The Way It Felt to Be Falling Study Guide

The Way It Felt to Be Falling by Kim Edwards

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Introduction

"The Way It Felt to Be Falling," by Kim Edwards, was first published in the *Threepenny Review,* although it received greater exposure when it was reprinted in the author's first and only book—*The Secrets of a Fire King*—in 1997. Edwards wrote the story as part of her first fiction workshop that she took in college, but revised it several times over the next decade as she honed her writing skills through creative writing programs and personal experience. Like many of Edwards's stories, "The Way It Felt to Be Falling" features a strong female protagonist. Kate is a nineteen-year-old woman who is working to save up money for college, and who hangs out drinking and shooting pool with her unstable boyfriend, Stephen, in her off time. Kate gets talked into going skydiving, an event that helps her overcome her fears of going mad like her father. In order to accurately reflect the skydiving sequences in the story, Edwards took skydiving lessons at a local airstrip, which helped give the story a greater sense of realism. The story also addresses many realistic issues, including mental degradation, the burden of responsibility, and suicide. A copy of the story can be found in the paperback version of *The Secrets of a Fire King,* which was published by Picador USA in 1998.

Author Biography

Edwards was born on May 4, 1958, in Killeen, Texas. When she was only two months old, her parents moved the family back to upstate New York, where Edwards grew up. Although she was interested in writing since she was a little girl, it was in her college years that the wheels were set in motion for her writing career. After transferring from Auburn Community College (now Cayuga Community College) to Colgate University in 1979, she signed up for a fiction workshop. Here, Edwards wrote her first story, "Cords," which eventually became "The Way It Felt to Be Falling." Edwards's instructor told her that she should do research to get her facts right in her fiction. As a result, the author took skydiving lessons at the local airstrip.

After graduating from Colgate University in 1981 with her bachelor's degree, Edwards earned her master of fine arts degree in the writing of fiction from the University of Iowa's internationally renowned Writer's Workshop. After graduating in 1983, Edwards began teaching composition classes, and in one class she had a number of international students. This experience, along with her desire to travel, encouraged her to pursue teaching English as a second language. To this end, she earned a second master of arts degree in linguistics, also from the University of Iowa, in 1987. The same year, Edwards married Thomas Clayton, who was also interested in teaching English as a second language. The couple spent five years living and teaching in Malaysia, Japan, and Cambodia.

Edwards's short stories reflect these diverse experiences. Several of the stories in her first collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King* (1997), depict life and situations in Asia. The collection also includes "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," which received a Pushcart Prize; "Sky Juice," which received the 1990 Nelson Algren Award for short fiction; and "Gold," which was included in the *Best American Short Stories of 1993.* In addition, Edwards has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Seaside Institute, the Kentucky Arts Council, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women. Her fiction and essays have appeared in the *Paris Review, Redbook, Ploughshares, The North American Review, Iowa Woman, River City, Michigan Quarterly Review, the Threepenny Review, Story, American Short Fiction, and the Chicago Tribune.*

Edwards, who is currently at work on her first novel, lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with her husband and two daughters.

Plot Summary

"The Way It Felt to Be Falling" starts out with Kate, the narrator, describing the summer she turned nineteen. In the midst of a recession, her father's consulting business has failed, an event that causes him to retreat into madness. Kate and her mother visit him in the hospital, but he does not notice them. Kate's mother works as a secretary during the day and decorates cakes as a side job, in order to support the family. Kate recalls one day where the bottom layer of a finished wedding cake collapsed, and her mother, normally a calm person, broke down crying. Kate talks about her boyfriend that summer, Stephen, the unstable older brother of her friend, Emmy—who has left town with a number of others to follow the Grateful Dead on tour. Kate wanted to go, but is working in a convenience store to save money, and also does not want to leave her mother. Instead, Kate stays in her small town and watches the planes and skydivers. Kate also monitors herself in the mirror, searching for signs of the madness that has claimed her father.

That summer, Kate and Stephen, who is known for his violent and suicidal episodes, usually met at Mickey's tavern to play pool. Kate did not like Stephen at first, because she was afraid of his scarred wrists and his massive consumption of Valium. After Emmy leaves town, Stephen starts to call Kate more often, and they begin to see each other. Stephen describes his suicide attempt to Kate, and Kate tries some of his Valium, liking the way that the drug blurs the lines of reality. The day that the wedding cake collapses, Kate arrives at Mickey's tavern, and Stephen is worried about something. Kate finds out that he has lost a bet during a pool tournament and that he must go skydiving. Stephen says he will go alone, but when Ted, the winner, says he wants to be there to witness it, Stephen refuses, and asks Kate to serve instead. He also asks Kate to jump with him. Kate agrees, then leaves to go to work. When she gets home that night, Kate's mother expresses concern about Kate's relationship with Stephen, and is even more frustrated when Kate says she cannot see her father the next day because she has plans with Stephen.

The next day, Stephen and Kate drive to the airplane hangar, where they meet their instructor, Howard. Even though they are not pulling their own ripcords, Howard has them practice all of the movements, including emergency maneuvers. Stephen's form is perfect, but he is still nervous. They break for lunch, and Kate says that they do not have to go through with this, but Stephen says his personal integrity is at stake. Kate jumps first, and immediately forgets all of her training, getting lost in the motionless feeling of falling. She feels her parachute open, and finally remembers her training, landing in a cornfield and twisting her ankle in the process. Stephen comes up to her, and she is surprised that he arrived first. He says he landed on target, but when Kate goes to collect her certificate from Howard, she finds out that Stephen did not jump.

Stephen takes Kate to the hospital to get her sprained ankle X-rayed, and halfway home, Kate tells Stephen she knows that he did not jump. Stephen says that he saw Kate falling, and was afraid of jumping. Kate tells Stephen that it felt like floating, not falling. She refuses to lie to Ted about Stephen backing out of the jump, and Stephen

destroys the film in Ted's camera, then physically threatens Kate into lying for him. When they get to Kate's house, Stephen tries to make up, but Kate tells him she never wants to see him again, and says that if he bothers her, she will tell the whole town that he did not jump.

When Kate gets inside her house, her mom is waiting up for her. Kate considers lying, but then tells her mother about her skydiving experience. Her mother is furious, and is concerned how Kate is going to work that week. Her mother calms down and uses the ruined wedding cake as a peace offering. They both laugh at their situation, and Kate's mother confesses that she is unsure what to do about anything, especially with Kate's father in the hospital. Kate tells her she is doing fine, and feels angry at her father for doing this to them. She realizes that she is no longer worried about going mad, and remembers what it was like to be falling, floating, in the air.

Summary

In *The Way It Felt to Be Falling* the narrator, Kate, recalls the summer she turned 19. During that summer, a recession had caused businesses to close and move South. Kate's father shut down in his own way after his consulting firm closed; he stopped speaking and ended up in the hospital, where he remained all summer.

Kate's mother is a secretary who decorates cakes on the side. The most difficult part of her job is decorating wedding cakes, especially in the summer heat. Although she is normally a calm, level-headed person, one day that summer, when a cake she is working on collapses, Kate's mother cries.

Kate watches her mother through the kitchen door. She hasn't seen her mother cry since the day her father was put in the hospital. After a few minutes pass, Kate's mother collects herself and finishes the cake. She takes out the section that collapsed. The cake is smaller now but still nice. They carry the box with the cake in it to the car. As Kate's mother begins to drive away, she asks Kate to clean up and do the dishes before she goes to work. She also warns her daughter not to spend all night with her dubious friends, referring to Stephen, Kate's only friend that summer.

Stephen has curly red hair and a long beard. He doesn't work, spends most days at a bar and shoplifts. Kate's mother thinks he is a bad influence. Everyone else in town thinks he is crazy. Stephen is the older brother of Kate's best friend Emmy. Emmy and her boyfriend left town that summer to follow the Grateful Dead tour. She invited Kate to go, but Kate is working at a convenience store for the summer to save money for school; and aside from that, Kate doesn't want to leave her mother alone.

Emmy sends Kate postcards from the places she visits. Kate is jealous; she feels trapped in her small town. She watches the planes in the sky overhead, flying to places she will never see. Sometime she sees skydivers, small specks plummeting to the ground. They grow larger just before they disappear behind the tree line.

After Kate's mother leaves, Kate goes back into the house and does the dishes. She feels a silence all around her. She doesn't like to stay in the house alone that summer. When she is alone, she begins to panic. Looking at herself in the mirror, the silence creeps over her and she can no longer recognize her own face.

The doctors say that her father is suffering from a stress-related condition and should be better soon. The day that her father stopped speaking, Kate remembers that his eyes were blank. When the ambulance came to get him, he didn't protest. Into madness "he slid away with ease." The narrator calls her father's condition a "descent" and says that, that summer, she was afraid of falling.

Kate's friend Stephen is not comfortable at Kate's house; he lives at the edge of town. So they meet every day at Mickey's Tavern, a place where local artists and other people who live on the fringes hang out. Kate stops in after work, but Stephen often spends all

afternoon and evening at Mickey's, betting on pool games. The other regulars are odd or crazy; some are even dangerous. Stephen is considered crazy and dangerous because he had smashed a window at his ex-lover's house once and he had tried to kill himself twice.

Stephen kept his distance from people. Kate didn't like him before Emmy left. He is 27 and living in a third floor apartment in his parents' house. He sleeps all morning and paces his room all night. He has dark scars on both wrists from when he tried to kill himself. He collects welfare and takes Valium every couple of hours.

Stephen could be mean or charming, depending on his mood. His danger was part of Kate's attraction to him. Emmy is the only one who is not afraid of him. Before she leaves for the summer, Stephen tells Emmy that Kate understands him. Emmy laughs at this.

After Kate's father ends up in the hospital, Stephen seems to know something about Kate. When Emmy leaves, he starts to call Kate every day until she finally gives in and agrees to hang out with him. She knows that Stephen understands the suspended world between madness and sanity; he lives in that world himself.

Kate tried Stephen's Valium once. She liked the calm it caused to sweep over her. Because of the Valium, Stephen claims that he never worries; but on the day that the cake collapsed, Kate can tell that he is worried when she sees him at the bar. Kate and Stephen order beers and start to play a game of pool. Kate watches him as he shoots. She finds him attractive; he has green eyes and a classic face. Stephen had been playing pool competitively for days against the other regulars. Each day the stakes are getting higher. The loser has to go skydiving.

When Kate hears this, she tells Stephen that she has always wanted to try skydiving. Ted Johnson, a local artist, watches Stephen play. Stephen gets nervous and misses his shot. Ted says he must be on a losing streak, revealing that Stephen has lost the competition and has to go skydiving. Stephen says it's no big deal; he's already called to make arrangements. He asks Kate to skydive with him when Ted insists that he must have a witness. Kate is afraid. She tells Stephen that she has never even flown before; but she's off work the next day, so she agrees to go with him. She tells Stephen that she will pick him up at eight. She leaves the bar to go to work.

When Kate gets home, her mother is in the kitchen. The house is dark and quiet. Her mother tells her she is late. Kate explains that she had to work late because someone went home sick. Her mother asks what she does when she's with Stephen. Kate says that they talk about books, music and art. Kate's mother warns her that Stephen and his friends are not stable. Then Kate asks her mother if she (Kate) is crazy too; her mother says no.

Kate's mother tells her that she visited the hospital and asks if Kate will go with her to see her father the next day. Kate says she has plans with Stephen. Her mother says that her father would like to see her. Kate knows that her father could not have said this

and responds angrily. Then she apologizes and says that she will see him next week. Kate goes to her room. Her mother calls after her, saying that sometimes Kate has no common sense.

The next day Kate secretly hopes for rain, but it is a clear day. Ted gives Kate a camera to document the event. Kate uses half the film taking pictures of the countryside and of Stephen wearing flowers in his beard.

The hangar at the skydiving site is a small concrete building on acres of cornfields. There are piles of stretchers lined up outside, which Kate finds less than reassuring. Two women arrive along with the instructor, a tall, grey-haired man named Howard. They all line up to practice. Howard shimmers in his white clothes. When he decides the group is ready, he takes them inside to practice emergency maneuvers. They practice jumping from rigging that is suspended from the ceiling. The two women have jumped before, but their training has expired. Howard gives the group a break for lunch.

Stephen tells Kate that he's never flown either. He is also afraid. Kate says that they don't have to do it but Stephen feels that he must, to protect his reputation. Kate says he will be fine because he wasn't nervous during the practice. Stephen says that feeling nervous doesn't mean anything. He says that free-falling is his natural state of mind, as he taps on the bottle of Valium in his pocket. He offers Kate one but she declines. He opens the bottle and discovers there is only one pill left. He takes the pill and discards the bottle in frustration.

Kate is hesitant to go through with the jump but figures that, since she has already come this far, she might as well jump. She is supposed to jump first. She stands nearest to the plane's opening when they are in the air. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. The jumpmaster motions Kate to the doorway. She gets into position. She feels Stephen touch her arm. The jumpmaster tells her to go but Kate doesn't move. The ground looks like an aerial map. The wind tugs at Kate's feet. The jumpmaster shouts again and Kate jumps.

Instantly Kate forgets all of the commands. She knows she is falling but it seems like the earth stays the same distance away. She keeps her eyes wide open; she is too terrified to scream. Kate feels the tug of the parachute. In the distance she hears the plane bank again. Then the silence around her grows and becomes complete.

All summer Kate has felt like she was slipping into the rush of the world, but now nothing seems to move. Kate sees someone on the ground trying to tell her something, but the figure is too small. Finally Kate senses that she is falling fast. She fixes her gaze on the row of trees ahead of her. Her left foot hits the ground and turns over and then later her right foot hits the ground. She rolls slowly onto the ground. She hears Stephen calling her name in the distance; he asks if she is okay. She wonders how he got to the ground first. He tells her it is because he landed on target and she landed in a cornfield.

They go back to the office. Stephen waits in the car while Kate gets her things. Howard comes out of the office and Kate asks him how she did. He says she did well for her first

time and gives her a certificate. He says he is surprised that Stephen didn't jump because he was the best during practice.

When Kate gets back to the car, her ankle begins to swell and turn green. They go to the hospital. Nothing is broken; it is just a sprain. The doctor lectures Kate on her foolishness as Kate walks out on crutches.

On the way home, Stephen says that jumping is the greatest high. Kate tells him that she knows he didn't jump. He says he wanted to, but when he saw Kate falling so fast, he couldn't do it. Kate explains that it doesn't feel like falling. There is no sense of descent. She says it feels more like floating.

Stephen asks her not to tell anyone that he didn't jump but she says she won't lie about it. The adrenaline from the jump is wearing off and Kate is tired. She closes her eyes but she can feel the car veer off the main road and turn onto a country road. She opens her eyes and asks Stephen what he is doing. His green eyes are wild and glittering. Kate is frightened. He grabs the camera and destroys the film and then he slams on the brakes of the car and pulls over. He smiles at her sadistically. He says he could do anything he wanted to her and traces her throat. Kate wants to go home. He says he will take her home if she promises not to tell anyone that he didn't jump. She promises not to tell. Stephen stays quiet; it reminds Kate of her father's silence and this makes her angry. Finally, Stephen starts the car.

When they arrive at Kate's house, Stephen touches her shoulder lightly. His voice is soft and calm. He apologizes for his temper and tells her she shouldn't provoke him. He asks if she will come over to his place. She tells him to go to hell and threatens that if he ever bothers her again, she will tell the whole town that he didn't jump. He asks her if she thinks he is crazy. She says she doesn't think he is crazy; she thinks he is scared like everyone else.

Kate quietly opens the door to her house. Her mother wakes up from sleeping on the couch. Kate was going to lie and tell her mother that she fell down a hill, but she realizes that it is easier to tell the truth. She does, however, leave out the part about Stephen. Her mother is angry after she hears the story about skydiving. She asks Kate how she expects to work like this and get paid. Kate says that money is the least of her problems. She says that, compared to the other problems in her life, money is a piece of cake.

Kate's mother picks up a slab of the cake that had collapsed. As she grabs it she says, "Piece of cake?" They both laugh. Kate's mother shakes her and says that she could have been killed. Kate says she's sorry.

Then her mother says that, with everything that's happening with Kate's father, she doesn't know what to do anymore. Kate reassures her mother that she is doing fine; she marvels at the hours her mother spends making wedding cakes, how she creates cakes that are as fragile as the dreams that demand them.

Kate's father remains still and silent in his white hospital room and Kate is angry about it. She is angry about what he is doing to her mother and her. Kate wants to say this to her mother. She also wants to tell her about the panic that came over her before and about the growing calm she feels inside now.

Whatever brought on her father's silence and Stephen's violence would not happen to Kate. Aside from her bandaged ankle, she is whole and strong. Kate's mother asks her if she is okay and she replies that she is fine.

Kate goes to her room. She looks out the window at the bright stars in the clear sky. Looking out into the darkness, she remembers the way it felt to be falling.

Analysis

The Way It Felt to Be Falling is part of Kim Edward's collection of short stories entitled *Secrets of a Fire King*. The story takes place the summer that the narrator turns 19. When Kate's best friend Emmy leaves to follow the Grateful Dead tour for the summer, Kate stays home, where she is surrounded by mental illness and depression. Kate is alone with her mother after her father has a breakdown and ends up in the hospital.

Kate's only friend this summer is Stephen, the older brother of Kate's best friend. Stephen is a mentally unstable man who pops Valium constantly and spends all day at a bar shooting pool instead of working.

In the opening of the story, Kate describes watching planes fly overhead from her backyard. She longs to leave her small town as she watches the planes fly to other destinations. Like much of Edward's use of symbolism in the story, the image of planes is repeated throughout the narrative. It indicates Kate's longing to leave town and her difficult life and it also foreshadows the event, skydiving, that changes Kate's perspective. The second time the narrator mentions planes, she describes watching skydivers fall to the earth.

The notion of silence is symbolic in the story. It is introduced when Kate's mother asks her to do the dishes before going to work. Kate goes into the kitchen after her mother leaves and feels a silence all around her. She fears being in the house alone because of the silence. For the narrator, silence represents her father's illness. He stopped talking just before his admission to the hospital. As a symbol of madness, silence ties Kate, her father and Stephen together.

Silence and being alone lead to the panic attacks that Kate experiences. Of course she fears these attacks are an indication that she is going crazy. Stephen's silence is equally disturbing. After skydiving, Stephen gets angry when Kate won't lie for him and say that he made the jump. He drives her to a country road at night and threatens to hurt her if she tells the truth. After she agrees not to tell, Stephen is quiet as he drives Kate home. His silence reminds Kate of her father and makes her angry.

It is this silence that makes Kate recognize the link between Stephen and her father. When she gets angry with Stephen, she is finally able to deal with her anger at her father for what he is putting her mother and her through.

The image of falling is also used throughout the story. Kate describes her father's slip into madness as a descent. Over the summer she battles with panic attacks and fears that she may be falling into a state of madness herself. She builds a friendship with Stephen because she feels that he understands the battle between sanity and madness.

When Kate decides to go skydiving, the image of falling and Kate's fear of falling are invoked again. When Kate finally jumps, though, she discovers that it doesn't feel like she is falling; it feels like she is floating. The imagery of floating through the air is in sharp contrast with Kate's description of madness as a "graceless descent."

Ironically, Stephen doesn't make the jump. He is paralyzed by fear when he watches Kate fall after jumping. This demonstrates that Kate has moved forward by conquering her fear. When Stephen asks if she thinks he's crazy, she says she thinks he's just scared, like everyone else. This shows that Kate realizes that her attacks are the result of fear, not madness.

The last line in the story gives tangible meaning to the story's title. Alone in her room on the night of her skydive, Kate remembers how it felt to be falling. Kate not only recalls the risk she took that day by skydiving, as well as the physical feeling of it; she also understands her strength and knows now that she will never succumb to madness.

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Characters

Emmy

Emmy is Kate's best friend and Stephen's younger sister, who leaves during the summer to go follow the Grateful Dead tour. Emmy's leaving brings Kate and Stephen closer together.

Howard

Howard is the instructor who teaches Kate and Stephen how to skydive. Howard is surprised when Stephen does not jump, since Stephen was the best in his class.

Kate

Kate is the narrator of the story, whose father has gone mad, and whose boyfriend, Stephen, is unstable. In the story, Kate recalls the summer that she was nineteen, when she was afraid of going mad like her father, who slipped away after his consulting business failed. She looks in the mirror, searching for a sign of the madness in her face, and spends her off hours drinking, playing pool, and gambling with a rough group of friends. Stephen is the most unstable of this bunch, and Kate finds herself drawn to his dangerous personality. She also believes that he can help her make sense of the world between sanity and madness, where her father is, and where Kate assumes she will end up. In addition to drinking, Kate has tried Stephen's Valium, and likes the way that the pills make reality seem fuzzy. Kate has to constantly defend her relationship with Stephen, whom her mother does not like.

One day at Mickey's Tavern, the local hangout where Stephen and Kate meet each day, Kate finds out that Stephen has lost a bet, and must go skydiving as a result. Stephen asks Kate to jump with him, to serve as a witness for Ted, the winner of the bet. Kate agrees, although she gets nervous during their skydiving class, and considers backing out. However, she decides to go through with it, and ends up being the first one to jump. Kate loses her sense of time and forgets the training from her class, marveling at the floating sensation of freefall. Her parachute opens, and Kate is entranced by the scenery, although she snaps out of it in time to land in a cornfield, spraining her ankle in the process. Stephen meets Kate at her touchdown point, and says that he landed on target, although Kate finds out from Howard that Stephen did not jump. Kate confronts Stephen on the way home, and refuses to lie for him, until he physically threatens her. This severs the relationship between them. Kate tells her mother about the skydiving incident, and her mother is upset at first, although they soon reconcile. Kate realizes that with this onset of anger over Stephen and her father, she is no longer afraid of going mad. In a private moment, she remembers the peaceful feeling she had while falling.

Kate's Father

Kate's father loses his consulting business during the recession, which causes him to retreat into madness. This situation puts increased financial strain on Kate's mother, and influences Kate, who worries that she will go mad like her father.

Kate's Mother

Kate's mother is a secretary who also works a side job as a cake decorator, supporting her family completely while her husband is in the hospital. The day that one of Kate's mother's wedding cakes collapses, Kate notices that it is the first time her mother has cried since Kate's father went into the hospital. Her mother is worried about Kate's relationship with Stephen, and is frustrated when Kate says she will not accompany her mother to the hospital one day, since she has plans with Stephen. When Kate returns home with a sprained ankle after skydiving, her mother is furious, but they soon reconcile over a piece of the ruined wedding cake. Kate's mother also breaks down and tells Kate that she is not handling the situation with Kate's father very well, although Kate reassures her that she is.

Stephen

Stephen is Kate's boyfriend and the older brother of Emmy, Kate's best friend. Stephen is twentyseven and still lives at home with his parents. Stephen has a reputation for being crazy and dangerous, because he is a thief, he has smashed out an ex-lover's window, and he has tried to kill himself. Stephen is on a high dose of Valium, which he takes every few hours to calm himself. When Emmy leaves town for the summer, Stephen starts to call Kate every day, and they begin to hang out more. They meet every day at Mickey's Tavern, where they drink, play pool, and gamble with a rough group of other young people. One day, Stephen loses a bet, which states that the loser has to go skydiving. Since he needs a witness to document his skydiving experience, Stephen chooses Kate, who agrees. During the skydiving class, Howard, the instructor, notes that Stephen has perfect technique. Stephen fails to jump, however, and his lie does not work on Kate, who finds out the truth from Howard. Kate confronts Stephen about his failed jump on the way home, and says she will not lie for him. This enrages Stephen, who drives out to a deserted country road, destroys the film, and threatens Kate, who then agrees not to tell. Stephen tries to apologize, but it is too late. Kate is angry at his threats and tells him she never wants to see him again.

Ted

Ted is one of the regulars at Mickey's Tavern, who beats Stephen in a pool tournament, forcing Stephen to go skydiving. Ted does not trust Stephen to go alone, but agrees to let Kate serve as witness. He gives Kate his camera, to document Stephen's jump.

Themes

Fear

Near the end of the story, after Stephen has threatened Kate, he asks her if she thinks he is crazy. She tells him, "No. . . . I think you're afraid, just like everybody else." Throughout the story, the characters exhibit many kinds of fear. Kate is afraid of going mad like her father, and carefully monitors herself. Says Kate: "I'd find myself standing in front of mirrors with my heart pounding, searching my eyes for a glimmer of madness." Stephen is also afraid, even though he says at one point that he does not worry about anything. He is afraid of being shamed in front of his friends, so much so that he believes he cannot back out of the jump. As he tells Kate: "For me it's my personal integrity at stake, remember?" Kate reassures him, saying that Stephen has the best technique of anybody in the class, so he should have no problems.

However, Stephen's fear of death outweighs his fear of shame and makes him discount his perfect skydiving technique, and he does ultimately back out of his jump. Says Stephen: "I don't know what happened, Kate. I stood right in that doorway, and the only thing I could imagine was my chute in a streamer." However, after the fear of death has passed, Stephen's fear of shame returns, and manifests itself when he threatens Kate. Other characters are afraid, too. Kate's mom is afraid that she is not doing a good enough job in the absence of her husband, and even her clients exhibit fear over their wedding cakes not being perfect or on time: "That summer, brides and their mothers called us on a regular basis, their voices laced with panic." However, Kate is one character who realizes that fear can be overcome. Her skydiving experience has changed her. Says Kate: "Whatever had plunged my father into silence, and Stephen into violence, wouldn't find me. I had a bandaged ankle, but the rest of me was whole and strong."

Responsibility

From the beginning, the story illustrates two types of people, those who are not responsible and those who are. Kate's father neglects his responsibility when he allows his stress to close him off from his family and the world. Says Kate: "My father had left too, but in a more subtle and insidious way. . . . he had simply retreated into some silent and inaccessible world." Likewise, Stephen retreats into his own world by ignoring responsibilities like work and by constantly consuming tranquilizers to escape from reality. "He collected a welfare check every month, took Valium every few hours, and lived in a state of precarious calm." Even Kate's friend, Emmy, abandons any responsibilities she has, taking off for the whole summer to follow the Grateful Dead on tour. She tries to get Kate to go with her, but Kate has responsibilities she feels she cannot ignore. "Come with us, she had urged, but I was working in a convenience store, saving my money for school, and it didn't seem like a good time to leave my mother." Kate's mother is also very responsible, working long hours to support herself and Kate

in the absence of Kate's father: "My mother had a job as a secretary and decorated cakes on the side." At the end of the story, as Kate realizes that she has conquered her fear of going mad, she becomes angry with her father for neglecting his responsibilities. Says Kate: "My father sat, still and silent in his white room, and I was angry with him for asking so much from us."

Freedom

Kate's fear of madness and dedication to her responsibilities cause her to seek ways of finding freedom, both physically and mentally. Unlike Emmy, "who had fled, with her boyfriend and 350 tie-dyed T-shirts, to follow the Grateful Dead on tour," Kate is unable to leave town. Instead, Kate finds other ways to escape the pressure of her responsibilities. On a daily basis, she hangs out at Mickey's Tavern with a group of artists and slackers, people who live free lives that are entirely different from her own. "They were young, most of them, but already disenfranchised, known to be odd or mildly crazy or even faintly dangerous." Stephen also introduces her to Valium, which becomes another method of escaping the real world. Says Kate: " I liked the way the edges of things grew undefined, so I was able to rise from my own body, calmly and with perfect grace." The ultimate escape, however, comes in the form of skydiving, which Kate has always observed dreamily from her backyard. When Kate hears about the pool bet, where the loser has to go skydiving, Kate says, "I've always wanted to do that." Although she is afraid, she goes through with the skydive, which ends up being the ultimate freeing experience for her.

Style

Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure or speech in which one word, used to mean something literally, is used to figuratively represent another thing in order to create a new understanding in the mind of (in this case) the reader. This technique is used to give a work of literature more impact, by forcing readers to think about a concept in a different way. In the story, Kate equates falling with madness. Both Kate and readers realize that falling and madness are two separate ideas, but the way Kate describes it, a reader can easily see that the sensation of falling is an appropriate way to figuratively describe madness. Says Kate in the beginning: "*Take care* I said each time we left my father. . . . And I listened to my own words; I took care, too. That summer, I was afraid of falling." Kate starts to hang out more with Stephen after her father goes into the hospital, because she thinks that, with his mental instability, he can help Kate make sense of what it means to be falling. Says Kate, "I knew that Stephen understood the suspended world between sanity and madness, that he lived his life inside it." The metaphor of falling is underscored even more by Kate's decision to go skydiving. By directly confronting her fear of falling, she conquers her fears of mental illness. In fact, at the end, Kate objects to Stephen's use of the word "falling," when he describes how Kate "disappeared so fast" out of the plane. Says Kate: "It was the word he kept using, and it was the wrong one. . . . 'That's the funny thing,' I told him. 'There was no sense of descent. It was more like floating." With this change in her perception, Kate is able to abandon the metaphor of falling as madness, and find peace.

Setting

The story takes place in a small town, most likely in upstate New York, where Edwards grew up. Kate initially feels trapped, and says as much when she talks about her friend Emmy, who leaves town to follow the Grateful Dead on tour. Says Kate: "I was fiercely envious, caught in that small town while the planes traced their daily paths to places I was losing hope of ever seeing." However, after her skydiving and the incident with Stephen, she realizes that she is not going to go mad in the small town, and has new confidence in herself. The fact that the small town is near an airplane hangar that offers skydiving lessons is also important. The story would not work in the same way if it were not for this setting.

Suspense

Edwards uses words and pacing that create tension and multiple surprises at the end. When Kate and Stephen enter the airplane hangar to take their skydiving lessons, the first thing they see is "a pile of stretchers stacked neatly against the wall" and a "hand-lettered sign that warned CASH ONLY." These ominous signs of past injuries and

danger start to build tension, since readers begin to wonder if Kate and Stephen are going to make it safely to the ground. This feeling grows as Howard explains how some people in the past have lost track of time, "panicked and pulled their reserve chute even as the first one opened, tangling them both and falling to their deaths." Thus, it becomes suspenseful when Kate jumps from the plane, because she loses track of time. Says Kate: "Three seconds yet? I couldn't tell. My parachute didn't open but the earth came no closer, and I kept my eyes open, too terrified to scream."

Kate lands safely, and Stephen soon comes up to her, so the reader may think that everything has gone well for both. However, Kate soon finds out from Howard that Stephen did not jump. Says Howard: "Best in the class, and he didn't even make it to the door." When Kate confronts Stephen about this and he suddenly turns dangerous, one wonders once again if anything bad is going to happen to Kate. "Stephen's breathing was loud against the rising sound of crickets. He looked at me, eyes glittering, and smiled his crazy smile." Stephen tells her that "I could do anything I wanted to you," as his hand is on her neck. One wonders if Stephen is going to choke Kate, or something worse. However, all of these issues are resolved by the story's end, when Kate arrives safely home, reconciles with her mother, and enjoys a quiet moment to herself.

Historical Context

The original version of the story was written when Edwards was in college in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, since she revised the story several times before it was published in the early 1990s, the story's time period is a little ambiguous. In fact, several aspects of the story—including the mention of personal computers—could place the story anywhere in this time period. However, two aspects of the story—the recession that causes Kate's dad to lose his consulting business and the reference to Stephen buying a computer to play chess—seem to indicate that Edwards meant the story to take place in the early 1980s.

In 1980, President Carter signed the controversial Chrysler Loan Guarantee bill, a $1.5 billion relief package to the Chrysler Corporation, which had experienced a $207 million loss in one quarter in the previous year. This unprecedented government bailout was just one of the many signs that the strong industrial base of the United States was weakening. During the 1980s, Many American industries experienced declining profits. The United States had once sold goods to the rest of the world. However, with technology in areas like Japan and Germany rivaling that of the United States, America began to import more goods than it exported. This led to many layoffs and cutbacks in industries, which only increased as some American manufacturers tried to cut costs by opening factories overseas, where they could hire cheaper labor. As businesses downsized or failed, the northeast and northcentral states—which were saturated with industrial factories—were hardest hit by recessions. As a result, during the 1980s, America's population shifted from these areas to southern and western regions, where the economy was better.

While southern states offered jobs in many industries such as oil production, the new American west was becoming the center for computer technology. Although computers had been around in various forms for decades, they were usually so expensive and bulky that only government or corporate clients could afford and house them. The first microcomputer —known more commonly as a personal computer—was the Altair, which debuted in 1974. However, since customers had to assemble the computer from a kit, it had limited appeal for anyone other than computer hobbyists and other technologically savvy consumers. Over the next decade, a number of developments from different companies—mainly Apple Computer, International Business Machines (IBM), and Microsoft Corporation —helped to launch the personal computer revolution.

In 1977, Apple Computer, Inc., introduced the Apple II, an inexpensive personal computer which was targeted to individuals, small businesses, schools, and others with limited budgets. Since the Apple II also ran VisiCalc—the first computerized accounting, or spreadsheet, program—it quickly gained popularity. As computer manufacturers began to realize the importance of software programs in making a computer useful for the average person, there were more developments. The IBM Personal Computer, introduced in 1982 and known commonly as the IBM PC, was not much faster than the Apple II or other personal computers, but it had several times more memory for running

programs. One of these programs, MS-DOS, produced by the Microsoft Corporation, became the standard operating system on IBM PCs.

IBM quickly lost control of its product, however, as Compaq and other computer companies began to make PC clones, which were compatible with IBM PCs, and which also ran MS DOS. This helped to give many companies a foothold in the computer industry, and greatly increased the number of computers available to consumers. However, it was the introduction in 1984 of Apple's Macintosh computer—featuring the first graphical user interface (GUI) and the first computer mouse—that helped to make computers popular and accessible in the average home. As computers became more useful and more powerful, software developers realized that games, such as computer chess, were a huge market, especially when targeted to younger people with a lot of free time on their hands, like Stephen in the story.

Critical Overview

"The Way It Felt to Be Falling" was included in Edwards's collection, *The Secrets of a Fire King,* which was published in 1997. This collection received excellent reviews overall. In her review of the book for the *New York Times,* Nina Sonenberg notes that it is an "accomplished first collection," and calls Edwards's stories "confident." Sonenberg also notes that the book captures "an impressive swath of the world in the book as a whole." Other reviewers also comment on the diversity of locations and cultures in the book. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer claims that the stories are "noteworthy for the range of their settings—America, Europe, Asia—and for the scope of the author's impressive imagination." Likewise, Tom Wilhelmus notes in his review for the *Hudson Review* that the book is "the work of a thoughtful writer with an elegant style and a similarly wide range of cultural, artistic, and intellectual interests." Still, despite this diversity, the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes that "the narrative tone remains strangely constant throughout the stories, no matter the setting or the speaker."

The reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes, on a more negative tone, that the stories are marked by "heavy dramatic ironies and polemic," or controversy, and calls Edwards "a talented writer still in search of subjects worthy of her craft." However, this reviewer also notes that Edwards writes with a "clean, fluent style."

Reviewers also comment on the quality of "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," in particular. Sonenberg notes that the stories that "stay close to home," like "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," feature characters who "find new wonder—and terror—in the familiar." In addition, in her review for *Library Journal,* Ellen R. Cohen notes that many of the stories "feature strong, pragmatic women as protagonists, usually motivated by love in its broadest sense." Cohen cites the specific case of Kate in "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," saying that Kate "finds hidden strength after skydiving with an unstable boyfriend." Likewise, Wilhelmus notes that the story "uses skydiving as a metaphor for learning self-sufficiency and freedom in a world in which no values are certain." Finally, the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer analyzes the story in context of the other stories in the collection, noting "Edwards uses the elements (fire, air, water, earth and metal) symbolically to ground her stories as characters move through the various landscapes she has created."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Edwards's exploration of perception in "The Way It Felt to Be Falling."

"The Way It Felt to Be Falling" is an extremely visual story. Right from the first sentence of the story, Edwards uses language that underscores the idea of perception. Says Kate, the narrator: "The summer I turned nineteen I used to lie in the backyard and watch the planes fly overhead, leaving their clean plumes of jet-stream in a pattern against the sky." Kate is a first-person narrator, meaning that the reader experiences the story from Kate's point of view, seeing the world of the story through her eyes alone. As Kate progresses through the story, the reader gets to know Kate's thoughts about real and perceived reality. Edwards uses the idea of perception to underscore her main theme of fear, by exploring Kate's own fears of madness, her references to colors, and the revelations she has while skydiving.

Kate's greatest fear during the story is that she is going to descend into madness, as her father has. Kate remembers the day that her father was taken away to the hospital. She goes to give him a glass of water, but his eyes are closed. "When he opened his eyes, they were clear and brown, as blank and smooth as the glass in my hand." Kate equates the blankness of her father's eyes with madness, which affects her perceptions about her own mental condition. Several times that summer, she tries to determine whether or not she is going mad, by examining her eyes. "I'd find myself standing in front of mirrors with my heart pounding, searching my eyes for a glimmer of madness." Stephen is the other character in the story who is mentally unstable. As a result, Kate finds herself drawn to him, because she thinks he can help her understand what it is like to be mad. When she describes him, she once again refers to his eyes in conjunction with a delusional madness. As Kate notes, Stephen had "eyes that seemed to look out on some other, more compelling, world." However, although she has romantic notions of Stephen and his mental condition, when he turns violent in the end, her perception of his eyes and mental state suddenly changes: "Stephen's eyes, green, were wild and glittering."

The specific description of Stephen's green eyes is one of many uses of color in the story. Edwards uses colors symbolically in several places to evoke vivid images. In the beginning of the story, Kate notes that even though it is only July, the "grass had a brown fringe and leaves were already falling." For Kate, the brown grass symbolizes the impending death of summer. Her summer has started out badly, since her dad has gone into the hospital, an event that has also sparked Kate's fear of madness. As a result, she can only see the negative implications of the color brown, which are under-scored even further when she describes her father's "brown" eyes. Likewise, when Emmy sends Kate postcards of the places she has visited, Kate sees " a sky aching blue over the ocean" in one of them. The color blue is given a negative association in Kate's mind at this point, since it evokes the longing and disappointment she feels regarding her being unable to accompany her friends on the Grateful Dead tour. The blue sky in the

postcard, like the sky over Kate's backyard—where she watches skydivers and wishes she were up there—represents an escape from Kate's reality. However, in the beginning of the story, she thinks that she will never get to experience the blue sky for herself.

Blue is also the color of Stephen's "plastic bottle of Valium," and the color of the pills themselves. This is appropriate, since Valium represents another form of escape for Kate. She has tried it before, and appreciates the feeling it gives her. Says Kate: "I liked the way the edges of things grew undefined, so I was able to rise from my own body, calmly and with perfect grace." By taking Valium, Kate has learned that she can alter her perception, escaping from her own reality into someplace where she does not have to worry about her father, her job, or the fact that she is stuck in a small town. In fact, when Kate describes her Valium experience, she says that she likes how "the blue pills slid down [her] throat, dissolving anxiety."

One example in particular illustrates the power of color to evoke ideas. Kate's mother decorates cakes, and is constantly called upon to follow vivid color schemes for the wedding cakes. "This bride's colors were green and lavender, and my mother had dyed the frosting to match swatches from the dresses." Her mother does not understand this obsessive need for color, asking Kate, "Whatever happened to simple white?" Even though her mother's wedding pictures are not in color, Kate knows "that it had been simple, small and elegant, the bridesmaids wearing the palest shade of peach." The use of many colors on the wedding cakes symbolizes the complexity and stress of modern weddings, as opposed to earlier days, when Kate's mother remembers colors—and weddings—as simpler.

The stress of modern weddings is underscored further by Kate's observation about her mother's clients: "That summer, brides and their mothers called us on a regular basis, their voices laced with panic." However, later in the story, Kate implies that this stress is sometimes unwarranted. She thinks about all of the hours her mother "has spent on wedding cakes, building confections as fragile and unsubstantial as the dreams that demanded them." With this statement, Edwards is once again drawing attention to the main theme of the story—fear. The brides are afraid that their weddings will not be perfect, and even after the wedding they will most likely live in fear. Because of this, they may not have the courage to follow their dreams, whether that means staying married or something else, which is why Kate refers to their dreams as "fragile" and "unsubstantial." For these people, the obsessive use of colors masks their own insecurities and fears, whereas Kate's mother, who is described repeatedly as strong, does not need all of these colors; she prefers white, which is more simple.

The greatest exploration of perception comes during Kate's skydiving experience. Throughout the summer, Kate equates madness with the idea of falling. For this reason, even though she is excited about finally being able to go skydiving, she is also terrified of what it will feel like to literally fall through the sky. Kate overcomes this fear and jumps out of the plane. During her freefall, Kate is amazed to find out that her perceptions of falling were wrong. "I knew I must be falling, but the earth stayed the same abstract distance away." Kate loses all sense of time, and is terrified. After her parachute opens, she calms down and looks around at the landscape below her. In this position, far above

the ground and apart from the daily struggles of her life, she begins to perceive things differently. "All summer I had felt myself slipping in the quick rush of the world, but here, in clear and steady descent, nothing seemed to move. It was knowledge to marvel at." By conquering her fears of falling, Kate feels a new confidence, and is ready to conquer her fears of madness.

The last incident that changes her perception is the threat from Stephen. After Stephen removes his hand from her neck, Kate looks at him and has her final revelation. "Watching him I thought of my father, all his stubborn silence, all the uneasiness and pain. It made me angry suddenly, a sharp illumination that ended a summer's panic." From this point on until the end of the story, Kate shows that she is a changed woman. She breaks up with Stephen, realizing that he is not the key to helping her with her fears of madness—he is afraid, just like everybody else. Instead, Kate achieves self-sufficiency, and realizes that she will not be beaten by her fears, as her father and Stephen have been. Says Kate: "Whatever had plunged my father into silence, and Stephen into violence, wouldn't find me. I had a bandaged ankle, but the rest of me was whole and strong." Throughout the story, Kate has been in a constant battle with her fears, like many other characters in the story. However, by surviving the trial of skydiving, she has conquered her fears and has a new perception of life.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Trudell is a freelance writer with a bachelor's degree in English literature. In the following essay, Trudell analyzes the feminism and ironic style in Edwards's short story.

The thematic argument of "The Way It Felt to Be Falling" is best understood as a formula for gaining emotional maturity. And, in its simplest reading, the story seems to achieve this goal in a straightforward manner. Kate escapes potential violence, avoids becoming "crazy," and regains a bond with her mother by emerging from a sense of falling. The story seems to reinforce the basic assumption that the crisis of descent is resolved into a stable and safe space within the home.

Before accepting that shiftless complacency is the goal of the story's subtext, it is important to examine Edwards's imagery surrounding the themes of descent, stability, and control. At first glance, the reader takes for granted the cliché connotation of falling out of control and, like Kate, assumes that a rapid movement through the sky is more dangerous than staying lazily in place. On closer examination, however, it is clear that Edwards challenges this assumption until her story, in a number of senses, turns upside down.

Beginning with the introductory images of objects in the sky—"clean plumes of jet-stream" and "discarded paper wings"—Edwards carefully reverses the figurative connotations of descent. "Paper wings," "clean plumes," and a flourishing, descending recession are paradoxical and imply their opposites: that descent is flourishing, clean, and controlled. Indeed, the primary image of the story, that of skydiving in a frightening freefall at the point where the reader might expect Kate to have the least control and emotional stability, is ironically the turning point of her crisis, a moment of silent autonomy over the vast space below: "All summer I had felt myself slipping in the quick rush of the world, but here, in clear and steady descent, nothing seemed to move."

This is a vastly different understanding of her world than ten pages earlier: "I knew: madness was a graceless descent, the abyss beneath a careless step." Here, falling is the worst and most dangerous reaction to Kate's world, although she is certainly fascinated and seduced by a "graceless descent." This is why she is attracted to Stephen; he is supposed to be out of control, master of the "free fall"—just dangerous enough to be exciting, but not too scary.

The reader might ask, then, if descent is actually a good thing, how Kate could have any control or emotional maturity when it comes to the most false, fearful, and dangerous character in the text. Again, it is necessary to look more closely at the ironic paradigm that Edwards has set up. By the time the reader comes to the skydiving scene, Edwards has developed a distinction between actual descent and false, "graceless" falling. It is a distinction of control. Edwards makes the reader question what actually constitutes descent, and what is merely a superficial seduction that does not move at all. Stephen's version of falling, represented by Valium pills that "slid down [his] throat, dissolving anxiety," is entirely different from the control Kate gains when she jumps from the plane.

Imagery of the pale Stephen "able to rise from my own body" proves that he is dangerous in a completely different sense, as Kate will soon find out. The real danger, the "falling" that is not falling at all, is losing control to Stephen's seductive series of lies about himself.

Kate realizes what it really means to fall only when she has jumped out of the plane. It is important that, immediately after her realization, Kate "tugged at the steering toggles." This emblem of control signals that, with her understanding, she has achieved the assertiveness necessary for her final confrontation with Stephen. Skydiving uncovers the myth that letting go and moving oneself forward is an action out of Kate's control, and it also uncovers the facade around Stephen. He could not jump out of the plane, not because he was scared or incapable (he was the "best in the class," after all), but because he is the stationary character without control over his actions. When Stephen says, "The free fall is my natural state of mind," it is another example of the gradually unraveling irony that makes the truth of Kate's world clear both to her and to the reader; Stephen is not falling, or moving, at all. This is made more explicit when Stephen shows his ugly and potentially brutal side during the drive home. The scariest moment in the story is not the rapid and dangerous swerving on the country lane, but the point when he stops the car and Kate cannot move because of her crutches. This stability, underscored by the opposite image to descent, "the rising sound of the crickets," is the thematic danger for Kate.

Kate's parents also, although perhaps less obviously, fit this paradigm of autonomous falling. Her father is introduced as having "retreated into some silent and inaccessible world" instead of following the economic descent into the lower states, and he is completely unresponsive and motionless during the visits of his wife and daughter. Like Stephen, except in his capacity for violent betrayal, Kate's father is characterized by stability and false security. Kate eventually learns that madness like her father's is not "the abyss beneath a careless step"; it is the product, in a sense, of being too afraid to fall out of an airplane.

Her mother, on the other hand, undergoes a similar subplot of emotional descent and control to Kate, beginning with the collapse of her cake. It is no coincidence that this is a wedding cake; the subtle struggle and stress of Kate's mother is an attempt to regain control of her life after the collapse of her marriage. In this sense, Kate's mother emerges as an important marker, if much less explicit to the reader, for the process of attaining emotional maturity. Like her mother, Kate learns to enjoy what has collapsed by eating it. This common search for control and happiness in a new kind of life is what allows for the mother-daughter bond in the closing moments of the story.

Edwards, then, does prescribe a formula for maturity and individual emergence from a potentially violent stability. But the power associated with female control in the story suggests that the reader should look closer still into Edwards's formula to understand its full resonance. Her presentation of an individual quest for control parallels, and is actually dependent on, a wider feminist social struggle.

In the last triumphant and even angelic image, Kate is able to shed her clothes and look outside at the clear starry sky. This is a moment of female control over the domestic space, which Kate's mother underscores by taking a bath (cleansing herself) at the same moment. Edwards's ironic imagery, which inverts the typical associations with negative uncontrollable descent, becomes particularly appropriate when the outward and autonomous triumph occurs indoors. Kate has a bandaged ankle (which connotes the damaged heel of the archetypical masculine hero, Achilles), but she is "whole and strong." She will be able to move outside of the safe domestic space and assert herself, but (as is the case with many feminist texts) this process begins with control over the home.

Edwards is careful to emphasize that this moment is a specifically feminine triumph and distances Kate from the two male characters: "Whatever had plunged my father into silence, and Stephen into violence, wouldn't find me." In its greater implications, "The Way It Felt to Be Falling" is the story of a reversal of male power. To underscore this inversion, Edwards shows Kate in a number of what might be masculine situations in a sexist society: drinking beer, playing pool, jumping out of an airplane, and most importantly, telling Stephen off. It is important that Kate and her mother earn money (unlike Stephen and Kate's father, who are financially useless).

The author associates her feminist vision with actual descent, dismissing a shiftless, dangerous, and decaying male world that only pretends to be falling. With her political subtext, Edwards is interested throughout the story in turning a number of social preconceptions upside down. Kate matures by developing an assertive and broad control over her environment, a genuine control associated with female empowerment, because a more localized version or an emergence dependent on a male character would betray Edwards's greater political understanding. When she remembers "the way it felt to be falling," Kate refers to the process of being betrayed and let down by the men in her life. She does not "remember" the new brand of falling she is experiencing; this is very much in the present and is better described as moving on with self-reliance.

Indeed, the worldview of "The Way It Felt to Be Falling" requires a complete independence from male control. Edwards is so careful to invert imagery and provide an ironic overturning of the male structure because the plot of the story allows no other option. Its feminism is not merely a mild overtone; Edwards is interested in the ways in which an individual struggle interacts with complacent social norms. In this world, men are not only shallow and superficial; they are weak, dangerous, and certainly not a force on which females can or should depend. The story, however much it may seem harmless or easy to fit within a framework of a growing-up tale, has an intense political subtext. In Edwards's formula, only by a greater effort towards social change will an individual female quest for emotional maturity be convincing.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

On January 20, 1999, the book club of Kentucky Educational Television (KET), an affiliate of the Public Broadcasting System, interviewed Edwards in her home about *Secrets of a Fire King*. KET's book club Web page—located online at http://www.ket.org/content/bookclub/ books/1999_feb (last accessed January 2003)—hosts a copy of the interview transcript. This page also links to other information about Edwards, including a transcript of a talk she gave to her alma mater, Colgate University, right before *Secrets of a Fire King* was published. This transcript, which can be accessed directly at http://www.colgate.edu/scene/may1997/edwards. html (last accessed January 2003), also features specific discussion about "The Way It Felt to Be Falling."

Topics for Further Study

In "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," Kate's father succumbs to a form of madness when he loses his consulting business during a recession. Using the clues in the story, research the specific condition that Kate's father most likely has, then put yourself in his place. Write a one-page description of what a typical day is like living with this mental condition, using your research to support your ideas.

Research the Grateful Dead phenomenon that swept through the United States in the late twentieth century. Imagine that you are making a contribution to a time capsule, in which you record what it was like to be a "Deadhead"—a devoted fan who followed the Grateful Dead on their concert tours. Use a combination of words, photos, illustrations, or other printed media in your description.

Investigate and discuss the current psychological theories behind what drives certain people to be thrill-seekers. Choose another extreme sport besides skydiving, and write a one-page fact sheet on the sport, including information on its history, equipment, rules, competitions, and demographic statistics on people who participate in it.

In the story, Kate works to save money for college, while many of her friends prefer to spend time having fun. Research the current statistics that show how most students paid for college in the 1980s as well as how most students pay for college today. Plot your findings on a chart or graph, and discuss the similarities and differences between the two time periods.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: As personal computers increase in technology and drop in price, they become commonplace in many homes. Application memory, processing speed, and data storage space become three features that are used to sell computers.

Today: As the Internet offers more options—such as email, online research, shopping, reservations, and e-cards—more people start to use it as part of their daily lives. Connection speed and bandwidth become two features that are used to sell Internet services.

1980s: In certain, industry-rich areas of the United States, recessions occur as America shifts from an export-based to an import-based economy. Manufacturing companies make many cutbacks and layoffs, affecting many workers and related industries.

Today: Many people from all walks of life are affected when the information technology boom of the 1990s finally busts, affecting retirement plans and stock portfolios. The massive fall of stock prices creates recessions in several areas of the United States, and workers in many industries are affected by cutbacks and layoffs. The discovery of several corporate financial scandals only makes the stock market more unstable.

1980s: With their limited memory and storage capacity, early computers are only able to handle simple games like chess. However, continuous improvements in computer and gaming technology rapidly improve the quality and complexity of computer games.

Today: Computers offer three-dimensional, highly realistic games, many of which have plots and characters. Computer games become so popular that their storylines are sometimes adapted into feature films.

What Do I Read Next?

In Edwards's story, Stephen says that he is going to skydive because his personal integrity is at stake, and then he backs out at the last minute, although he lies about his jump. In Stephen Carter's *Integrity* (1996), the author poses questions about the degradation of personal integrity in society and offers an eight-principle program for a return to traditional ethics, especially in democracies like the United States.

John Forbes Nash Jr. is a schizophrenic who is also a Nobel Prize-winning economist. In *A Beautiful Mind: A Biography of John Forbes Nash, Jr.* (1998), Sylvia Nasar gives a thorough overview of Nash's life in mathematics and madness. The book was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film in 2001.

Shine, another biographical film that earned several Oscars, details the story of David Helfgott, a musical prodigy who is driven into a mental breakdown as a child by his father and music teachers. As an adult, David returns to the music scene, to popular acclaim. The 1996 film, which was written by Jan Sardi, was published in script form as *Shine: The Screenplay* in 1997.

Tom Wolfe, known for decades as a journalist, inspired controversy with his first novel, The Bonfire of the Vanities (1987), which uses realism and satire to try to capture the feel of life in 1980s America—particularly New York. In the story, a high-powered investment banker hits a black man while driving through the Bronx. The resulting chain of events takes the reader through a full tour of modern city life in the 1980s.

Further Study

Breggin, Peter R., *Toxic Psychiatry: Why Therapy, Empathy, and Love Must Replace the Drugs, Electroshock, and Biochemical Theories of the New Psychiatry,* St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Breggin, a psychiatrist, argues with the popular view that drugs are the best solution for many mental disorders, which are increasingly thought to be caused by chemical imbalances. He advocates alternate, drug-free methods for assisting the mentally ill. He also challenges schoolteachers, parents, and others who seek chemical solutions to behavior problems.

Brick, John, and Carlton K. Erickson, *Drugs, the Brain, and Behavior: The Pharmacology of Abuse and Dependence,* Haworth Press, 1998.

This book gives an overview of the relationship between the human brain and behavior, with a special emphasis on the effects of mood-altering substances.

Derosalia, John, *Mental Training for Skydiving and Life,* SkyMind Publishers, 2001.

This book examines the type of mental training that helps skydivers overcome stressful situations. Using this idea as a starting point, the book then applies this type of training to life, showing readers how to overcome weaknesses and fears in general.

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide,* Knopf, 1999.

In the story, Kate talks about her friend, Stephen, who once tried to kill himself. In this book, Jamison, a professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and a person who has attempted suicide, explores the psychology of suicide. The book focuses mainly on people younger than forty and discusses how suicide can be prevented.

Johnson, Erik, *Understanding the Skydive,* Lamplighter Press, 2002.

Johnson, a skydive instructor, provides a thorough overview of the sport for both novices and experienced skydivers. The book examines the various techniques used in skydiving, risks, weather conditions, competitions, skydiving etiquette, and the psychology of skydiving.

Kallen, Stuart A., ed., *The 1980s,* Cultural History of the United States through the Decades series, Lucent Books, 1999.

Each book in this series examines a specific decade through theme-based chapters, which place events in a cultural context for students. Among other topics, the 1980s volume discusses the Reagan presidency, the fall of Communism, the rise of Wall Street and corporate power, and the computer revolution. The book also includes a bibliography and a detailed chronology of events.

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Cohen, Ellen R., Review of *The Secrets of a Fire King,* in Library Journal, Vol. 122, No. 7, April 15, 1997, p. 122.

Edwards, Kim, "The Way It Felt to Be Falling," in *Secrets of a Fire King,* Picador USA, 1998, pp. 93-113.

Review of *The Secrets of a Fire King, in Kirkus Reviews,* February 15, 1997.

Review of *The Secrets of a Fire King, in Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 244, No. 8, February 24, 1997, pp. 64-65.

Sonenberg, Nina, "Surprises and Consolation Prizes," in the *New York Times* Book Review, April 20, 1997, p. 20.

Wilhelmus, Tom, Review of *The Secrets of a Fire King,* in the Hudson Review, Vol. 50, No. 3, Autumn 1997, p. 527.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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