The Shock of the Fall
A reading group guide

INTRODUCTION

There are books you can’t stop reading, which keep you up all night.

There are books which let us into the hidden parts of life and make them vividly real.

There are books which, because of the sheer skill with which every word is chosen, linger in your mind for days.

The Shock of the Fall is all of these books.

‘A stunning novel. Ambitious and exquisitely realised, it's by turns shocking, harrowing and heartrending. The writing is so accomplished it's hard to believe it's a debut – it's clearly the work of a major new talent’ S J Watson

EXTRACT

‘I’ll tell you what happened because it will be a good way to introduce my brother. His name’s Simon. I think you’re going to like him. I really do. But in a couple of pages he’ll be dead. And he was never the same after that.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Filer is a registered mental health nurse. He is also a performance poet, contributing regularly to literary events across the UK. His work has been broadcast on television and radio. The Shock of the Fall is his first novel.
A CONVERSATION WITH NATHAN FILER

What inspired you to write *The Shock of the Fall*?

Only published authors get asked what inspired them. If you had peered into my bedroom / office / entire world three years ago, I reckon you'd have gone with *possessed*.

This was such a challenging story to write, and for the most part unsatisfying – a search in the dark, when I wasn't even sure what I was looking for. Then on page 248 Mum and Dad cough in their sleep and '...we both froze. Simon made a show of it, making his whole body rigid, only his eyes moving from side to side, grinning at me.'

And I think: That's it. That's real.

It's not a sentence anyone will stop to re-read, or copy out into their notebook. But it was the right sentence. I got to see him there.

I'm inspired by those moments; by the process.

Of course I also got to spend time in the company of Matthew Homes, who I grew to like enormously. Perhaps compelled is the right word. I felt *compelled* to tell his story.

This novel explores mental health but it also sensitively looks at the subject of grief and how it impacts one family. Was this something you had intended to explore in the novel, as well as the way we, as a society, handle the subject of grief?

I knew that I was going to kill Simon, so I suppose it should have been obvious. But no. I never expected grief to be such a big part of the story. I think this is a good example of how characters must lead the way.

I kill Simon Homes in chapter one, so of course there will be grieving in chapter two, perhaps a few more paragraphs of grief in three, then a meaningful flashback in chapter seven. It isn't unreasonable to plan in this way. The cast are entirely fictional; someone has to call the shots. But it doesn't work because it isn't believable.

Susan Homes loses her son and her life is shattered by it. Not ruined for a couple of chapters. Shattered. There was never a time when it felt feasible to draw a line under her grief. So the grief stayed.

Is the character of Matthew based on anyone?

No.
On page 31, Matthew claims, ‘But that is what these people do – the Steves of this world – they all try and make something out of nothing. And they all do it for themselves.’ Is this a critique of mental health workers?

No. It is a critique of the Steves of this world.

Throughout the novel, you interweave images, letters, chapter headings and different fonts. What is the significance of this? Do you think these elements help in the understanding of the book?

It is central to the novel that Matthew is physically writing out his story, that this process takes time, happens in different locations, and that his life is continuing to move forwards as he writes about it. In the final chapter he sits at the computer for the last time, with all of his printouts and artwork beside him.

This is how I see the piece in my mind: The crumpled stack of Matt’s writing and drawings; the typewriter pages with their smudged ink; the letters from Denise; the words that Patricia cut up and stuck down with Pritt Stick. All left behind in Hope Road Day Centre, on a table in the dark – waiting to be found.

The problem, as my publisher explained, is that this can’t be stocked in Waterstones. The book in your hands is our best effort at a compromise.

On page 206, Matthew notes, ‘We walked through the tunnel, separating Crazy Crazy NutsNuts Ward from the general wards’. Is this description an attempt, on Matthew’s part, to make light of the situation?

Yes. But then – he’s allowed, isn’t he? Another example is in his letter to Aaron and Jenny. Or is it Gemma? ‘Please forgive me if I got it wrong. Not making excuses, but I am a schizophrenic.’

In my capacity as a nurse / human being I never use the word schizophrenia. I say: a person with schizophrenia. It’s a subtle distinction, but an important one. I agonised over that line, but resolved to go with it because it sounded right for Matt.

Matthew repeatedly implies that his mother is ‘mad’. What is the difference between Matthew’s ‘madness’ and his mother’s? Was there an intention when writing The Shock of the Fall, to confront the stigma around ‘madness’?

What is the Danish for déjà vu? Here’s an email exchange I’ve just had:

**DANISH TRANSLATOR:** Matt says several times that she [his mother] is mad, but I’m not sure whether he means it literally ... Is she mentally ill like him, or is it “just” a depression? In Danish there’s many synonyms for mad, and I’m not sure whether to translate it with: insane, crazy, mentally ill. What would you prefer?
ME: It's a good question. Matt's first reference to his mother being “mad” is deliberately ambiguous. It can be taken literally, but by Matt's own recognition with the second reference (p. 26) he has yet to demonstrate her madness. Besides, we don't yet know whether we can trust Matthew's account. It is only as the story unfolds that we come to realise quite how poorly Susan is.

I think you are right that it is a depression that she suffers from, with anxiety and grief and all the other things that make illness so hard to categorise.

Mad is a useful word because it is informal but not terribly offensive. It is a word that nurses use – often sympathetically – behind the closed door of the office, and a word that patients might well use to describe themselves. But it is not a word that would ever appear in an official document.

We need an informal, vaguely ambiguous term that isn't too controversial but isn't too stuffy, and is in keeping with what a nineteen year old might say.

(I'll wait and see what they come back with...)

Regarding the stigma of mental illness, I set out to challenge this only insofar as I set out to make the characters as real as I could. Matthew is funny and humble and perceptive and stoic and brave. He is also conflicted, damaged and angry. A pernicious disease shapes so much of his life, yet it singularly fails to define him.

Of course it fails to define him.

That won't surprise anyone who has known mental illness, but it might surprise those who have known it only through fiction and the media.

What would you like the reader to take away from your novel?

A desire to share it.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss Matthew’s relationship with his parents. How does it change throughout the novel?

2. Why does Matthew need to tell his story? Is the act of writing a cathartic process?

3. How does Matthew portray life in the psychiatric ward? Were you shocked by any of the descriptions?

4. What is Nanny Noo’s role in the novel?

5. Discuss Matthew’s comment on page 275, ‘I guess there’s a Use By date when it comes to blaming your parents for how messed up you are’.

6. In Matthew’s invitation to Aaron and Jenny, he writes ‘I’m really sorry if I’ve got your name wrong. Part of me thinks it’s Gemma. Please forgive me if I got it wrong. Not making excuses, but I am a schizophrenic.’ Is this an indication that Matthew has come to terms with his illness? Why does he joke about it?

7. How did the novel make you feel? Would you recommend it?

8. Did you have much of an insight into schizophrenia before reading the novel? Has it made you want to find out more about mental illness?