichton's focuses on the passivity and cynicism of Americans brought up in the glare of the "boobtube," people more impressed by the visual impact than by the thoughtfulness of what they watch, especially in their choice of so-called "news programs" that are really more scandal-mongering than news-reporting.



Related Titles

Crichton's novels *Rising Sun* (1992) and *Disclosure* (1992) are about intrigue in the industrial sector of modern America.

Rising Sun, narrated by a young police detective, focuses on the murder of a woman during a celebrity-studded bash celebrating the recent opening of a new high-rise office in downtown Los Angeles. The subsequent investigation into the murder, which involves the Japanese businessmen who own the building and who may be covering up for the guilty party, must proceed at a break-neck pace before all of the evidence can be destroyed or doctored. The detective is teamed with a newly-retired police captain who was the department's expert on the local Japanese business community, which is portrayed as a business culture having its own code of conduct, one that has a reputation for particular ruthlessness and for contempt of non-Japanese.

Along with his mentor, the young detective very nearly becomes a casualty in the war between two competing factions of that community, as both his integrity and his life are in danger until the murderer is revealed.

Of the two novels, *Disclosure* is the more clearly similar to *Airframe* in plot and structure, although *Airframe* is not a sequel to either one. In *Disclosure*, the central character is a project manager for Digicom, a hot young computer company on the verge of a merger with a larger firm. Tom Sanders, along with many others in the company, stands to make a great deal of money when the merger is complete. He also is in line for a promotion. Together these two things will give his young family some much-needed financial security. He is in for a big and less than pleasant surprise: The promotion has gone to someone outside the company, someone he knows all too well. Meredith Johnson is an old girlfriend, and she seems eager to re-establish a physical relationship with the now-married Sanders. After rejecting her advances Sanders is astonished to discover that she is accusing him of sexual harassment, a move that may both derail his career and the merger.

Like Casey Singleton, he is up against a ruthless superior who is a master of politics, and he is being set up to take a fall.

But why? Can it have anything to do with Sanders' latest project, the Virtual Information Environment? Sanders is a technical master, unlike Meredith who has always been weak in that area, but he is unsure that his strength will be able to counteract Meredith's ability to manipulate people. It is a race against time, as the atmosphere at Digicom is turning poisonous for Sanders. Meredith seems to be just one step ahead of him as he looks for a way to unmask her. Like Casey he has an unknown ally, someone who is giving him hints where to look next for the answer to his problem. The answer must be objective enough to convince the head of the company that his new protegee is up to no good, without looking like simple sexism and sour grapes over the lost promotion. Like Casey, Tom Sanders has only a few days to uncover the truth. If Meredith Johnson succeeds Digicom will not just lose an excellent manager, but the company will be stuck

with a technical incompetent in a key position at the worst possible time. Many good people could be badly hurt, and Sanders is the only one who can save the situation.



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