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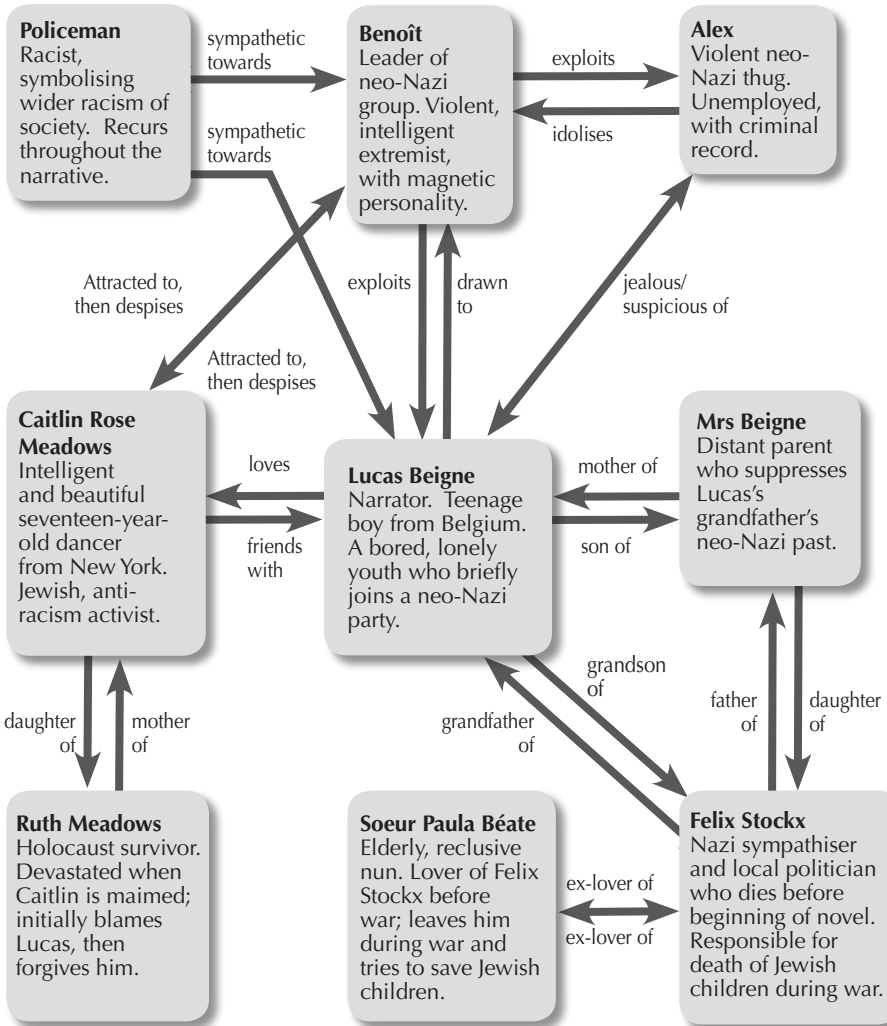
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CHARACTER MAP



INTRODUCTION

In her carefully crafted novel, *Falling*, Anne Provoost tells the story of a teenage boy, Lucas Beigne, who gets caught up in the neo-Nazi racism that swept Europe in the early 1990s.

As the grandson of a Nazi collaborator in Belgium in World War II, Lucas painfully searches for the truth of the past, but his naivety and vulnerability leave him open to domination by both the ultra-nationalist and the Holocaust survivor's daughter, Caitlin. Kept ignorant of the past by his mother who finds it difficult to accept the reality of her father's denunciation of fifteen Jewish children hidden by the nuns in the Convent of Sainte-Antoine, Lucas is torn apart by conflicting loyalties. In an attempt to overcome his feelings of powerlessness and impotency he assists in criminal damage, sabotage and racist demonstrations against the immigrant minority in a small town in rural Belgium. His life becomes complicated and contradictory.

Lucas's increasing sense of guilt and his identification with his grandfather lead him to a point where he believes his life is more fiction than reality. An accident involving his friend Caitlin that results in horrific injuries for which he is responsible, pushes him towards a nervous breakdown. It is, finally, the recognition of his feelings for her and the promise she holds for the future that bring him to an honest appraisal of his actions. He gains a measure of maturity with the realisation that all human life is precious and that doubts and uncertainty are a normal part of life.

The book offers an important comment on the dangers of succumbing to mob violence and partaking in mindless racism. When members of a society cannot cope with periods of rapid change some people feel disenfranchised and resort to extreme behaviour in order to be heard. How governments value the ordinary people who are their citizens and make change valuable for all provide an important measure of a civilisation. The past informs the present and influences it. These larger issues are implicit in this story of a small community. There is no final resolution offered.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Setting: A Small Town in Belgium

It is summer in Montourin, a small, fictional town in rural Belgium. The Beigne family lives in the capital, Brussels. There are two languages spoken in Belgium: Flemish (a derivative of Dutch) in the north and French in the southern and eastern provinces. Around Brussels is a bilingual metropolitan area. The regional economy in the south (Wallonia) is based on subsidised heavy industry whereas the Flemish sector prospers because of economic reform and foreign investment.

By 1988-89 a revised constitution extended regional autonomy, including cultural autonomy to both the Flemish and Wallonia regions, and changed Belgium into a federal state. In addition, in the 1960s the Belgian government granted independence to its colonies in Africa, The Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and Ruanda-Urundi (now separate countries: Rwanda and Burundi). Some of the 'immigrants' that Benoît wants to eliminate are citizens of Belgium from these former African colonies.

Auschwitz, Neo-Nazism and Denialism

During World War II, as German armies spread east and west, Nazi policy of genocide against European Jews was implemented in all the countries they occupied. Between 1939 and 1945 six million Jews perished in the concentration camps scattered throughout Eastern Europe. The most notorious of these forced labour camps was Auschwitz in Poland, the largest centre for extermination, where Jews in thousands were shipped in cattle trains across Europe to die in gas chambers. The local populations near the camps ignored what was happening, either too frightened to protest or too accepting of the Aryan propaganda that was preached by Hitler and his followers. In this novel, the fifteen Jewish children who were sheltered by the Convent of Sainte Antoine were shipped to Auschwitz.

Belgium was one of the Nazi-occupied countries. When it was invaded on 10 May 1940, the government fled to Britain, but their King, Leopold III, remained to preside over a puppet government controlled from Berlin. Felix Stockx, Lucas's grandfather, was a Nazi sympathiser who, as was true for other people like him in other occupied countries, assisted the regime. The discovery of his anti-Semitic views deeply disturbs Lucas's mother.

The end of World War II and the defeat of Germany brought an end to official policies of anti-Semitism but, during the 1980s and 90s, extremist groups basing their platform on Nazi propaganda began to emerge across Europe, particularly in Germany. These groups believed that their problems were attributable to the large numbers of cheap, unskilled workers who were brought in to fuel the economic boom in Europe in the 1970s and 80s. Right wing groups based on Nazi beliefs (neo-Nazis) are currently banned in Germany and other countries in Europe but subversive groups, like those to which Benoît and Alex belong, still exist. Their propaganda opposes the large numbers of cheap, unskilled workers brought in to fuel the economic boom in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. In *Falling*, malcontents like Benoît are shown to believe that the ‘foreigners’, immigrants particularly from Arab and African countries, had taken their jobs and were an unnecessary drain on economic resources after the economic downturn of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The broader political changes behind the attitudes of individuals like Benoît and Alex created economic difficulties. The break-up of the Soviet Union after 1989 exacerbated the situation, particularly the reunification of East and West Germany and economic hardship that followed. The moves to unite Europe under the European Union added to the strain on economies, which caused social difficulties. Further, countries were required to meet stringent standards of economic management to qualify as members. These factors all underpinned the racist attacks against minorities that became common in the 1990s.

Opposition to Immigrants

By 1993 there were calls across Western Europe to halt immigration while restrictions were imposed on the immigrants already there. In Austria, the leader of the right-wing Freedom Party, Jörg Haider, called for identity passes for foreigners seeking work and a 30% limit on the number of foreign schoolchildren allowed to attend classes. These policies were supported by 7.4% of voters. In France Jacques Chirac blamed unemployment on immigrants while on his first day as President in 1995, Edouard Balladur promised to crack down on ‘illegal immigrants’. Deaths followed as the police were given sweeping new powers to demand proof of identity.

In Germany seventeen deaths due to race-related violence occurred in 1992 and at least twenty people were killed in the first ten months of 1993, including five German-born Turks. They were killed in a firebombing

in Solingen on 29 May, days after the passage of tighter asylum laws. Of 41,900 Germans belonging to right-wing organisations, 6,400 were militant and violence-prone according to the national police intelligence office. The police identified 2,584 proven acts of violence by right-wing individuals/supporters in 1992, a 74% increase from the previous year. In Belgium there was similar unrest.

In addition, there exists a related movement that denies that the Nazis ever perpetrated war crimes against Jews. Called 'Denialists', they are led by British (so-called) historian David Irving who propagates the view that there was no practice of extermination against Jews and that Auschwitz "... is baloney, it's a legend". In countries like Australia, which denied Irving entry in 1995 and 1996, he is regarded as promoting dangerous anti-Semitic propaganda and racial discrimination. His platform gives rise to Lucas's remark about Benoît that "I heard him claim recently that Auschwitz was just an ordinary prison" (p.201).

Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection

The term 'natural selection' was first used by Charles Darwin in *The Origin of the Species* (1859) which presented his unique views on evolution. Although the concept of evolution did not originate with Darwin, he was the first and most consistent defender of the mechanism of natural selection, an elegantly simple concept that underlies much of contemporary evolutionary study.

Darwin's theory is based upon his observations that the weakest of a species will die, leaving the strong to pass on their genetic structure to the next generation. Those organisms most capable of existing in a given environment are those that are most likely to survive. In addition, organisms that are successful in their environments will be more likely to be successful in reproduction.

Key Point

Darwin never implies either that the strongest have "rights" or that the weak must be killed "to preserve purity" as Benoît does (p.124).

GENRE, STRUCTURE & STYLE

Genre

Falling is a novel narrated by a teenage boy who relates the events of the past summer, which serve to mark his rite of passage to adulthood. It is the story of an isolated, unaware, bored teenager who, through his experiences, reaches a hard-won maturity.

First-Person Narration

The strategy of using a first-person narrator, 'I', allows the author to establish a first-hand believable account. Sometimes referred to as a self-reflexive narrative technique, it allows the narrator to reflect on, or comment on, matters such as the narrative itself. This creates the impression that Lucas Beigne is a 'reliable narrator' who, even though he lies on many occasions to others:

- speaks truthfully as the witness of his own life
- has authority over the events related
- tells the story in hindsight, reflecting on his own difficulties, behaviour, thoughts and attitudes
- reveals his own inability to take control of his life and to act with integrity and purpose
- provides an understanding of his aimlessness and ennui, even though it results in suffering and harm to others
- shows his eventual path to atonement and self-knowledge.

Structure

Through the strategy of withholding information, the first paragraphs set up the suspense of the action of the novel, as the reader must begin at the end of the story, piecing the incidents together.

The narrative is chronologically ordered except for the opening and closing sections, which are set in the present and make a frame for the events of the recent past summer. The narrative unfolds the past in flashback until the end when the story returns to the present (p.278).

Lucas Beigne's visit to the hospital marks the transition in the narrative from the present to the past as Lucas tries 'to remember the very beginning of it all' (p.22). To tell the story he must go back in time to the point where

his grandfather died. That point marked an end to one life and began a rite of passage for Lucas, a period when he moves from irresponsible adolescence towards the possibility of self-knowledge.

At several points the narrator switches to the present to underline for the reader the stages in his development:

- the loss of his innocence – when he has his haircut he points out that in hindsight this is ‘the moment everything started to go wrong’ (p.28);
- his reference to the lasting impression Benoît made on him (p.74);
- the reference to the fire in the smithy: in retrospect, it was merely an ‘incident’, an overture to a major misfortune ‘that totally disrupted [his] life and abruptly put an end to [his] youth’ (p.231).

Motifs

There are several recurring motifs through the narrative. Two important symbols need to be carefully noted as they appear: fire and the chainsaw. Fire symbolises both purification and destruction while the chainsaw represents power. Lucas *falsely* believes that the chainsaw empowers him.

The chainsaw

The chainsaw occurs at the crucial points of the action and builds to the climax when Lucas uses it to sever Caitlin’s foot. It often reflects Lucas’s frame of mind — either of elation or depression (see pp.14, 36, 42, 56, 142, 163, 175, 234, 277).

Fire permeates the narrative

- Fire has destroyed what Lucas has tried to save, but symbolically it has destroyed the innocence of both Caitlin and Lucas (p.21)
- Benoît is often associated with the image of fire (p.74)
- Lucas walks up the hill with his blood ‘banging in his head’. His ‘head felt as if it had caught fire, like a flaming torch’ (p.77)
- Mrs. Beigne burns all the evidence relating to her father’s activism (p.92); reinforced by the way she lights a cigarette (p.130)
- Caitlin is surrounded by candles and ‘as she moved, the flames moved with her’ (p.157)
- Fire is suggested for purification (p.171) but it really means destruction
- Benoît sets fire to the tyre dump as a violent reaction to finding out Caitlin is a ‘filthy Jew’ (p.208)

- The fire in the smithy (p.230)
- Fire, falling and the chainsaw: the narrative's motifs coalesce when the car falls, catches fire (p.232) and Lucas cuts Caitlin's leg with the chainsaw (p.235)
- Finally, Caitlin's severed foot is destroyed by fire (p.21).

Imagery

Much of the imagery in the novel surrounds Caitlin. Lucas likens her to fragile birds and animals as if to underline her vulnerability. He sees her through a series of similes:

- *like* a wounded rabbit (p.17)
- *like* a fox (p.132)
- *like* an animal that 'leapt and slid' (p.195)
- supple as a cat (p.79).

KEY IMAGES

Caitlin, from Lucas's viewpoint, is 'like a landing heron, moving its body weight backwards in order to slow its speed' (p.54). This is reinforced again when later he describes her 'as still as a bird by the water... [he] was completely enchanted by her...She coloured the landscape yellow' (p.199).

- Q** Why is the heron simile important? Is it because he sees the gracefulness of the dancer or because by the end of the narrative that grace will be taken from her forever?
- Q** Does this mark the point (p.54) at which 'he falls in love' with Caitlin?

Imagery that refers to Lucas himself

- At the point of his loss of innocence Nadine's 'hand moved *like* a scorpion' (p.29)
- 'Nadine swept the hair onto the footpath in one smooth movement', sweeping away Lucas's innocence (p.30)
- As he bends to 'straighten a few blocks of wood that looked unstable'... in the woodpile, one is dislodged and 'the whole lot keeled over' (p.193). This metaphor reveals what is happening in Lucas's life. He understands that violence sets off a chain reaction but his arguments 'to prove that refugees would be out of place in the presbytery...had collapsed with the woodpile' (p.194).