

A Reader's
Guide to
Chris
Bohjalian's

*The
Buffalo
Soldier*

“Wonderful ... a story that pulls at the reader's heart.”

—*Denver Post*

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This reader's guide was developed by Writers & Books.

Funds for "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book..." come from The City of Rochester, Flower City Printing, The New York State Council on the Arts and The National Endowment for the Arts.



Robert J. Duffy, Mayor
City of Rochester, NY



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Dear Reader,

Writers & Books is Rochester's nationally renowned non-profit literary center located at 740 University Avenue, in the heart of Rochester's Neighborhood of the Arts. In 2001, Writers & Books initiated the "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book..." program.

The goal of "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book..." is to encourage people to connect to others in our community through reading and discussion, and through the shared experience of literature. Each year Writers & Books selects one book for our community to explore together, leading to an extended residency by the author.

Our choice for 2007, the seventh year of the program, is the novel *The Buffalo Soldier* by Chris Bohjalian. We estimate that between 60,000 and 90,000 Rochester area readers participated in the six previous programs, which featured *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines (2001); *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks (2002); *Kindred* by Octavia Butler (2003); *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger (2004); *Servants of the Map* by Andrea Barrett (2005); and *Name All the Animals* by Alison Smith (2006).

During Chris Bohjalian's residency in Rochester, March 14 through 16, 2007, he will make a number of appearances at local libraries, schools and universities in the Rochester area to read and discuss her work and sign books.

For a complete calendar of events or to learn how to participate in this program, visit our web site at www.wab.org, or call us at (585) 473-2590.



Joseph Flaherty
Executive Director, Writers & Books

CHRIS BOHJALIAN: A BIOGRAPHY

Chris Bohjalian, a native of White Plains, New York, is the author of nine novels, including his most recent *New York Times* bestseller, *Before You Know Kindness*, as well as a collection of columns and essays, *Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town*. A new novel, *The Double Bind*, is scheduled for publication in February 2007. He won the New England Book Award in 2002. His novel *Midwives* was a number one *New York Times* bestseller, a selection of Oprah's Book Club, a *Publishers Weekly* "Best Book," and a New England Booksellers Association Discovery pick. His work has been translated into 18 languages, been published in 21 countries, and twice become acclaimed movies (*Midwives* and *Past the Bleachers*). *The Law of Similars* and *The Buffalo Soldier* are currently in development for movies. He has written for a wide variety of magazines including *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest*, and the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, and has been a Sunday columnist for Gannett's *Burlington Free Press* since 1992. Bohjalian graduated from Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and lives in Lincoln, Vermont, with his wife and daughter.



A CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS BOHJALIAN

W&B: What authors or experiences influenced your decision to become a writer?

Bohjalian: When I was 13, my family moved from a suburb of New York City to Miami, Florida, and we moved there the Friday before Labor Day Weekend. The following Tuesday I started school, and then that afternoon I went to my new orthodontist—a sadist, it would turn out, if ever there was one. He gave me some orthodontic headgear that looked like the business end of a backhoe. I had to wear the device for four hours a day. And so that autumn I would come home from school, put in my headgear, and then go straight to the Hialeah Miami Lakes Public Library. There I read.

I read William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist*, Thomas Tryon’s *Harvest Home* and Peter Benchley’s *Jaws*. I read a somewhat higher caliber of literature as well: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Joyce Carol Oates’ *Expensive People*. From Blatty and Benchley and Tryon I learned about the importance of linear momentum; from Lee and Oates, I began to understand that the first person narrator in a novel is every bit as made-up as the fictional constructs around him or her. And from them all I learned that I wanted to write.

W&B: What inspires the particular stories you write? I am especially interested in your unique—and very human—characters.

Bohjalian: I tend to write about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Essentially, I drop my neighbors or my family or my friends or myself into seemingly untenable situations, and then watch what happens.

W&B: Most of your novels take place in Vermont, your home state. How many of your stories stem from places you know and from real events? For example, did the flood that killed the Sheldon girls in *The Buffalo Soldier* really happen?

Bohjalian: I would not say that my novels are autobiographic. But there certainly is autobiographic minutiae in many of them. To wit: That flood that opens *The Buffalo Soldier* really occurred—except for the reality that no one was hurt (thank heavens). But you can read the details of the devastation that flood caused in my essay about the destruction of the Lincoln Library in my collection, *Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town*. My novel with the most autobiographic detail does not take place in Vermont. It is set in New Hampshire and Manhattan, and that novel is *Before You Know Kindness*.

W&B: How much research did you do before (or during) the writing of *The Buffalo Soldier* or while writing your other novels? How do you go about this research?

Bohjalian: My novels have all taken a lot of research. For *The Buffalo Soldier*, I spent time with moms and dads in multiracial foster families, with their children, with state troopers, and with social workers. I did the research as I was writing the book, since it helped me to add depth to the characters as I worked. Basically, I just track down the midwives or transsexuals or state troopers I want to interview, and invite them to breakfast or lunch. And then I hang around with them for as long as they will allow.

W&B: What got you interested in using the experiences of the Buffalo Soldiers (a group of people you couldn’t actually meet) as a narrative thread for a novel? How did the idea come to include letters of Buffalo Soldiers in a novel that focuses on loss, grief, family, marriage and foster care in a contemporary setting?

Bohjalian: I think it was the little boy in me who has always been interested in the Plains Indians Wars, and the role played by the Buffalo Soldiers. I think I always knew they would figure in some way in a novel of mine.

W&B: What is the source of the letters? In deciding to include them in the novel, why did you focus on the “rules”?

Bohjalian: I made those letters up. Many readers presume they're real, and I am certainly flattered. But they were a device to give readers a sense of the knowledge that Alfred was gaining—and how it was impacting his sense of self and his self-worth.

W&B: Did you shape the story and chronology of the Sheldon family (in all its forms) first and later add the letters of Veronica Rowe? The letter excerpts that seem to serve as epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter also function as codas commenting on the chapter that came before. Did you play with this effect at all, with the connections between the two stories?

Bohjalian: Yes, absolutely—thank you for noticing. The letters do serve as chapter epigraphs—as a parallel story and as a bit of foreshadowing.

W&B: Did the idea of using the lyrics from Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldier" as an epigraph come to you early in the process or later? Do you see this sentiment as pertaining to numerous characters?

Bohjalian: A lovely thought: Yes, I think the epigraph is as relevant for Terry Sheldon as it is for Alfred. I hadn't thought about that until you asked, but I think you're onto something. And I did indeed have the Bob Marley song in mind very early on—you bet!

W&B: How do you tie your disparate narrative lines together, and at what point? For example, did you flesh out the scenes of Phoebe's family before or after you knew the ultimate nature of her relationship with Terry?

Bohjalian: I rarely have the slightest idea where my books are going. I had no idea that Phoebe was going to wind up pregnant until my wife came across a home pregnancy test kit in a rest stop ladies' room. We both found this notion very sad—we imagined a teen girl going to the rest stop because she didn't dare take the test at home—and before I knew it, Phoebe was taking such a test in a highway rest stop and discovering that she was pregnant.

W&B: Considering the numerous dramatic (natural and man-made) events that take place in the novel, it is the characters that always take center stage. Is this a difficult balancing act for you, working between the significant incidents that drive the narrative and the way your characters respond to these stimuli?

Bohjalian: Oh, I just put the events out there and see how the characters respond. And I think my books are at their best when characters are responding to each other—and *not* to natural events. I really believe that.

W&B: Indeed, the realistic portrayal of relationships between characters is one of the strengths of your work. For example, one reviewer referred to the "beautifully observed domestic psychology" of *The Buffalo Soldier*. Is this what you were aiming for in this book or in any of your other novels?

Bohjalian: Yes, I did want the book to be a very precisely experienced, authentically rendered domestic chronicle. In a way, my model was Kent Haruf's absolutely lovely and haunting and poignant novel, *Plainsong*.

W&B: That is a wonderful novel full of rich characters, and it is ultimately the story of so many of them growing together, whether up or older. Did any of your own childhood experiences or emotions come into play in the creation of Alfred's character, and especially his growth process?

Bohjalian: There is a lot of me in Alfred. I moved frequently as a kid—four different schools in four consecutive years at one point—and so I was always the new kid on the block. I used that sense that I was always the outsider in my creation of Alfred.

W&B: Your novels often take place in small towns, and *The Buffalo Soldier* is no exception. What draws you to explore the dynamics specific to smaller communities? Do they function in a way that better suits your narratives?

Bohjalian: Sometimes, the issues can be examined more closely in a small town: You have fewer people, less ambient noise. You can focus in a little more carefully. But I love big cities, too, and certainly there are great novels set in the suburbs. My two most recent novels, *Before You Know Kindness* and *The Double Bind*, are set largely in Manhattan and Long Island and Burlington, Vermont (a city), and I hope the characters are just as real and the issues presented just as convincingly.

W&B: Regardless of where they are set, your novels often touch on sub-cultures, from animal rights activism to homeopathy, from to midwifery to foster care, from dowsing to transsexuality, leading a *New York Times* reviewer to refer to you as an “issues novelist.” What draws you to explore these out-of-the-mainstream perspectives? Do you feel your novels have provided some insight into those on the margins of our culture?

Bohjalian: I am fascinated by the cultural margins. And while I am, first and foremost, a storyteller, I am always pleased when my work leads someone to re-examine an issue or think of it in a new light.

W&B: In an earlier interview, you referred to the characters of *The Buffalo Soldier* as an “ensemble cast.” I assume you would agree that this is true of the characters in at least some of your other novels as well. Is creating this “ensemble” something you strive for in your writing or does the “cast” come together on its own as if it was just meant to be?

Bohjalian: I don’t have outlines. And so when the characters come together in an ensemble, more times than not it is the result of many, many drafts. It’s also interesting to me how many characters appear in a first draft and never make it to the final draft—or how many have their parts scaled back, or grow in ways I hadn’t expected. The Heberts, for instance, were only comic relief in my mind in the early drafts of *The Buffalo Soldier*. Obviously, that changed.

W&B: You often write using a first-person narrative. How did the

writing of *The Buffalo Soldier* differ and was third person the only choice once you decided to structure the novel using the perspectives of numerous characters?

Bohjalian: Of my last six novels, three have been in third person and three have been in first. It’s no coincidence that my last three have been third person. It’s more difficult than first person and demands greater narrative control. I’m older and more experienced now. But third person also offers greater rewards in terms of how you can impart information to the reader and the vocabulary—and, thus, precision—that is at your disposal.

The Buffalo Soldier initially was going to have two first-person narrators: Terry and Laura. And it was going to be a he-said/she-said meditation on grief. There was no Alfred originally, and no Phoebe, and no Heberts. But when they arrived, I shelved my first-person approach and went to the third.

W&B: On what do you draw in order to write from the points of view of so many disparate characters?

Bohjalian: Imagination and research. I think a lot . . . and I have lots of lunches with people far more interesting than I.

W&B: The Heberts share chapter headings, unlike the other main characters. Is this a commentary on the closeness of their marriage as compared to the distance at which the other characters seem to relate for the most part?

Bohjalian: Oh, it’s nice to think so. I used to have a lot more of *both* Heberts in middle drafts. And so when in the end it was mostly Paul, I couldn’t bring myself to title those chapters with only Paul’s name.

W&B: Your comments are especially interesting considering that the Prologue in *The Buffalo Soldier* exhibits a different writing style than the rest of the book and is the only section that does not

announce a point of view. Is the narrator in some sense the town, a choral narrator as in William Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily"? Did you ever consider revealing the information about the flood more slowly throughout the book, perhaps as Alfred pieces together the story?

Bohjalian: I did want authorial omniscience there, yes—someone who could share with the reader what the girls' bodies were like as the current carried them downriver, and convey the epic scale of the flood. And that meant doing something different from simple third-person subjectivity.

W&B: Terry's brother Russell is the only somewhat well-explored and plot-driving character who does not get his own point-of-view chapters. He is an interesting and complex character; were you ever tempted to give him any more play in the novel or was he always fated to be a foil?

Bohjalian: Bingo: Foil only. Plus, I just didn't like him. Mostly I was inside the heads of people I liked in this particular novel.

W&B: Your characters do engender empathy: I think readers eventually understand and accept the complex motivations of each, even if they do not initially understand their actions. Does the story or do these characters ever take over or do you always remain in control?

Bohjalian: Hah! I *wish* I were in control. More times than not, it's their show.

W&B: Your novel *Midwives* was selected for Oprah's Book Club in 1998. How did that event change the course of our career? What are your thoughts on the influence of Oprah Winfrey and her Book Club on the literary world in general?

Bohjalian: No one has done more for fiction and reading than Oprah Winfrey. She has reminded us all of something we try to teach our children and grandchildren all the time, but as grownups we all too often tend to forget: Reading is meant to be fun. It is capable of evoking from us the same enthusiasm as movies and music and stage plays, if we only give the notion a chance. She's the best, and I will always

be honored beyond words to have been a part of her Book Club. It was a great, great gift.

W&B: Tell us about your new novel, *The Double Bind*, which is coming out in February of 2007, just before your visit to Rochester. A synopsis of the novel is included in the Annotated Bibliography in this Reader's Guide. I understand that this fascinating story stems more directly from an actual person and his true story than the stories in your other novels.

Bohjalian: This novel had its origins in December 2003, when Rita Markley, the executive director of Burlington's Committee on Temporary Shelter, shared with me the contents of a box of old photographs. The black-and-white images had been taken by a once-homeless man who had died in the studio apartment her organization had found for him. His name was Bob "Soupy" Campbell.

The photos were remarkable, both because of the man's evident talent and because of the subject matter. I recognized the performers—musicians, comedians, actors—and newsmakers in many of them. Most of the photos were at least forty years old. We were all mystified as to how Campbell had gone from photographing luminaries in the 1950s and 1960s to winding up at a homeless shelter in northern Vermont. He had no surviving family we were aware of that we could ask.

The reality, of course, is that Campbell probably wound up homeless for any one of the myriad reasons that most transients wind up on the streets: mental illness. Substance abuse. Bad luck. We tend to stigmatize the homeless and blame them for their plight. We are oblivious to the fact that most had lives as serious as our own before everything fell apart. The photographs in *The Double Bind* are a testimony to that reality: They were taken by Campbell before he wound up a transient in Vermont.

Obviously, Bobbie Crocker, the homeless photographer in this

novel, is fictitious. He is not Bob Campbell and this book is not his story. But the photographs you will see in *The Double Bind* are real.

W&B: Readers can see those photos, learn what you discovered about Campbell's life, read an excerpt from the novel, and watch a multimedia trailer about it on your web site, www.chrisbohjalian.com. I'm sure a visit to your site will inspire even more people to read, and enjoy, your work, and hopefully to join us when you visit Rochester this March.

DISCUSSION POINTS FOR READERS OF *THE BUFFALO SOLDIER*

The Writer and His Craft

- How does the title of the novel, *The Buffalo Soldier*, relate to the story told in the novel?
- Author Chris Bohjalian includes an epigraph in the form of lyrics from Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldier" that read: "If you know your history / Then you would know where you coming from." How do these words serve as an introduction to the novel? How do they foreshadow the narrative to come?
- How does the book's Prologue set up the cultural and geographical setting of the book? How is a sense of place established?
- How is the novel structured?
- What are the advantages of hearing the story told from several different points of view?
- How does devoting different sections of the narrative to the experience of each main character create a richer experience?
- How does experiencing the voice of a third-person narrator throughout the book differ from that of using a first-person narrator for each character? Do you respond to each character differently through this objective voice than you would if their experience was presented in first person?
- How do the chapter titles function as illustrative or explanatory?
- What purpose do the passages from the nineteenth-century documents about the buffalo soldiers serve?
- There are several passages that outline the "rules" established by

Sergeant Rowe that the men of the tenth regiment had to live by. Explore what particular meaning the rules that the author included may have for the characters or the plot and how they relate to the narrative of the novel.

- What role does the setting of the novel in Cornish (a small, rural New England town) play?
- Bohjalian has referred to his novels as “domestic dramas,” saying, “I write about ordinary people in what I hope are extraordinary circumstances.” How are the characters in *The Buffalo Soldier* ordinary and the circumstances extraordinary?
- Bohjalian has been called an “issues novelist” since his books explore the worlds of people involved in such activities as mid-wifery, animal rights activism and homeopathy. How does *The Buffalo Soldier* fit within this characterization? What other novelists might fall into this category?
- What portions or aspects of the writing did you find most artful and/or enjoyable to read?

Characters and Motivation

- Who is the main character/protagonist in the novel? Who is the Buffalo Soldier of the title?
- How are the characters of Hillary and Megan revealed through the course of the novel?
- Explore the relationships within the Sheldon family before the girls’ deaths. How would you characterize the relationship between Terry and Laura before the girl’s deaths? How does their marriage change after their loss?
- Discuss the different ways people in the story deal with their own grief. For example, in what different ways do Terry and Laura deal

with the loss of their daughters? What other ways might people handle these emotions?

- How do the different careers of Terry (as a state trooper) and Laura (who works at an animal shelter) reflect their personalities? In what ways might these also reflect on their responses to Alfred (e.g., the seminal confrontation between Terry and Alfred)?
- How are children portrayed in the novel? Are their thoughts and actions believable?
- How do we first see Alfred? In what specific ways is his alienation portrayed?
- In what specific ways throughout the novel is Alfred’s character (and his emotional life) explicated by the author?
- In what ways does the loss of her daughters affect the way Laura deals with Alfred’s normal childhood behaviors and experiences?
- How does Alfred react to knowing of, but not about, the twins’ deaths? In what different ways does he acknowledge their lives and their deaths?
- In what ways are Alfred’s actions and feelings misconstrued by others?
- How do Alfred’s prior experiences as a foster child affect how he deals with his peers at school and with Terry and Laura?
- How do the complicated issues surrounding race affect trust and other aspects of the characters’ relationships?
- Why does Terry turn to having an affair with Phoebe?
- Why does Phoebe engage in an affair with Terry even though

she recognizes the complications of doing so from their first encounter?

- How does Terry's view of Alfred change over the course of the novel?
- How does the way in which Alfred speaks and thinks about Terry and Laura change as his relationship with each of them changes?
- How does Laura change through the novel, both as a partner to Terry and a maternal figure?
- How do the different characters understand and experience the concept of "home"?
- How are different types of "family" portrayed and understood?
- What role do the Heberts play in the Sheldon family's story?
- How is the friendship between Alfred and Paul characterized? In what ways is Paul able to communicate with Alfred that the Sheldons are not?
- How do the accidents both Phoebe and Terry have during the storm affect their respective outlooks on a potential future together?
- How might Phoebe's decision at the end of the book cast a different light on her earlier motivations?

Plot

- As Terry's relationship with Phoebe becomes more complicated, how do Laura's feelings for Alfred change?
- How do other characters react to the increasing emotional distance between Terry and Laura?
- How does the saga of the Buffalo Soldiers comment on or parallel

Alfred's experience? How does he change after reading the book about the soldiers? Is he the Buffalo Soldier of the title?

- What purpose does the saga serve in revealing characters or plot?
- How does Paul's purchase of a horse alter the course of the story?
- Why does the author include so many detailed episodes from Terry's work experience? What purpose does each of these narratives serve?
- The book begins (in the Prologue) with the flood that takes the lives of the Sheldon twins and ends with another flood that again changes the dynamics of the Sheldon family. How do each of these disasters alter the different relationships affected by them?

Issues and Themes

- What does the novel reveal about the process of coming to terms with great loss?
- What makes this story so compelling? What is it about tragedy and loss that attracts our interest?
- How does the landscape of Vermont interact with the human characters and vice versa?
- How does the landscape affect the reader's perception of the family's situation?
- How are various senses of isolation (as experienced by the different characters) portrayed?
- How do the Sheldons address the issue of racism in the town and its affect on Alfred?
- How is the foster care system portrayed in the novel? What var-

ied stories do we learn about Alfred’s foster families and the friends he makes in the system? How do those experiences affect his relationship with the Sheldons?

- Although the novel takes place in a rural community, much of the narrative centers around driving and roads. What is the function of vehicles in the book?
- How is the issue of familial love addressed throughout the book, in both large and small ways?
- One reviewer referred to the “beautifully observed domestic psychology” of *The Buffalo Soldier*. What does this mean in terms of this narrative? What other books might fall into the category of “domestic psychologies”?

Speculative Questions

- What do you think Bohjalian’s motivations were in writing this novel?
- Would this story affect parents of older children, or grown children, differently than those with younger children? Why?
- Could the Sheldons have addressed the issue of racism in the town and its affect on Alfred’s experience more directly?
- Does Laura know that Phoebe is pregnant? Would she approve of Terry abdicating his paternal responsibilities to Phoebe’s child? What would happen if Laura did not know? Would it be a set-up for more conflict down the line?
- We do not see Terry interact with Alfred or Laura after the accident. Are we sure they will, individually and as a family, be better off with Terry back in the home? Will Terry, Laura and Alfred come together as a family?

TIPS FOR BOOK DISCUSSIONS

Reading Critically

Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time readers learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important passages or pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” or “How does this relate to previous elements of the story?” Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don’t know the answers yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don’t be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what authors are revealing about themselves and want you to learn about life from their perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

As you read *The Buffalo Soldier*, consider the questions and topics raised in the “Discussion Points.” What timeless topics does Bohjalian raise? How are some of these issues addressed in the book? How do these issues relate to your own life? These are the

kinds of questions that lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book meaningful and of lasting value.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking herself, “What if…” questions. Think about which “What ifs” prompted the story.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author’s style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are the stories or chapters prefaced by quotes or titles? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Often, themes run through an author’s works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author’s work with another’s can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience: They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between the reader and the writer. Searching for, identifying and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself in the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work’s value and the discussion potential for your group.

The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You’ll often find that the questions you’ve prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don’t be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the “It just didn’t appeal to me” statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing and worldview. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That’s interesting, but what’s more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author’s attitude toward the murderer and victim. It is often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences.

Some Suggestions for Participants

A good discussion depends partly on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions (based on the New York Public Library's book discussion program):

SPEAK UP! Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

LISTEN! Try to understand the other person's point of view; see what experience and thinking it developed from. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember, there are several points of view possible on every question.

BE BRIEF! Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible—it's more effective in a group discussion. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.

SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE! Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comment of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND! As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS IN PRINT BY CHRIS BOHJALIAN

Water Witches (1995)

Set in the Vermont countryside, *Water Witches* is the tale of the clash between progress and tradition, science and magic. In the midst of a nightmarish New England drought, cynical ski industry lobbyist Scottie Winston is trying to get a large ski resort the permits it needs to tap an already beleaguered river for snow. However, his wife, his little girl and his sister-in-law—all dowrsers or "water witches"—hope to stop him in this gentle, comic, life-affirming novel.

Midwives (1997)

On an icy winter night in an isolated house in rural Vermont, a seasoned midwife named Sibyl Danforth takes desperate measures to save a baby's life. She performs an emergency cesarean section on a mother she believes has died of a stroke. But what if Sibyl's patient wasn't dead—and Sybil inadvertently killed her? As Sibyl faces the antagonism of the law, the hostility of traditional doctors, and the accusations of her own conscience, *Midwives* engages, moves and transfixes readers.

The Law of Similars (1999)

When one of homeopath Carissa Lake's patients falls into an allergy-induced coma, possibly due to her prescribed remedy, Leland Fowler's office starts investigating the case. But Leland is also one of Carissa's patients, and he is beginning to realize that he has fallen in love with her. As love and legal obligations collide, Leland comes face-to-face with an ethical dilemma of enormous proportions. Graceful, intelligent and suspenseful, *The Law of Similars* is a powerful examination of the links between hubris and hope, deception and love.

Trans-Sister Radio (2000)

When schoolteacher Allison Banks develops a crush on university professor Dana Stevens, she knows that he will give her what she

needs most: gentleness, kindness, passion. Her daughter Carly enthusiastically witnesses the change in her mother. But a few months into their relationship, Dana tells Allison his secret: he has always been certain that he is a woman born into the wrong skin, and soon he will have a sex-change operation. Allison, overwhelmed by the depth of her love, finds herself unable to leave him—but by deciding to stay she must face questions most people never even consider. Not only will her own life and Carly's be irrevocably changed, she will have to contend with the outrage of her small Vermont community and come to terms with her lover's new sense of self—and hope against hope that her love will transcend their ingrained notions of what it means to be a man and a woman.

The Buffalo Soldier (2002)

Two years after their twin daughters die in a flash flood, Terry and Laura Sheldon, a Vermont state trooper and his wife, take in a foster child. His name is Alfred; he is ten years old and African American. And he has passed through so many indifferent families that he can't believe that his new one will last.

In the ensuing months Terry and Laura will struggle to emerge from their shell of grief only to face an unexpected threat to their marriage: Terry's involvement with another woman. Meanwhile, Alfred cautiously enters the family circle, and befriends an elderly neighbor who inspires him with the story of the Buffalo Soldiers, the black cavalrymen of the old West. Out of the entwining and unfolding of their lives, *The Buffalo Soldier* creates a suspenseful, moving portrait of an unconventional family—the ties that bind it and the strains that pull it apart.

Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town (2003)

In March 1986, while living in Brooklyn, Bohjalian and his wife were cab-napped and taken on a 45-minute joy ride in which the cabbie ignored all traffic lights and stop signs. Around midnight, he deposited the young couple on a near-deserted street where officers were about to storm a crack house. Bohjalian and his wife were told to hit the ground for their own protection. While lying on the pavement, Bohjalian's wife suggested that perhaps it was time to move to New England.

Months later they traded their co-op in Brooklyn for a century-old Victorian house in Lincoln, Vermont, and Bohjalian began chronicling life in that town in a wide variety of non-fiction magazine essays and in a newspaper column. The column, "Idyll Banter," written weekly for 15 years, is a diary of both this writer's life and how America has been transformed in the past decade and a half. It is rich with the idiosyncratic universals that come with being a parent, a child and a spouse, reflecting our common experience.

Before You Know Kindness (2004)

For ten summers, the Seton family—all three generations—met at their country home in New Hampshire 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 of this tradition, 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 lead to a nightmarish accident that put to the test the values that unite the family—and the convictions that just may pull it apart.

The Double Bind (forthcoming 2007)

When college sophomore Laurel Estabrook is attacked while riding her bike through Vermont's back roads, her life is forever changed. Formerly outgoing, Laurel withdraws into her photography and begins working at a homeless shelter. There she meets Bobbie Crocker, a man with a history of mental illness and a box full of photos he won't let anyone see. When Bobbie dies suddenly, Laurel discovers that he was telling the truth: before he was homeless, Bobbie Crocker was a successful photographer who worked with such legends as Chuck Berry and Eartha Kitt.

As Laurel's fascination with Bobbie's former life begins to merge into obsession, she becomes convinced that his photographs reveal a deeply hidden, dark family secret. Her search for the truth will lead Laurel further from her old life—and into a cat-and-mouse game with pursuers who claim to want to save her.

This list was adapted from www.chrisbohjalian.com.

RELATED BOOKS OF INTEREST

Loss & Grief

Before and After
by Rosellen Brown

Catcher in the Rye
by J.D. Salinger

The Deep End of the Ocean
by Jacquelyn Mitchard

The Empty Room: Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age
by Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn

Girls
by Frederick Busch

The Lovely Bones
by Alice Sebold

A Map of the World
by Jane Hamilton

Ordinary People
by Judith Guest

Past the Bleachers
by Christopher Bohjalian

River, Cross My Heart
by Breena Clarke

The Sweet Hereafter
by Russell Banks

Visions of Gerard
by Jack Kerouac

The Year of Magical Thinking
by Joan Didion

You Remind Me of Me
by Dan Chaon

Foster Care/Adoption

The Bean Trees
by Barbara Kingsolver

A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life
by Dana Reinhardt

Brother and Sister
by Joanna Trollope

The Heart Knows Something Different: Teenage Voices from the Foster Care System
by Al Desetta

The Lost Boy: A Foster Child's Search for the Love of a Family
by Dave Pelzer

One Small Boat: The Story of a Little Girl, Lost Then Found
by Kathy Harrison

Orphans of the Living: Stories of America's Children in Foster Care
by Jennifer Toth

A Theory of Relativity
by Jacquelyn Mitchard

White Oleander
by Janet Finch

Coming of Age

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
by Mark Twain

Bastard Out of Carolina
by Dorothy Allison

The Big Rock Candy Mountain
by Wallace Stegner

Boys of My Youth
by Jo Ann Beard

Disturbances in the Field
by Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Ellen Foster
by Kaye Gibbons

Gapcreek
by Robert Morgan

The Glass Castle
by Jeannette Walls

Life-Changing Stories of Coming of Age
edited by Thomas Dyja

She's Come Undone
by Wally Lamb

Sleeping Arrangements
by Laura Shaine Cunningham

This Boy's Life
by Tobias Wolff

Where the Heart Is
by Billie Letts

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