



A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

## Before the Fall (Hawley)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)

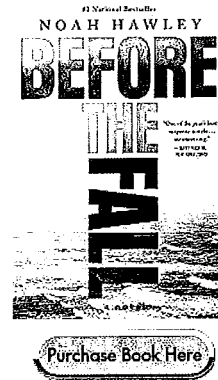
### *Before the Fall*

Noah Hawley, 2016

Grand Central Publishing

400 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781455561780



### Summary

*Winner, 2017 Edgar Award*

On a foggy summer night, eleven people—ten privileged, one down-on-his-luck painter—depart Martha's Vineyard on a private jet headed for New York. Sixteen minutes later, the unthinkable happens: the plane plunges into the ocean.

The only survivors are Scott Burroughs—the painter—and a four-year-old boy, who is now the last remaining member of an immensely wealthy and powerful media mogul's family.

With chapters weaving between the aftermath of the crash and the backstories of the passengers and crew members—including a Wall Street titan and his wife, a Texan-born party boy just in from London, a young woman questioning her path in life, and a career pilot—the mystery surrounding the tragedy heightens.

As the passengers' intrigues unravel, odd coincidences point to a conspiracy. Was it merely by dumb chance that so many influential people perished? Or was something far more sinister at work?

Events soon threaten to spiral out of control in an escalating storm of media outrage and accusations. And while Scott struggles to cope with fame that borders on notoriety, the authorities scramble to salvage the truth from the wreckage.

Amid pulse-quickenning suspense, the fragile relationship between Scott and the young boy glows at the heart of this stunning novel, raising questions of fate, human nature, and the inextricable ties that bind us together. *(From the publisher.)*

### Author Bio

- Birth—1967
- Where—New York City, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., Sarah Lawrence College
- Awards—Edgar Award

chapters about each passenger and revelations about why each could have been a target...Mr. Hawley has made it very, very easy to race through his book in a state of breathless suspense.

**Janet Maslin - New York Times**

Hype and advertising and celebrity can certainly get a reader to pick up a novel and read the first few pages. After that, it's all about the words and the characters, the heart and soul of the story. I had no doubt that Hawley could write, that he could create amazing characters, that he had an ear for dialogue and a unique point of view—but could he write a successful novel? The answer, as readers of his four earlier books probably know already, is a resounding yes...Noah Hawley really knows how to keep a reader turning the pages, but there's more to the novel than suspense. On one hand, *Before the Fall* is a complex, compulsively readable thrill ride of a novel. On the other, it is an exploration of the human condition, a meditation on the vagaries of human nature, the dark side of celebrity, the nature of art, the power of hope and the danger of an unchecked media. The combination is a potent, gritty thriller that exposes the high cost of news as entertainment and the randomness of fate.

**Kristin Hannah - New York Times Book Review**

[A] terrific thriller...an irresistible mystery...a tale that's both an intriguing puzzle and a painful story of human loss.

**Patrick Anderson - Washington Post**

At first blush, *Before the Fall* appears to be on track to be a typical action-packed thriller.... But author Noah Hawley soon veers his highly entertaining novel into an insightful look at families, revenge and media intrusion by delving deeply into each character's story. Hawley invests the same care with a soupcon of dark humor into *Before the Fall* as he does on the TV series *Fargo*, of which he is executive producer, writer and showrunner.

**Associated Press - Oline H. Cogdill**

(*Starred review.*) [T]elevision producer and screenwriter Hawley's fifth novel is a masterly blend of mystery, suspense, tragedy, and shameful media hype.... This is a gritty tale of a man overwhelmed by unwelcome notoriety, with a stunning, thoroughly satisfying conclusion.

**Publishers Weekly**

[A] struggling artist becomes a hero twice—first by saving a young boy's life, then by outsmarting the anchor of a Fox-like conservative TV network.... Hawley piles on enough intrigues and plot complications to keep you hooked even if you can spot most of them a sea mile away.

**Kirkus Reviews**

12. What tips the NTSB and the FBI that the plane had suffered neither mechanical nor pilot error?

13. How has experiencing the crash and subsequent investigations changed or altered Scott? What do you imagine or hope for Scott's future?


14. What different meanings could the title BEFORE THE FALL signify?

15. Noah Hawley is well-known for his work in film and television. (*Bones*, *Fargo*, *Legion*, etc.) Did his style of writing help you, confuse you, or add to the tension of the mystery? Why did he use the flashback style of writing?

16. Did you enjoy reading this book? Did it keep you involved in the mystery? Did it challenge any of your ideas?

*(Questions submitted to LitLovers by Linda of Anaheim Hills Page Turners. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)*

top of page (summary)

Site by **BOOM** (<http://www.boomsuper.com>)  (<http://www.br>

Lit

This month's book club was a great discussion (read last month's here). After about 90 minutes we moved onto current events (*ahem* politics, Trump, abortion, immigration, etc.), and luckily we are able to have a perfectly healthy discussion about politics. Then we moved on to more books we were all reading or loved, and TV shows we loved.

Let's quickly discuss the TV — shows that were brought up were *Westworld*, *Black Mirror*, *The Night Of*, *This Is Us*, *The Affair*, *The Night Manager*, *The Wire*, *Victoria* (on PBS), and *The Crown*. I've literally only seen *The Crown* and loved every second, so clearly I have some catching up to do. The rest came recommended in different forms.

I bring this up because part of this book relates to TV and 24/7 media and we all agreed that TV (shows not news) has gotten really good lately. It used to be good on primetime network channels. Remember the days of *ER*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Law & Order*, etc. Then it got a little too reality TV and still is. There aren't many network shows that are that good anymore, they all moved to HBO, AMC, Netflix. Any TV shows you are loving right now not mentioned above? Please share in the comments.

The book we read this month was *Before the Fall* by Noah Hawley. I'm saying SPOILER ALERT now so stop reading if you haven't read the book unless you are OK with knowing everything about it.

We jumped right into discussing the book. Generally we all liked it, but we all felt there were a few huge flaws. One person immediately brought up that the author is a film and TV producer and screenwriter and felt like the book read like a screenplay. Another girl felt that it was *too* cinematic. She pointed out that some of the "scenes" in the book felt written for a movie. The scene where he paints on the wall with food in Layla's house? Come on. The scene where he goes into the gas station and runs off and leaves his friend there? No.

The second flaw is that we all felt like most of the characters were underdeveloped. The entire book was all about why the plane crashed, and then the reason it ended up crashing felt so underwhelming. As a reader, we barely knew the co-pilot, Charlie, and the reason he took the plane down felt like a letdown. A shallow story plot.

There were enough interesting characters to make the reason the plane went down a much more twisted and complex story and I wish Hawley would have gone there. We all agreed it would have been more interesting if it had involved something with Mr. Kipling in some way.

I still felt like the book was a page-turner. There was action and multiple plots and enough for interest. If Hawley would have had to have added to 200 pages to the book to develop all the characters I would have read them. I'd rather watch a 6-part mini series than a 2-hour movie with undeveloped characters, ya know.

Someone in my group said they felt like he was on a deadline, like the author spent so much time on the first half of the book and then had to finish it to meet a deadline. I thought that was an interesting way to put it.

So while I felt like it was a letdown, I was entertained for the entire book and I can definitely see it being made into a movie — but I hope that if it does get made into a movie that the characters are developed enough to either make the ending more interesting or just completely change the ending as a surprise in the theater!

There were some parts of the book I noted that I thought were well-written or brought up an interesting subject. Passages from the book are in bold, my thoughts are below.

**That summer he [Scott] rented a small house on Martha's Vineyard and holed up. Once again the only thing that mattered was the work, except now he realized that the work was him. *There is no separating yourself from the things you make*, he thought. *If you are a cesspool, what else can your work be except shit?* (p. 80)**

First of all, I would LOVE to rent a space somewhere and hole up for a month and just focus on creating work. That's a dream. But being an artist, I think I was additionally interested in the book (and maybe not as letdown as others were) because art was a mini topic in the book and that always has my interest. Here Scott, the artist, is talking about his work. We discussed this passage because I didn't agree with it. Sometimes when you are (or feel like) a cesspool you might create amazing work that came from that dark terrible place. Writers always talk about how if they came from a broken or messed-up childhood they have so much more to write about. When you have experiences that feel like a cesspool then you probably have a lot to express. Good artwork can come from that.

**Layla draws on her electronic cigarette. This is what the future looks like, Scott thinks. We smoke technology now.** (p. 121)

I just liked this line. I thought it was dark funny.

**You stay home and raise daughters, who grow up and get jobs and then feel pity for you, their stay-at-home mothers.** (p. 139)

I also thought this was interesting. I'm curious if this will happen with all of the obsessive helicopter moms out there. Now it's much more normal to be a working mom, even if financially you don't *need* to work, you just do because you *want* to. It isn't something that is looked down upon as it once was.

**Scott eats cereal for dinner, still dressed in his borrowed suit, tie askew. It feels disrespectful to take it off somehow. Death, so permanent for the dead, should be more than just an afternoon activity for the mourners. So he sits and shovels and chews in all black, like a breakfast undertaker.** (p. 190)

I thought this was interesting. I don't think I would have even thought about it this way. I've lost a lot of friends when they were young, mostly to car accidents or freak accidents, and even almost lost my husband. So I think I look at death a little differently than most, and have for over half of my life. To me, it's always a possibility that today is my last day alive. You can mourn people for a while (and some forever, I mean if my husband died I would be a complete mess for a long long time), but you also have to make sure you live the precious moments you have left of your own life.

**There was no such thing as hardship anymore, certainly nothing more than a fleeting inconvenience, and yet when she reflected on it late at night Maggie was amazed by how her sense of life's difficulties ebbed and adapted to fit her new circumstances. Whereas, before David, she would have to bike home in the rain some days through gridlock traffic and scour her apartment for pennies to do laundry (and even that couldn't truly be considered hardship in a world where children went to bed hungry), now she found herself exasperated by foolish things—misplacing the keys to her Lexus, or being told by the clerk at D'Agostino that he didn't have the change for a hundred. When she realized this, how soft she was becoming, how *privileged*, Maggie felt a wave of self-loathing. They should give all their money away, she told David, raise their kids hand-to-mouth with proper values.** (p. 222)

I feel like many of us experience this at one point or another. Something happens or we meet someone or we travel and see something that moves us. That puts things into perspective. I mentioned at book club that I felt like everything I ever tweet could have the hashtag #firstworldproblems. It also reminds me of a quote by Martin Luther King Jr.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

It's also like how you always adapt to the money you start making. If you get a raise, you alter your life to live within that amount and up and up. And it also made me think about the book *Breaking Night*. How Liz Murray had nothing and became something. How people will just do whatever they have to do regardless of what they do or don't have if they are truly motivated.

Is there anything in particular in your life that makes you feel a similar self-loathing to Maggie? I honestly always think about it a little when I tweet something that is very first world. Usually I just think it's funny. But then I think to myself, I have it so so good. Also a lot of times I think about this concept when I'm taking a shower. Stay with me here ... because I take really hot showers and I know that running water is such a luxury, and running *hotwater* is even more of a luxury. I just enjoy my steaming hot showers a lot and I can't imagine having to take a cold shower all the time. I won't even get into a pool if it's not bathwater warm.

**He thinks of Andy Warhol, who used to make up different stories for different journalists—I was born in Akron. I was born in Pittsburgh—so when he spoke to people he would know which interviews they'd read. Warhol, who understood the idea that the self was just a story we told. Reinvention used to be a tool of the artist. He thinks of Duchamp's urinal, of Claes Oldenburg's giant ashtray. To take reality and repurpose it, bend it to an idea, this was the kingdom of make-believe.** (p. 274)

I don't know if this is true but I thought it was SO SMART of Warhol if it was. It made me think of the Van Halen rider where they requested M&Ms but there were to be no brown ones. Most thought this was just a ridiculous rocker request, but really they did it to see if the promoters actually read the rider. And if they didn't they felt like they obviously didn't pay attention to detail, and in that case, what other details did they miss?

**All he [Scott] wants is to be left alone. Why should he be forced to clarify, to wade into the swamp of lies and try to correct these poisoned thoughts? Isn't that what they want? For him to engage? To escalate the story? When Bill Cunningham invites him on the air, it is not to set the story straight so the story ends. It is to add a new chapter, a new twist that propels the narrative forward into another week of ratings cycles.**

**A trap, in other words. They are setting a trap. And if he is smart he will continue to ignore them, move forward, live his life.**

**As long as he doesn't mind the fact that nobody on earth will ever see him as he sees himself. (p. 274-275)**

As a character I thought it was actually strong of Scott to be able to avoid and hide from the media for so long. I can only imagine being in a similar position and wanting to set the story straight.

**Someone had once said to him, *It's hard to be sad when you're being useful.* And he liked that idea. That service to others brought happiness. It was self-involvement that led to depression, to spiraling questions about the meaning of things. (p. 306)**

I really liked the saying *it's hard to be sad when you're being useful.* I feel like it's so true.

**The Batemans' cappuccino machine alone is worth relocating for. And, yes, he knows that's shallow—but isn't that what the whole artisanal return-to-simplicity movement is all about—making sure that every single thing we do is thoughtful and perfect? That every bite of every meal, every step of every day, everything from our hemp throw pillows to our handcrafted bicycles is like a koan from the Dalai Lama.**

**We are the enemies of industrialization, killers of the mass market. No more "10 billion served." Now it's one meal at a time, eggs cooked from your own chickens. Seltzer infused by your own CO2 tank. This is the revolution. Back to the soil, the loom, the still. And yet the struggle is hard, the way each man has to claw his way into some kind of future. To overcome the obstacle of youth and *establish himself* without getting lost along the way. (p. 335)**

This was Doug, Eleanor's slimy husband, and actually even though we all hated his character I thought this was funny and true about the hipster/artisan movement. Although I don't know that there's anything wrong with making something thoughtful or wanting it to be handmade versus mass market. To me it goes back to you never know how long your life will be so you should try to live each moment how you want to. I wish I had fresh eggs from chickens! My family back in Missouri has chickens and fresh eggs!

And *clawing* seems like a pretty harsh word, he just seems lazy from how Eleanor describes him in the book. Like he felt entitled to success. Like he feels like you shouldn't *get lost* at some point if you are trying to start a business. Sorry dude, that's just part of it.

///

So there you have it! My thoughts on the book, plus some insights from my awesome little book club. If you've read the book and want to join my digital book club, please share your thoughts in the comments!

**Next month we are reading *Swing Time* by Zadie Smith.**

See my **2017 Reading List** here! And **24 Books I Read in 2016** here!

///

The **Serious Book Club** is called *serious* not because we only read serious books (we don't) but because we *seriously* discuss the books for at least an hour of our club. I thought it would be fun to have a unique name versus just "book club" — also, I'd love for you to join digitally! All that means is you read the book too and pipe in with your thoughts in the comments!

Books

# 'Before the Fall' by Noah Hawley: a masterly mix of intrigue and satire

By Patrick Anderson

May 26, 2016

Noah Hawley's terrific thriller "Before the Fall" begins one August evening as a private plane awaits passengers on a runway in Martha's Vineyard. The plane has been chartered by David Bateman, a Republican political kingmaker who has founded a wildly profitable — and proudly right-wing — cable news network. Bateman is traveling with his wife, Maggie, the couple's two young children, the family's Israeli-born bodyguard, a friend who's a financier facing indictment for money laundering, and a modestly successful painter to whom Maggie offered a flight back to the city.

Just before takeoff, the author tells us: "As she does at a thousand random moments out of every day, Maggie feels a swell of motherly love, ballooning and desperate. They are her life, these children." After that lovely moment comes a punch: "None of them has any idea that sixteen minutes from now their plane will crash into the sea."

Crash it does, and soon readers and federal officials alike are struggling to understand why. It's an irresistible mystery and, for the icing on his fictional cake, Hawley adds a satirical portrait of a cable news star named Bill Cunningham that will delight some readers and outrage others.

Moments after the crash, Scott, the painter, struggling in the water amid burning debris, fearing sharks, sees no other survivors. A competitive swimmer in his youth, he heads in what he hopes is the direction of Martha's Vineyard, only to find the Batemans' 4-year-old son, JJ, clinging to a seat cushion. Miraculously, swimming for hours in the dark and cold, Scott carries the boy to safety.

As news of the disaster spreads, Scott is hailed as a hero. The National Transportation Safety Board questions him with respect, but then a hostile FBI agent sniffs terrorism and suggests that Scott might have somehow caused the crash. What was a penniless painter doing on the plane, he demands. Was he having an affair with Mrs. Bateman?

The agent's insinuations are broadcast nationally by Cunningham, whom Bateman had transformed from a washed-up reporter into a \$10-million-a-year cable superstar. Cunningham, an "angry white guy" who claims to speak for the Average Joe, warns his millions of followers that the crash is "an act of terrorism, if not by foreign nationals then by certain elements of the liberal media." He sees Scott as a loser, a nobody, yet somehow central to the conspiracy: "Yes, I know they're saying he rescued a four-year-old boy, but who is he and what was he doing on that plane?" The question becomes whether Scott, having survived the ocean's sharks, can survive those of the cable-news universe.

Scott has bonded with JJ, who rarely speaks to anyone else. The boy has gone to live with his mother's sister, Eleanor, a good woman who's married to a jerk. The husband is indifferent to the boy but thrilled at the prospect



of controlling the fortune the child has inherited. Scott is increasingly focused on both the boy and Eleanor, even as the FBI threatens to arrest him.

NTSB officials launch an intensive search for the bodies of missing passengers, as well as for the plane, the black box and cockpit voice recorder they hope will explain the crash. The search, the NTSB's man confides, is the kind that occurs "when the President of the United States makes a phone call" and in fact it recalls the one in July 1999 after the plane piloted by John F. Kennedy Jr., and carrying his wife and sister-in-law, went down en route to Martha's Vineyard. What caused this new tragedy? Did the Bateman plane malfunction? Was it targeted by a missile? Was a bomb hidden aboard, perhaps by enemies of the network or by co-conspirators in the money laundering scheme? Or might someone on the plane have deliberately caused the disaster? Readers can look for clues in chapters devoted to the background of each passenger and the plane's three-member crew.

Hawley, the author of four previous novels and the creator of the TV show " Fargo," here has spun a tale that's at once an intriguing puzzle, a tasty satire and a painful story of human loss.

**Patrick Anderson** reviews mysteries and thrillers for Book World.

Read more:

Review: 'Wilde Lake' by Laura Lippman

Review: 'The Travelers' by Chris Pavone

'The Capitalist': A financial thriller inspired by Bernie Madoff

## BEFORE THE FALL

By Noah Hawley

Grand Central. 400 pp. \$26

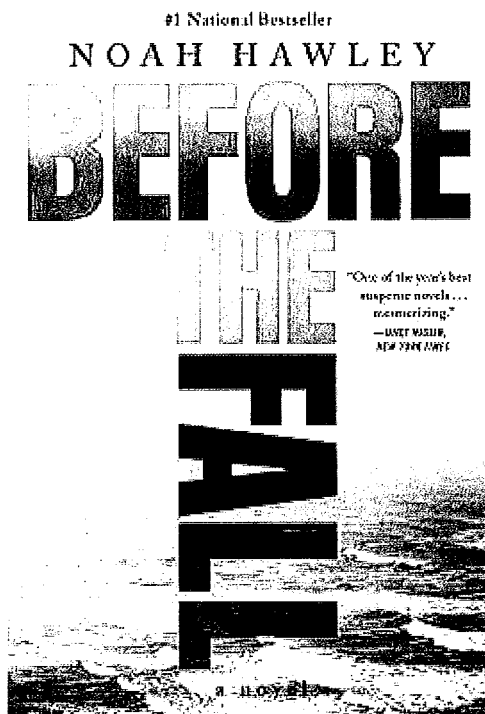
*We are a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.*

 **0 Comments**



## Review: *Before the Fall* by Noah Hawley

BY DEBORAH LACY April 21, 2017



***Before the Fall* by Noah Hawley is a heart-pounding thriller that raises questions of fate, human nature, and the inextricable ties that bind us together. It is nominated for an Edgar Award for Best Novel.**

Everyone has their path. The choices they've made. How any two people end up in the same place at the same time is a mystery. You get on an elevator with a dozen strangers. You ride a bus, wait in line for the bathroom. It happens every day. To try to predict the places we'll go and the people we'll meet would be pointless.

As Noah Hawley sets up his thriller *Before the Fall*, 11 people take off in a private airplane from Martha's Vineyard that winds up crashing 16 minutes into the flight.

On board the private plane are:

The owners of the plane—the rich and powerful David Bateman

and his wife Maggie.

- Their two children.
- Another rich and powerful couple—the husband learns right as he's boarding the plane that he'll be arrested the following day.
- A bodyguard.
- Two pilots.
- A flight attendant.
- A random acquaintance who needed a ride.

When the plane goes down, it is only the acquaintance, Scott Burroughs, and the Bateman's four-year-old son that remain alive. But this book is as much about the lives of these eleven people as it is about the crash. And that's what makes it so interesting. As the scenes alternate between the present day investigation and flashbacks of the victims of the crash, we learn about their backgrounds and what led them to that day.

Burroughs, a struggling artist, is a likable main character who was starting to rebuild his life while recovering from a midlife crisis. It's during this rebuild that he met Maggie Bateman. His recommitment to his career is admirable, and it's not the easiest path, but he somehow doesn't fall into the cliché of the tortured artist.

He was a disaster survivor in that he had survived the disaster that was his life. And so that's what he painted. That summer he had rented a house on Martha's Vineyard and holed up. Once again, the only thing that mattered was the work, except now he realized the work was him. "There is no separating yourself from the things you make," he thought. "If you are a cesspool, what else can your work be except shit?"

As the only adult survivor, naturally suspicion lands on Scott. This suspicion is heightened when a sensationalist TV personality decides to revive his career by dredging up whatever dirt he can find on the painter and covering it on TV in the most dramatic way possible.

In addition to Burroughs, I found the investigator, Gus Franklin, and Eleanor, who becomes the little boy's guardian, to be my favorites. But all of Hawley's characters in this novel have a depth about them.

Since we know that the airplane is going to crash at the beginning of the book, *Before the Fall* deviates from the usual thriller conventions. This setup makes the characters and the investigation feel fresh while maintaining the quick pace and urgency needed to sustain a thriller.

Hawley has won an Emmy and many other awards. He has also been a creative force in TV shows including *Fargo*, *Legion*, *Bones*, *My Generation*, and *The Unusuals*. His TV background is apparent in his clear writing and fast but well planned plotting.

*Before the Fall* is easy to read and hard to put down. I read the novel in one day, finding it hard to tear myself away. This book is Hawley's 4th novel, and I plan to pick up the other three.

**To learn more or order a copy, visit:**



---

**Deborah Lacy's** short mystery fiction has appeared in *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, the 2016 Bouchercon Anthology: *Blood on the Bayou*, and she has a story coming up in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. She also runs the Mystery Playground blog.

Review: *Flamingo Road* by Sasscer Hill  
People, Choices, and Moments

## The New York Times

### BOOKS OF THE TIMES

# Review: Noah Hawley's 'Before the Fall' Is One of the Year's Best Suspense Novels

By Janet Maslin

May 25, 2016

Martha's Vineyard. A private plane. A few rich passengers boarding. A foggy night. Uh-oh.

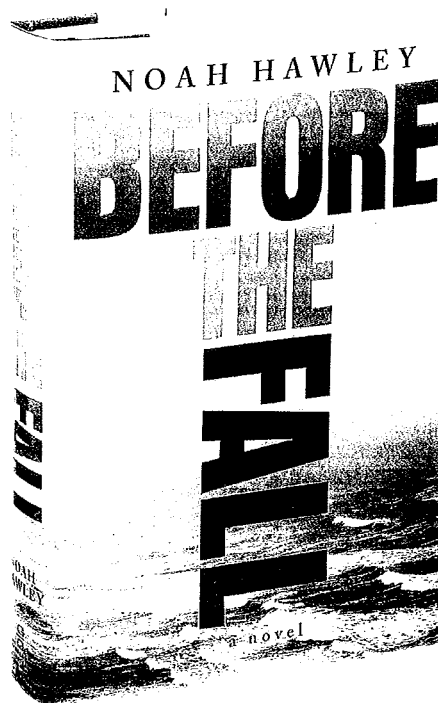
And a spine-tingling bit of foreshadowing: Two weeks later, one passenger will be giving an interview about the plane to New York magazine. Why? These are cosseted, secretive people. Their travels aren't supposed to make news.

This is how Noah Hawley kicks off his ingeniously nerve-racking "Before the Fall." If you didn't already know that Mr. Hawley is a celebrated storyteller, you'll know it before you finish the first page of this novel, his fifth. If his books are relatively little known, blame that on his television and film work: He is currently the showrunner for "Fargo," a TV adaptation so good it has won a Peabody award. Before that, he created "My Generation" and "The Unusuals." He has plans to adapt Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle" for the big screen. Special prize to anyone who can guess which other novel Mr. Hawley has said he thinks has excellent movie potential.

But "Before the Fall" has hardly been written as a pre-screenplay. This is one of the year's best suspense novels, a mesmerizing, surprise-jammed mystery that works purely on its own, character-driven terms. Before the main action begins, we get an exact list — well, we hope it's exact — of who was aboard that little plane. It was chartered by David Bateman, the head of what sounds a lot like Fox News. He was accompanied by his wife, Maggie, and their young children, Rachel and JJ.

The Batemans have invited another couple to join them: Ben Kipling, a Wall Street power player, and his wife, Sarah, who doesn't enjoy the rustic pleasures of the Vineyard as profoundly as Maggie does. Sarah is perfectly drawn in only a few strokes. Beach sunsets bore her. She'd rather be at Barneys.

Then there's the stranger, the last-minute passenger Maggie happened to invite for reasons not entirely clear. He is Scott Burroughs, a good-looking, middle-aged unsuccessful artist with whom Maggie has been exchanging smiles at the farmers' market. Scott definitely doesn't fit in with this private-plane set, but he welcomed the flight home to New York. Finally, the barely described crew members: pilot, co-pilot, beautiful stewardess and armed Bateman bodyguard.



Patricia Wall/The New York Times

Sixteen minutes after takeoff, all but two of these people are dead. And Mr. Hawley spends the rest of the book presenting what would be a variation on the classic locked-room whodunit, except for the big and noisy new element he throws in: an egomaniacal talk show commentator, Bill Cunningham, who is obsessed with the plane crash and determined to mourn and exploit the death of his boss. Since David Bateman's network is so like Fox, Cunningham is a version of Bill O'Reilly, who is quick to pronounce: "What we're talking about here is nothing less than an act of terrorism, if not by foreign nationals then by certain elements of the liberal media." And on he goes, speechifying and bullying, through the rest of the book.

**You have 4 free articles remaining.  
Subscribe to The Times**

The odd fact that Scott's boyhood hero was the exercise pioneer Jack LaLanne, who specialized in such superhuman feats as pulling a boat through water while handcuffed, has inspired him to become a spectacular swimmer. So, early in the book, right after the crash, Scott manages to swim to Montauk in pitch darkness, despite a dislocated shoulder, with the 4-year-old JJ in tow. But in today's tabloid atmosphere, as rendered so chillingly by Mr. Hawley, that makes him suspect. Why would a starving artist hit on Maggie Bateman or rescue her orphaned son if he weren't after the Batemans' money? Even worse, the hiding place that Scott finds to avoid being stalked and slandered by the media belongs to a flighty left-wing heiress who mostly sees him as a collector's item.

And we, the readers, would really like to know why that plane went down. But Mr. Hawley does a beautiful job of turning his book into an extended tease, with separate chapters about each passenger and revelations about why each could have been a target.

Where shall we start? How about with Scott himself? Even if he sounds badly disoriented back on dry land, his most recent paintings have depicted a series of transportation catastrophes. They were spooky to begin with. Now, thanks to so much unwanted attention they will make him a star.

Mr. Hawley has artfully filled “Before the Fall” with enough red herrings to satisfy a flock of sea gulls. Take the fact that Ben Kipling learns, just before he boards the plane, that he’s been caught laundering gazillions and will surely go to jail. (“But don’t worry,” he is assured by his lawyer, a hilariously vivid character who pretends to be an all-powerful fixer. “I’ve got a good lice guy.”).

Just as carefully, Mr. Hawley alludes to the fact that Rachel Bateman was kidnapped as a baby. But the details are carefully held back until midbook, so we aren’t really sure how badly the family needs armed guards or “glass as thick as an unabridged copy of ‘War and Peace’” on its East River Drive windows. And for extras, Mr. Hawley throws in Maggie’s predictably good-hearted sister and her creep of husband, who may wind up as JJ’s stepfather and can’t believe his presumed windfall. It’s inevitable that this guy and Cunningham, America’s “raging voice of common sense,” will team up on the side of noisy injustice.

With so many possible explanations for what went wrong, the real one had better reach a high bar. Does it? I had doubts. But this much is clear: Mr. Hawley has made it very, very easy to race through his book in a state of breathless suspense. Get to that endpoint. Then you can decide.

Before the Fall

By Noah Hawley

391 pages. Grand Central Publishing. \$26.

A version of this article appears in print on May 26, 2016, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: Wealth, Tragedy and Exquisite Twists

Art World (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world>)

## Author Noah Hawley Tracks Rise of the New Medicis In His Summer Blockbuster 'Before The Fall'

A painter is the story's protagonist and unwitting hero.

Eileen Kinsella (<https://news.artnet.com/about/eileen-kinsella-22>), August 19, 2016



Noah Hawley. Courtesy of Leah Muse.

If you haven't already torn through Noah Hawley's thriller, *Before The Fall* (<https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/noah-hawley/before-the-fall/9781455561780/>), you still have a few sun-soaked summer weekends to do so.

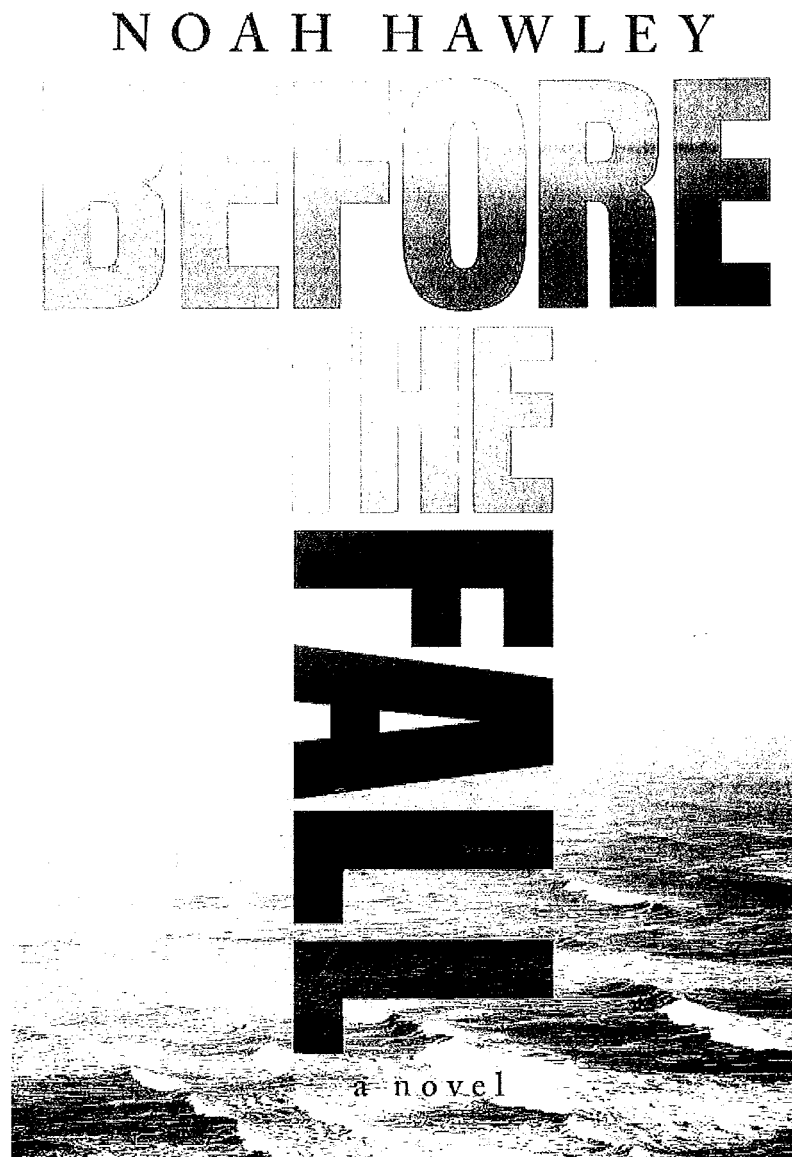
Contemporary art looms large in the plot, in the form of a middle-aged painter who serves as the story's protagonist and unwitting hero as well as an all-too-familiar type of uber-wealthy twenty-something art patron.

The tale opens with the mysterious crash of a private plane that plunges into the ocean mere minutes after takeoff from Martha's Vineyard en route to Teterboro airport near Manhattan. The only survivors of the crash are Scott Burroughs, the aforementioned painter, whose swimming skills enable him and another plane passenger, the four-year-old son of David Bateman, the news magnate who chartered the plane, to survive by getting them both safely to land after an eight-hour ordeal in the ocean.

True to form for our media-obsessed culture, what seems from Burroughs's point of view to be sheer luck and determination against impossible odds, quickly becomes the focus of suspicion as investigators spark a feeding frenzy.

Hawley delves into the details and inner lives of a sprawling cast of related characters —the passengers on the plane, the conspiracy-crazed employees of the FOX News-esque empire that Bateman forged, the suspicious and wise-cracking NTSB and FBI investigators on the case, and lastly, the heiress and arts patron named Leslie "Layla" Mueller who helps shield Scott from the media circus by allowing him to hole up in her lavish West Village townhouse, while also dangling the promise of turning him into a contemporary art star.

artnet News caught up with Hawley in a phone interview, where he answered our questions about contemporary art and the roles played by various art world figures in the book.



Noah Hawley, *Before the Fall* (2016). Courtesy of Grand Central Publishing.

**What is your knowledge of or involvement with the art world?**



I've had a longstanding appreciation of art and my mother was a painter and writer. Growing up in New York City, visual art was all around me, and over the years I went to a lot of museums and galleries. There's something in the idea of art—the space it gets created in and the space in which we experience it—that feels similar to the space you try to write from. [Art is] where I go whenever I need inspiration, it's not for research. Sometimes you just want to be in a person in a space experiencing the unexpected.

**Who are some of your favorite artists?**

I was a big [Francis Bacon](http://www.artnet.com/artists/francis-bacon/) fan even the first time that I saw his work. I like [Lucian Freud](http://www.artnet.com/artists/lucian-freud/) and [Jenny Saville](http://www.artnet.com/artists/jenny-saville/), who does this sort of body dysmorphic work. There is something about that exaggeration of the human in the [Francis Bacon](http://www.artnet.com/artists/francis-bacon/) work that seems so horrifying— like a vacuum you could project a lot of things on to.

I tend to be drawn to more modern work. I'm always on the lookout for a new voice.

**What becomes a key part of the story is that Scott was working on a series of “disaster” paintings; train derailments, catastrophic storms, or car wrecks. Tell us about the idea for those themes.**

He was a guy whose own life was a disaster, and so he found himself drawn to these [works]. As we realize each painting, whether it is of a train derailment or of a tornado bearing down, or a highway pileup, the subject matter becomes clear. There is always this one woman who is wandering through the wreckage and a big question in the book becomes “Who is that woman in his mind and in his past?” I liked that idea.

The last painting that I put in—really as we were going off to press—was the text one. It just said: “We are sorry for your loss”. White text on black background and I like that sentiment. Again, it sums up so much. The words are in keeping with the concept for the series. Once I started going down that road with what these paintings could be, I saw them as sort of photorealistic in a [Gerhard Richter](http://www.artnet.com/artists/gerhard-richter/) kind of way... almost like an [Andy Warhol](http://www.artnet.com/artists/andy-warhol/) kind of car wreck—true to life and yet it's also a fantasy.

**What was the inspiration for Layla, the uber-wealthy twenty-something patron?**

The first round of the modern offspring of billionaires, like of the Paris Hilton variety, were famous for being famous, they went to parties, etc. Now there is this whole circuit—the [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/business/for-the-new-superrich-life-is-much-more-than-a-beach.html) did a piece—you can go on over the whole year that takes you to Davos and Cannes and the Venice Biennale. It's sort of half-philanthropic.

There is a real sense of the new Medici class that is out there. And you can become a patron in the way that [Charles] Saatchi did when he bought [Damien Hirst](http://www.artnet.com/artists/damien-hirst/)'s entire library. Now that is a sort of regular model. Money has always been power, but then in this kind of world, this very young woman can come in and become this patron in a way that for an artist like Scott, she just changed your life on a whim. If she likes you, then you're made.

**The story seems like a natural to come to the big screen. Has it been optioned for a movie?**

It's at Sony and I'm finishing a screenplay. A conversation that I get a lot with readers is ‘How are you going to do the paintings?’ They really want to see that. It's such a visual component of the book—you describe a painting and you intimate that if you could see this painting you would understand the character better. They feel like there's this real piece of insight.

Paintings in movies are sort of like rock bands in movies. There is a question of how are you going to create work and make it really look like art? I see them as sort of photorealistic. The concept and subject matter is so clear.

**Who would play Scott Burroughs? Who would play Layla?**

For Scott, I think you need an actor of a certain age. He would need to be in his late 40s. You need to believe that he's someone who can be an artist, a painter. Also, he should be someone who has lost something—time or something important to him.

For Layla, you want to feel that there is a certain beautiful arrogance there that needs to come through, but also a vulnerability. There is a part in the book where she says she really worries that people only talk to her because she's rich, or because they want to have sex with her. On some level she doesn't feel like she has earned this identity she has because it's built on borrowed money, or someone else's hard work.

**Why did you choose to have an artist—and one who is as out of the mainstream as your protagonist? (Scott lives on Martha's Vineyard and is something of a Luddite, lacking a computer or even a cell phone).**

I like the idea that Scott is naïve on some level as to the thriller mindset that the rest of the world just takes for granted. I recently went to the [Eames House](http://eamesfoundation.org/visit/how-to-visit/) in Pacific Palisades. There was a sense in that space that it was created as a place to play. This idea of play and childhood is the purest form of imagination, and in order to be an artist you have to leave yourself open to that. But those kinds of people don't fare well in the real world of cops and robbers.

Follow [artnet News](https://www.facebook.com/artnet) on Facebook:

Like 299K

*Want to stay ahead of the art world? Subscribe to our newsletter to get the breaking news, eye-opening interviews, and incisive critical takes that drive the conversation forward.*

<http://link.artnet.com/join/522/newscta&hash=8e9534fb495110baf97a368037111816>

# artnet news

It looks like you're using an ad blocker, which may make our news articles disappear from your browser. artnet News relies on advertising revenue, so please disable your ad blocker or whitelist our site. To do so, simply click the Ad Block icon, usually located on the upper-right corner of your browser. Follow the prompts from there.

SHARE



Article topics

**Contemporary** (<https://news.artnet.com/topic/contemporary>)



<https://news.artnet.com/about/eileen-kinsella-22>

**Eileen Kinsella**

Senior Market Editor

<https://news.artnet.com/about/eileen-kinsella-22>