



# READING GUIDE

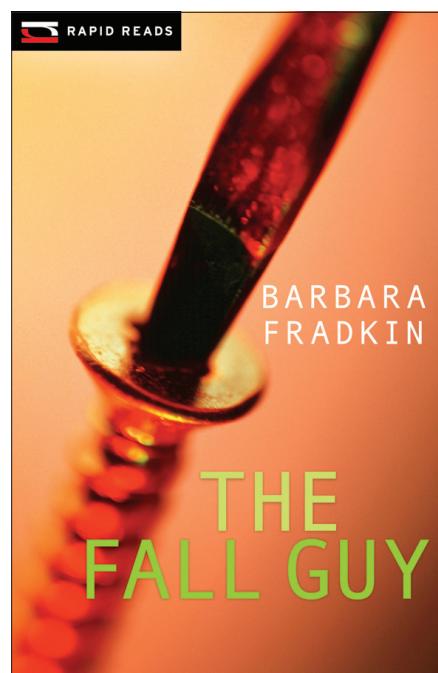
## THE FALL GUY BARBARA FRADKIN

Reading level: 4.0

Interest level: Adult

Themes: mystery, murder, family issues

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### Summary

When Jeffrey Wilkins's wife falls through the railing of a deck that Cedric O'Toole built, all hell breaks loose. The wealthy man sues O'Toole, claiming the deck he built was unsafe. Except O'Toole, a handyman with a penchant for perfectionism, knows that's impossible.

O'Toole drives out to the Wilkins property to examine his supposedly defective deck. There, he discovers evidence that has been overlooked in the investigation: somebody changed the screws, weakening the railing spindles. Wilkins arrives, and blames O'Toole for his poor workmanship—but O'Toole is pretty sure Wilkins did the deed himself. However, with no plans, no inspection report, no proof of his workmanship—and no friends in the area who'll vouch for him—O'Toole realizes he's between a rock and a hard place.

On his way to the police station to tell his side of the story, a powerful car runs O'Toole off the road and into a river. The noise stamp tells O'Toole it's an old Ford V8. When the local tow-truck driver mentions Wilkins's wife had just such a truck, and had passed it along to her college-aged son Daniel, Wilkins is again cast in a suspicious light. Except it doesn't make sense. Why would Wilkins go to the trouble of borrowing his stepson's car? If he had wanted to off O'Toole, he could have done it with any number of vehicles.

Now O'Toole suspects Daniel of tampering with the railing in hopes his stepfather would fall through. The kids had stood to inherit a lot of money if Jeffrey Wilkins died. It made perfect sense.

O'Toole rigs up a recording device and heads to Wilkins's property. He wants to catch the kids' conversation, and in so doing, prove his innocence. During his stakeout he learns that it was Lori-Anne's daughter, Bethany, who unscrewed the deck rails in hopes that Jeffrey would plunge to his death. When O'Toole is caught spying, a terrifying chase leads him straight into the hands of the police, where he turns over his recording—and solves the mystery.



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### Questions for Discussion

1. O'Toole's mom wanted him to be a doctor. Why do parents put these expectations on their kids? What secret (or not-so-secret) expectations did you grow up with?
2. O'Toole likes to build, tinker, and invent things. What hobbies do you enjoy?
3. Jeffrey Wilkins's wife is first described as a "tiny blond who flitted around inside the house like a trapped chickadee." How is this stereotypical description effective in establishing the character inside the reader's mind?
4. Although most of his jobs are completed without incident, O'Toole does take a risk when he builds structures without permits or plans. It's the same way a lot of small-time contractors operate. As you see it, should he conduct his business differently? Explain.
5. Explain the meaning of the terms *criminal negligence* and *manslaughter*.
6. In chapter 3, O'Toole chooses not to answer one of the police officer's questions: "I said nothing. Sometimes that's a good thing." What does he mean by this? When has it been advantageous for you to say nothing?
7. A simile is a literary device that makes a comparison using the words "like" or "as." Here's an example of a simile from chapter 5, where Wilkins discovers O'Toole on his property: "He steamed around the edge of the house like a bull on a charge, all six feet four inches and three hundred pounds of him." How does this simile enhance the scene?
8. O'Toole's Aunt Penny suspects Wilkins was jealous of the friendship his wife showed toward O'Toole while he was working on the couple's deck. She thinks this might have been sufficient motive to kill his wife. What other books or movies have you encountered where one partner's jealousy drives him or her to commit a crime?
9. Not many people turn up at Lori-Anne Wilkins's funeral—perhaps because Jeff Wilkins had kept her shut away in their home, away from community interaction. Her eulogy, delivered by the minister, is unoriginal and lacks depth. As a path for self-exploration, or as part of a therapeutic program, people are sometimes asked to write their own eulogies. Write yours. How do you want to be remembered?
10. How does the author make Jeffrey Wilkins into such an unlikable character? Find details from the story to support your reasoning.
11. O'Toole isn't a fan of technology. He reflects that TV, music and computers take us away from the real world—and besides, "old parts don't fit new things." Do you agree that technology is a drag? Weigh the benefits and drawbacks of technology.
12. When O'Toole is caught spying on the Wilkins property the night of the funeral, he reflects that the youngsters are now even more dangerous than ever because they'd gotten in over their heads. Have you ever found this to be true in the real world? Explain.
13. A number of police officers descend on the local detachment as the search for Wilkins's stepchildren gets underway. O'Toole observes that many of them "acted like they'd seen trouble coming a mile off." As you see it, why do humans have this tendency to be all-knowing, even if it's not authentic?



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14. In chapter 14, O'Toole listens to the officers as they discuss Lori-Anne's life: "I didn't like listening to them picking people apart like this. People screw up. They want things and they don't know how to get them. I was no better." What do these observations tell us about O'Toole's character?
15. When it comes to light that the kids have been apprehended, O'Toole reflects that "sometimes people just find themselves in a dark place they never planned on." Do you agree with this message—that all of us have the potential to do terrible things? Explain.
16. Why do you think the author decided to end the book in this way? As you see it, what's next for O'Toole?



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