

# The Fall of Princes

While We Were Dancing:  
A Note from the Author



Questions for Discussion





WHILE WE WERE DANCING

## A Note from the Author



**I**t was the 1980s when the lights in the vast, unformed, and limitless space of our young lives went out. We had arrived in New York City, college over, and most of us had no idea how we got there or what to do with no one to judge our performance. There was no grade point average. There was only this, this being, this relentless freedom, and the fear that came with not being told what to do.

Then the spotlight hit the mirrored disco ball, and it beckoned us, called us from the drudgery of our first jobs, our first awful apartments, and we found ourselves in the most marvelous city on earth in the most marvelous time that ever was.

And the pulsing music began, and we moved with the music, and the music and the lights and the throbbing bass took hold of us and of our bodies, and they did not let go for a decade, and that was our lives; we knew who we were as long as the music played, and we hoped that it would never stop. In fact, we believed it never would. We spent the nights searching for our sexuality. And the drab jobs we went to each morning were only what we did when we had kissed the revolving moon goodnight and gone home to the drab apartments to hang up the sparkling clothes and sleep for three hours before we put on the sensible suits to go and do whatever it was we did to earn the money to pay the piper.

We did have jobs, of course. We went to them. Our parents were very proud. And relieved. So we made sure to do our jobs well, to live by day beyond reproach, our shirts pressed, our faces shaven, our spreadsheets and media reports flawless. We called home on Sundays, we wrote thank-you notes, we were perfect angels, until we heard that bass line, until the first dimple of that fractured color from the giant disco ball caught our eye, and then we were demons for what we called fun. The money we got paid went for clothes we couldn't afford and drugs we believed were not bad for us. On the dance floor, classes mingled, the famous and the obscure, drag queens and bankers, and we could

tell, as we danced at four in the morning, our desks waiting four hours away, that society was losing its grip, and we laughed about that too.

*What's wrong?* screamed the headlines. *What's wrong with society?* And shamefaced, coming home at five so drunk we couldn't pronounce our own addresses, in the company of somebody whose name we already couldn't remember, we could have answered, *You want to know what's wrong with society? We are.*

Still, despite all appearances, we believed we were good people. We didn't steal or murder, at least not in the conventional sense. We worked hard. We were faithful to our friends. But we were in our midtwenties and making more money already than our fathers ever dreamed of. And so we lived lavishly, without thought, without fear.

It all seemed so easy and so harmless. And it was fun. I have to repeat that. It was fun.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't so much fun anymore. First came hints that a disease was about in our land, and then it became full-blown AIDS, and suddenly the lights went out and the disco ball stopped spinning and the party was over. Just like that.

In *The Fall of Princes*, I wanted to look back to that time and to acknowledge the signposts, the tsunami of money that made us feel invincible, the dance of death under

the spinning, flashing lights. These are the markers of my generation.

Looking back, I see that many are dead and lost, and those who remain, the living, they have never recovered from the great fall from the mighty heights. Their lives go on, but they have been forever changed. The loveliness of love will be forever fraught, weighted with the guilt of not dying. They will always be dialing phone numbers in their heads that no one will ever answer.

It was a generation, a whole generation of bright young men and women who thought there was no more tomorrow, only more of today, an infinite expansion of wanting and an infinite answer of getting.

It occurred to them too late, far too late, that what they thought was inevitable was not even remotely possible. And so they fell, their lives a neverending plunge. I know. I was one of them.

## Questions for Discussion



1. Though created as a novel, *The Fall of Princes* is constructed in the form of stories that are interconnected by the reappearance of key characters and by the forward progression of events. Do you feel that author Robert Goolrick has succeeded in shaping these stories into a narrative that feels whole and fully connected? Why or why not? What other novels have you read that use the same construction?

2. In his previous novels, Goolrick performed a tightrope act in creating characters who are deeply flawed and who must earn the reader's sympathy if the narrative is to succeed. Do you think he has accomplished this feat once again in *The Fall of Princes*? Why or why not?

3. Goolrick has commented widely on the intent of his writing: to present a story of revelation and redemption in which the characters come to understand how their lives took a wrong turn and then set out to redeem themselves. Do you feel that by the end of this novel, Rooney, the focus of *The Fall of Princes*, truly understands the willfulness and excess of his early life? In what way(s) do you see redemption figuring into his life at the end?

4. The author has described the main character in the novel as a young man who “flies too high and falls too fast, an Icarus with no name.” Why do you think comparing this character, Rooney, to the ill-fated Icarus of Greek legend is apt?

5. Goolrick has further said that it is not the character’s fall that fascinates him as much as the rise that comes after the fall, a rise in which he is changed forever, “changed from something dazzling and rich and powerful into something ordinary and anonymous and proud.” Discuss whether or not this statement presents an accurate picture of Rooney at the end of the novel.

6. Many critics have described *The Fall of Princes* as an “eighties novel” and have compared it to Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, as well as to the films *Wall Street* (1987) and *The Wolf of Wall*

*Street* (2013). What these books and films have in common is their focus on the hedonistic excesses of that era, and perhaps the section of Goolrick's novel that best encapsulates that flamboyant period is the chapter titled "One Reason I Don't Go to the Beach Anymore." What are some of the characteristics of that "excess" that you see in that story? Do you think such excess is playing out again in this era, or is it truly a thing of the past? Why?

7. In the chapter "The Eleven-Foot Hooker Walks the Walk," Holly, a transvestite street walker, tells Rooney, with whom she has fallen in love, "the greatest sin is to love somebody and not tell them" (page 272). Do you think there is any truth in that statement? Who do you think Rooney loves, and do you think he has ever "told them"?

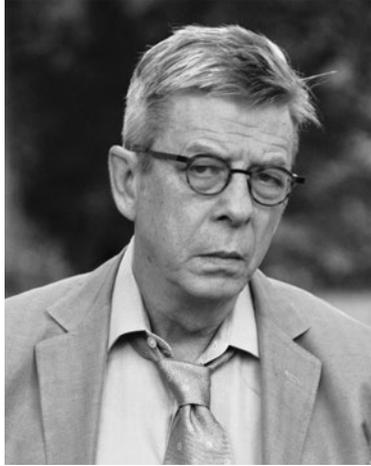
8. Rooney's parents figure only marginally in his story, and he often seems to feel that they either are to blame for his corruption or should have done a better job in preparing him for the fall he has taken. How do you feel about his parents? Could they have tried to help him? Should they? Would he have let them?

9. During the course of the novel, the characters become aware of AIDS. When one of the "princes," Harrison Seacroft IV, contracts the disease, he commits suicide rather than

face its ravages, and for a moment the novel's narrator is forced to reflect on his own lifestyle and to wonder if he, too, might fall victim to this new scourge. But then he decides that it is not something that he can worry about, saying, "It was an age in which bad behavior was not only allowed, but encouraged and rewarded" (page 157). Do you think that "bad behavior" ended with the 1980s, or do you see it in today's society? If it still exists, is it different, and how has it changed?

10. Given Rooney's great success in the financial world, his high level of education (he earned an MBA at Wharton), and his obvious delight with material possessions, do you think it is realistic that he would end up working as a clerk in a bookstore? Why or why not? And why do you think the author chose that occupation as the one Rooney would choose?

ANDREW WATKINS



Robert Goolrick is the author of a memoir, *The End of the World as We Know It*, and two previous novels, *Heading Out to Wonderful* and *A Reliable Wife*, the latter a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. He lives in Virginia.