

Before the Fall Study Guide

Before the Fall by Noah Hawley

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Plot Summary

Note: Citations in this study guide refer to the May 2016 Hachette Book Group/Grand Central Publishing First Edition of *Before the Fall*.

Before the Fall is a contemporary thriller by Noah Hawley in which plane crash survivor and artist Scott Burroughs attempts to recall the events leading up to the crash and to deal with its aftermath. When the novel begins, Scott is a last-minute addition to a private flight from Martha's Vineyard to New York, chartered by millionaire conservative news magnate David Bateman, his wife, Maggie, and their two children, Rachel and JJ. David, though much older than Maggie, has a good marriage and is very close with his children despite wishing he was home more. Maggie, however, has secretly become enamored with Scott, though she explains to everyone he is a friend whose art she is enthusiastic about.

Friends of the Batemans, private investment firm owner Ben Kipling and his wife, Sarah, are also invited along before the flight. Sarah has accepted the invitation at Maggie's insistence for an enjoyable flight back to New York together, while Ben hopes to ask David's advice on how to handle an indictment about to be served to him by the FBI for dealing with dirty money. The plane is watched over by Israeli-American private security man Gil Baruch, who along with a security unit was hired by the Batemans for protection after Rachel was kidnapped some years before. Gil and the Bateman family are close, and trust one another completely. The private OSPRY plane is piloted by a longtime captain, James Melody; copiloted by thirty-year old Charlie Busch; and is tended to by Emma Lightner, a flight attendant in her mid-twenties. Sixteen minutes into the flight, the plane crashes into the sea. Scott surfaces, unable to clearly recall the preceding few moments, and discovers only one other survivor—the four year-old JJ. With JJ in tow secured to a seat cushion flotation device, Scott swims to shore and washes up on Montauk on Long Island.

Gus Franklin, who handles transportation disasters for the federal government, immediately responds to the crash. There are no other survivors. Gus spends the next few weeks piecing together the wreckage of the plane and trying to determine what happened while befriending Scott and urging Scott to try his hardest to recall the past. JJ is sent to live with his compassionate aunt and stands to inherit over \$100-million. Scott spends time visiting JJ while doing his best to avoid the media as much as he can. Scott himself comes under investigation when it is discovered that his latest paintings all feature disasters, including a plane crash. Scott is finally forced to confront the public to explain the paintings, saying they are a reflection of his own life which has largely been a waste until recently, and that the paintings present the undeniable truth to people—that one day, everyone dies.

Gus, in the meantime, begins piecing together the lives of the people who were on the plane, especially when the bulk of the wreckage is found with bullet holes in the cockpit door and the dead pilot on the wrong side of the cockpit door. The data and voice recorders of the plane are recovered and decoded. As this occurs, Gus learns that



Charlie Busch had been a screw-up as a kid but had apparently been set on the right path by his uncle, a U.S. Senator. As it turns out, Charlie was in an abusive relationship with Emma, where Charlie was the abuser. Charlie's toxicology report tests positive for alcohol and cocaine, meaning he was flying high and drunk. Emma resisted Charlie's advances the day of the flight and even slapped him across the face. The data and voice recorders reveal that the pilot left the cockpit to deal with a nosebleed, during which time Charlie began calling Emma a bitch over and over before deliberately crashing the plane into the ocean.



Pages 1 – 78

Summary

Untitled Chapter – A nine-seat, private 2001 OSPRY 700SL plane is awaiting takeoff at Martha's Vineyard. Pilot James Melody is British; copilot Charlie Busch is from Odessa, Texas; and flight attendant Emma Lightner is from San Diego. A Dutch holding company in the Cayman Islands has the record of ownership, while the plane reads Gullwing Air. The narrator explains that everyone has a path, has made choices, but to try to predict anything would be pointless. The plane is well-decorated. The late August night is balmy, foggy, and eighty-six degrees. The Bateman family—millionaire newsman David, his younger wife of ten years, Maggie, and their two small children, Rachel, and four year-old JJ, arrive to board the plane. David carries the sleeping JJ aboard. David works hard, and wishes he were home more. They have been at the Vineyard on vacation and are constantly watched by Gil, an Israeli security man who is part of their private security team hired after Rachel was kidnapped in July of 2008. Ben and Sarah Kipling, another wealthy couple, arrive next. Ben is a partner at a firm on Wall Street, and quietly tells David they need to talk, but David brushes it off for later. Sarah notices Maggie appears to be looking for someone. She explains she is waiting for an artist named Scott Burroughs she has invited to join them in New York. Maggie sees the captain examining the plane wing, which he explains is a routine visual inspection. Scott, in his mid-forties, then arrives. Maggie is thrilled to see him, while Scott thanks her casually for the invitation. The plane takes off, and sixteen minutes later crashes into the sea.

Part 1

Untitled Chapter – The novel jumps back in time to when Scott is six and visits San Francisco with his family. There, they see a swimming stunt by Jack LaLanne underway at Fisherman's Wharf, where LaLanne, almost sixty, seeks to swim to shore from Alcatraz for a second time while pulling a boat. The crowd assembled discusses whether or not such a thing is possible, and whether or not anyone could have ever escaped from Alcatraz. LaLanne succeeds. Scott is impressed, and signs up for swim classes back home in Indianapolis.

“Waves” – The novel returns to the present. Scott surfaces from the water after the plane has crashed. He moves through the wreckage, seeking other survivors. Scott cannot remember much from the last few moments, such as whether or not the plane broke apart and then crashed, or broke apart on impact. Scott worries he may be bleeding, that he may have damaged his left shoulder, and that this may attract sharks. He forces himself to stay calm. He tries to get his bearings and realizes he is in open water, miles away from land. Scott then finds JJ, clinging to a seat cushion and crying. Scott ties the cushion to the boy and then begins swimming. As he swims, he thinks of Jack LaLanne. JJ worries about his family, but Scott does his best to calm JJ. Scott realizes he has a clear purpose unlike ever before in his life. He must survive and save



JJ in the process. The swimming is agonizing, and a number of obstacles, such as a large wave and the cold water, must be contended with. By dawn, Scott and JJ make it to shore—to Montauk State Beach, New York.

Untitled Chapter – A fisherman drives Scott and JJ to the hospital. The nurse at reception is skeptical about Scott's contention he and JJ have survived a plane crash until she sees the news on the TV reporting the lost plane. Scott holds JJ's hand as IVs are hooked up to them and the doctor begins checking them over. The doctor then heads to alert the police about Scott and JJ. JJ's aunt and uncle are contacted and head down from Westchester. When Scott is strong enough, he heads out into the patient lounge to watch the news. The reporter notes that Ben Kipling was under investigation by the Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), with charges pending. Gus Franklin, from the National Transportation Safety Board, arrives along with a group of men and women in suits. Gus introduces them. Leslie is with the FAA, Frank is from OSPRY, Special Agent O'Brien is from the FBI, and Barry Hex is from OFAC. Gus notes that David Bateman chartered the flight, but private flight passenger records are not always reliable. Scott must respond to many questions coming at him all at once. Scott must explain that he was on the plane because of Maggie and that he had been getting close with her but had not slept with her. Scott explains that before the crash, there was a loud banging and then the plane dropped. Scott has difficulty remembering and begins to lose his nerve, so Gus says they will be back later and allow Scott some time to rest. Gus congratulates Scott on saving JJ, and on the swim. Outside, news crews and reporters begin to gather.

"List of the Dead" – A list of the dead is published. It includes David Bateman, 56; Margaret Bateman, 36; Rachel Bateman, 9; Gil Baruch, 48; Ben Kipling, 52; Sarah Kipling, 50; James Melody, 50; Emma Lightner, 25; and Charlie Busch, 30.

"David Bateman: April 2, 1959 – August 23, 2015" – In this chapter, the novel jumps back in time. David Bateman is the architect of ALC News, with a staff of fifteen-thousand and two-million viewers each day. ALC News, begun in 2002 with a one-hundred-million dollar investment by an English billionaire, has become a hit by exploiting political scandal wherein David has put his past experience in political consulting to good use. Events of the day are shaped to fit the message of the network. David knows people do not just want news, but they want to know what it means and want perspective on it. With powerful and fiery figures like commonsense Bill Cunningham on the network to provide that perspective, ALC is a hit. David, the son of a GM autoworker, reflects on becoming inspired by Ronald Reagan while in college to get into politics.

Untitled Chapter – It is now a few days before the plane crash. David calls Maggie, out on vacation at the Vineyard with the kids, to check in. He feels lonely without his family, making trips out to the Vineyard on the weekends while staying in New York during the week to work. At work, not only does David deal with the news, but with people who write in to curse David for the positions he takes on the affairs of the country and the world. At the ALC building, David's long-time secretary, Lydia Cox, apprises him of his schedule. Bill and his executive producer, Krista Brewer, come in to see David. Bill



reveals that, during a drunken outing with his friend Namor, a former Navy SEAL and Pentagon intel, Namor boasted he could illegally tap any phone line. Bill says he drunkenly suggested tapping the phone of CNN host Kellerman and then forgot all about it until Namor came back with audio files from the tap. David refuses to hear any more about it and says they should be talking to a lawyer. David ignores a call from someone named Sellers and then stalks down to see the in-house counsel, Don Liebling, about Cunningham. The situation is bad. It will sink Cunningham and damage ALC. David realizes he must call the English billionaire backer of ALC to let him know what is coming, and that Cunningham must be kept off the air that night.

“Injuries” – The novel returns to the present. Scott is still at the hospital, and dreams of sharks. On TV, Bill Cunningham declares the plane crash is no accident because planes do not just fall from the sky. Cunningham vows to get to the bottom of things. JJ’s Aunt Eleanor, younger sister of Maggie and a massage therapist, and her husband, a writer named Doug, have arrived and spent the night at the hospital. Scott worries and wonders what will become of JJ, for it seems he is to live with Eleanor, who seems kind, and Doug, who gives Scott a bad feeling. Later that morning, Scott and JJ are released. Scott realizes that JJ now stands to inherit millions. When Doug hands JJ a new toy car, Scott realizes there are lots of sharks in the sea. Scott gives his number to Eleanor and Doug as they leave. Scott reflects on the fact that most of his own life has, so far, been a waste. He is forty-six and has spent his life painting, drinking, and living off the graces of others. His decision to go to Martha’s Vineyard was to get his life in order and to recommit to painting, which ultimately allowed him to begin to climb to success. The trip to New York was to have been another step in that direction.

Analysis

When the novel begins, Scott and JJ are the sole survivors of the OSPRY plane crash. The crash itself becomes the hub of the plot, with the causes for the crash, the investigation into the crash, and those individuals involved either with the crash or its aftermath becoming revolving features. The narrator initially notes that that everyone has a path in life and has made choices. However, the narrator slightly misleads the reader when he says predicting anything would be impossible—implying that chance, rather than free will and choices—have something to do with what is about to unfold. The reader should carefully note this, because what follows has nothing to do with chance but everything to do with individual human choices—choices which affect not only the individual making the choice, but the lives of those surrounding the individual. This will become an important theme as the novel progresses. Everyone who was on the plane chose to be on the plane.

Bearing this in mind, the reader quickly realizes that not everyone is as they first appear to be. This will become an important and recurring thematic argument in Noah Hawley’s work. Often, the wealthy—especially wealthy conservatives—are portrayed as uncaring elitists who are cold and callous. David Bateman, a self-made, wealthy conservative, is anything but the stereotype. He is a family man who works hard not only for love of his job, but for his family—and wishes he was home more often with his family. The scene



where David personally carries his sleeping son aboard the plane is evidence of that love and that warm closeness. David's decision to hire security comes as a result of Rachel having been kidnapped some years before, and his desire to protect his family at all costs. Likewise, when David discovers Bill Cunningham's phone tapping, David immediately goes to legal and prepares to remove Bill Cunningham from the air, demonstrating a strong moral character and honesty. This also unveils another important theme—that there must be a limit to how far the media is willing to go to get a story.

The other people on the plane have not been heavily explored as characters yet but it is clear that they, like David, are not as they first appear to be, either. Readers already know that there is possibly something romantic between Maggie and Scott, meaning that the stereotype of the wealthy man cheating on his wife is done away with. Maggie's delight at seeing Scott actually come onto the plane is demonstrative of this. But exactly why Maggie could have invited Scott, who appears to be a forty-something loser and an artist who has not made it big, is currently unknown. Ben's insistence on talking to David about something important is likewise indicative of something very serious, and something very important that is affecting Ben.

Scott himself presents a vital clue and link to the plane's crash, but he cannot remember the moments before the impact. Scott, at the moment, is the key to determining why the plane went down—and Gus Franklin recognizes this. Bill Cunningham also vows to get to the bottom of everything. As the novel unfolds, the reader learns more about Scott's own background, which helps get to the bottom of things. For example, Scott's ability to swim several miles to shore is made possible by his younger days as a swimmer, and by his admiration for the heroic swimmer Jack LaLanne, who inspired Scott to go into swimming. Scott, by all appearances (and by his own admission) a loser, is clearly more than meets the eye. This supports the author's argument that not everyone is as they first appear. As this background information is revealed, and as Gus begins to speak with Scott, news crews begin to arrive at the hospital, determined to get Scott's story of survival.

Discussion Question 1

Although Scott's survival of the plane crash itself is currently a mystery, what explains his ability to survive in the ocean after the crash? What does this demonstrate about Scott as a character in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

As the novel gets underway, the author begins devoting chapters to the lives of the characters before the crash. Why is this so? What relevance does this have to the crash and the author's thematic arguments?



Discussion Question 3

When Scott and JJ are released from the hospital, Scott passes along his number to Eleanor and Doug. Why does Scott do this? How do Eleanor and Doug react to this?

Vocabulary

emanates, perfunctory, trepidation, vigorously, unquantifiable, diffusion, indecipherable, tenuous, maelstrom, apoplectic, equivocated, debauchery



Pages 82 – 156

Summary

Untitled Chapter – Scott’s drinking buddy and fellow artist, Magnus, comes to pick him up from the hospital. News crews are swarming outside, so Scott and Magnus steal doctors’ scrubs to sneak out without being noticed. Magnus explains he is to take Scott to billionaire Leslie Mueller’s house. Leslie is a billionaire heiress, her father a tech giant, and owns the Mueller Gallery. Leslie has opened her door to Scott after learning about his ordeal and saving JJ. Scott is not thrilled about this, but consents at least to going to dinner. Scott suddenly has a seeming flashback of the flight attendant arguing with one of the pilots. He asks Magnus to pull into a gas station for some gum and then he ditches Magnus. Scott heads into a fried chicken place, calls Gus, and says he wants to help with the search. He explains that bits and pieces of the crash are coming back to him.

“Painting #1” – A painting featuring two directional lights and a female survivor of a terrible accident is described directly to the reader.

“Storm Clouds” – Gus arrives to pick Scott up, telling Scott that the Coast Guard, the Navy, and NOAA are working together to find the plane wreckage. Pieces of the plane wing were discovered by Philbin Beach the day before. Gus, a black man, has long relied on math, science, and practicality in his life, never believing anything out of reach. He is an engineer who looks at everything with a mathematical eye for understanding—which is why his marriage did not work out. Yet his work in transportation disaster investigation has allowed him to see that feelings and emotions are not something which can be rationally controlled and determined. Gus approaches such disasters as tragedies, with practical and personal aspects. They take a helicopter and land on a Coast Guard cutter.

Untitled Chapter – Gus explains that air traffic control (ATC) at Teterboro screwed up because they did not notice the OSPRY disappear from radar for six minutes. Gus explains the search for the wreckage is being performed systematically, grid by grid, and that there was no mayday call from the OSPRY before it went down. Gus himself explains he was at Teterboro at 11:46 that night with the Go Team. Scott asks why Gus has brought him by helicopter to the scene of the search, and why Gus is giving him so much information. Gus explains he hopes being back in the area might jog his memory, and that plane crash survivors are very rare. Scott remembers two investigators at the hospital talking about the baseball game also playing during the flight, during which the longest at-bat in baseball history was made—which lasted the length of the OSPRY’s flight. Gus, meanwhile, continues to relate important facts. So far, both pilots seem clean and professional. A storm appears in the distance. Inside the cutter, Scott watches the news where Cunningham breaks the story that Ben Kipling was under investigation by the Treasury Department for investing money illegally obtained from North Korea and Iran. Cunningham now considers the crash a terrorist attack. Cunningham also breaks



news about Scott himself, saying little is known about him beyond that he is a painter. He asks for anyone with information about Scott to contact the news network. Gus asks Scott if Scott has a place to hide under the radar for a few days. Scott says he does.

“Orphans” – Eleanor sadly reflects on growing up with Maggie and how close they were. She reflects on meeting the hipster Doug three years before at a bar after breaking up with her previous boyfriend. She also recalls how much Doug disliked David’s Republican politics and wealth, though she knows secretly that Doug has envied that wealth. With money being tight, things are tough. With the death of David, Maggie, and Rachel in the present, Eleanor and Doug find themselves trustees for JJ’s inheritance, though Doug looks at it like he himself has won the lottery. JJ’s trust is currently worth \$103-million, which will become available to JJ over the next forty years. Eleanor is to be sole executor of the trust. \$10.3 million is to be available to JJ and Doug for raising JJ to adulthood. Eleanor is very worried about JJ, while Doug is delighted to learn that properties, cars, and other assets can be kept or sold. Eleanor realizes she is now a mother and knows JJ must be her number one priority.

“Painting #2” – The narrator describes a painting of a girl on windy day, walking through a cornfield while a storm and tornado come in above while a man in a nearby house is shutting the door and locking both girl and viewer out.

“Layla” – Leslie “Layla” Mueller is twenty-nine, a billionaire heiress, and part of an emerging class of young people who use their inheritances to launch companies, fund the arts, and make more money through dividends that they spend. Layla is thrilled when Scott arrives to see her, telling him she is obsessed with him. Magnus is also present and does not seem to be angry about being ditched. Layla asks about the plane crash, to which Scott explains everything he can remember. She calls him a hero and wants to throw him a party because everyone is talking about him. Layla is happy to have Scott stay with her and says she expects nothing in return. She explains she hates the twenty-four-hour news cycle and how there is no such thing as privacy anymore, such as when the tabloids ran with her parents’ divorce and her sister’s problem with Vicodin. It is then learned through Layla’s phone that bodies have been found.

“Ben Kipling: February 10, 1963 – August 23, 2015; Sarah Kipling: March 1, 1965 – August 23, 2015” – The novel steps back in time to a few days before the crash. In the bathroom at the Soprezzi, Ben tells Greg Hoover that money is not a noun, is not an object, but a friction of life reducer. Money makes life effortless when enough is to be had, he explains. Hoover reveals that Lance is hearing things regarding the FBI. Ben is suddenly worried, wanting to know if Bill “Gillie” Gilliam, senior partner at the law firm that handles all their deals, has been gotten to. Hoover says it is a major problem. Both men head back out to the restaurant where two Swiss investment bankers are being courted by Tabitha. He momentarily thinks the bankers may be undercover agents and then pushes away the fear. He explains to the Swiss bankers that their money, considered dirty, will be funneled through new accounts through his firm that cannot be connected back to them, and come out clean. After lunch, Ben returns to the office to find Treasury Department agents Bewes and Hex waiting for him. They explain they suspect him of laundering money.



It is at that moment that Barney Culpepper, the firm's corporate attorney, enters the room to essentially tell the agents to come back with evidence and warrants. After they leave, Culpepper tells Ben not to worry, that the agents are like traffic cops looking to fill a quota. Meanwhile, Ben's wife, Sarah, though she appreciates her husband's success, does her best to soften his edges to be rich without being tacky, and not to laud it over others. She heads to meet her daughter, Jenny, at the Whitney Museum. Jenny insists on paying and refuses money for a cab later. Jenny is preparing to have her parents meet her fiancé, Shane, for the first time. Though Jenny does not hold it against her parents for being rich, she wants to make it on her own. At dinner, Ben is constantly distracted by the earlier confrontation with the agents. He goes out for a smoke when a black car pulls up and Ben is encouraged to enter. Inside, he is told in no uncertain terms to protect the money. Whoever the men now speaking to him represent, they have already heard about the Treasury visit.

Untitled Chapter – Ben and Sarah travel to Martha's Vineyard. It is now Friday, before the crash. Sarah can tell Ben is stressed and urges him to retire. Ben says he has responsibilities, but Sarah does not know the kind of responsibilities he is speaking about. She tells him they have more than enough money to ever spend. She is also still upset about the dinner with Shane and his parents. Sarah tells Ben they need to be better people, and believes she and Ben have finally reached a point where they will get better together. On Sunday morning, Sarah goes to the Vineyard farmer's market. It is then that Sarah sees Maggie apparently flirting with a man Maggie introduces to Sarah as Scott. Maggie tells Scott not to worry about taking the ferry back to New York, but to come on their private plane. Maggie then invites Sarah and Ben to fly back with them as well. Meanwhile, Culpepper does some digging around and relays news to Ben that he believes the feds have a whistleblower. When Sarah announces the flight with David and Maggie back to New York, Ben realizes he can use it as a chance to talk to David to see if David has any advice on how to handle the situation. Just before the flight that night, Barney calls to let Ben know the feds are indicting, and will be arresting him, Hoover, Tabitha, and everyone else the following morning at work.

Analysis

There is a limit to how far the media must be willing to go in order to get a story, Hawley continues to argue as his novel unfolds. While it is certainly understandable that both the public and the press want a story, to be hounding Scott in the manner which they are is disturbing and does not justify getting a story by compromising Scott's peace of mind. Cunningham declares that his investigation will get to the truth, though he currently bases his accusations of actual sabotage on hunches and suppositions rather than facts and hard evidence. This is to be seen in contrast to Gus, who is attempting to get at the truth of the matter by working with Scott, and seeking to actually draw evidence from the physical remains of the wrecked aircraft. Gus also presents yet another episode in Hawley's thematic argument that people are not as they first appear to be. Gus is not a stereotypical faceless government agent who does not care about his job. To the contrary, Gus is not only brilliant, but very human and very compassionate. This is why he chooses to connect with Scott on a personal level rather



than simply hounding Scott the way the media is doing—especially now that Cunningham has issued an open-season call for information on Scott.

Gus also realizes—after having dealt with survivors of transportation disasters, and especially after knowing how rare plane crash survivors are—that returning to normalcy after such a tragedy is difficult at best. Scott, who is clearly searching for security and a return to normalcy, finds it difficult to do so not only because he is a key part of the investigation, but because the media and the public will not leave him alone. Scott, to his credit, understands the fascination with him—but also aspires to privacy and quiet. A relentless media make this impossible, meaning that his return to normalcy will not occur for a while. Indeed, as the reader will come to see through the rest of the novel, Scott will continually attempt returns at normalcy—and this will remain a running theme.

As Scott attempts to return to some form of normalcy in the present, the narrative of the novel continues to jump back into the past, sometimes distantly, sometimes only a short time before the plane crash. As the reader is fast becoming aware, and in keeping with the theme that choices have consequences, the explanation of the crash must come before the fall—and from this idea, the novel takes its title. The frequent returns to the time before the fall continue to delve into the lives of the various characters that comprised the body of people on the flight. Ben Kipling's money laundering through his firm provides grounds for an indictment against him, of which he received word only moments before takeoff.

As David is the representation of a man who has come into wealth but retained his moral character and soul, Ben is the representation of a man who has come into wealth and has lost his moral focus in his pursuit of more wealth. While done to escape his meager background, Ben represents a classic tragic figure, undone by his own devices and recognizing it only too late. It is now clear that this is the reason that Ben was seeking David's advice: given David's understanding not only of the business world, but how stories break in public, Ben wanted to know if David had any thoughts on how the indictment should be handled. Ben's troubles are a result of his own choices. While this explains Ben's choice to be on the airplane belatedly, it does not explain Ben's choice to be on the airplane initially.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the OSPRY flight back to New York become so important to Ben? Why does Ben choose to pursue this important course of action? What does he hope it will do for him?

Discussion Question 2

Cunningham believes the plane crash was not the result of mechanical failure, but human intent. Is this theory based on evidence or assumption? Why? Is it right that Cunningham theorizes based on this? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Gus handle Scott with such respect and kindness? How does Gus differ from Cunningham, the media, and other investigative agents? What is the result of Gus's behavior?

Vocabulary

intangible, pragmatic, nonlinear, irrefutable, minutiae, decorum, nonchalance, irrevocably, travails, existential



Pages 165 – 234

Summary

Part 2

“Cunningham” – Bill Cunningham narrowly survives the phone-hacking scandal by taking the lead on investigating the plane crash leading to the death of David and the others. Cunningham continues to tell his audiences he believes the crash was murder, for how otherwise could two of the most powerful men in New York be killed the same night in the same plane. He does not just pursue the story because it has saved his own neck, but because he was a good friend of David’s, was David’s best man at David’s wedding, and was Rachel’s godfather. Over the course of the week, the bodies of Emma Lightner and Sarah Kipling are recovered. Cunningham later meets up with Namor at Fish!, a 1990s-style bar on Orchard Street. Cunningham first met Namor on a flight to Germany during President George W. Bush’s first term in the early 2000s. Namor reveals he has already begun digging around about the passengers, has done some hacking, and set up taps. The only person Namor is having difficulty pursuing is Scott, because Scott is a throwback: he does not even have a cell phone. Namor also says he is making progress on trying to tap Gus Franklin, but must proceed carefully because of the Patriot Act.

“Funhouse” – Scott watches the newscasters begin to try to trace the details of his life while calling him a hero at every turn. Scott does his best to stay out of the public eye, but when people notice him, he does his best to be friendly and answer questions. He refuses pictures, however. In Layla’s guest apartment, Scott struggles with the idea that he is alive when so many others are now dead. Scott simply cannot bring himself to return to his home on Martha’s Vineyard. Scott also wonders how JJ is making out. Scott calls Eleanor to see how JJ is doing, and learns that they, too, are being hounded by the public and by the press. She reveals that JJ hasn’t cried yet, and that Doug is still floored by the money.

Untitled Chapter – On Wednesday the funerals begin, starting with Sarah Kipling. Scott attends the funerals, wondering why he is alive and the others are dead. After Sarah’s service, Michael Lightner, father of Emma, introduces himself to Scott. Michael is a former military pilot, is kind, and easy to talk to. Scott asks him if he has heard anything about the plane. Michael reveals that the pilot and plane were both sound, but that it does not rule out human error. They are awaiting the flight recorder. Scott then meets with Gus, O’Brien, and Hex. Gus reports the search has to be called off because Hurricane Margaret is approaching. The three men also find it interesting that Scott has no online presence. Hex and O’Brien are disturbed by Scott’s disaster paintings—and if these could have inspired him to paint his own disaster in real life. Scott tells them they do not need a warrant, that they can drop by anytime to see the paintings. He says his paintings are about trying to understand the world, and are a reflection of how his own



life has been a disaster of sorts. That night, Scott wonders what it is like to be dead, and then wonders what he will now paint.

“Threads” – Gus tells his anxious bosses he is still working toward an answer. Piece by piece, plane wreckage and debris, including suitcases, is discovered. However, as time goes on and more evidence is lost to the nature of the ocean, the less likely it is that Gus and his people will find the smoking gun piece of evidence they are looking for. Gus learns that \$6.1 billion of Ben’s firm’s money has been frozen, owing itself to Libya, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria. Agent Hex believes the crash was caused by foreign agents to silence Ben prior to the arrest. Gus argues against this, saying that Ben and Sarah were invited on to the flight as an afterthought. The ground crew did not notice anything suspicious. Gus meets with U.S. Senator Birch, copilot Busch’s uncle, to see if anything new can be learned. Early on, Busch was a typical screw-up kid but pulled his act together, Birch reports. Gus also learns elsewhere that, at the last minute, Busch switched GullWing flights with Peter Gatson, meaning Busch should never have been on the flight that killed him. Gus learns, however, that it was Busch’s idea to switch, apparently on impulse so he could go to New York. O’Brien later tells Gus they have gained a warrant to seize Scott’s paintings. Gus is angry about this because it is his investigation. He lays into O’Brien and then tells him he is off the task force. O’Brien is stunned, but says they’ll see.

“Painting #3” – The narrator describes a painting of a sinking warship with bodies floating all around.

Untitled Chapter – A transcript of Bill Cunningham’s evening monologue is presented. Bill explains ALC has received a leaked document penned by FBI Special Agent Walter O’Brien which raises questions about Scott Burroughs. The leaked document shows tension in the investigation about how to proceed, in which O’Brien believes Scott had something to do with the crash despite Gus telling him to lay off. Vineyard residents, Cunningham says, report seeing Maggie and Scott very close together in public the morning of the crash. Cunningham says he refuses to suggest an affair, but notes that it does raise questions as to why Scott was ever on the flight. Cunningham also notes the subjects of Scott’s paintings, including a plane crash. Cunningham then questions Gus Franklin’s leadership of the investigation.

“Allies” – Bill Cunningham goes to visit Eleanor, her mother (Bridget Greenway), Doug, and JJ. Eleanor is casually acquainted with Cunningham through David and Maggie. Eleanor cautions Cunningham and Doug not to talk about the crash in front of JJ. Cunningham briefly reflects on his own childhood, where he was raised by a weak mother more interested in having a sex life than having a son. Bill asks Eleanor if she has spoken to Scott before he leaves, noting that a lot of people are curious about him because so little is known about him. Doug notes that sometimes Scott calls in the middle of the night. Eleanor says it is none of Cunningham’s business to know. Eleanor refuses to talk to Doug after Cunningham leaves. She is furious to think that anyone could imagine Scott causing the crash and faking his own swim to shore. She thinks about how Doug is urging a move into the city, to the townhouse where JJ lives, for the sake of continuity. Eleanor considers this might be the best thing, but she will put all the



money set aside for them back into the trust—except what is precisely needed to care for JJ.

“Rachel Bateman: July 9, 2006 – August 23, 2015” – The novel jumps back in time. Rachel knows she is named after her mother’s grandmother, and remembers little about her kidnapping apart from the facts given to her by her family and rescuers—that her kidnapper, Wayne R. Macy, was shot and killed during the ransom exchange after shooting and killing Mick Daniels, a lawman formerly with the FBI and a Gulf War veteran. Rachel finds it hard to live life freely because she is always followed by a bodyguard, and because she knows her kidnapping has changed everything. Rachel feels as if she does not fit in, so she reads books about wayward girls, including Harry Potter and The Hunger Games. Rachel remembers how the nanny, twenty-two year-old Francesca “Frankie” Butler went missing one night, with Rachel being kidnapped after that, and Mick Daniels arriving to impersonate a paid security consultant as part of the ransom racket.

“Blanco” – Scott considers the white walls of Layla’s apartment and how everything in it is white. With charcoal in hand, he begins drawing. Layla comes in after getting home from a party, amazed at what Scott is doing. When Scott turns to talk to Layla, he discovers she is lying on the couch, naked. When she beckons him into the bedroom, Scott calls JJ instead to see how he is doing. Scott promises to visit. He then gets into bed with Layla, snuggles up with her, and falls asleep quickly.

Analysis

Hawley’s novel continues to explore the lives of the characters not only involved with the crash, but also those who have been affected by the crash. Among them is Cunningham. While Cunningham’s methods at pursuing news stories—relying on taps and suppositions rather than hard evidence—can be criticized, his intentions cannot. Cunningham, like Ben, emerges as very much a tragic and very much a human figure. Cunningham’s desire to pursue the story is not only about saving his own neck, but it is primarily about understanding what happened to David and his family.

As it is revealed, it was David who first gave Cunningham his job. Cunningham was not only employed by David, but was friends with David—suggesting that at least at one point, Cunningham’s morals were far steadier and more rock-sure than they are now, otherwise, David would never have hired him, befriended him, had him serve as best man at his wedding, or have him serve as godfather to his children. Cunningham is acting from a sense of stunned loss—and overreaches in his methods to find the truth. To Cunningham, especially in the present situation, the ends justify the means. Nevertheless, Hawley cautions that there must be a limit to how far the media is willing to go.

Much more about Scott is also revealed through this section of the novel. Scott’s series of disaster paintings come to life, which intrigue Hex and O’Brien. The paintings are indeed disturbing, especially because one features a plane crash. Scott explains that he



had nothing to do with the OSPRY crash, and that his paintings are a reflection of his own wasted life and a reflection of the truths that people try to avoid—that sooner or later, everyone dies. Gus does his best to shield Scott from this investigative overreach, believing that Scott had nothing to do with the crash itself. Gus is attempting to sort through evidence and uncover facts to determine the truth, while Hex and O'Brien are now, along with Cunningham, jumping off at hunches and generating suppositions based on coincidences.

Gus's thorough and meticulous approach is not applauded, however, but is criticized by everyone from Hex and O'Brien to Gus's superiors to Cunningham on the news. Indeed, Cunningham goes so far as to call for Gus's removal from the case. However, the reader should note that even Cunningham has recognized that Scott may very well be the key to the mystery. Whereas Cunningham throws around suppositions ranging from being too close to Maggie to being a strange and mysterious passenger, Hex and O'Brien are coming to suspect that Scott directly had something to do with the crash. This is not the kind of attention that Scott wanted. In a day and age when privacy is virtually non-existent, Scott is a very private man. Given the very public nature of the crash, Scott's clamor for privacy proves to be suspicious activity to others. Any hopes that Scott will return to normalcy are dashed because of this. Ironically, the more privacy Scott seeks the more the public and the press seek to know more and find out why. Yet again, Hawley cautions that there must be a limit to how far the media is willing to go. While the media should seek the truth, it must also respect privacy.

Discussion Question 1

How do Gus, O'Brien, Hex, and Cunningham differ in their approach to pursue the truth relating to the plane crash? Why do they pursue such different paths in seeking the truth? Can any one of them be blamed for their approach? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

While the media should seek the truth, it must also respect privacy, argues Hawley in his novel. However, given the circumstances, do you believe Scott should be so reticent about going public? Is the media's desire to get to the truth—given the circumstances of Scott's reticence—understandable? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What explains Cunningham's unwavering and utilitarian pursuit of the truth regarding the plane crash? Do you believe this justifies his actions? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

narcissism, processing, intrinsic, perfunctory, ruminate, impulsive, continuity, proximity, intricacies



Pages 240 – 312

Summary

“Painting #4” – The narrator describes a building engulfed by flames obscured by white paint, like smoke.

“Public/Private” – By the morning, the news media has found where Scott is staying. The news stations surmise he has shackled up with Layla. Layla swears to Scott she hasn’t told anyone. Scott calls Magnus and asks him to rent him a car so he can drive up to Croton-on-Hudson in Westchester to visit JJ. As he heads out into the apartment, he looks at his drawing, which is of Maggie and her two children.

“Jack” – Jack LaLanne explains that he never liked to exercise, but liked results, and so got into exercising in order to get results—including business results. Jack’s can-do attitude made him popular as a fitness and health guru and his belief in America’s future made him wildly popular.

“Imago” – Scott goes down to face the crowd of reporters and media people. He agrees to take some questions, doing his best to answer them. A reporter named Vanessa asks questions of Scott directly from Bill Cunningham, including why he was on the plane to begin with. He responds to these questions with a baffled tone, questioning how the media could think he was having a sexual affair with Layla when he had just met her. He explains his paintings have nothing to do with the crash, but are reflections of reality in that everyone dies someday, and that he himself was portraying irony in response to his own failures in life.

“Gil Baruch: June 5, 1967 – August 26, 2015” – The novel steps back in time. Gil Baruch is an Israeli-American who not only served Israel in the military himself, but his father also served in the Israeli armed forces. Legends abound about Gil, from those of heartbreak (the death of family members at the hands of Palestinians) to the intriguing (that he has had a long line of beautiful women as lovers). Gil’s current role in private security in America with Enslor Security is something he takes very seriously, given his own upbringing and Rachel’s kidnapping, which brought on the need for security. Gil personally watches over David and his family, staying close but never too close so as to be a burden. Gil spends the days before the end of the Martha’s Vineyard vacation coordinating with the Secret Service, as David has been invited to Camp David for Labor Day Weekend. When Gil learns the Kiplings are to be flying with them, he has his men check into their backgrounds. Gil learns about the indictment against Ben and presents this information to David and Maggie. At Maggie’s insistence and David’s approval, it is agreed that the Kiplings will still be flying with them. Later that evening, at the airport, Gil supervises his team as they sweep the plane and perform security checks. Gil personally speaks with the crew of the plane, learns that Busch has sometimes flirted with—and been denied—by Emma, and then gives the okay to go.



“Countryside” – Scott drives north to visit JJ. He knows he is now being referred to as an heroic scoundrel in the news. Scott knows information and entertainment are vying for control of the tragedy of the crash. Scott realizes all he wants is to be left alone.

Untitled Chapter – Scott arrives at Eleanor and Doug’s place. It is a small and cozy place surrounded by trees. As Scott arrives, Doug leaves and does not return Scott’s wave. Scott gives JJ a toy dump truck while Eleanor apologizes for Doug, saying things are tough at the moment. Eleanor, like Scott, wants the media to leave her alone. She explains that Doug is having a hard time because he does not know what he actually believes. She goes on to say she doesn’t want to use any of JJ’s money on herself even if it is an aspect of caring for JJ, while Doug wants to use the money on themselves because it is an aspect of caring for JJ. Scott explains he was not having an affair with Maggie because he is a recovering alcoholic and as a recovering alcoholic he has to remain focused on work. Scott later calls his landlord on Martha’s Vineyard who explains his dog is fine but that the FBI took away all of his paintings. This bothers Scott, because it is his life’s work. He wonders what he will have to do to get the paintings back. Eleanor receives a call and relays the news to Scott that the rest of the bodies have been found.

Part 3

“Screen Time” – Gus does not believe Scott’s paintings have anything to do with the crash, even as he studies them with a multi-jurisdictional team of agents, officials, and representatives. He believes that all that has been done is to unnecessarily harass Scott. Gus notices that there is a woman in each painting, and that each woman seems to have the same face. Word comes that the bulk of the plane wreck has been found at last. Gus and the others gather to watch a live feed of video from the wreck. One wing has been torn off, as has the back of the plane. A crumple zone is noted. Gus knows the entire plane will have to be raised and brought back for a thorough examination. Video is then seen of the bodies inside the bulk of the plane. Bullet holes can be seen in the cockpit door. Gil’s body is nowhere to be found, though the other bodies are present. The pilot is noted as being on the wrong side of the locked cockpit door.

“James Melody: March 6, 1965 – August 23, 2015” – The novel shifts back in time. James Melody, pilot of the OSPRY, has never known who his biological father is. James believes in God, and his love of learning and high respect for science and mathematics brings him closer to God. James finds his religious faith to be complemented by science and reason. James reflects on his mother belonging to a death cult when he was an infant, and how after five years, they left. As an adult, James’s mother has sponged off of him. He battles feelings of annoyance and wanting to care for his mother, who comes and goes at will and lives all over. As the evening of the OSPRY flight arrives, James familiarizes himself with the plane, a model which he has never flown before. He is not worried because he knows OSPRY makes quality, capable aircraft. He checks the weather forecasts as well before beginning a preflight check of the plane itself. He also speaks with the ground crew and Emma, whom he has never flown with before. James is annoyed but not worried when Charlie arrives late to copilot, saying Gaston has some sort of stomach issue. James reports he has called maintenance about stickiness in the



yoke. At takeoff, he finds the yoke is still a little sticky, but believes it is just a part of the plane's idiosyncrasies.

“The Blacks” – The novel returns to the present. Scott spends the night on Eleanor’s couch. As he is about to fall asleep, he hears Doug come home, apparently drunk. In the morning, Scott and JJ skip stones at the river. Scott later takes a call from Layla, confirming he is spending time with JJ. With JJ’s help, Scott pulls up a video of the Red Sox game playing the night of the crash. A helicopter lands outside the house. Gus and O’Brien get out. Gus explains new facts in the crash case have put the FBI in the lead. Confirming the bullet hole theory, Gus now knows there are many questions to be asked: who fired the shots and why; was the shooter a hero or a villain; why was the pilot on the wrong side of the cockpit door; and why the copilot did not issue a mayday call.

Busch’s body, Gus explains, was found still strapped into his seat, his hands on the yoke. Gus believes this may mean that either Busch committed a suicidal act of mass murder, or suffered some sort of heart attack which led to the crash. This information is fed to Scott, piece by piece, with the hope that it will jog his memory. Scott struggles to recall the events surrounding the crash. Scott remembers small talk and remembers sketching a picture of Rachel, but struggles to remember more. Gus then asks about the girl who appears in all of Scott’s paintings. Scott explains it is his sister who died when she drowned in Lake Michigan night swimming when she was sixteen. Hours later after he and O’Brien leave, Gus speaks with Scott by phone, saying he was helpful, and that the flight recorder, though damaged, has been recovered. Scott also relates that Doug has left Eleanor, which will not look good to the public.

Analysis

Hawley continues to argue that there must be a limit to how far the media is willing to go in pursuit of a story. The media has discovered that Scott is staying with Layla. Rather than respecting his privacy, the media has descended upon Layla’s house. Media curiosity and the desire to get to the truth is one thing, but there is a point at which human interest becomes inhuman. In a situation like Scott’s, the circumstantial factors—his insistence on absolute privacy to the extent that he has avoided the media totally and completely, word about a potential affair with Maggie, the still-unexplained causes of the crash, his paintings, and so on—understandably generate interest in Scott. To his credit, Scott finally does confront the media, answering their questions as best he can, but resisting leading and insinuating questions.

Just as the reader learns that not all characters in the novel are as they appear to be, the public is learning that the circumstances surrounding Scott—such as the paintings—are not as they appear to be, either. Despite this, public interest in Scott only grows because answers in the official investigation are not swiftly forthcoming. As the novel continues to unfold, the reader comes to learn about Gil and James Melody, the most professional of the service professionals on board the flight. These two men, though not exactly what they appear to be, are indeed actually the closest to what they appear to



be. Both men are indeed unfailingly professional, true—but both men are very much human. Professionalism in the professional sphere does not mean private lives are as stable or secure. As the reader learns, it is believed that Gil’s entire family was killed by Palestinians, and it is known that James struggled with his mother’s cruelties.

This information regarding both Gil and the pilot is utterly important as the fuselage of the aircraft is finally found. Most striking is the fact that James is found on the wrong side of the cockpit door, that bullet holes are found in the cockpit door, and that Gil’s body is missing. A hasty generalization of this evidence might indicate a hijacking performed by Gil gone wrong, or a successful murder carried out, with Gil bailing out before the plane crashed since his body has not been found. However, the reader must bear in mind the information that has been learned about both James and Gil—as well as bearing in mind the thematic argument that things are not always as they appear to be. Recall that David was a conservative news magnate, and as such, was very much pro-Israel. There is no reason why an Israeli-American who lost his entire family to Palestinian terrorism would want to kill one of Israel’s biggest defenders. Likewise, given how professional James was in his life, there must have been a good reason why he was found on the other side of the cockpit door, especially given minor concerns about yoke stickiness. All evidence now points to Charlie Busch.

As the evidence is weighted against appearances, the reader should also bear in mind the thematic argument that the events in life—and life itself—are a consequence of the choices that people make. Gus is coming to believe that the plane was brought down by human, rather than mechanical error, since no problems can so far be found with the physical evidence amassed from the plane wreckage. The truth now rests not with Scott’s memories, but with the flight recorder—both for its data recording regarding the flight, and its voice recording regarding the human actors involved with the flight. It is because Charlie is still strapped into his pilot’s seat that Gus comes to believe that Charlie must have been the cause of the crash—but whether by accident or intent can only be determined once the hard evidence is recovered from the flight recorder.

Discussion Question 1

What evidence initially seems to implicate Gil in the crash of the plane? What evidence arises that demonstrates this cannot be the case? Why does this matter to Gus? How does Gus intend to get at the actual truth?

Discussion Question 2

What does Gus come to suspect caused the crash of the plane? Why does he believe this to be so?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Scott decide to at last go public and confront the media? What does he hope this will do for him? What actually happens as a result of Scott's going public?

Vocabulary

gumption, bafflement, optimal, vigorous, tumultuous, idiosyncrasy, procedural, discombobulated



Pages 313 – 390

Summary

“Emma Lightner: July 11, 1990 – August 23, 2015” – The novel shifts back in time. Emma enjoys the traveling her job entails and knows that boundaries are the way to keep professional. She flirts with men on the jet but gently turns down their advances. She has even turned down Kanye West. After graduating from college with a degree in finance, and after trying a job with a big New York investment bank, Emma remembers wanting to travel and loving planes, thanks to her Air Force father, which is how she became a flight attendant. She befriends many of the other air service workers, and enjoys spending time with them between flights. Emma does a line of cocaine with a girl named Chelsea before heading out to a party. Emma is stunned when Charlie shows up to attend the party as well. Emma has not seen or spoken to Charlie in six months since getting out of a bad relationship with him. Emma considers him a natural disaster with a bipolar heart. Emma realizes she has no choice but to go through with the evening.

“Hurt” – Doug meets Kristen Brewer, Bill Cunningham’s executive producer, in the ALC News lobby. Doug hates being thrown out of his own home by Emma, and now prepares to go on television with Cunningham. Doug sits opposite Cunningham and knows he is now being watched by 900-million people around the world. Cunningham knows Doug is unreliable, but he does his best to make Doug comfortable by asking him simple questions about his life, then about the crash. Cunningham and Doug begin talking over the angles—how Doug was thrown out after Scott showed up at his house, and how the money in the trust is to be left to JJ. Cunningham then presses in on Doug, revealing knowledge that Scott has apparently bedded Layla—and is speaking to Layla from Doug’s home.

“Bullets” – Ballistics testing shows that the bullets fired in the plane are consistent with Gil’s service weapon—and Gil’s body is still missing. Charles Busch’s toxicology report has come back positive for alcohol and cocaine. The data from the flight recorder shows a normal takeoff and autopilot engaged. Fifteen minutes into the flight, control is switched from pilot to copilot. Sixteen minutes in, autopilot is switched off, the plane banks sharply and then dives, spiraling into the ocean. It is clear the crash is not mechanical. Gus and the others now seek to know why Busch crashed the plane. It is clear it is not an accident—by drugs and alcohol or by deliberate intent—but why is still unclear. It can be presumed the shots were fired into the cockpit to attempt to take back the plane. Gus now must await the techs, who are working on cracking the recorder.

“Games” – Scott and Eleanor watch, horrified, as Doug is on television with Bill Cunningham. Doug blames all the drama and division between him and Eleanor on Scott. To keep JJ away from the news, Scott gives JJ the fountain pen he uses to sign all his paintings—a gift long ago from his father. Scott realizes he is now passing down a gift of sorts, from a father to a son. Scott teaches JJ how to use the pen, and sees before him a new man being born. Scott feels a sense of purpose come over him and



then calls Bill Cunningham's office to accept an offer of an interview, saying belittling people from a distance is a bullshit coward's way of being a man.

"Painting #5" – The narrator describes a painting with the giant words WE ARE SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS.

"The History of Violence" – Gus learns that news has already broken that Busch was high and has crashed the plane deliberately, and that Scott is preparing for an interview. In the interview, Scott is upfront and direct with Cunningham. Scott denies the affair with Maggie. Meanwhile, Gus listens to the just-cracked voice recordings of the flight. Everything is normal from takeoff. Gus overhears Emma saying that Busch is fine and does not need anything to drink. A short silence follows, during which time Gus can only imagine looks of some kind are exchanged. Captain Melody then excuses himself from the cockpit due to a nosebleed. In the silence that follows, he hears Busch whispering "bitch" over and over again. Cunningham, at the same time, asks Scott to begin to recount the events of the flight, which he does as best he can. Cunningham is skeptical of Scott's account of surviving, so he moves on to Scott's paintings. Scott denies his paintings have anything to do with the crash, and denies being involved in causing the plane to crash. Cunningham asks if Scott is sleeping with Layla, but Scott wonders why this matters. Cunningham then plays a recording. Meanwhile, Gus continues listening to the tape. The words "bitch" and "that fucking bitch" are repeated over and over again, followed by autopilot being switched off.

"Charles Busch: December 31, 1984 – August 23, 2015" – The novel shifts back before the crash. Charles "Charlie" Busch is a handsome athlete during his time at high school, and makes great use of his uncle's position as a U.S. Senator to curry favors and get almost anything he wants. Charlie thinks about how it was his uncle who helped get him into National Guard flight school, and how it was his uncle who helped get him into GullWing. Charlie does his best to sleep with all the flight attendants, but they do not bow to his charm the way other girls do. Charlie knows his life story is that of a fraud, and it makes him angry and mean. He meets Emma eight months after beginning work at GullWing, and pursues her. Charlie knows he was wrong to insult and hurt Emma during their relationship, losing the only woman he knew could save him from himself. Charlie is stunned and glad to see Emma again just before the OSPRY flight, but discovers her gone after the party. When he learns she is to be on the OSPRY flight, he switches with the hung over Peter Gaston, and tries to sober up by drinking black coffee. When he tries to hug Emma before the flight, she slaps him across the face. Emma tells James to keep Charlie away from her, which he blames on her time of the month. In the bathroom before the flight, Charlie looks at himself in the mirror and blames himself for being played by Emma. He then begins calling her a bitch in his mind.

"Flight" – Gus hears a recording that the autopilot has been switched off. He listens as the captain tries to get back into the cockpit, and hears the gunshots that are fired. He then hears the sound of the impact and crash. Gus realizes everything was about Emma. Meanwhile, Scott listens to the tape Cunningham plays of a conversation between him and Layla where Layla suggests they go away together. Cunningham then



plays the tape of Scott speaking to Gus about Doug leaving. Scott is incensed, calling Cunningham's actions of bugging phones immoral and illegal. The memories about the crash come rushing back to Scott, who then reveals them in detail, from the copilot going crazy to Gil and the pilot trying to force their way back into the cockpit. Cunningham is stunned into silence. Scott tells him shame on him, and both men rise, prepared to fight. Veronica and two cameramen grab Cunningham while Scott departs. As Scott leaves, he knows he will get his paintings back, and will teach JJ how to swim.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the theories that all have held regarding the crash of the plane—that it was not a mechanical accident but human intent—are proven to be true. However, the varying aspects of those theories surrounding the crash—those revolving around Scott—are all dismissed. As it is discovered, Charlie Busch intentionally crashed the plane in a rage with an already-distorted mind (brought on by alcohol and cocaine) due to his romantic rejection at the hands of Emma, as well as his own self-loathing. This is demonstrated through the psychotic whispering of Charlie on the voice recorder in the flight recorder. James was on the wrong side of the door because he excused himself due to a nosebleed, while the bullet holes in the door were an attempt made by Gil to regain control of the plane before it crashed.

Scott comes to realize that he and JJ will always be an important part of one another's lives as a result of the crash. The crash means that Scott has become something of a father to JJ, demonstrated by the handing down of a family heirloom pen from Scott to JJ. A father who never had a son now has a son who has lost his father. Scott comes to realize his survival is a gift, a chance at a renewed life, and the possibility to make things better than they were before. Scott sees real purpose in caring for JJ, and understands that surviving such a tragedy does not mean continuing to accept things as they are: it means taking life in his own hands to do better. Scott begins by confronting Cunningham, where the two have an epic showdown on live television. Scott calls out Cunningham for his methods, not only as a means to return to normalcy in his own life, but so that JJ will have a chance at normalcy in his own life.

As the narrator has argued from the start, life is a result of the choices that people make. David and his family chartered a private plane to return home from vacation in Martha's Vineyard. Sarah and Ben voluntarily accepted the invitation to go along, as did Scott. Maggie's flirtations with Scott likewise meant that he would be on the plane—and would be around to save JJ. Emma's decision to do drugs and party despite claiming to be utterly professional about her work meant establishing contact with Charlie Busch once more—who in turn chose to pursue Emma to the point of stalking and switching flights. Charlie, though warped by drugs and alcohol, chose to crash the plane in revenge for Emma's rejection.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Scott come to accept that he and JJ will always be a part of one another's lives? How does Scott decide to make this official? Why does Scott choose to do so in this fashion?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree or disagree with Bill Cunningham's methods for getting to the truth of a story? If you disagree, do you believe, had Scott actually been guilty of causing the plane crash, that Cunningham's methods would have been justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Hawley presents the novel as a reflection of his argument that life, its events, and its circumstances are the result of human choices. Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? Why?

Vocabulary

anonymously, collusive, bravado, visceral, inevitable, implode, belittling, disdain



Characters

Scott Burroughs

Scott Burroughs is a forty-something artist, and one of two survivors of the plane crash. Scott has largely wasted his life drinking, and has only recently gotten back on track by recommitting to his art. Scott is first invited onto the plane by the flirtatious Maggie, who urges Scott to avoid the lengthy ferry trip for a shorter, simpler flight. Scott's lifelong love of swimming helps him to save himself and JJ after the crash, but his lifelong love of privacy and anonymity (in addition to his survival) make him a central and very public point of focus in the aftermath of the crash. Scott comes to recognize that he and JJ will forever be bound by the crash, and that the crash has given him the opportunity to finally take his life in his own hands and make something of it.

JJ Bateman

JJ Bateman is the four year-old son of David and Maggie Bateman, and is the younger brother of Rachel Batemen. JJ is one of the two survivors of the plane crash. Since making it to shore, JJ has not cried. He has gone to live with his Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Doug, and looks forward to visits from Scott. JJ does not completely understand what has happened, but knows something terrible has happened, and that his mother, father, and sister are no longer around as a result.

David Bateman

David Bateman is a fifty-six-year-old millionaire conservative news magnate who is devoted to his family and retains a strong moral center despite his power, wealth, and position. David always wishes he could spend more time with his family, and does everything he can to do so—such as visiting them each weekend while they are staying out at Martha's Vineyard. It is David who charts the plane for a ride home back to New York. He is among those killed in the crash.

Maggie Bateman

Maggie Bateman is the thirty-six year-old wife of David Bateman, and is the mother of Rachel and JJ. Maggie is immensely kind and loving, and up until meeting Scott, has seemingly been unfailingly loyal and committed to her husband and her family. Maggie is taken by Scott's good looks and his art, so she invites him to come along on the flight back to New York. Whether Maggie's flirtations will ever lead to anything more is unknown, though, as she is among those killed in the crash.



Ben Kipling

Ben Kipling is the fifty-two-year-old founder of an investment firm which routinely launders money from dirty countries such as Iran and North Korea. Ben, a self-made man, has lost himself along the way, losing his moral center in pursuit of money and its excesses. Only with the FBI's indictment of him for this practice does he come to realize his flaw. What Ben's next steps may have been are never known, as he is among those killed in the crash.

Sarah Kipling

Sarah Kipling is the fifty-year-old wife of Ben. Although from a financially comfortable background, Sarah does not become jaded or misled by her husband's immense, self-made wealth—a trait passed on to their daughter. Sarah has finally convinced Ben that they need to be better people, together, especially as it comes to their wealth. What may have happened next with Ben and Sarah is never known, as Sarah is among those killed in the crash.

Bill Cunningham

Bill Cunningham is the predominant news personality on ALC News, often relying on immoral and illegal tactics to get to the truth of important stories—and often going on hunches and supposition until the truth is known. Bill is currently reeling from an illegal wiretapping scandal that has nearly sunk him. Bill, who is friends with David, his family, and who is godfather to their children, makes it a personal mission to find out what killed them—not only as a way to put scandal behind him but because he is genuinely stunned and heartbroken by their deaths. Bill goes above and beyond in his utilitarian approach to do whatever is needed to get to the truth—including harassing Scott. Cunningham is ultimately confronted and shown up on live television by Scott for the tactics and methods that he uses.

Eleanor Dunleavy

Eleanor Dunleavy is the sister of Maggie, the sister-in-law of David, the aunt of Rachel and JJ, and the wife of Doug. Eleanor works as a massage therapist while doing her best to support her lazy husband. When Eleanor comes to adopt JJ, she is horrified by Doug's delight at being entrusted with millions of dollars. Eleanor eventually throws Doug out because of his callousness. She shields JJ from the media and ensures that JJ and Scott are able to see one another.



Gus Franklin

Gus Franklin is the head of the investigation into the OSPRY crash, and works as an investigator into transportation disasters though he is an engineer by trade. An African-American, Gus has never believed anything to be out of reach, including the truth. Gus is very methodical and very inclined toward reason, science, and mathematics. He understands that tragedies, like the plane crash, are as much physical investigations as they are emotional investigations—which is why he comes to treat Scott with such respect and kindness during the investigation.

Gil Baruch

Gil Baruch is the forty-eight-year-old head of the Bateman security team, having been hired after Rachel's kidnapping. Gil is close with the Batemans personally, but also strives to be distant enough to be professional about his work. Gil, an Israeli-American, is a former member of Israeli special forces, and now takes his work protecting the Batemans with the utmost seriousness. When Charlie seeks to crash the plane, it is Gil who leaps into action, attempting to shoot his way into the cockpit to stop Charlie. Gil is among those killed in the crash.



Symbols and Symbolism

OSPRY

A nine-seat, private 2001 OSPRY 700SL plane is chartered by David for a return trip to New York, and crashes into the ocean very early in the novel. Luxuriously decorated, the plane is piloted by James Melody, copiloted by Charlie Busch; and has as flight attendant, Emma Lightner. The plane carries several passengers, including David, Maggie, Rachel, and JJ Bateman; Scott Burroughs; Gil Baruch; and Ben and Sarah Kipling. The cause of the OSPRY crash that kills everyone on board except Scott and JJ becomes the central focus of the novel.

ALC News

ALC News is the predominant conservative cable news network in America. Founded by David Bateman with an investment from an English billionaire, ALC News not only presents the news, but provides perspective and context—things which make it a success and the most popular news network ever. ALC has as its preeminent anchor and host Bill Cunningham, whose commonsense pursuit of the truth has earned him a widespread audience. Following David's death, Cunningham uses his position at ALC to pursue the truth behind the plane crash.

Inheritance

An inheritance of \$103-million, plus other assets including property, homes, cars, and so on, is what JJ will receive after the death of his family. The \$103-million itself will be set up in a trust fund fully dispersible by the time JJ is forty. The inheritance becomes a dividing wedge between Eleanor and Doug, as Eleanor believes all the money should go to JJ while Doug believes they are entitled, as guardians, to spend much of the money on themselves.

Catastrophe paintings

Catastrophe paintings are created by Scott, and symbolize both his acknowledgement of his having wasted most of his life and the inescapable truth in life that one day, for one reason or another, everybody dies. Each painting portrays disaster and death in some way, shape, or form, including a plane crash. This makes Scott a temporary suspect in the plane crash he himself has survived. A warrant is issued and the FBI seizes the paintings. Scott vows he will get the paintings back at the end of the novel.



Plane wreckage

Plane wreckage is collected piece by piece by the investigative team, and is used to determine what happened to the OSPRY that cause it to crash. The wreckage includes everything from pieces of the plane to articles of clothing and luggage. Gus carefully sifts through the evidence, but is unable to reach a conclusion because the bulk of the wreckage—the plane’s fuselage—has not yet been found.

Fuselage

The OSPRY fuselage is located after many days of searching, and helps Gus to determine the crash was not a mechanical error, but human intent. The fuselage, or main body of the plane, contains the bodies of the majority of the dead as well as important clues. These include bullet holes in the cockpit door, the missing body of Gil, Charlie strapped into his seat, and James on the wrong side of the cockpit door. The fuselage demonstrates that human involvement was the cause of the crash—but how and why are the mysteries that Gus needs the flight recorder to solve.

Pen

A fountain pen is used to sign all of Scott’s paintings, is given to JJ from Scott, and represents the father-son relationship that Scott knows he will come to have with JJ. Scott received the pen as a gift from his father, so his passing down the pen to JJ is a passing not only of manhood and a family heirloom, but the establishment and acknowledgement of the father-son relationship between him and JJ, one brought about by the crash: the sonless father and the fatherless son come to find what they have lost or lack in one another.

Bullet holes

Bullet holes found in the door of the cockpit in the fuselage confirm to Gus that something dramatic must have occurred in the OSPRY which caused it to crash. Until the voice recorder is recovered, the exact details are unknown. The bullet holes match Gil’s gun, and it is later demonstrated that shots were fired by Gil to gain access to the cockpit to stop the plane from being crashed by Charlie.

Data recorder

The data recorder is part of the flight recorder that is finally recovered and deciphered from the wreckage of the OSPRY. The data recorder reveals the physical actions of the plane, its path and movements, and its descent into the ocean. The data recorder proves that the plane did not crash as a result of mechanical failure.

Voice recorder

The voice recorder is part of the flight recorder that is finally recovered and deciphered from the wreckage of the OSPRY. The voice recorder provides an audio record of the flight, from start to crash. The voice recorder proves that Charlie Busch deliberately crashed the plane into the ocean as a result of anger over being rejected once again by Emma.



Settings

Martha's Vineyard

Martha's Vineyard is an island community off the coast of Massachusetts, about an hour's flight from New York. It is home to a predominantly upper-class and wealthy crowd, and is where the Bateman family vacations. It is on Martha's Vineyard that Scott rents a small house to paint and get his life in order, and it is on Martha's Vineyard that the Kiplings spend a weekend trip. It is from Martha's Vineyard that the Batemans, the Kiplings, and Scott board the OSPRY to return to New York.

Atlantic Ocean

It is in the Atlantic Ocean that the OSPRY on which Scott and JJ are traveling is crashed into the water. It is in the Atlantic Ocean that Scott discovers JJ is still alive, and swims with him for the next eight hours toward shore. Scott and JJ must deal with everything from the cold water to massive waves to reach land.

Montauk

Montauk is located on the extreme eastern end of the southern fork of Long Island. It is at the beach on Montauk State Point Park that Scott and JJ manage to swim ashore, knowing then for sure that they will survive. It is from Montauk that a fisherman brings Scott and JJ to the hospital.

New York City

New York City is the home of the Bateman family, the Kiplings, and is where both David and Ben run their businesses. It is to New York City that Scott is seeking to travel for the purposes of art, and it is to New York City that the OSPRY flight from Martha's Vineyard is bound. It is in New York that Scott later comes to hide at Layla's house before being found out by the media, and it is in New York that Scott comes to confront Bill Cunningham on air at ALC News headquarters.

Croton-on-Hudson

Croton-on-Hudson is a small town located on the Hudson River, upriver from New York City. It is the home of Eleanor and Doug, and is where JJ goes to live following his release from the hospital. It is to Croton-on-Hudson that Scott later travels in order to visit JJ, and it is in Croton-on-Hudson that Gus, O'Brien, and Hex come to see Scott about his paintings.



Themes and Motifs

The deception of appearances

Not everyone or everything is as they first appear to be, argues Noah Hawley in his novel *Before the Fall*. Appearances can be deceiving and can be misleading in the pursuit of the truth. This is as true of situations and information as it is of individual people.

A seemingly straightforward cast at the beginning of the novel turns out not to be so. David Bateman, millionaire conservative, defies the common stereotype of a wealthy, heartless Republican. David is very warm, very moral, and very compassionate—especially to his family. Ben Kipling, under indictment, is likewise not a heartless person determined to be rich no matter the cost, but has simply lost moral focus in pursuit of wealth—and is very much human in his overreach. Bill Cunningham is loud, blustery, and determined to do anything to get to the truth in large part because he is personally stunned and brokenhearted at the deaths of the Batemans—whom he considered family. An apparent affair between Maggie and Scott also turns out not to be the case—though it is possible that such an affair may be in its initial stages at the time of the flight.

As Scott is the sole survivor of the crash, and given his catastrophe paintings, Scott becomes the focus of the investigation temporarily. The FBI considers that Scott may have had something to do with the crash, but what looks apparent is not so: the paintings are a reflection of Scott's own failures in life and the unavoidable conclusion of death in life in general. Initial considerations that the plane may have crashed due to mechanical failure are proven not to be correct, while Cunningham's argument that the plane was deliberately crashed turn out to be completely correct, but for reasons other than a conspiracy to kill two of the most powerful men in New York.

When the fuselage of the plane is discovered, the pilot is on the wrong side of the cockpit door, the cockpit door has bullet holes in it, and Gil's body is nowhere to be found. It is first imagined that the plane may have been hijacked or intentionally put down by Gil, who leapt to safety. When Charlie's body is discovered on the other side of the cockpit door strapped in, first appearances are done away with. It is clear Charlie is to blame for the crash—but whether this is an accident or suicide is unknown. Both apparent theories are proven incorrect by the flight recorder, which reveals Charlie crashed the plane in a rage at Emma.

The difficulty of adjusting to normality

It is very difficult to adjust to normality again after an abnormal event, Noah Hawley argues in *Before the Fall*. Gus Franklin has been on the scene of many transportation accidents, which are sudden and massive deviations from normalcy and are life-



changing and life-ending events. Survivors of these events have tremendous difficulty at returning to life as normal given such extraordinary circumstances.

Scott and JJ, as the survivors of the crash, struggle to readjust to life as normal, though their lives have been forever changed by the crash. Scott is plagued by bad dreams while JJ finds himself unable to cry. Scott struggles to accept that he has survived when so many others have not, while JJ cannot quite understand that his entire family has been killed. The friends and family members of the dead, from Eleanor to Emma's father, struggle to adjust to life without their loved ones in them.

Scott himself comes to realize that only by going through daily routines and daily motions can any semblance of normalcy be regained. However, things are made far more difficult for Scott and JJ (and Eleanor) as the news media refuses to back down from covering the story—or, in Cunningham's case, doing whatever is necessary to get to the truth. Incessant calls for interviews, floods of reporters and news crews parking outside of houses, and Cunningham's constant accusations, insinuations, and challenges on television mean that Scott especially is unable to try to return to normal.

Scott is only ever able to begin to return to something like normal by accepting that his life will never again be the same as it was—and that JJ (and Eleanor) will forever be a part of his life because of the crash. In fact, Scott's decision to give JJ the gift of his fountain pen—in turn a gift from Scott's own father—is a demonstration of the father-son relationship that the two are now forging. Scott, the sonless father and JJ, the fatherless son here find a degree of normalcy in one another's presence as they are the only things that have made sense about the crash. When Scott decides he must begin acting like a survivor and is given a renewed sense of purpose by seeking to protect JJ, Scott is able to begin a new normal in life.

Survival is not something to be wasted

Survival is not something to be wasted argues Noah Hawley in his novel *Before the Fall*. Gus Franklin, from countless transportation disaster investigations knows that such accidents are tragedies for all those involved either directly or indirectly. Returning to a life resembling something like normal is difficult at best because life will never be the same again. As a result, those who survive such tragedies should renew their purposes in life and ensure that their lives have a new, special meaning because their lives have been spared.

When Scott returns to land after the plane crash, he struggles for some semblance of normalcy, but discovers this is impossible between the crash itself and the public and the press constantly following and badgering him regarding the crash. Scott is questioned about his catastrophe paintings, which reflect his former life as he explains it. The paintings are metaphors for his own wasted life and are his process of putting that part of his life to bed. The survival of the crash is the exclamation point to Scott's decision to move on. Scott realizes he has survived for a reason and that he cannot



return to life as it had been before the paintings, but must use both the time before and after the crash as a starting point for a new direction in life.

Scott comes to realize that he and JJ will forever be bound in life by their survival of the crash. Their lives have been forever altered by the crash, and their survival is not something which should be taken lightly or taken for granted. Scott recognizes that he will now become something of a father to JJ, and this is symbolized by the passing on of the fountain pen from Scott to JJ. It is a new direction in life for Scott, and proof that his life will not be wasted: his past life was that of an irresponsible and selfish man. Now, he realizes he has a purpose in protecting and caring for JJ because of their extraordinary linking in the crash.

Scott comes to recognize that he has been saved for a reason, that he has survived the crash for a reason, and it is time that he start acting like a survivor. This is imbued with the purpose of protecting and caring for JJ—and so Scott heads into ALC News in order to confront Bill Cunningham on air. The anger which builds in Scott allows his memory to return—and he shuts Cunningham down live over Cunningham's immoral and illegal tactics. Scott has used his survival to great purpose in calling out Cunningham, not only on behalf of himself and JJ, but on behalf of every person Cunningham has ever wronged.

Events in life are the result of deliberate choices

Noah Hawley argues in *Before the Fall* that events in life are a consequence of the choices people make. Indeed, from the very start of the novel, Hawley—through the narrator—argues that the choices people make create their paths in life. This is especially true of the people who populate his book.

David's decision to become a conservative news station founder leads to his fame, fortune, and success, which in turn led to a kidnapping attempt with Rachel, the hiring of security, and vacations in Martha's Vineyard. David's most recent trip to Martha's Vineyard and choice to charter a private flight back to New York in turn leads Maggie to invite the Kiplings and Scott to join in the flight. Maggie's flirtation with Scott, and the subsequent choice to invite Scott on board, inadvertently means JJ will not perish in the aftermath of the crash of the jet. David's decision to charter a private plane inadvertently leads to the crash itself. David's decision to hire security leads to Gil's heroic but failed attempt to regain control of the plane before it crashes.

Sarah's decision to accept Maggie's invitation on the flight inadvertently dooms her and her husband. Ben's choice and decision to engage in illegal and immoral laundering of money in turn leads to his indictment, news of which reaches him prior to takeoff. It secures in Ben's mind the decision to travel with the Batemans, for he wishes to ask David's advice. Scott's choice to pursue swimming through his life ultimately gives him the stamina and capability to swim with JJ to shore, thus saving both of their lives. Scott in turn was inspired to go into swimming in the first place by Jack LaLanne after



witnessing LaLanne swim to shore from Alcatraz dragging a boat behind him at the age of sixty.

For reasons not entirely clear—either the original copilot genuinely being hung over as Charlie claims, or simply agreeing to switch flights with Charlie—leads to Charlie taking on the flight he knows Emma will be working. Emma's decision to do drugs and go out to a party the night before the Vineyard-New York flight even though she knows Charlie will be there is a dangerous decision. Charlie, obsessed with Emma and high on cocaine and drunk on alcohol, takes her rejection of him bitterly and personally—which in turn builds into a rage. Charlie chooses to take revenge on Emma by crashing the plane into the ocean.

The media's relentless pursuit for a story

There must be a limit to how far news media is willing to go to get a story argues Noah Hawley in his novel *Before the Fall*. While pursuing the truth or a story is important, pursuing the truth or a story in an ethical manner is also immensely important. For Hawley, the ends do not justify the means.

When the plane goes down in the ocean, Bill Cunningham places himself at the forefront of the investigation, vowing to get to the truth no matter what it takes. As the reader has already learned, Cunningham will indeed do whatever it takes to get the story—including illegal and immoral actions such as warrantless wiretapping. In the present, Cunningham is the first to argue that the plane crash could not have been a mechanical failure given the people onboard. Cunningham believes the plane was deliberately brought down because of the people onboard. Although Cunningham has no real evidence to back his theory up, he is going on a hunch as reporters often do. While Cunningham is proven to be correct, his details are incorrect.

When Cunningham learns of the survival of Scott and JJ, he focuses his efforts on learning more about JJ. He urges viewers to send in any information they have about Scott, hires Namor to look into Scott's background, and sends news crews out after Scott. Cunningham uses his on-air position to throw around accusations and insinuations based on Scott's reluctance to be in the public spotlight. Cunningham goes so far as to play on-air recordings of Scott's conversations with Gus Franklin and Layla to attempt to discredit or provoke Scott.

While Cunningham does not pursue such tactics with JJ—this is Cunningham's sole soft spot—the rest of the news media has no qualms about stalking, harassing, and calling Eleanor to learn more about the crash. Eleanor becomes unendingly frustrated with the media, and this can be heard in her voice when she first takes Scott's call and mistakenly believes him to be just another reporter. Scott and Eleanor find an ally in Layla, who—merely because she is rich—has all of her family's private struggles and drama dragged through the public square by the media eager for viewership and funding.



Styles

Point of View

Noah Hawley relates *Before the Fall* in the third-person omniscient perspective from the point of view of a narrator who directly addresses the audience, involving them in the story as it unfolds. The third-person narrator allows the reader unlimited access to the story as it unfolds—both in the past before the crash, in the plane during the crash, and after the crash as well. The third-person narrator gives the reader unique insight into each of the lives, thought processes, beliefs, and motivations of each of the characters, giving the reader a far better understanding of the people involved in or affected by the crash than those people themselves may have. The narrator breaks the fourth wall frequently in order to personally invest readers in events and make them relevant. Consider in the first, untitled chapter of the novel on page 1 how the narrator says that “Everyone has their path. The choices they’ve made. How any two people end up in the same place at the same time is a mystery. You get on a bus... You ride an elevator... It happens every day. To try to predict the places we’ll go and the people we’ll meet would be pointless.” Or, for example, in the chapter “Layla” on page 119, the narrator talks about Layla’s wealth directly to the reader: “She makes so much money just being rich that the annual dividends on her savings account earns make it the seven hundredth richest person on the planet. Think about that. Picture it if you can, which of course you can’t. Not really. Because the only way to truly understand wealth at the level is to have it.” Or consider the chapter “Bullets,” on page 343: “Who among us really understands how recording works?... It is just one of a million magic acts we have master over the centuries...”

Language and Meaning

Noah Hawley relates *Before the Fall* in language that is straightforward, engaging, and compelling in order to provoke thought and make points. This is in keeping with the fourth-wall breaking of the narrator, who directly addresses readers with words like “you” and “we”—such as on the very first page of the novel’s first untitled chapter when the narrator argues, “To try to predict the places we’ll go and the people we’ll meet would be pointless.” Here, the narrator argues a point and engages readers to consider whether or not this is true while alerting the reader that the novel about to be read will either challenge or conform to that argument. In many situations, the personal engagement of the reader reflects the simple, commonsense language and engagement of Bill Cunningham and his viewership, such as in the chapter “Injuries,” on page 72: “‘They’re calling it an accident,’ Bill Cunningham is saying from the screen’s largest box, a tall man with dramatic hair, thumbing his suspenders. ‘But you and I know—there are no accidents. Planes don’t just fall out of the sky...’” The straightforward language also allows the narrator to make important contextual points and arguments, once again in directly challenging the reader. Consider, for example, in the chapter “Countryside” on page 274 where the narrator explains succinctly, “A private plane crashes. A man and a



boy survive. Information versus entertainment”—calling attention to the blurring of informational news and entertainment news to the detriment of news itself, and those featured in the news: tragedy has become a circus of entertainment. Consider also page 176 in the chapter “Funhouse”: “Once anointed a hero by your fellow man, you lose the right to privacy.” Hawley’s narrator provides thematic arguments and makes important points that contextualize the plot as it unfolds, challenging readers to consider what is being said in relation to their own lives.

Structure

Before the Fall is divided into four primary parts, with the last three parts being subdivided into chapters. The first part of the novel is untitled and features the arrival of all of the people who will be a part of the crash within a few minutes’ time. The following three parts feature chapters—some titled, some untitled, some appearing in alternative forms (such as transcripts of television shows or a list of the dead from the crash. A handful of chapters comprise descriptions of some of Scott’s catastrophe paintings. The chapters themselves veer back and forth between the past and the present, with present chapters raising mysteries that past chapters fill in. The final chapters of the novel—especially the chapter “Flight”—blur the past and present together within single chapters. The excursions into the past allow the reader to better know the dead and to see them as fully-dimensional human beings with fears, hopes, dreams, aspirations, loves, and histories of their own. It is because of some of the characters themselves—especially Charlie—that the truth behind the plane crash is finally known.



Quotes

Everyone has their path. The choices they've made. How any two people end up in the same place at the same time is a mystery... To try to predict the places we'll go and the people we'll meet would be pointless.

-- Narrator (Untitled Chapter)

Importance: When the novel begins, and passengers board the OSPRY, the narrator lays out what many perceive to be a truth in life. This is that everyone has a path based on choices they have made, and how two people end up somewhere together is, in the end, a mystery. The narrator notes that trying to predict such a thing is pointless, because such things are so mysterious. However, this is a false narrative: what follows in the novel is anything but chance, and has everything to do with choice.

They're calling it an accident,' Bill Cunningham is saying from the screen's largest box, a tall man with dramatic hair, thumbing his suspenders. 'But you and I know—there are no accidents. Planes don't just fall out of the sky...

-- Bill Cunningham (Injuries)

Importance: While in the hospital recovering, Scott watches ALC News. Bill Cunningham declares that the plane crash cannot have been an accident because planes do not just fall from the sky. Bill believes there is something else at work, and that something mysterious has gone on that has nothing to do with chance or luck, but everything to do with human cause.

Definitely a VIP package. This is what happens when the president of the United States makes a phone call.

-- Gus Franklin (Storm Clouds)

Importance: Gus explains to Scott that the Coast Guard, the Navy, and NOAA have teamed up together to find wreckage from the OSPRY. Scott asks how normal such an operation is for a small plane. Gus explains it is not normal, and only possible given a call from the president. This means the crash of the plane—and those killed—is of serious and exceptional importance.

And yes, I said murder. Because whatever else could it be? Two of the most powerful men in a city of powerful men, whose plan disappears over the dark Atlantic, a plane serviced just the day before, flown by top-notch pilots who reported no mechanical issues to flight control, but somehow dropped off radar eighteen minutes after takeoff—look at my face—no one on earth can convince me there wasn't some kind of foul play involved.

-- Bill Cunningham (Cunningham)

Importance: Bill Cunningham narrowly escapes being fired for the phone hacking scandal by heading the charge on the network's investigation into the plane crash and David's death. Cunningham lays out all of his reasons, arguing that it is impossible that



coincidence, bad luck, or an accident could be to blame. With everything seemingly in working order, there is no way the plane crash could have been anything other than murder. While Cunningham has no hard evidence to back this statement up, he senses something is amiss and will pursue it—and not only because it has saved his own neck.

Once anointed a hero by your fellow man, you lose the right to privacy.
-- Narrator (Funhouse)

Importance: As Scott's fame grows from not only surviving the plane crash, but saving JJ, Scott loses his privacy. Having always valued privacy, Scott realizes his status as a hero means he no longer has any privacy. It is something he does his best to handle, but struggles to deal with especially as Cunningham comes to directly challenge Scott on TV.

Why is he alive and they dead?
-- Narrator (Untitled Chapter)

Importance: As Scott attends the funeral of Sarah Kipling, he begins in earnest to question why he survived when the others did not. He is now plagued by survivor's guilt, and attends the funerals to pay his respects. He is deeply troubled by this, and even imagines what it must be like to be dead, but he cannot do so.

Deep water is dark. Currents shift. What doesn't float, sinks. Either way, the more time that went by, the less likely it was that they would find what they were looking for.
-- Narrator (Threads)

Importance: As the search for an answer to the crash drags into its tenth day, Gus's superiors grow anxious and demand answers. Day by day, though piece by piece of wreckage and debris is recovered, the smoking gun has yet to be found. Gus does everything he can, knowing there is an answer to everything that happened—but that that answer must still be found.

And yet in these moments of mass death—a ferry sinks, a plane crashes—we are brought face to face with the truth. We too will die one day, and for reasons that have nothing to do with us, our hopes and dreams... So—what started as irony—my life, the disaster—opened a door.
-- Scott (Imago)

Importance: Scott finally faces down the press, and fields countless questions about the crash and his involvement. Some of the questions zero in on his artwork. Scott explains they are a reflection of his own failure in life, as well as the undeniable truth that everyone dies. Scott here conforms to the narrator's earliest assertion that some things in life cannot be explained—people die in ways that have nothing to do with their hopes and dreams. In other words, people die and there is no deeper conspiracy behind it.



A private plane crashes. A man and a boy survive. Information versus entertainment.
-- Narrator (Countryside)

Importance: As Scott drives to visit JJ, he reflects on how much he hates being in the public eye. He longs for privacy and realizes the tragedy of the plane crash has become a circus. He realizes that somewhere information about the crash has devolved into entertainment, obscuring the tragedy and getting in the way of real answers.

“Outside, the world continues to spin. Inside, they go through the motions of daily life, pretending everything is normal.
-- Narrator (The Blacks)

Importance: When the bulk of the wreckage is found and details begin to emerge about the plane’s final moments before the crash, Scott continues to spend time with JJ to try to get through to him. Scott comes to realize he and JJ are both trying to live as if nothing has happened by getting through each day. The same is true even of people like Eleanor, who find their lives substantially altered by the crash. They look for comfort, security, and reassurance in daily routines—and from these find normality as best they can. It is very difficult to adjust to normality again after an abnormal event.

Life can paralyze us, freeze us into statues if we think about things too long.
-- Narrator (Games)

Importance: As the novel heads toward its conclusion, Scott gives his old fountain pen to JJ. The fountain pen was a gift to Scott from his own father, and Scott now realizes he has assumed a father-son relationship with JJ by passing the pen down again. In a sense, Scott has adopted JJ and decides not to dwell on this too long because he knows it will cause him not to act. Instead, Scott focuses on acting to help JJ however he can—bringing him a renewed sense of purpose and a new direction in life.

He is a survivor. It’s time he started acting like one.
-- Flight (Narrator)

Importance: Following Scott’s epic confrontation with Cunningham, Scott decides he will do whatever he must to get his paintings back and to take care of JJ however he can. He realizes he has survived a crash that should have killed him and he has a second chance at life. Instead of being a victim, he will be a leader, and will act like the survivor the crash has made him.