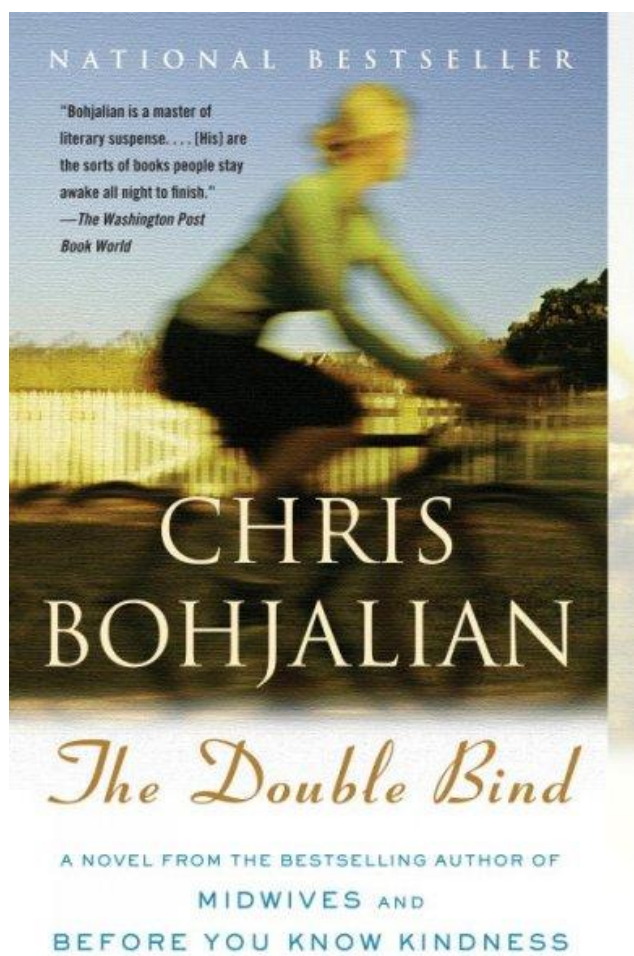


## About the book...



When college sophomore 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 and begins to work 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 suddenly, Laurel discovers that he was telling the truth: before he was homeless, Bobbie Crocker was a successful photographer who had indeed worked with such legends as Chuck Berry, Robert Frost, and Eartha Kitt. As Laurel's fascination with Bobbie's former life begins to merge into obsession, she becomes convinced that some of his photographs reveal a deeply hidden, dark family secret. Her search for the truth will lead her further from her old life—and into a cat and mouse game with pursuers who claim they want to save her.

## About the author... [www.chrisbohjalian.com](http://www.chrisbohjalian.com)



A summa cum laude graduate of Amherst College and a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Bohjalian and his wife lived in Brooklyn, New York until 1986, when they decided to move to Vermont in order to retreat from city life. Here, Bohjalian began a weekly newspaper column entitled "Idyll Banter", in which he chronicled his everyday experiences.

Chris Bohjalian is the author of eleven novels including a World War II love story, *Skeletons at the Feast*, published in 2008. Chris won the New England Book Award in 2002, and 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 21 languages and has sold over three million copies. Twice his books have become movies ("Midwives" and "Past the Bleachers"). 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's novels tend to center on ordinary people who find themselves trapped in extraordinarily difficult situations due to unforeseen circumstances often triggered by other parties. His most recent book, "Skeletons at the Feast," is considered a departure because it is a love story set in the last six months of World War II in Poland and Germany.

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.

## REVIEWS

*Kirkus Reviews/ \*Starred Review\*/*

Psychological thriller, crime novel and “what-if” sequel to *The Great Gatsby*—with significant twists.

Schizophrenic, yes, and alcoholic—but Bobbie Crocker isn’t your stereotypical street person. Bohjalian (*Before You Know Kindness*, 2004, etc.) invests him with mystery; when he dies in Burlington, Vt., he leaves behind photographs from 1960s issues of *Life* magazine. Eartha Kitt, Dick Van Dyke, Muddy Waters—they’re celebrity shots he took, combined with elegant evocations of Jazz Age Long Island. Laurel Estabrook, social worker at Crocker’s shelter, discovers something else among them: a snapshot of herself riding a bike, just as she had, seven years before, when savaged by two thugs. The attack scarring her, she’d retreated into PTSD therapy, affairs with comforting, if noncommittal, father figures and a life less of ambition than service. Crocker’s photos provide Laurel clues to their strangely interconnected pasts—and she sets out to decode them. Had the homeless man actually been to the manor born, son of Tom and Daisy Buchanan of fabled West Egg? His sister denies it, having spent most of her 70 years trying to whitewash her parents’ reputation—Tom’s brutality and Daisy’s suspicious involvement in the car crash that killed one of his lovers. Had those wealthy, morally bankrupt parents

caused Bobbie's "double bind," provoking schizophrenia by instilling in an unwanted child love/hate mixed messages? Or could Bobbie's father be someone yet more notorious, the darkly glamorous star of Fitzgerald's masterpiece? And why was Laurel's own likeness found in Crocker's cache? Sleuthing obsessively, she discovers that Bobbie had a son himself, a boy who grew up to terrify his father. And terrify her. Conflating literary lore, photographic analysis and meditations on homelessness and mental illness, Bohjalian produces his best and most complex fiction yet. Ultra-clever, and moving, too.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Readers will be startled to learn early on that the heroine of this engrossing puzzle, 26-year-old Laurel Estabrook, was born in West Egg. Wait a minute, wasn't West Egg where Jay Gatsby lived? Laurel works in a Burlington, Vt., homeless shelter and is trying to overcome mental and physical scars incurred from a brutal assault some six years earlier. After being given a portfolio of photographs taken by a recently deceased resident of the shelter, Bobbie Crocker, she becomes obsessed with questions surrounding what appears to be a picture of herself, shot on the day of her attack. Laurel's already fragile mental state begins to unravel as she follows Bobbie's life from his rich-kid childhood on Long Island to homelessness in Vermont. The Gatsby references

form the basis of the mystery, compelling readers to try to imagine how this fictional backdrop relates to the novel's "reality." It's a high-wire act for bestseller Bohjalian (*Midwives*), and while the climactic explanation may be a letdown for some, he generally pulls off a tricky and intriguing premise.

### *Booklist*

The author of *Midwives* (1997) and *Before You Know Kindness* (2004) turns his attention to the plight of a 26-year-old woman grappling with the aftermath of terrible trauma. Laurel Estabrook, a caseworker at a homeless shelter, is haunted by the attack that changed her life in college. After Bobbie Crocker, a genial homeless man, dies, Laurel's boss suggests that Laurel go through his photographs and put together a gallery exhibition. As Laurel examines the images, she becomes obsessed with Bobbie's apparent connection to Daisy and Tom Buchanan and their neighbor Jay Gatsby (real characters in the world of Bohjalian's novel). She visits the Buchanans' now elderly daughter, Pamela, whom she suspects might be related to Bobbie, and quickly realizes Pamela is determined to keep her relationship to Bobbie a secret. As Laurel's investigation turns into an obsession, the novel races toward a conclusion that boasts a shocking twist. Although Laurel isn't as easy to connect to as previous Bohjalian characters, this elegantly crafted tale is well worth delving into.

### *The Washington Post*

The last line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has become one of literature's most recognizable sentences: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Nick Carraway's haunting reflection as he stares up at Gatsby's abandoned mansion from the shoreline on his last evening in West Egg is part stately elegy, part defeated warning, and it tolls out across the landscape of American fiction with the beautiful and mournful sound of a bell ringing in the mist. Few writers have expressed the hopelessness of the human condition...with as much eloquence as Fitzgerald. The tragic figure of Gatsby and the exhausted appeal of Nick's voice, at once so corrupted and so disappointed, have long cast a powerful spell over writers and readers.

Chris Bohjalian's new novel, *The Double Bind*, is a kind of reply to *Gatsby*, both its place as a monument on the literary horizon and its message about human destiny, but it is not easy to say what sort of reply it is. Indeed, *The Double Bind* is a difficult novel to describe because at every turn there is the risk of spoiling the story by divulging its surprise ending. Fitzgerald set *Gatsby* in 1922 ... [and] that background is chimerical; Bohjalian has dropped a veil between fiction and reality -- the two seem to merge

in this novel in disturbing ways -- and he does not lift that veil until the story's final pages.

The author of nine other novels, Bohjalian is a master of literary suspense. He does it so well, it's as if he simply can't help himself; convolutions of plot and a perfect instinct for timing are characteristic of his work, including the bestseller *Midwives*. They are the sorts of books people stay awake all night to finish, and *The Double Bind* exerts that same hypnotic tug, even if the reader is sometimes more bewildered than intrigued.

Here, at least superficially, is the story's plot: The main character, Laurel Estabrook, is a college sophomore in Vermont when she is viciously attacked by two masked men late one fall afternoon while bicycling alone on a country road. It takes her months to recover and return to college life, and even then she is withdrawn and careful, her social circle drastically diminished.

A few years later, and by now employed at the local homeless shelter in Burlington, Laurel comes into possession of a trove of photographs belonging to a homeless man; Bobbie Crocker has died and left no trace about his past except the tantalizing trail suggested by his photographs, including images of a girl on a bicycle on the very road where Laurel was assaulted.

The coincidence is as unsettling as it is intriguing, and the novel follows Laurel as she pursues the truth about the identity of the man who left behind this rich store of images and his role in the events of that autumn day when she was assaulted...There's an additional, important complication: Some of Bobbie Crocker's photographs are of West Egg, the fictional setting of *The Great Gatsby* and the place where Laurel happened to grow up. In fact, the descendants of Gatsby's main characters -- Tom and Daisy Buchanan's unfortunate children -- roam the novel's pages as if the world from which they sprang were entirely real.

The idea of the invented self hovers over *Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby, we remember, begins an unpromising life as James Gatz and is murdered for a crime he does not commit. Bohjalian, too, is interested in the gray area between hope and delusion, in how people are shaped by the events of their lives and the efforts they make to hold the self inviolable against fate and harm. As Nick Carraway concludes, the past is powerfully present in the future, and Laurel's investigations into Bobbie Crocker's life lead her inevitably into her own history. Some readers may reach the end and feel blindsided rather than enlightened, but *The Double Bind* describes just how circuitous that inescapable journey can be.

*Library Journal*/\*Starred Review\*/



Laurel Estabrook, a young social worker living in Vermont, becomes obsessed with a box of photographs that belonged to a deceased homeless man, Bobbie Crocker. An amateur photographer herself, Laurel wonders how someone as destitute as Crocker came to possess such high-quality photos, many of them featuring famous people and, bizarrely, Laurel's childhood town. As she devotes more and more time to researching Crocker's past, her friends and family become concerned for her mental well-being. Six years previously, Laurel was attacked by two men in the woods while riding her bike, and though she recovered enough to finish college and get a job, she remains fragile. Bohjalian, whose *Midwives* was an Oprah Book Club selection, adds original and creative elements to this tale by blending the story of *The Great Gatsby* with Laurel's story and including photographs by a real-life homeless man named Bob Campbell. Far from being simply a mystery story, this is a complex exploration of the human psyche and its efforts to heal and survive in whatever manner possible.

### **Discussion questions**

[http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides\\_D/double\\_bind1.asp](http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_D/double_bind1.asp)

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. 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.

12. 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?

13. 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?

14. In the end, were Bobbie Crocker and his photographs real or just a figment of Laurel's traumatized mind?

### **Readalikes**

The Lace Reader by Brunonia Barry (2006)

*The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

*Tell them who I am: the lives of homeless women* by Elliot Liebow (1993)

*I Am the Central Park Jogger: a story of hope and possibility* by Trisha Meili (2003)

*The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller (1992)