Catherine grew up in Lewiston, a small town in upstate New York, not far from Niagara Falls (the "Falls" referred to in the title). The Niagara River, she points out, is visible from both Canada and America. To the casual onlooker, the river appears calm, but the acute observer senses the dangerous eddies and currents beneath its surface. Young Catherine was clearly the latter, and even at the tender age of four, had an uncanny knack for asking the unanswerable question—or the question that no one wanted to answer. In a series of vignettes, the reader is introduced to the residents of Lewiston who field precocious Catherine's inquiries. On the front-line are her parents, Mr. and Mrs. McClure, who were blessed with Catherine's birth late in their marriage. Mrs. McClure was a fascinating departure from the typical 1950s housewife. She used the stove only to warm mittens, dodged drop-in visitors by "hitting the floor," had an insatiable appetite for history, and was meticulous in her fashion sense. Mr. McClure—kind and hardworking—owned the local pharmacy. While the McClures fostered Catherine's inquisitive nature, her excessive energy drove them to solicit a local physician's advice. His prescription: put her to work. And so began Catherine's childhood career—accompanying Roy, an employee of the pharmacy, on his deliveries. In the opening chapter, a snowstorm prevents Roy from getting Catherine, only six years old, home safely after a party. He takes her to Niagara Falls for the night. They dine on "Sassy-fried" chicken; Catherine drinks Shirley Temples and eats Maraschino cherries. She didn't imagine that a world even existed where everyone looked like Roy. When Roy brings Catherine home the next morning, a policeman and a tearful Mrs. McClure greet him. Catherine's gleeful recounting of the night's adventure only inflame the situation. What's the big deal, Catherine wants to know, and why is everyone being so rude to Roy? Roy left an indelible impression on Catherine, and it is in his presence
that she begins to suspect that reality is relative, and that life deals everyone a different hand. But Catherine also recognizes that one immutable fact is that everyone needs medicine, even Marilyn Monroe. When the film star is in town filming a movie, Catherine and Roy deliver a prescription to her hotel room. Catherine is shocked that the actress parades around in her slip, stands too close to Roy, and has a bad dye job. She thinks Marilyn looks trashy. Roy, obviously, thinks otherwise. Again, Catherine has a hunch that things just aren't what they seem.

As Catherine comes of age, asking difficult questions no longer suffices—she wants answers. The double standards embedded in the town's social order, and in Catholicism, enrage her. Her genuinely heartfelt efforts to figure out life within the boundaries of "acceptable" behavior either go unnoticed, such as her attempt to canonize Warty, or are altogether used against her. Engaging in spirited debates within Mother Agnes's classroom earns her the nickname "doubting Thomas."

While Catherine has a ferociously questioning attitude during her teenage years, the author manages to maintain throughout her memoir a gentle yet vigorous tone as her perception of the world begins to crystallize. In the powerful and ironic scene for which this memoir was titled, Catherine discovers a painful truth about Father Rod, the first man to respect Catherine as a woman, to embrace rather than squash her vigorous questions. Does this revelation represent the ultimate betrayal, or just another example of the duplicity and moral ambiguity ever present in life? One only assumes that that is the very question that drove Catherine Gildiner to craft such a probing and eloquent retelling of her childhood in Lewiston, a small town in upstate New York, not too far from Niagara Falls.
ABOUT CATHERINE GILDINER

Catherine Gildiner has been in private practice in clinical psychology for nearly twenty years. She writes a monthly advice column for Chatelaine, a popular Canadian magazine, and contributes regularly to countless other Canadian newspapers and magazines. She lives in Toronto with her husband and three sons.
1. Discuss what makes a good memoir. How did *Too Close to the Falls* incorporate these qualities?

2. How did you feel about Catherine's childhood "career"? Did it place her in situations that were inappropriate for a child of her age? Elaborate.

3. How do you think being exposed to these realities affected her?

4. If Roy were to describe young Catherine McClure, what do you think he would say? What about Mother Agnes? Father Rodwick?

5. Early on in the book, the reader understands that Catherine feels she is a misfit. How much of that can be attributed to her natural character? Should her parents have made more of an attempt to force Catherine to conform? More importantly, is it wrong for a child to feel "different" from everyone else? Can it build character?

6. Catherine struggles throughout *Too Close to the Falls* with double standards and issues of moral hypocrisy. In which scenarios did you find these themes especially pronounced?

7. Did Catherine experience a loss of innocence? If so, when? Do you remember a particular moment in your life that contributed to a "loss of innocence"? Is that moment an unavoidable part of growing older?

8. Is the spirit of rebellion evident in Catherine's character simply innate in certain individuals, or does growing up among particularly restrictive institutions (a strict Catholic school, a small conservative town, for instance) incite rebellion where there may otherwise have been none? Are there any people or institutions that you rebelled against as a teenager, but later embraced?

9. Consider the women Catherine comes into contact with: her mother, Miranda, Marie Sweeney, Marilyn Monroe, Warty, and Mother Agnes. What did she learn from each of them?

10. How did you react to the last scene in the book, the evening that Catherine spent with Father Rodrick? Was it surprising that Catherine—the adult looking back—seemed not to be judging the priest's actions? Do you think that the time they spent together was inappropriate? Might she have drawn something positive from that night?

11. "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in."—Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*

12. If you could choose that significant moment in *Too Close to the Falls*, what would it be? What about in your own life?