

Before the Fall Discussion Questions

by Noah Hawley

Author Bio: (from *Fantastic Fiction*, Wikipedia, & LitLovers)

Noah Hawley is an American film and television producer, screenwriter, composer, and author. He wrote and produced the television series *Bones*, *Fargo*, and *Legion*, as well as a few others.



Noah began writing as a release from his job at the Legal Aid Society where he worked with abused and neglected juveniles. In San Francisco he met critically acclaimed author Po Bronson who invited him to join “The San Francisco Writers’ Grotto” an organization where writers, filmmakers and storytellers practice their craft.

Hawley resides in Austin, Texas, and Los Angeles, California, with his wife Kyle Hawley and their two children.

Characters:

- **Scott Burroughs** – (mid 40s) – Painter. Former alcoholic. This is his first flight on a private plane. Idolized Jack LaLanne as a child. Likes swimming. Sister drowned in Lake Michigan at 16.
- **David Bateman** – (56) – Millionaire who runs a media/TV news outlet, ALC. Formerly was a political consultant. Married to Maggie. Has two children, Rachel and JJ.
- **JJ Bateman** – (4) – David and Maggie’s son.
- **Maggie Bateman** – (36) – David’s wife. Former preschool teacher. Has two children, Rachel and JJ.
- **Rachel Bateman** – (9) – David and Maggie’s daughter. Was kidnapped as a child and her nanny, Frankie, was killed. Has an overall serious, no nonsense attitude.
- **Gil Baruch** – (48) – Personal security guard for the Bateman family. Israeli expat. Been with Bateman family for 4 years.
- **Charlie Busch** – (30) – The plane’s first officer. Nephew of a senator. Recently broke up with Emma Lightner.
- **Ben Kipling** – (52) – Partner in a Wall Street Firm. Under federal investigation for laundering money for sanctioned countries/governments. Has a wife Sarah (50) and a daughter, Jenny.
- **Emma Lightner** – (25) – The plane’s flight attendant. Recently broke up with Charlie Busch.
- **James Melody** – (50) – The plane’s pilot.
- **Bill Cunningham** – Loudmouth news anchor at Bateman’s ALC who says he is the “Voice of Common Sense”. Possibly in trouble for wiretapping.
- **Eleanor Greenway** – (34) – Maggie’s little sister. Newly married to Doug, an aspiring writer and alcoholic. Becomes JJ’s guardian.
- **Jack LaLanne** – One of the first exercise gurus. Had TV specials on how to exercise. Scott’s childhood hero.

- **Leslie (Layla) Mueller** – (29) – Heiress interested in paintings and art.
- **Namor** – Cunningham’s phone hacker friend.
- **Agent Jordan Bewes** – Treasury Department Agent investigating Kipling.
- **Gus Franklin** – (51) – Lead NTSB investigator. Engineer at heart.
- **Agent Hex** – Office of Foreign Asset Control. Investigating Kipling.
- **Agent O’Brien** – FBI agent looking into plane crash due to possible link to terrorists.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. What do you think the title, “Before the Fall” means/signifies?
3. This book vignettes each passenger’s life in between chapters dealing with the present and the fallout of the plane crash. Why do you think the story was written that way? How do those stories add to your understanding of the story?
4. Jack LaLanne figures incidentally in this novel. Do you remember him from your youth? How do his philosophy and actions figure into the plot of this story?
5. Scott Burroughs, our reluctant protagonist, saves himself and 4 year old. What motivated him to such a heroic act?
6. The first indication for Scott that his heroism was going to be a "messy situation" was his meeting with Gus Franklin of the NTSB, who asked him, "Were you sleeping with Mrs. Bateman?" What would have been your reaction if you were Scott? How did his artwork figure into this story? Do you agree, "Once you become a hero, you lose your privacy"?
7. The often sensationalist nature of the media’s news culture can drastically impact the lives of people who survive exceptional situations, like a plane crash. How do you think the news affects the participants/victims? How long does this attention last? Does this book make you rethink what you see on television every day?
8. David Bateman’s philosophy of a news network was, "All other networks react to the news. We’re going to Make the News." He meant their network would "shape the events of the day to fit the message of their network." Do you think this is true of news stations today? If yes, what effect has it had on our culture?
9. Bill Cunningham is a reporter-commentator on ALC. How does he impact the news and the story line? Was he "the raging voice of common sense, the sane man in an insane world?" Do you believe it is possible to be an impartial newsperson? And what did Cunningham do to collect news that was illegal? Does this remind you of any real news story?
10. What kind of business was Ben Kipling involved in? How might this have affected the future of the flight?
11. How is the concept of heroism explored throughout the book? What separates heroes from other people? How does an ordinary person become a hero?

12. Hawley says that he likes putting ordinary people/characters in situations where they are “over their heads” and seeing if they are up for it. How do you feel about that? Does succeeding make them heroes? Superheroes?
13. In what ways is this novel a traditional thriller? In what ways does it bend the conventions of the thriller genre?
14. Scott “too is striving for truth. Or maybe he alone” (p 356). Much of the book revolves around a quest for the truth. What truths are debated or searched for during the course of this book? Do you believe that truth is objective? Do you agree with Bill Cunningham that “people have a right to know” the truth (388)?
15. What tips the NTSB and the FBI that the plane had suffered neither mechanical nor pilot error?
16. Were you surprised by the cause of the plane crash?
17. When you learned who caused the plane crash, how did it make you feel? Is there a way to protect ourselves from people like this?
18. What emotion did you feel about the prosaic nature of the plane’s crash? Did you desire a more scandalous ending? Does your reaction say something about the nature of the expectation of plots and conspiracies in our reading and culture?
19. Do you think Scott knew what happened to the plane all along and just wasn't talking about it or did it just come to him as an epiphany during the TV interview?
20. In many ways, Scott has been a passive observer rather than an active participant in life. In what ways does the crash change how he relates to the world around him and his sense of self?
21. How has experiencing the crash and subsequent investigations changed or altered Scott? What do you imagine or hope for Scott’s future?
22. Noah Hawley is well-known for his work in film and television. In what scenes do you see this reflected in the book?
23. Were you satisfied with the ending of the story? Why or why not?
24. Hawley has written four other novels and a nonfiction book. Will you read any of them?

References:

- Book of the Month – <https://www.bookofthemoth.com/discussions/product/before-the-fall-124>
- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/h/noah-hawley/>
- GoodReads – https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/40670008-before-the-fall?from_search=true
- Lit Lovers – <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/10672-before-the-fall-hawley?start=3>
- Novelist – <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=851b6b22-78e4-4543-a15c-a9721ea24b4e%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#UI=10488636&db=neh>
- Reading Group Guides – <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/before-the-fall/guide>
- Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah_Hawley

Noah Hawley Books

- [A Conspiracy of Tall Men \(1998\)](#)
- [Other People's Weddings \(2004\)](#)
- [The Punch \(2008\)](#)
- [The Good Father \(2012\)](#)
- [Before the Fall \(2016\)](#)

Nonfiction

- [Fargo \(2019\)](#)
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If you liked [Before the Fall](#), try...

- [Countdown to Mecca](#) – Michael Savage
- [The Harder they Come](#) – Coraghessan Boyle
- [Numero Zero](#) – Umberto Eco
- [Ghost Shift](#) – John Gaper
- [You Will Pay](#) – Lisa Jackson