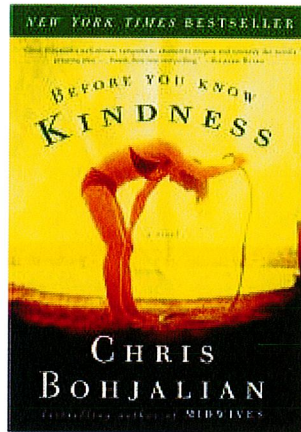


Before You Know Kindness

by Chris Bohjalian



About the Book

For ten summers, the Seton family --- all three generations --- met at their country home in New England to spend a week together playing tennis, badminton, and golf, and savoring gin and tonics on the wraparound porch to celebrate the end of the season. In the eleventh summer, everything changed. A hunting rifle with a single cartridge left in the chamber wound up in exactly the wrong hands at exactly the wrong time, and led to a nightmarish accident that put to the test the values that unite the family --- and the convictions that just may pull it apart.

Before You Know Kindness is a family saga that is timely in its examination of some of the most important issues of our era, and timeless in its exploration of the strange and unexpected places where we find love.

As he did with his earlier masterpiece, **Midwives**, Chris Bohjalian has written a novel that is rich with unforgettable characters --- and absolutely riveting in its page-turning intensity.

Discussion Guide

1. **Before You Know Kindness** opens with a blunt, clinical description of Spencer's injuries. Is the preface a purely objective report or does it begin to develop some of the general themes of the novel? What does it convey about the Setons and their way of life?
2. Spencer's speech pp. 16-19 and Nan's descriptions of his behavior pp. 27-29 offer varying insights into his personality. Does the tone of the writing influence your impressions of him? What specific details bring out the differences between Spencer's self-perceptions and the way others might view him?

3. How does Bohjalian portray FERAL and the people who work there? Do you think this is an accurate portrait of the animal-rights movement? What reasons might Bohjalian have for modifying their attitudes and activities?
4. Sara thinks, "The problem with Nan-and with John and Catherine, and yes, Spencer when they were all together-was that they could never just . . . be." [p. 38] In what ways is this attributable to Nan and Richard Seton's marriage and the atmosphere in which John and Catherine grew up? Why does Spencer, whose background is so different, demonstrate the same quality?
5. How persuasive are John's explanations of why he took up hunting? What does the argument that hunting "is the most merciful way humans had to manage the herd" [p. 73] imply about the relationship between humans and the natural world? Does John's anguish after the accident alter his view of hunting in general? Do you think that it should?
6. In talking to Willow about Catherine and Spencer, Charlotte says, "Sometimes I get pissed at both of them. I don't think Mom would be the way she is if Dad wasn't this public wacko." [p. 116] Are Charlotte's complaints typical of a teen-ager or does Spencer's profession put an unusual burden on her? Is her criticism of her mother's flirting well-founded?
7. Bohjalian suggests several times that Charlotte may have subconsciously wanted to injure her father. She herself says, "There were lots of reasons for pointing Uncle John's weapon at what was moving at the edge of the garden. . . ." [p. 133] and acknowledges that others might think, "*She was just doing it to get your attention.* . . ." [p. 135] Is this speculation supported by the way Bohjalian describes the accident? By Charlotte's subsequent behavior and her conversations with Willow?
8. The accident and Spencer's permanent disability provide FERAL with an irresistible opportunity to make their case against hunting. Is their decision to bring a lawsuit totally reprehensible? Do the depictions of Dominique, Paige, and Keenan undermine the validity of their case?
9. Self-interest plays a part not only in FERAL's reaction to the tragedy. Are you sympathetic to John's concerns that the lawsuit will effect his professional reputation, as well as his fear that "for as long as he lived he would be an imbecile in the eyes of his daughter" [p. 142]? How did you feel as Catherine vacillates in the second half of the novel between wanting to help her husband and wanting to leave him?
10. "Nan was a particular mystery to [Sara]. Exactly what was it that she didn't want to think about?" [p. 176] Were you puzzled by Nan as well? By the end of the novel, did you feel you had a better understanding of her?
11. What would have happened if Charlotte and Willow had not confessed to drinking and smoking pot on the night of the shooting? Were you relieved that Spencer decided not to pursue the lawsuit?
12. Although the plot revolves around Spencer, at various point in the novel each character moves to center stage to comment on the events and their repercussions. Which members of the family most appealed to you and why? How successful is Bohjalian at capturing their individual points of view and personalities? Did your opinions of them change as the novel progressed?
13. Does Bohjalian present both sides of the controversy in an evenhanded way? Which characters appear to embody his

own point of view? What is the ultimate message of **Before You Know Kindness**?

14. Do you think that the issues Bohjalian examines in **Before You Know Kindness** are more important (or more relevant) than the topics he explored in (for example) **Midwives** or **The Law of Similars** or **Trans-Sister Radio**?

15. Why did Bohjalian use a passage from **The Secret Garden** as one of the epigraphs? In what ways is the children's classic relevant to **Before You Know Kindness**?

16. Why did Bohjalian take his title from the poem, "Kindness," by Naomi Shihab Nye, a portion of which serves as the other epigraph?

Author Bio

Chris Bohjalian is the critically acclaimed author of 16 books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS, SKELETONS AT THE FEAST, THE DOUBLE BIND and MIDWIVES. His novel MIDWIVES was a number one *New York Times* bestseller and a selection of Oprah's Book Club. His work has been translated into more than 25 languages, and three of his novels have become movies (SECRETS OF EDEN, MIDWIVES and PAST THE BLEACHERS). He lives in Vermont with his wife and daughter.

Critical Praise

"Once again, Chris Bohjalian dares to tackle the complexities --- and complacencies --- of modern society at its most vulnerable spot, where the personal clashes with the political, where the private is forced to go public. And once again, he forges a drama that will keep his readers on the edge of their seats...perhaps their conscience as well."

Before You Know Kindness

by Chris Bohjalian

Publication Date: October 5, 2004

Genres: Fiction, Literary Fiction

Hardcover: 448 pages

Publisher: Shaye Areheart Books

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ISBN-13: 9781400047451

Before You Know Kindness

Chris Bohjalian, 2004

Random House

448 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781400031658

Summary

Chris Bohjalian, bestselling author of *Midwives*, presents his most ambitious and multi-layered novel to date—examining wildly divisive issues in today's America with his trademark emotional heft and spellbinding storytelling skill.

On a balmy July night in New Hampshire a shot rings out in a garden, and a man falls to the ground, terribly wounded. The wounded man is Spencer McCullough, the shot that hit him was fired—accidentally?—by his adolescent daughter Charlotte. With this shattering moment of violence, Chris Bohjalian launches the best kind of literate page-turner: suspenseful, wryly funny, and humane.

More

Every summer the extended Setons family gathers at the family homestead in New Hampshire, where Nan Seton, age seventy, presides over what her children and grandchildren jokingly call "The Seton New England Boot Camp." The hectic schedule of golf and tennis and swimming at the club, nature hikes before dinner, and badminton on the lawn in the waning hours of daylight is disrupted one Memorial Day weekend when Nan's son-in-law, Spencer, corrals the family into planting a garden.

An avid animal-rights activist, Spencer envisions tables laden with fresh fruits and vegetables and a new appreciation on the part of his skeptical extended family of the virtues of vegetari-anism. But a horrible accident in the garden exposes deeper divides within the family and forces them all to reexamine their loyalties to one another. (*Both synopses from the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1960
- Where—White Plains, New York, USA
- Education—Amherst College
- Awards—Anahid Literary Award, 2000; New England Book Award, 2002
- Currently—lives in Lincoln, Vermont

Christopher Aram Bohjalian, who goes by the pen name Chris Bohjalian, is an American novelist. Bohjalian is the author of 15 novels, including *New York Times* bestsellers *Midwives*, *Secrets of Eden*, *The Law of Similars*, *Before You Know Kindness*, *The Double Bind*, *Skeletons at the Feast*, and *The Night Strangers*.

Bohjalian is the son of Aram Bohjalian, who was a senior vice president of the New York advertising agency Romann & Tannenholtz. Chris Bohjalian graduated summa cum laude from Amherst College, where he was a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. In the mid-1980s, he worked as an account representative for J. Walter Thompson advertising agency in New York.

He and his wife lived in a co-op in Brooklyn until March 1986, when the two were riding in a taxicab in which the driver refused to let them out of the car for 45 minutes, ignoring all traffic lights and stop signs. Around midnight, the driver dropped them off at a near-deserted street in front of a crack house, where the police were conducting a raid and Bohjalian and his wife were forced to drop to the ground for their protection. The incident prompted the couple to move from Brooklyn; Bohjalian said, "After it was all over, we just thought, 'Why do we live here?'" A few days later, the couple read an ad in *The New York Times* referencing the "People's Republic of Vermont," and in 1987 the couple moved to Lincoln, Vermont.

Early career

After buying their house, Bohjalian began writing weekly columns for local newspaper and magazine about living in the small town, which had a population of about 975 residents. *The Concord Monitor* said of Bohjalian during this period, "his immersion in community life and family, Vermont-style, has allowed him to develop into a novelist with an ear and empathy for the common man." Bohjalian continued the column for about 12 years, writing about such topics as his own daily life, fatherhood and the transformation of America. The column has run in the *Burlington Free Press* since 1992. Bohjalian has also written for such magazines as *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest* and the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*.

Bohjalian's first novel, *A Killing in the Real World*, was released in 1988. Almost two decades after it was released, Bohjalian said of the book, "It was a train wreck. I hadn't figured things out yet." His third novel, *Past the Bleachers*, was released in 1992 and adapted as a Hallmark Channel television movie in 1995.

In 1998, Bohjalian wrote his fifth book, *Midwives*, a novel focusing on rural Vermont midwife Sibyl Danforth, who becomes embroiled in a legal battle after one of her patients died following an emergency Caesarean section. The novel was critically acclaimed and was selected by Oprah Winfrey as the October 1998 selection of her Oprah's Book Club, which helped push the book to great financial success. It became a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller. Victoria Blewer has often described her husband as having "a crush" on the Sybil Danforth character. In 2001, the novel was adapted into a Lifetime Movie Network television film starring Sissy Spacek in the lead role. Spacek said the Danforth character appealed to her because "the heart of

the story is my character's inner struggle with self-doubt, the solo road you travel when you have a secret."

Later career

Bohjalian followed *Midwives* with the 1999 novel *The Law of Similars*, about a widower attorney suffering from nameless anxieties who starts dating a woman who practices alternative medicine. The novel was inspired by Bohjalian's real-life visit to a homeopath in an attempt to cure frequent colds he was catching from his daughter's day care center. Bohjalian said of the visit, "I don't think I imagined there was a novel in homeopathy, however, until I met the homeopath and she explained to me the protocols of healing. There was a poetry to the language that a patient doesn't hear when visiting a conventional doctor." The protagonist, a father, is based in part on Bohjalian himself, and his four-year-old daughter is based largely on Bohjalian's daughter, who was three when he was writing the book. Liz Rosenberg of *The New York Times* said the novel shared many similarities with *Midwives* but that it paled in comparison; Rosenberg said, "Unlike its predecessor, it fails to take advantage of Bohjalian's great gift for creating thoughtful fiction featuring characters in whom the reader sustains a lively interest." Megan Harlan of *The Boston Phoenix* described it as "formulaic fiction" and said Bohjalian focused too much on creating a complex plot and not enough of complex characterizations. *The Law of Similars*, like *Midwives*, made the New York Times bestsellers list.

He won the New England Book Award in 2002, and in 2007 released "The Double Bind," a novel based on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

In 2008, Bohjalian released *Skeletons at the Feast*, a love story set in the last six months of World War II in Poland and Germany. The novel was inspired by an unpublished diary written by German citizen Eva Henatsch from 1920 to 1945. The diary was given to Bohjalian in 1998 by Henatsch's grandson Gerd Krahn, a friend of Bohjalian, who had a daughter in the same kindergarten class as Bohjalian's daughter. Bohjalian was particularly fascinated by Henatsch's account of her family's trek west ahead of the Soviet Army, but he was not inspired to write a novel from it until 2006, when he read *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany*, Max Hastings' history of the final years of World War II. Bohjalian was struck not only by how often Henatsch's story mirrored real-life experiences, but also the common "moments of idiosyncratic human connection" found in both. *Skeletons of the Feast* was considered a departure for Bohjalian because it was not only set outside of Vermont, but set in a particular historical moment.

His 2010 novel, *Secrets of Eden*, was also a critical success, receiving starred reviews from three of the four trade journals (*Booklist*, *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*), as well as many newspapers and magazines. It debuted at # 6 on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

His next novel, *The Night Strangers*, published in 2011, represents yet another departure for Bohjalian. The is both a gothic ghost story and a taut psychological thriller.

He has written a weekly column for Gannett's Burlington Free Press since February 1992 called "Idyll Banter." His 1,000th column appeared in May 2011.

Personal comments

In a 2003 Barnes & Noble interview, Bohjalian offered up these personal comments:

I was the heaviest child, by far, in my second-grade class. My mother had to buy my pants for me at a store called the "Husky Boys Shop," and still she had to hem the cuffs up around my knees. I hope this experience, traumatizing as it was, made me at least marginally more sensitive to people around me.

I have a friend with Down syndrome, a teenage boy who is capable of remembering the librettos from entire musicals the first or second time he hears them. The two of us belt them out together whenever we're driving anywhere in a car. I am a pretty avid bicyclist. The other day I was biking alone on a thin path in the woods near Franconia Notch, New Hampshire, and suddenly before me I saw three bears. At first I saw only two, and initially I thought they were cats. Then I thought they were dogs. Finally, just as I was approaching them and they started to scurry off the path and into the thick brush, I understood they were bears. Bear cubs, to be precise. Which is exactly when their mother, no more than five or six feet to my left, reared up on her hind legs, her very furry paws and very sharp claws raised above her head in a gesture that an optimist might consider a wave and guy on a bike might consider something a tad more threatening. Because she was standing on a slight incline, I was eye level with her stomach—an eventual destination that seemed frighteningly plausible. I have never biked so fast in my life in the woods. I may never have biked so fast in my life on a paved road.

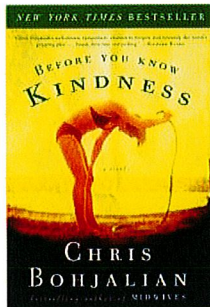
I do have hobbies—I garden and bike, for example—but there's nothing in the world that gives me even a fraction of the pleasure that I derive from hanging around with my wife and daughter.

He lives with his wife and daughter in Lincoln, Vermont, where he is active in the local church and the Vermont theater community—always off-stage, never on.

Writing style

Bohjalian novels often focus on a specific issue, such as homelessness, animal rights and environmentalism, and tend to be character-driven, revolving around complex and flawed protagonists and secondary characters. Bohjalian uses characteristics from his real life in his writings; in particular, many of his novels take place in fictional Vermont towns, and the names of real New Hampshire towns are often used throughout his stories. Bohjalian said, "Writers can talk with agonizing hubris about finding their voices, but for me, it was in Vermont that I discovered issues, things that matter to me." His novels also tend to center around ordinary people facing extraordinarily difficult situations resulting from unforeseen circumstances, often triggered by other parties. (From Wikipedia.)

She's happily married...
so is it ever worth it to
play with fire?



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Review

Before You Know Kindness

by Chris Bohjalian

Chris Bohjalian is no stranger to controversial subjects. In *TRANS-SISTER RADIO*, he addressed homosexuality and transsexuality. In *BUFFALO SOLDIER*, he tackled interracial adoption. And in *THE LAW OF SIMILARS*, the subject at hand was holistic medicine. In each of these, and in all of Bohjalian's novels, his art is subtle, graceful and thoughtful. *BEFORE YOU KNOW KINDNESS* is no exception to the literary realities that are the hallmarks of Bohjalian's writing. He balances --- seemingly effortlessly --- the two sides of the gun laws argument deftly, and he draws (once again) characters of great depth and dimension.

Three generations of the Seton family descend upon their country home in New England, as they have for a decade, to enjoy each other's company as the summer winds down. Nan Seton (matriarch of the family), her two children, their spouses, and their children fill the house with good conversation and healthy competition, despite their differences. This summer finds Catherine Seton restless and weary of her husband Spencer's activism on behalf of animals and vegetarians. John Seton is a secret hunter, fearful of telling his brother-in-law about his new extracurricular activity. The female cousins are tight, sweetly conspiratorial in an adolescent/pre-adolescent way. Family tensions abound under the surface and explode one tragic night when an unattended gun in John's car gets into the hands of Charlotte, a teenager.

What happens next is twofold: first, the initial unraveling of long-hewn relationships in the wake of near infidelity, physical disfigurement, familial silences and deceptions, and a threatened non-profit marketing campaign guaranteed to destroy all involved. And then, the finding of balance and peace that reunites all sectors of the family. How Bohjalian does it amazes me. Palpable tensions between siblings, spouses, and sisterly-cousins play themselves out on the pages amidst the propaganda of gun control and animal rights, without ever taking one side over another: in the arms argument and in the family arguments. In the end, it all just works out. As I said before, it's as if without effort, as if it was always known that it would work out.

Bohjalian has a rare talent. He tells stories packed with power in beautiful hushed tones -- almost whispers. Even the title, *BEFORE YOU KNOW KINDNESS*, implies all that has to transpire prior to good. This novel is all about the happenings that lead to the Seton family's ultimate contentment and happiness, and all that leads to the reader's ultimate contentment and happiness with a tale.

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Chris Bohjalian

Birth Date : 1960

Known As : Bohjalian, Christopher A.; Bohjalian, Christopher Aram

Place of Birth : United States, New York, White Plains

Nationality: American

Occupation : Novelist

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about this author

Awards:

Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection, 1998, for *Midwives*; Anahid Literary Award, Columbia Armenian Center, 2000; New England Book Award for fiction, New England Booksellers Association, 2002.

Personal Information:

Born August 12, 1960, in White Plains, NY; son of Aram (an advertising executive) and Annalee (a homemaker) Bohjalian; married Victoria Blewer (a photographer and artist), October 13, 1984; children: Grace. **Education:** Amherst College, B.A. (summa cum laude), 1982. **Politics:** "I imagine I have some. Generally, I vote Democratic." **Religion:** Episcopalian. **Memberships:** PEN, Phi Beta Kappa. **Addresses:** Home: Lincoln, VT. Agent: Arlynn Greenbaum, Authors Unlimited, 31 E. 32nd St., Ste. 300, New York, NY 10016; Dean Schramm, The Schramm Group, 4804 Laurel Canyon Blvd., Ste. 749, Sudio City, CA 91607. **E-mail:** chris@chrisbohjalian.com.

Career Information:

Burlington Free Press, Burlington, VT, book critic, beginning 1987, "Idyll Banter" columnist, 1992--; *Vermont Life* magazine, Montpelier, VT, book critic, beginning 1991, freelance journalist and novelist. New England Young Writers Conference at Bread Loaf, faculty member, 1991-92.

Writings:

NOVELS

- *A Killing in the Real World*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Hangman*, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Past the Bleachers*, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Water Witches*, University Press of New England (Hanover, NH), 1995.
- *Midwives*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The Law of Similars*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Trans-Sister Radio*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Buffalo Soldier*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Before You Know Kindness*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Double Bind*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2007.

- *Skeletons at the Feast*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2008
- *Secrets of Eden*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2010
- *The Night Strangers*, Crown Trade (New York, NY), 2011.

OTHER

- *Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 2003.

Also author of *Chris Bohjalian's Idyll Banter* Web log. Contributor to numerous periodicals, including *Reader's Digest*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Boston Globe Magazine*.

Media Adaptions:

Past the Bleachers was adapted for a Hallmark television movie in 1995; *Midwives* was adapted for the stage by Dana Yeaton, 2000, and by Lifetime cable channel for a TV movie; *Secrets of Eden*, Lifetime, 2012

Sidelights:

Chris Bohjalian has published a number of critically acclaimed novels, including *Midwives*, *The Double Bind*, *Skeletons at the Feast*, *Secrets of Eden*, and *The Night Strangers*. "The people in Bohjalian's novels are confronted with domestic tragedies and professional crises; many of his works focus on the aftermath of dramatic loss," observed *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor Booth Austin. "Bohjalian's works explore the ways in which social controversies play themselves out in the domestic arena."

Bohjalian once told *CA*: "I view myself fundamentally as a novelist. Although I am also a weekly newspaper columnist and freelance journalist, it is my novels that matter to me most. I have no particular agenda for my writing--especially my fiction--no particular goal. I write because it gives me enormous pleasure, and I can't imagine I'd be happy doing anything else."

Bohjalian published his first novel, a mystery titled *A Killing in the Real World*, in 1988, and followed that with *Hangman*, a ghost story. His third work, *Past the Bleachers*, which deals with a couple grieving for their eight-year-old son who died of leukemia, became a Hallmark television movie in 1995.

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer characterized *Water Witches*, Bohjalian's fourth book, as "a moving, life-affirming novel suffused with ecological wisdom." The plot centers on a Vermont ski lodge that wants to develop the wilderness that surrounds it. Environmentalists oppose the development, among them local residents who are the "witches" of the title (modern-day dowrsers who can find underground water with a forked stick). Bohjalian's protagonist and narrator, Scott Winston, is a transplanted New York lawyer who represents the interests of the developers. As Scott becomes more aware of the situation and is affected by the New England environment, however, his allegiance begins to shift. "With wit, insight and mordant irony," the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted, "Bohjalian charts Scott's metamorphosis from rationalistic materialist and skeptic to one who believes in higher powers and the interconnectedness of all life." Janet St. John, writing in *Booklist*, also praised *Water Witches*, observing that "Bohjalian manages . . . to retain a proper distance from his characters so that they become believable, realistic, and human without submitting to the author's political correctness."

Bohjalian's *Midwives* was selected by talk-show host and book-club maven Oprah Winfrey as one of her book-club picks. Again set in Vermont, the book tells the story of Sibyl Dansforth, an experienced midwife who performs a caesarean section on a woman who has stopped breathing to save her unborn infant. However, it turns out that the woman may not have been dead at the time, and Sibyl must go on trial for involuntary manslaughter. "The description of the nightmarish Caesarean . . . is harrowing; it is also the book's most effective passage," related Suzanne Berne for the *New York Times Book Review*. Narrated as a remembrance by Sibyl's grown daughter, an obstetrician, the novel details the course of Sibyl's trial and the inevitable conflicts it raises between midwifery and the mainstream medical community. Paula Harding of *Library Journal* praised Bohjalian as a "thorough writer," noting that the book is filled "with information about pregnancy and childbirth, and the characters are well developed, especially Sibyl and her trial lawyer." Michele Green of *People* called *Midwives* "a superbly crafted and astonishingly powerful novel." A reviewer for

Publishers Weekly commented that "readers will find themselves mesmerized by the irresistible momentum of the narrative and by Bohjalian's graceful and lucid, irony-laced prose."

In an online *BookBrowse* interview, Bohjalian commented: "I interviewed over sixty-five people while researching *Midwives*, including (of course) a great many midwives, nurse-midwives, and parents who'd had their children at home. That research was instrumental in all the 'birth' stories in the book, and in the development of the characters and their language." It was after the publication of *Midwives* that Bohjalian--until then a fairly obscure writer--got the call from Oprah Winfrey telling him she'd picked his novel for her book club. "I understood two things right away. All of a sudden I was on the same short list of writers of the caliber of Toni Morrison, Wally Lamb, and Alice Hoffman (all previous Oprah choices). I also understood that *Midwives* was going to sell a lot more copies, and it was the greatest professional blessing I could have," he told *Grand Rapids Press* reporter Curt Schleier.

In *The Law of Similars*, Bohjalian further explores the central theme of *Midwives*, the conflict between traditional and alternative forms of medicine. Homeopath Carissa Lake treats Vermont deputy state attorney Leland Fowler for asthma. Leland is not only cured, he is attracted to Carissa, the first woman he has been drawn to since the death of his wife. But when one of Carissa's patients dies and the man's wife demands a criminal investigation of Carissa, Leland must face the ethical conflict of whether or not he can fairly prosecute a woman with whom he is falling in love.

The Law of Similars drew a considerably less enthusiastic response from critics than *Midwives*. According to Pam Lambert of *People*: "Unlike *Midwives* ... which builds to a wrenching courtroom climax, this book ends with a disappointing whimper." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer remarked that the immorality of some of Leland's actions undercuts his appeal as a protagonist. Liz Rosenberg, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, found the characterizations flat compared to those in *Midwives* but concluded that "despite its flaws, *The Law of Similars* is fast-paced and absorbing."

Bohjalian subsequently produced two more novels that explore the edges of what is acceptable societally: *Trans-Sister Radio* and *The Buffalo Soldier*. The first, as Erica Jacobson wrote in the *Burlington Free Press*, "introduces school teacher Allison Banks, her teenage daughter, her ex-husband and the man who loves her while on his way to surgically becoming a woman." Reviewing *Trans-Sister Radio* in the *Brisbane Sunday Mail*, Robyn Garner noted: "There are dramatic changes in store for all--some expected, some coming out of left field--but they are approached with a refreshing level of honesty and integrity. All credit must go to Chris Bohjalian for this sensitively handled, thought-provoking piece of fiction. Fans of his earlier books ... will not be surprised to hear that there is nothing camp, overplayed or remotely stereotyped in his portrayal of Dana." According to *Lambda Book Report* contributor Susan Branch Smith, readers "will find a page-turner that sheds a mainstream light on a well-hidden part of America. And all of us can take hope from the life that Dana makes for herself in the face of intolerance and change."

"All of my books, at least my good ones, are fictional memoirs," Bohjalian told Jacobson. "It's an individual chronicling the seminal event in her life." Jacobson added, "For every hour [Bohjalian] spends writing, he spends another researching everything from school board meetings to state's attorneys. He interviewed at least thirty-five people for *Trans-Sister Radio*, traveled to Colorado to spend time with people going through gender reassignment surgery and sent the manuscript to [a woman] doctor ... who specializes in sex changes as well as once having been a man herself."

The Buffalo Soldier is a departure from Bohjalian's fictional memoir format. He writes it in the third person, with different sections showing the perspective of different characters. The book, again set in a Vermont town, centers on a couple who have lost their twin daughters to a flood. Struggling to work through their grief, Laura and Terry Sheldon decide to become foster parents, since Laura is unable to have more children. Into their home and their all-white community comes Alfred Benoit, a ten-year-old African American child who has been shunted from home to home and is consequently "secretive, shell-shocked, silent," in the words of *Book* reviewer Paul Evans, who added: "What elevates *The Buffalo Soldier* ... is the presence of young Alfred. As the adults in his newfound home fret, dissemble and nearly disintegrate, the boy becomes stronger and eventually comes into his own."

Alfred comes into his own in large part because of Laura's kindness and because, as Evans put it, "He is helped by a neighbor, an old man [named Paul Hebert] who, like Alfred, feels out of place in the community. He gives Alfred a book on the Buffalo Soldiers of the 1860s, black riders in the U.S. Cavalry. For Alfred, those riders become dream heroes."

inspirations. An experienced horseman himself, the old mentor even teaches Alfred to ride." In the meantime, the Sheldon family falls apart as Terry buries himself in his work as a state trooper and has a momentary desperate affair with a woman who becomes pregnant. Evans commented, "While Bohjalian isn't the page-turning storyteller that, say, Stephen King and Alice Hoffman are, he may be something rarer yet equally fine, a remarkably empathetic writer who cares sufficiently about his characters to invest them with genuine warmth, an almost tragic dimension that's rare in mainstream, accessible fiction. With this novel, he's again proved himself a valuable resource--an author of concern and attention."

Robin Vidimos, in a piece for the *Denver Post*, commented: "*The Buffalo Soldier* is a story that pulls at the reader's heart, but it would be nice to see Bohjalian stretch a little more. He's very good at getting into his characters' souls, but there is a sense, this time, that he could be telling a lot more about what makes them tick. He uses a combination of conflicts to drive his plot, it is tempting to wonder how the plot might have deepened if one of them, perhaps the extramarital affair, had been cut." Vidimos concluded, though, that the reader should find much to like in this latest novel, despite the fact that Bohjalian has decided to abandon quotation marks to denote speech.

Lynette Ingram, in a *Tennessean* book review, wrote: "Distributing the narrative among the perspectives of four major characters, Bohjalian weaves shadings of moral complexity into this richly textured novel. Interspersed with journal entries and correspondence from Captain George Rowe of the Buffalo Soldiers and his Comanche wife, the story of one family's problems expands to explore the wider concepts of unconventional alliances and reconfigured community." *Seattle Times* writer Nancy Pearl, however, judged that "Chris Bohjalian stumbles badly in his eighth novel... a coincidence-strewn, credulity-straining tale of a family's redemption from a devastating tragedy." Pearl found that "here even the main characters never seem fully realized, so that it is nearly impossible to feel empathy (or sympathy) for what they're going through." Philip Herter of the *Boston Herald* observed that "opting for a prescription of fresh air and wholesome exercise, *The Buffalo Soldier* raises more questions about race in America than it attempts to answer. As the novel ducks the real social issues that give it weight, it seems the author is exploiting a hot-button topic for effect... Putting a black protagonist into an all-white town is a potentially powerful idea for a novel, but in *The Buffalo Soldier* it remains little more than a notion."

In an online *BookPage* interview, Bohjalian gave a different view on the purpose of the book: "By design, *The Buffalo Soldier* is about multigenerational love." Bohjalian said: "I hope it illuminates the fact that friendship can transcend age." Interviewer Alden Mudge responded: "Not only does the book do that, but through the sympathetic portrayal of the widely varying perspectives of its ensemble of characters, *The Buffalo Soldier* sheds light on the whole question of what constitutes a family in contemporary America." Bohjalian told Mudge: "I write domestic dramas. Sometimes that term sounds pejorative, but that's not how I mean it. I write about ordinary people in what I hope are extraordinary circumstances."

Bohjalian examines another family in crisis in *Before You Know Kindness*. The work concerns Spencer McCullough, an animal rights activist who is accidentally shot and crippled by his twelve-year-old daughter, Charlotte, after she discovers her uncle's hunting rifle. Spencer's employer, the Federation for Animal Liberation, seizes the opportunity to promote its antihunting agenda, creating rifts in the McCullough family. "Bohjalian excels at getting inside each character's head with shifts of diction and perspective," noted a *Publishers Weekly* critic, and *Booklist* contributor Kristine Huntley stated that the author's "characters leap off the pages as very real, flawed, but completely sympathetic human beings."

The Double Bind, Bohjalian's tenth novel, centers on Laurel Estabrook, a young social worker who works in a Vermont homeless shelter after surviving a brutal attack years earlier. When a schizophrenic street person named Bobbie Crocker passes away, Laurel takes charge of his possessions, which include photographs of entertainers such as Chuck Berry as well as images of West Egg--Laurel's hometown and the playground of Daisy and Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby. "The author employs a remarkable, and risky, conceit in this novel," observed *San Antonio Express-News* contributor Jennifer Root Laster. "The people in Fitzgerald's masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, become real again within the fictional confines of *The Double Bind*." Determined to learn more about Bobbie's past, Laurel visits Pamela Buchanan Marshfield, the elderly daughter of Tom and Daisy, who appears to harbor a deep secret. Writing in *Library Journal*, Jay Humphrey called *The Double Bind* "a complex exploration of the human psyche and its efforts to heal and

survive," and a critic in *Kirkus Reviews* wrote: "Conflating literary lore, photographic analysis and meditations on homelessness and mental illness, Bohjalian produces his best and most complex fiction yet."

Inspired by the diary a German woman kept during World War II, Bohjalian's twelfth novel, *Skeletons at the Feast*, is a geographical and temporal departure for the author, set during the waning days of the Reich in Germany. Here a group faces a perilous journey across war-torn Germany, one step ahead of the advancing Soviet army. Anna Emmerich is eighteen, a beautiful young aristocrat from Prussia, traveling with her younger brother and mother. Joining her is a Scottish prisoner of war, Callum Finnella, who worked on Anna's farm and has become her lover. In addition, a Jewish escapee from a train headed for Auschwitz, Uri Singer, joins the group and becomes an unlikely leader and protector as the band makes its way westward.

Andrea Y. Griffith, writing in *Library Journal*, found this novel "immensely readable" in spite of its characters, who are "more like archetypes than individuals." Griffith felt that the author provides "a fresh perspective and details the brutal realities of World War II." Similarly, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted: "Although most of the characters lack complexity, Bohjalian's well-chosen descriptions capture . . . the dehumanizing desolation wrought by war." Higher praise came from a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor who felt that the events in the novel ranged "from harrowing to inspiring." In a similar vein, *Bookreporter.com* reviewer Ray Palen called *Skeletons at the Feast* a "fearless account of one of the greatest tragedies of the 20th century."

Bohjalian turns to a nuanced murder mystery with *Secrets of Eden*, "his most splendid accomplishment to date," according to *Library Journal* reviewer Julie Kane. The novel begins with the tragic murder-suicide of Alice and George Hayward. Alice has just been baptized by the Reverend Stephen Drew before her husband kills her and then himself. The event shakes Stephen from his faith, and he attempts to find some solace with Heather Laurent, the author of inspirational books about angels. Stephen leaves his church for Heather, who meanwhile forms a bond with Katie, the girl left orphaned by these deaths. Heather has her own connection to such tragedies, for her own parents died in the same manner. Soon officials begin to suspect that perhaps George did not kill himself after all, and suspicion begins to fall on Stephen, who was privy to Alice's secrets.

Secrets of Eden earned widespread critical acclaim. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer termed it a "masterfully human and compassionate tale." Likewise, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor dubbed it a "schematic tale of battered wives, murderous husbands and the consequences for their traumatized daughters." Further praise came from Kane, who termed this novel a "breathtaking piece of fiction." *Booklist* writer Carol Haggas also had a high opinion of the work, noting that Bohjalian "weaves subtle nuances of doubt and intrigue into a taut, read-in-one-sitting murder mystery."

Bohjalian blends family drama with psychological thriller in *The Night Strangers*. Chip Linton is trying to find some peace in rural New Hampshire. An airline pilot, he is one of only nine survivors of an emergency landing he attempted, and he is tormented by that tragic event, thrust into clinical depression. He, his wife, Emily, and their twin daughters decide on a new start in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, but they are unnerved by people and events in the sleepy town. A group of gardening women seem to be paying too much attention to the family, and then there is the matter of the heavily bolted door in the cellar of their Victorian house. It bears thirty-nine bolts, the same number of people who died during the emergency landing of Chip's jet.

Booklist contributor Joanne Wilkinson found this a "suspenseful . . . genre-bending novel . . . [with] spooky twists and turns." Similarly, *Library Journal* reviewer Christine DeZelar-Tiedman termed it a "compelling story . . . [that is] truly frightening." A *Publishers Weekly* writer likewise dubbed this a "gripping paranormal thriller," and concluded that the "slow-mounting dread makes this a frightful ride."

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Book Reviews

An irresistible read. Moving from quiet domestic drama to legal thriller.

Washington Post

A dark psychological dance of family estrangements, lies and self-righteousness...plenty of finely wrought characters and thought-provoking personal and political drama.

Seattle Times

May very well be his best.... Masterly... timely [and] well-wrought.

Boston Globe

Bohjalian's new novel begins with a literal bang: a bullet from a hunting rifle accidentally strikes Spencer McCullough, an extreme advocate for animal rights, leaving him seriously wounded. The weapon-owned by his brother-in-law, John, and shot by his 12-year-old daughter, Charlotte-becomes the center of a lawsuit and media circus led by Spencer's employer, FERAL (Federation for Animal Liberation), a dead ringer for PETA. The many-faceted satire Bohjalian (*Midwives*, etc.) crafts out of these events revolves around Spencer and Jon's families, but also involves a host of secondary figures. Bohjalian excels at getting inside each character's head with shifts of diction and perspective, though he makes it difficult for readers to connect with any one in particular. This is in part because his portraits are often unsympathetic; the characters are allowed to hoist themselves on their own petards. While some are credibly flawed-Spencer is both a loving father and an obnoxious activist-others are cartoonishly mocked with their own thoughts, like high-powered attorney Paige, who mourns the loss of her leather chairs and briefcases, hidden away for as long as FERAL is a lucrative client. If there is a grounded center to this work, it is 10-year-old Willow, Spencer's niece, who distinguishes herself from this baggy ensemble by always trying to do the right thing. She alone is spared the narrator's irony, and it is Willow, years after the accident, who has the last word. Bohjalian's skewering of the animal rights movement gets the better of his domestic drama, but his skillful storytelling will engage readers. More like *Midwives* and *Trans-Sister Radio* than the recent, more intimate *The Buffalo Soldier*, this patented blend of social commentary and soul-searching moral drama for the public radio crowd should do well for Bohjalian.

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review*) Bohjalian's elegant, refined writing makes even the most ordinary details of family life fascinating, and his characters leap off the pages as very real, flawed, but completely sympathetic human beings. Bohjalian manages to examine

some very weighty issues without ever coming off as preachy or pedantic. A triumph. —*Kristine Huntley*.

Booklist

The privileged summer of a prosperous family is shortened by a bullet in the night. Courteously observing dramatic unities, Oprah-blessed Bohjalian (*Midwives*, 1997; *The Buffalo Soldier*, 2002, etc.), America's answer to Joanna Trollope, sees to it that the jammed rifle in the back of Vermont lawyer John Seton's borrowed Volvo goes off to critical effect when it's fired by 12-year-old-going-on-16 Charlotte McCollough into her father's right shoulder. The great irony in this suavely perceptive story is that novice hunter Seton's bullet had been intended for a deer, a deep dark secret hitherto kept from the brutally winged Spencer McCollough, Seton's brother-in-law and the public face of FERAL, an animal activist organization. Spencer has been vegan since repenting of the murder of countless lobsters as a kitchen laborer during his college years, and his dedication to the well being of animals is deep and long-standing. That dedication, Bohjalian politely points out, has not always extended to the animals in his own herd-wife Catherine, a meat-sneaking Brearley instructor, and daughter Charlotte. In fact, his vegetarian rigidities and professional absences have so distressed Catherine that she was ready to discuss separation just before the pot- and beer-befuddled Charlotte fired the rifle at what she thought might be the deer that had ruined that summer's ambitious vegetable garden. Nan Seton, Catherine and John's immensely energetic, capable, and prosperous mother, manages the immediate effects of the crisis, which occurred at her New Hampshire cottage, but she is helpless to patch the rift that develops between the families of her two children when Spencer refuses to forgive his deeplyrepentant brother-in-law and allows FERAL to push for publicity and a lawsuit. The balance of power rests with Charlotte's younger cousin Willow, a real sweetheart who'd shared that spliff with Charlotte hours before the disaster. The finely drawn scenes and characters here will suck in all but the hardest-hearted. Pretty much irresistible.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. *Before You Know Kindness* opens with a blunt, clinical description of Spencer's injuries. Is the preface a purely objective report or does it begin to develop some of the general themes of the novel? What does it convey about the Setons and their way of life?
2. Spencer's speech pp.16-19 and Nan's descriptions of his behavior pp. 27-29 offer varying insights into his personality. Does the tone of the writing influence your impressions of him? What specific details bring out the differences between Spencer's self-perceptions and the way others might view him?
3. How does Bohjalian portray FERAL and the people who work there? Do you think this is an accurate portrait of the animal-rights movement? What reasons might Bohjalian have for distorting their attitudes and activities?

4. Sara thinks, "The problem with Nan-and with John and Catherine, and yes, Spencer when they were all together-was that they could never just . . . be." [p. 38] In what ways is this attributable to Nan and Richard Seton's marriage and the atmosphere in which John and Catherine grew up? Why does Spencer, whose background is so different, demonstrate the same quality?
5. How persuasive are John's explanations of why he took up hunting? What does the argument that hunting "is the most merciful way humans had to manage the herd" [p. 73] imply about the relationship between humans and the natural world? Does John's anguish after the accident alter his view of hunting in general? Do you think that it should?
6. In talking to Willow about Catherine and Spencer, Charlotte says, "Sometimes I get pissed at both of them. I don't think Mom would be the way she is if Dad wasn't this public wacko." [p. 117] Are Charlotte's complaints typical of a teen-ager or does Spencer's profession put an unusual burden on her? Is her criticism of her mother's flirting well-founded?
7. Bohjalian suggests several times that Charlotte may have subconsciously wanted to injure her father. She herself says, "There were lots of reasons for pointing Uncle John's weapon at what was moving at the edge of the garden. . . ." [p. 133] and acknowledges that others might think, "She was just doing it to get your attention. . . ." [p. 135] Is this speculation supported by the way Bohjalian describes the accident? By Charlotte's subsequent behavior and her conversations with Willow?
8. The accident and Spencer's permanent disability provide FERAL with an irresistible opportunity to make their case against hunting. Is their decision to bring a lawsuit totally reprehensible? Do the depictions of Dominique, Paige, and Keenan undermine the validity of their case?
9. Self-interest plays a part not only in FERAL's reaction to the tragedy. Are you sympathetic to John's concerns that the lawsuit will effect his professional reputation, as well as his fear that "for as long as he lived he would be an imbecile in the eyes of his daughter" [p. 142]? How did you feel as Catherine vacillates in the second half of the novel between wanting to help her husband and wanting to leave him?
10. "Nan was a particular mystery to [Sara]. Exactly what was it that she didn't want to think about?" [p. 176] Were you puzzled by Nan as well? By the end of the novel, did you feel you had a better understanding of her?
11. What would have happened if Charlotte and Willow had not confessed to drinking and smoking pot on the night of the shooting? Were you relieved that Spencer decided not to pursue the lawsuit?
12. Although the plot revolves around Spencer, at various point in the novel each character moves to center stage to comment on the events and their repercussions. Which members of the family most appealed to you and why? How successful is Bohjalian at capturing their individual points of view and personalities? Did your opinions of them change as the novel progressed?

13. Does Bohjalian present both sides of the controversy in an evenhanded way? Which characters appear to embody his own point of view? What is the ultimate message of *Before You Know Kindness*?

14. Do you think that the issues Bohjalian examines in *Before You Know Kindness* are more important (or more relevant) than the topics he explored in (for example) *Midwives* or *The Law of Similars* or *Trans-Sister Radio*?

15. Why did Bohjalian use a passage from *The Secret Garden* as one of the epigraphs? In what ways is the children's classic relevant to *Before You Know Kindness*?

16. Why did Bohjalian take his title from the poem, "Kindness," by Naomi Shihab Nye, a portion of which serves as the other epigraph?
(Questions issued by publisher.)

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