

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. Every person on the plane has experienced sadness or difficulties in the past. Do you think that, universally, everyone has his/her own sad story, or is this unique to this particular set of characters?
2. What different meanings might there be in the title *Before the Fall*?
3. “True horror, you see, comes not from the savagery of the unexpected, but from the corruption of everyday objects, spaces” (p. 363). Do you agree with that statement? Can you see this idea reflected elsewhere in the book?
4. In what way is this novel a traditional thriller? In what way does it bend the conventions of the thriller genre?
5. The twenty-four-hour news cycle is ubiquitous in our culture. How is this phenomenon portrayed in *Before the Fall*, and how does it make you rethink what we see on television every day?
6. *Before the Fall* alternates between the present day—the investigation into the plane crash and Scott’s experience—and flashbacks to each passenger’s life. As you read more of the flashbacks, how does your understanding of the past inform or change your understanding of the present-day narrative?
7. “He [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 (p. 388)?

8. Noah Hawley is well-known for his work in film and television. In what scenes of the book do you see his experience reflected?
9. “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” (p. 1). Much of the plot hinges on chance encounters or small decisions. What are some seemingly unimportant choices characters make that turn out to be pivotal? Do you see this sort of thing happening in real life?
10. How is the concept of heroism explored throughout the book? What separates heroes from other people? And how does an ordinary person become a hero?
11. After the plane crash, Scott meets many different people—JJ, Eleanor, Doug, Layla, Gus, Bill—who want different things from him. How do these characters affect Scott and his personal journey?
12. In much of his life Scott has been a passive observer rather than an active participant. How has the crash changed the way he relates to the world around him and to his sense of self?

A Conversation with Noah Hawley About *Fargo* and *Before the Fall* (Reprinted with permission from *Parade* magazine/Parade.com)

Before the Fall—the new novel from Noah Hawley, best known as executive producer and writer of *Fargo* on FX, is packed with mystery, conspiracy, and sinister goings-on beginning with the foreboding of an extremely foggy night. Here *Parade* talks to the author about his new book and what we can expect from the highly anticipated Season Three of *Fargo*.

One of the most shocking and compelling things in *Fargo* is the idea of people doing things they never thought they were capable of doing.

Right. If circumstances called for it.

Can you tell us anything about Season Three?

We did a lot in the show so far with people who are living under a certain level of threat. I think what's interesting is to look at a story set in the recent past in Minnesota and to look at a way of life that's kind of under threat. There's this idea of "Minnesota nice" and this regional identity, which is so based on community.

Joel and Ethan Coen described that area as "Siberia with family restaurants." In the winter, it's a place where you can have the Swedish meatballs at the buffet and then freeze to death in the parking lot. A certain amount of that has created this really wonderful sense of bonding together that you feel in that region. But now we're in this moment where we're all interacting with screens, and we have a sort of community that's virtual, and what does that do to our hero's sense of place?

Tell us about the inspiration for *Before the Fall*. There seems to be some of the same kind of themes as we saw on *Fargo* last season.

There's an interesting dynamic of what we do on *Fargo* that for some reason appeals to me—telling stories about basically decent people who are in over their heads. There's something

about that in our superhero culture, where everyone is literally invulnerable. But it's nice to tell a story that requires a great effort from someone who may not be up for it.

At its root, the story [in the novel] is about a man who failed, right? And he's gone into hiding, almost, and finds himself at the center of a moment where heroism is called for, and he responds to it and finds that that act puts him at the center of attention. Then he has to figure out how to move forward in his life in a real way. He's a survivor and he needs to start acting like one. I wanted to look at that idea.

How is the process of doing the novel different than writing for TV?

Someone once described it to me as like, When you work for Hollywood, your phone rings every day, and someone tells you they love you. But when you write a book, you sit in a room and your phone never rings.

Or if it does, you try not to answer it so you can get things done.

Right! Exactly, exactly. You know, for me, it's always about trying to find the quickest and most-lasting path to pure creativity, and to be in that space where you're doing your best creative work. And, for me, storytelling is really an excuse to try to understand the world that I live in. You sort of look at a relationship that you don't understand, and then you try to re-create it. Or a kind of person you want to understand better, so you sort of try to put yourself in their shoes. On that level, it's all the same animal, but obviously sitting in a room and making something up is different than being on a set and trying to guide a real person through the process of inhabiting that character.

With fiction, the audience does have to work. They read the words, but create the movie in their heads. With TV or film, most of that work is done for them. What I try to do with *Fargo* is to make that dynamic more like a book, where you're seeing a lot, but there's so much in there that requires you to engage with the material in a way that is more thought-provoking. It's less of a passive experience, I think.

A book is full of ideas. You just live with what you read for so much longer. A lot of the times, nowadays, with a movie or TV show, it's like, "Oh, it's entertainment!" And you never think about it again. And that's not interesting to me, because there's enough of that. We're sort of entertained to death, right?

There's entertainment everywhere. Anywhere, anytime.

I'm not a message-oriented person, but I do think that if you entertain people, they give you permission to do more on a thematic level or a character level. So it's important to do more.

How was it working on a TV series that was inspired by a movie? Was that a big challenge or a nice jumping-off point?

It is a challenge, because it's based on the movie and kind of not based on the movie at the same time. My assignment was: Can you adapt this movie without any of the characters or the story from the movie? At which point, you're like, What is it then? If it's not consistent, it has to give you the same feeling. That's all it is. Somehow, you have to tell a totally different story with all new characters that gives you the same feeling. And that's a really fascinating challenge.

Will *Before the Fall* be made into a movie?

We sold it to Sony and I'm writing a script of it now. With a little luck and a prayer, we can get it done. It feels good. It feels like a good story for this moment. It has kind of a central mystery or thriller quality to it. It's a very human story, as well, which I think is important. But we're in a sort of blockbuster, make-believe moment in entertainment, and the key—as it was with the book—is to make something that provides that adrenaline and that escape, but then sort of surreptitiously sneaks in all the other elements where it feels like, hopefully, at the end you've read something that asks some important questions.

Taking a bit of a left-turn, is it true that your grandmother was a playwright?

She was. She actually was an assistant to Walter Lippmann at *The New York World* in the 1920s and '30s. My mother was a writer as well, so I have a long history of writers in the family.

My mom never went to college, so she just assumed the writer identity, and that was always really inspiring to me. It's not something you need nine levels of education for. It's really an identity that you claim for yourself, and then you have to make yourself one.

Did your mom have a kind of routine or a work ethic that you saw?

Yeah. Writing is this odd act, right? To sit and type, or write by hand, or whatever people do. And it requires a real discipline, because it is really a sheer act of will that you're creating something and you're doing it by yourself. I definitely saw that discipline in her.

How much does real life play into your work?

The big challenge is to find your way to something that people can relate to. There's this common sense idea that in order to appeal to the biggest number of people, you have to write something very general, but my experience is the more specific you make something, the more people respond to it, in a very odd way. Like, to write a character who seems so unusual, and then people come up to you and they're like, "That's just like my dad!"