

The Double Bind

A Novel

by Chris Bohjalian

About the Book

When Laurel Estabrook is attacked while riding her bicycle through Vermont's back roads, her life is forever changed. Formerly outgoing, Laurel withdraws into her photography, spending all her free time at a homeless shelter. There she meets Bobbie Crocker, a man with a history of mental illness and a box of photographs that he won't let anyone see. When Bobbie dies, Laurel discovers a deeply hidden secret — a story that leads her far from her old life, and into a cat-and-mouse game with pursuers who claim they want to save her.

In a tale that travels between the Roaring Twenties and the twenty-first century, between Jay Gatsby's Long Island and rural New England, bestselling author Chris Bohjalian has written his most extraordinary novel yet.

Praise for the Book

"Bohjalian is a master of literary suspense. . . . [His] are the sorts of books people stay awake all night to finish."

— *The Washington Post Book World*

"Artfully constructed and fiercely felt. . . . Bohjalian is . . . rearranging our previous assumptions, producing the sense of shock we felt viewing *The Sixth Sense*."

— *The Miami Herald*

"Terrifying. . . . Laurel is an unforgettable, vulnerable, complicated character."

— *The Los Angeles Times*

"*The Double Bind* is simply one of the best written, most compelling, artfully woven novels to grace bookshelves in years. Immediately after the spellbinding surprise ending, readers will want to begin again. . . . It's THAT good."

— *The Associated Press*

"The sort of book you want to read in one sitting, and it packs a twist at the end that will leave you speechless."

— **Jodi Picoult**

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Chris Bohjalian

American Novelist (1960–)

Also known as: Chris Bohjalian, Christopher A. Bohjalian

Updated: 03/09/2007

Personal Information: Born August 12, 1960, in White Plains, NY; son of Aram (an advertising executive) and Annalee (a homemaker; maiden name, Nelson) Bohjalian; married Victoria Blewer (a photographer and artist), October 13, 1984.

Education: Amherst College, B.A. (summa cum laude), 1982.

Politics: “I imagine I have some. Generally, I vote Democratic.”

Religion: Episcopalian.

Memberships: League of Vermont Writers, Phi Beta Kappa.

Addresses: Home: Lincoln, VT. Agent: Ellen Levine Literary Agency, Suite 1801, 15 East Twenty-sixth St., New York, NY 10010-1505.

Career: *Burlington Free Press*, Burlington, VT, book critic and columnist, 1987–; *Vermont Life* magazine, Montpelier, VT, book critic, 1991–; freelance journalist and novelist. New England Young Writers Conference at Bread Loaf, faculty member, 1991–92; novelist.

Awards: Grant in literature finalist, Vermont Council on the Arts, 1990–91; New England Book Award for fiction, New England Booksellers Association, for *Midwives*, 1998; Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection, 1998, for *Midwives*; Anahid Literary Award, 2000; *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* book club selection, 2003, for *The Buffalo Soldier*.

WRITINGS

- *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: A Novel*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The Law of Similars: A Novel*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Trans-Sister Radio*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *The Buffalo Soldier*, Crown (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town*, Harmony Books (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Before You Know Kindness: A Novel*, Harmony Books/Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Double Bind*, Shaye Areheart Books (New York, NY), 2007.

Contributor to numerous magazines, including *Reader’s Digest*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Boston Globe Magazine*.

Media Adaptations: *Past the Bleachers* was adapted for a Hallmark television movie in 1991; *Midwives* adapted for the stage by Dana Yeaton, October, 2000, and by Lifetime cable channel for a TV movie; *The Buffalo Soldier* also adapted by Lifetime, 2002.

Sidelights

Chris Bohjalian dismisses his first two novels as “apprentice fiction.” Regarding *A Killing in the Real World* he states: “What begins as a vacuous coming-of-age story metamorphoses into a truly horrific mystery.” *Hangman* he describes as “a perfectly fine New England ghost story,” but goes on to add, “Does the world need another New England ghost story?” Only with his third novel, *Past the Bleachers*, does Bohjalian feel that he found his milieu, writing about “everyday people dealing with the complex moral ambiguities that fill the world.” *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 1991.

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer characterized *Water Witches*, Bohjalian’s fourth book, as “a moving, life-affirming novel suffused with ecological wisdom.” The plot centers around 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 dowzers 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. Yet as Scott becomes more aware of the situation and is affected by the New England environment, 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 of *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: A Novel* was chosen by *Publishers Weekly* as among the best fiction of the year, and subsequently selected by the Oprah Winfrey television show as a book club pick. Critics were nearly unanimous in their praise. Michelle 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.” 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*. 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. Reba Leiding 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.”

In an interview with Rebecca Bain for *J-B Online*, Bohjalian commented, “I don’t view *Midwives* as an ‘issue’ novel. I have no agenda for or against home birth, though I do have a massive amount of respect and affection for midwives and nurse-midwives, and the midwifery model for birth.” He added, “About six months after my daughter was born, my wife and I were at a dinner party and I realized I was sitting next to a lay (or independent) midwife. . . . That was the first time I’d ever heard the term ‘catching a baby,’ and I grew interested fast. And as I got to know this talented and charismatic midwife, I learned that she had attended between 650 and 700 births, which meant she had seen between 650 and 700 sobbing men. I began to realize that she was a part of a profession in which everyone saw their work as a calling (not merely a job), and there was a tremendous amount of beauty and drama every single day. . . . 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.” The *BookBrowse* interviewer asked Bohjalian if, having written the novel, he and his wife would consider home birth as an option. He replied, “In a heartbeat. My wife and I would be very comfortable having a baby at home, or using one of the terrific nurse-midwives at the hospital. Certainly we’d see an ob-gyn in the beginning as well, to make sure that Victoria (my wife) was a good candidate for a midwife-attended birth. But assuming it was a low-risk pregnancy, we’d be eager to call our neighbor — now friend and neighbor — who happens to be a midwife, and ask her to help us have our baby.”

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 Chris Schleier.

In *The Law of Similars*, Bohjalian further explores the central theme of *Midwives*, the conflict between traditional and alternative forms of medicine. Homeopathist 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. Yet when one of Carissa’s patients dies, and the man’s wife accuses Carissa and demands a criminal investigation, 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 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 undercut his appeal as a protagonist. Liz Rosenberg of the *New York Times* found the characterizations flat

compared to those in *Midwives*, but concluded that “despite its flaws, *The Law of Similars* is fast-paced and absorbing.”

Chris Bohjalian 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.

“I began writing as a genre novelist, producing a mystery, *A Killing in the Real World*, and a ghost story, *Hangman*. It was an accident; it was a mistake. I don’t particularly enjoy mysteries. Consequently, my third novel, *Past the Bleachers*, is the first book I’ve produced that can illuminate the kinds of work I hope to complete over the rest of my career: traditional adult fiction inspired by the work of such contemporary novelists as John Irving, Joyce Carol Oates, and Howard Frank Mosher.”

In continuing that career, Bohjalian’s prediction that he would be able to write “riskier books” because of his selection for the Oprah book club has come true. He has produced two more novels that explore the edges of what is acceptable societally: *Trans-Sister Radio* and *The Buffalo Soldier*. The first, as Erica Jameson in the *Burlington Free Press* described, “introduces school teacher Allison Banks, her teen-age daughter, her ex-husband and the man who loves her while on his way to surgically becoming a woman.” Brisbane *Sunday Mail* writer Robyn Garner pointed out that *Trans-Sister Radio* “is unlikely to top Christian best-seller lists, as the topic is trans-sexuality. That’s trans-sexuality, not transvestism; gender reassignment, not gender exploration. There’s a big difference between donning the missus’ frock and frilly knickers for a bit of a thrill and spending your whole life knowing you’ve been born into the wrong skin, be you male or female.” Garner continued, “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, including *Midwives* and *Law of Similars*, will not be surprised to hear that there is nothing camp, overplayed or remotely stereotyped in his portrayal of Dana.” “All of my books, at least my good ones, are fictional memoirs,” Bohjalian told Jameson. “It’s an individual chronicling the seminal event in her life.” Jameson added, “For every hour he 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 re-assignment surgery and sent the manuscript to [a woman] doctor . . . who specializes in sex changes as well as once having been a man herself.”

According to Robin Vidimos in the *Denver Post*, “Readers seem to be reacting to the book as a love story, even if the lovers are a far cry from Ward and June or even Bill and Hillary.” The writer continued, “The book brings to life an alternative kind of partnering that, over the last year, has been increasingly in the mainstream. . . . Bohjalian recognizes the trend, saying, ‘I think that’s a good thing.’” He added, “Traditionally we’ve viewed it

[gender] as [if] there are men on one side, women on the other. There are people in the world who argue quite convincingly and beautifully that [this view] is narrow-minded, and that it's narrow-minded whether you are gay, straight, or transgendered." "The view of gender as a continuum, and also the impossible psychic conflict that arises from being forced into the wrong gender identity box, come through with clear grace in *Trans-Sister Radio*," wrote Vidimos.

The Buffalo Soldier is a first departure from Bohjalian's fictional memoir format. He writes it in the third person, with different sections in the voices 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's coming into his own is in large part both because of Laura's kindness and because, as Evans put it, "He is helped by a neighbor, an old man [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 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, which Knight Ridder reporter James Ward Lee characterized as "postmodern cuteness [that] makes the typing easier, but the reading harder."

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. . . . Ultimately, the novel puts a happy face on race relations in America, suggesting that in some decent little communities, the storms of prejudice are raging well beyond the cozy farmhouse yards. 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 a *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."

A collection of Bohjalian's newspaper columns, titled *Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town*, is a diary of the author's life and of small town America. In a Barnes & Noble Web site interview, Bohjalian said, "I have a novel coming out next autumn. It is tentatively titled *Before You Know a Kindness*, a reference to a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye. It begins: Before you know what kindness really is / you must lose things, / feel the future dissolve in a moment / like salt in a weakened broth."

Denise Civelli in the Melbourne *Herald Sun* remarked of Bohjalian's work, "Author Bohjalian gently develops his characters through their own interpretations of circumstances. His narrative ebbs and swells in the exploration of the people in his landscape — his gift is giving credence to what initially appear to be unlikely scenarios." The popularity of his writing continues to grow as he enables readers to empathize with unlikely characters in complex and challenging situations which he does not belittle or simplify.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

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- *Booklist*, March 1, 1995, p. 1177; February 15, 1997, p. 1001; December 1, 2000, p. 743; March 1, 2002, p. 1089; November 15, 2002, p. 615.
- *Boston Herald*, March 24, 2002, p. 048.
- *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington VT), May 7, 2000, p. D01; October 19, 2000, p. D03; June 30, 2002, p. D01; August 9, 2002, p. C01.
- *Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, OH), April 3, 2003, p. E1.
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- *Denver Post* (Denver, CO), May 14, 2000, p. I-06; June 18, 2000, p. F-03; April 14, 2002, p. EE-03.
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- *Lambda Book Report*, September, 2000, p. 17.
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- *Maclean's*, July 17, 2000, p. 46.
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 14, 2000, p. 06; July 2, 2001, p. 01.
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Author Interview

Q: You moved to Vermont from New York after an unpleasant experience involving a taxi. How would Chris Bohjalian the novelist in NY have been different from Chris Bohjalian the novelist in VT in terms of inspiration and issues you raise in your novels?

Chris Bohjalian: Novelists talk with an agonizing amount of hubris about how they found their voice. The reality, however, is that I did indeed find mine in Vermont. Vermont is a fascinating microcosm for issues that have relevance everywhere — the environment vs. development, alternative vs. traditional medicine, all the baggage that we bring to gender and sexual orientation — and it is so small that it is possible to bring these issues to life on a scale that is human, recognizable and profoundly accessible. For instance, I would never have written a book about the literal and metaphoric place of birth in our culture (*Midwives*), if I had remained in Manhattan. After all, home birth isn't a part of the dialogue. Nor would have I written a vaguely eco-novel such as *Water Witches* — and it's interesting to note that I wrote that novel in 1993 (it was published in 1995), years before we were focused on global climate change the way we are now. It's not that I am especially prescient — but in some ways Vermont is.

Even a novel such as *The Double Bind*, which explores themes that I would have been likely to come across in New York — including, of course, mental illness and homelessness — was informed by Vermont. It was easy to research the subject at the state psychiatric hospital and one of the correctional facilities, as well find therapists and social workers who were available to help me, because we are just so small. A phone call here and a phone call there, and I was able to line up the necessary interviews.

Now, I love New York. I get back there often, and half of *Before You Know Kindness* is set there. But I believe I have found subjects in Vermont that are more in keeping with my strengths as a stylist.

Q: Talk about your upcoming novel, *Skeletons at the Feast*.

CB: This novel is a departure — and it was creatively the most satisfying thing I have done in my life. (That doesn't mean it's any good or I got anything right — just that it was a struggle and it was rewarding.)

Back in 1999, the father of a girl in my daughter's kindergarten class asked me if I would read an unpublished diary his grandmother had left behind. His mother had just translated it from German into English and typed it up. We're good friends, and so I was happy to take a look at it.

The diary chronicled this woman's life on a massive estate and farm in East Prussia, and there was a lot in it that fascinated me — especially the desperate journey the women made in the last months of the Second World War to reach the British and American

liners ahead of the Soviet army. I shared it with some editors, but there weren't any takers.

Years later, in 2005, I read Max Hastings' *Armageddon*, his non-fiction account of the last year of the Second World War in Germany, and I kept coming across references to scenes that were familiar. And then I realized why: I had read of similar occurrences in that diary six years earlier. I asked my friend if I could see it again. When I reread it, I decided I wanted to write a novel set in the period, and thus began some of the most intense research (and writing) of my professional career.

Skeletons at the Feast is a love story — a love triangle, really, set in Poland and Germany in the last six months of World War Two.

The characters? There is 18-year-old Anna Emmerich, the daughter of Prussian aristocrats who were originally pleased when their massive estate once more became a part of Germany in 1939, but who discovered over the next five years what Nazi management really meant for their rural district.

There is her lover, Callum Finella, a 20-year-old prisoner-of-war who was brought from the stalag to her family's farm as forced labor. And there is a 26-year-old Wehrmacht corporal who the pair know as Manfred — but who is, in reality, Uri Singer, a German Jew who managed a daring escape from a train bound for Auschwitz, and who has been sabotaging the Nazi war effort ever since.

The novel chronicles the longest journey of their lives: Their attempt to cross the remnants of the Third Reich, from Warsaw to the Rhine if necessary, to reach the British and American lines.

Q: Women figure prominently in many of your novels. Talk about the challenge of writing a novel like *Midwives* or *The Double Bind*, where delving into the psyche of the characters is key.

CB: I wish I could say there was a specific process, but I don't find writing about women that different from writing about men. In each case, it's an act of imagination. How would a person respond to a specific event or moment? What is an individual experiencing or thinking? What are people seeing or hearing?

In the last decade, I have written novels or scenes within novels from the perspectives of (among others) a midwife, a transsexual lesbian, a vigorous female senior citizen, an African-American foster child, a 10-year-old girl, an 18-year-old female Prussian aristocrat in 1945, a young Jewish man from Germany who has jumped off a train on the way to a death camp in 1943, and a variety of balding middle-aged men. I actually found this last category — the balding middle-aged men who are like me — the least interesting.

Q: Talk about memories from your youth that you cherish most.

CB: I had a classically 1960s/1970s suburban childhood. I grew up in a variety of Cheever-esque dysfunctional suburbs just outside of New York City (with a three-year detour to Miami, Fla.). When I read Peter Balakian’s *Black Dog of Fate*, I saw echoes of my own childhood.

We also moved a lot, however, and in one period I went to four different schools in four years. And so while my childhood wasn’t bad, it didn’t revolve around great friends once I finished 6th grade. The fact is, my friends changed by necessity almost every year from 7th grade on.

My favorite memories, in no apparent order, are:

Playing Little League baseball in Stamford, Conn.;

Reading *Johnny Tremain* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *April Morning* for the first time;

Visiting my grandparents in Tuckahoe, N.Y., and listening to Leo Bohjalian — my grandfather — play the oud, after losing to his wife in pool. I can still smell my grandmother’s beregs;

Organizing baseball cards in my living room before thunderstorms;

Flying anywhere on airplanes;

Being scared silly by the following movies: “The Birds,” “The Haunting” and “Psycho.”

Q: How do you decide what issues to tackle in your novels? Talk about the process of writing a novel.

CB: Invariably the inspiration is something in my personal life: Someone I have met or something I have heard or something I have seen.

The Double Bind may be as good an example as any. The novel had its origins in December 2003, when Rita Markley, the executive director of Burlington’s homeless shelter, shared with me a box of old photographs. The black-and-white images had been taken by a once-homeless photographer who had died in the apartment building her organization had found for him. His name was Bob “Soupy” Campbell.

The photos were remarkable, both because of Campbell’s evident talent and because of the subject matter. I recognized the performers — musicians, comedians, actors — and newsmakers in many of them.

I write a weekly column for the “Burlington Free Press,” which was why Rita wanted me to see the photos. She thought they might make for an interesting story, and she was absolutely right: I wrote about Campbell in December 2003, researching his life and accomplishments and why he might have wound up homeless, and to this day it remains one of my favorite essays I’ve written for the paper. I had celebrated Campbell’s talents (which were extensive) and I had reminded people of the very fine line that separates so many of us from being homeless. But then I thought I was done with the subject. Six months later, in June 2004, I reread *The Great Gatsby*. I love that novel. Few writers crafted sentences as consistently luminescent as Fitzgerald or understood class and culture and longing as well.

Then I went for a bike ride on a dirt road deep in a canopy of woods. My wife had heard a story on the radio that day that advised parents to tell their children the following: If someone ever tried to abduct them while they were riding their bikes, they should hold onto the handlebars for dear life. It’s more difficult to abduct someone and throw them into the back of a car or a van if they are firmly attached to their bike. The geometry just doesn’t work.

As I rode, I started thinking about Bob Campbell for the first time in months, and I was thinking about him in regard to *The Great Gatsby*. Why? Perhaps it’s because we always see *The Great Gatsby* through a haze of black and white photographs — Campbell’s medium. And, of course, *The Great Gatsby* is a jazz age novel — and Campbell photographed a lot of jazz musicians.

And so the idea for *The Double Bind* formed in my head on that dirt road. I knew precisely how a book would begin and — for the only time in my life — I knew precisely how it would end.

Of course, this also meant I know A and Z, but not the 24 letters in between. That meant I had a different set of problems to solve. I wrote four drafts before I could even begin to seriously edit it: A Henry James-ian third person draft; then a first person draft narrated by Laurel Estabrook (the main character); then a draft with multiple first person narrators; and, finally, a draft that was third person subjective — less cold and omniscient than that initial version. This draft worked in ways the earlier ones hadn’t. Only then was I able to start refining and tightening the novel.

Q. What was the book that most influenced your life or your career as a writer — and why?

CB: I'm actually going to pick a single period in my life, rather than a single book, because I believe it's the most honest way to answer this question.

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. I started school the following Tuesday, and then, that afternoon, went to see 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, and I had to wear said device for four hours a day when I was awake.

Since I couldn't (well, wouldn't) wear it during school, I had to wear it after school. It was inevitable, but I couldn't speak when I was wearing it.

And so I couldn't meet any kids in my neighborhood, and make new friends. What did I do that first autumn and winter — winter, such as it is, in South Florida?

I went to the Hialeah Miami Lake Public Library. And I read. I read the sorts of things any adolescent boy was likely to read in the mid-1970s. I read William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home*, and Peter Benchley's deceptively fine novel *Jaws*.

Also, in all fairness, I read a somewhat higher caliber of literature as well — Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People*.

I read those books in the library as well as in the den in our new home, and from them I learned a very great deal that would help me profoundly as an adult writer. I learned the importance of linear momentum in plot from Blatty and Benchley and Tryon. And I learned about the importance of voice — and the role of person in fiction — from Lee and Oates.

I learned on a level that may not have been fully concrete yet — but that did indeed adhere — that the narrator in a first-person novel is a character, too, and every bit as made-up as the fictional constructs around him or her.

Q. Do you have any special writing rituals? For example, what do you have on your desk when you're writing?

CB: I am frighteningly compulsive when it comes to the library in my house in which I write. It is very clean. And orderly. The books are alphabetized; the pens are lined up in their cases. At night, I put a dust cover on my computer.

I actually have two desks. One holds the computer on which I write rough drafts. Along with the computer and printer, it has on it photographs of my wife and my daughter, and two small sting rays made of polished stone from Grand Cayman (an island I love because of the scuba diving and snorkeling) that my daughter gave me. The other desk is smaller, and on it I edit my rough drafts. It has a lamp built from an Art Deco planter of a black panther, and most of my favorite pens.

Both desks have glorious views of Mount Abraham, the third-highest mountain in Vermont, and I watch the sun rise over the mountain as I work.

Q. Many writers are hardly “overnight success” stories. How long did it take for you to get where you are today? Any rejection-slip horror stories or inspirational anecdotes?

CB: When I was a sophomore in college, the writer-in-residence was a novelist whose work I cherished. She was teaching a creative writing seminar in the spring semester, and I wanted very much to be among the anointed she was going to choose to be in it. That meant submitting a short story in December, which she would read over the holiday break.

In January, I was summoned to her office in the brick monolith that housed the school's English Department, and there I met her for the first time. She was seated behind a desk the size of a putting green. When she saw me, she adjusted her shawl, fixed her eyeglasses, and said, “You're Chris. I'm not going to try to pronounce your last name.”

I nodded, a little apprehensive now. Then she slid my short story across the expanse of desk as if it were a piece of profoundly disagreeable roadkill. “Well, Chris I'm-Not-Going-to-Pronounce-Your-Last-Name,” she continued, “I have three words for you.” This clearly wasn't going to be good, but I am nothing if not optimistic. And so I waited.

Then it came: “Be a banker,” she said. And we were through.

Someday I will dedicate a book to her.

Q. What tips or advice do you have for writers still looking to be discovered?

CB: Read lots. Have a thick skin. And write often — and write about things that interest you passionately. Writing teachers often encourage young writers to write about what they know — or, conversely, to write about things that are foreign to them. I think neither should be a cardinal rule. Instead, you should write about things that interest you, regardless of whether you know anything about the topic when you start, or you're among the world's foremost experts. The key is to care so deeply about the subject — find it so extraordinary — that you are willing to give up a year or two of your life to it. If you bring that level of enthusiasm to the story, it certainly increases the chances that you will create something of interest to strangers browsing in a library or bookstore. One more thing: Have fun and avoid a mean spirit. I've never felt a writer needs to be tormented to succeed in this business.

Q. What are your ten favorite books, and what makes them special to you?

CB: I feel guilty limiting the list to a mere ten, given how many books that are indeed special to me. I have, however, always enjoyed that game in which you have to pick a few books or movies to have with you on a desert island, and so here's a group that I've read multiple times — the ultimate compliment, I believe, one can bestow upon a book. Incidentally, the list has 11 titles. I couldn't possibly delete any one of them. Mea culpa.

- *The Voyage of the Narwahl* by Andrea Barrett — A tale of icebound sailors and scientists in the 19th century (and the women they leave behind) that I found as moving as it was gripping.
- *The Joyous Season* by Patrick Dennis — Imagine Holden Caulfield with less angst and a better sense of humor, and you have the howlingly funny narrator of this book. The book chronicles the near-dissolution of one wealthy Manhattan family in the early 1960s, and what it takes to keep it intact. Nearly every page is a scream, especially read today, because every moment feels so fabulously retro.
- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald — Individual sentences give me a whopper of an inferiority complex, but I love every one. You'll see echoes of it in my new novel, *The Double Bind*.
- *The Cider House Rules* by John Irving — I savor Irving's books because his characters are so gloriously eccentric and idiosyncratic, and this sweeping story is filled with people I cherished.
- *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer — The tale is riveting, and not simply because it's all true. Krakauer is a terrific storyteller.

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee — There is obviously so much to savor in this book and so many ways to examine it. Among the elements that I cherish the most is what an authentic father-daughter love story it is.
- *Homeboy* by Seth Morgan — The only novel Morgan left us before he died in a motorcycle accident. The prose (from page 1) is electric, the story is gloriously seamy, and the ending profound and poignant.
- *A Stranger in the Kingdom* by Howard Frank Mosher — A story about race, yes, but also a tender story of fathers and sons, and the unexpected places where we find friendship.
- *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje — I love novels that teach me something, and in this book I learned a bit about Africa, archeology, and Egypt in the years immediately before the Second World War. It's also a breathtakingly beautiful and authentic love story.
- *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron — Perhaps the most sad and wrenching novel I've ever read.
- *The Right Stuff* by Tom Wolfe — Wolfe is characteristically bemused in this history of the Mercury space program, but he also captures the sense of adventure and courage that peppered the endeavor, as well as the humanity of the test pilots, the astronauts, and their wives.

Courtesy of www.chrisbohjalian.com

Discussion Questions

1. Chris Bohjalian begins the novel with a very matter-of-fact description of a brutal attack. Later in the novel, he writes about Laurel, “she preferred black and white [photography] because she thought it offered both greater clarity and deeper insight into her subjects. In her opinion, you understood a person better in black and white” (page 33). Compare Laurel’s analysis of photography to the writing style of the author, particularly in the prologue.
2. In a feat of narrative turnaround, *The Double Bind* ends with a shocking revelation. Did you find yourself reviewing the novel or rereading it to experience it anew? Did you find the treatment of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s characters to be more or less significant in light of the revelation about Laurel’s sanity?
3. Bohjalian introduces the world of *The Great Gatsby* seamlessly into his characters’ lives, as if it were real. As readers, we come to understand that all of it was a figment of Laurel’s addled mind. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald’s themes resonate deeply within Bohjalian’s narrative: the death of the American Dream, repeating the past, and self-reinvention, to name a few. Discuss how each author (Fitzgerald and Bohjalian) explores these themes, and examine any others that stood out for you.
4. Discuss Bohjalian’s treatment of homelessness, both as a reality and as an abstraction or social issue. Did *The Double Bind* change your thoughts and views on the plight of the homeless in America? If so, how?
5. Why did Laurel, as the author writes, allow Talia to “remain a part of her life when she consciously exiled herself from the rest of the herd” (page 125)?
6. We learn from Laurel that the phrase “Double Bind” is a psychiatric term for a “particular brand of bad parenting [that] could inadvertently spawn schizophrenia” (page 200). What else, in light of Laurel’s mental state, might the title of the book refer to?
7. Is Laurel’s imagined life for Bobbie — and all his psychiatric problems — a way for her to express her own psychotic break? Is the Bobbie Crocker that the reader gets to know really a facet of Laurel’s personality?
8. Through most of the book the reader believes, along with Laurel, that she escaped certain rape — and that her ability to hold on to her bike saved her. But after the attack, she gives up biking. Discuss the play between the conscious and subconscious mind — a delicate balance that must have underlined all of Laurel’s actions — in this abandonment of the very thing she’d convinced herself was her savior.

9. In what ways is Dan Corbett's tattoo of the devil as a skull with horns reminiscent of the billboard of the pair of eyes that overlooks the Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby*? Is there other imagery in the novel that echoes Fitzgerald's tropes?
10. "For the first time, [Katherine] began to wonder if she'd made a serious mistake when she'd given Laurel that box of old photos" (page 142). Were the photos the catalyst for Laurel's downfall? Would Laurel have eventually suffered a similar psychological breakdown without the introduction of the photos?
11. Were you surprised to discover that David's children were figments of Laurel's imagination? In hindsight, were there clues in Marissa and Cindy's actions that revealed their origin in Laurel's mind?
12. Was Bobbie Crocker really the father of Laurel's attacker, Dan Corbett? Is it possible that the elderly Crocker really did see her attack? If so, would he have known who Laurel was when he arrived at BEDS? Discuss the implications of this possibility.
13. How was Laurel able to block out what really happened to her when she carried real physical scars of the mutilation to remind her of it? Were there clues in the narrative that part of her did know what happened all along?
14. Laurel suffered a horrendous attack and managed to go on to do great work for the most neglected members of society. Does her breakdown and hospitalization have a negating effect on the seemingly heroic work that came before it? Why or why not?
15. In the end, were Bobbie Crocker and his photographs real or just a figment of Laurel's traumatized mind?

Courtesy of Random House