

The Double Bind

A Guide for Readers and Discussion Group Leaders

* Please note that items in this guide appearing in **bold underlined text** may give away important plot developments. Read this guide carefully if you do not want too much of the plot revealed to you.

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Plot Summary

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 most of her time working 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 21st Century, between Jay Gatsby's Long Island, and rural New England, bestselling author Chris Bohjalian has written his most extraordinary novel yet. The Double Bind is a page-turning mystery, a complex character study, and an exploration of how things are not always what they seem to be, all rolled into one gripping novel.

14 Questions for Readers and Book Group Leaders

1. Could Bobbie Crocker really have been the father of Laurel's attacker, Dan Corbett? Is it possible that the elder Crocker really did witness her attack? If so, would he have known who Laurel was when Crocker arrived at B.E.D.S.? Discuss the implications of these possibilities.

2. How do you think Laurel was able to block out what had actually happened to her when she carried physical scars to remind her of her trauma? Were there clues in the writing that part of her really did know what had happened all along?

3. What is the significance of both Bobbie and Laurel being photographers? What is important about the way a photographer sees the world? In the end, do you think Bobbie Crocker and his photographs were real, or just figments of Laurel's troubled imagination?

4. The Double Bind was inspired by the photographs of Bob "Soupy" Campbell, who, as Chris Bohjalian explains in his Author's Note, "had gone from photographing luminaries from the 1950's and 1960's to winding up at a homeless shelter in northern Vermont." While the novel's character, Bobbie Crocker, is entirely fictitious, the photographs in The Double Bind are Campbell's actual work. What do they add to the narrative?

5. Discuss the book's treatment of homelessness. Did The Double Bind change your thoughts and views on the plight of the homeless in America? If so, how?

6. Bohjalian seamlessly meshes the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby with that of his own novel. Did you recognize elements of Fitzgerald's fiction as you read The Double Bind? Did you find the appearance of characters from another work of fiction intriguing or disconcerting?

7. Why does Bohjalian connect his novel to The Great Gatsby? What themes does the Fitzgerald novel share with The Double Bind? What influence does the past exert on the characters in both novels?

8. In what ways is Dan Corbett's tattoo in The Double Bind reminiscent of the billboard that overlooks the Valley of Ashes in The Great Gatsby? Is there other imagery in the novel that echoes Fitzgerald's symbolism?

9. We learn from Laurel that the phrase "double bind" refers to Gregory Bateson's theory that "a particular brand of bad parenting could inadvertently spawn schizophrenia." What else might the title of the book refer to? **See the definition of "double bind" below.**

10. Why do you think Laurel, as the author writes, allowed Talia to "remain a part of her life when she consciously exiled herself from the rest of the herd?"

11. How does Laurel's imagined life for Bobbie reflect her own preoccupations, problems, and needs?

12. Did you find yourself reviewing or rereading the novel to search for clues relating to the ending of The Double Bind? What clues did you find? In what ways did these clues affect the telling of the story?

13. An unreliable narrator is a narrating character or storyteller who provides inaccurate, misleading, conflicting, or otherwise questionable information to the reader or audience. In what ways does Laurel fit the concept of an unreliable narrator? How does she mislead the reader? Does she leave any clues behind about the "true" events in the novel?

14. What might Bohjalian's objective have been when he called his novel "The Double Bind?" Which character, or characters, is in a double bind? What impossible choices face that character? How could they be resolved? Consider the definition of a "double bind" below.

What Is a Double Bind Anyway?

DOUBLE BIND. Noun. 1. A psychological impasse created when contradictory demands are made of an individual, such as a child or an employee, so that no matter which demand is followed, the response will be seen by the receiver of that demand as incorrect. 2. A situation in which a person must choose between equally unsatisfactory alternatives; a punishing and inescapable dilemma.

Gregory Bateson coined the term "double bind" in 1956 while studying the characteristic effects of communication in families with schizophrenic members. Bateson and his collaborators identified a specific restricting interaction, creating a situation they called the double bind. The double bind fits into a category of paradox called the pragmatic paradox. The effects of the paradox in human interactions were first described by Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland in a document entitled "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," published in 1956. Bateson and his collaborators were looking for sequences of interpersonal experiences that could lead to a type of behavior that would justify the diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Here is a typical case of a double bind that these researchers described:

A mother buys two neckties for her little boy, one green and one blue. The next day the child is in a hurry to sport the green necktie. The mother says, "So you don't like the blue tie I gave you?" The next day the boy puts on the blue tie, hoping to earn his mother's approval, and draws the symmetrical response: "So you don't like the green tie I gave you?" On the third day, the child tries to find a compromise solution in order to satisfy his mother's two demands: he puts on the two ties together. His mother comments: "You poor boy, you're out of your mind. You're going to drive me crazy." This paradoxical injunction, where the double bind mechanism is particularly obvious, clearly shows the confusing and destructive effects on the person at the receiving end.

In 1960, Antonio J. Ferreira described one particular form of double bind, the split double bind, observed in the families of young delinquents. Here is an example of a split double bind:

A patient presents persistent headaches, for which in-depth medical examinations reveal nothing. The patient has conveyed the following message through his symptoms and his prior relations with doctors: "I want you to help me, but I won't let you help me." The therapist understands that any talk about the help that psychotherapy could provide would doom the treatment to failure. The patient therefore has to face the fact that his state is incurable. Ethically, all that the therapist can do is help him learn to live with his pains.

Author Biography

Christopher A. Bohjalian was born August 12, 1960 in White Plains, New York, the son of an advertising executive and a homemaker. Chris received a B.A. from Amherst College in 1982. He married Victoria Blewer, a photographer and artist, on October 13, 1984. They live in Lincoln, Vermont, with their daughter. Chris is the author of eleven novels, including the New York Times bestsellers, *Skeletons at the Feast*, *The Double Bind*, *Before You Know Kindness*, *The Law of Similars*, and *Midwives*. 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 25 languages and has sold over three and a half million copies. His books have become movies twice - *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 the Vermont *Burlington Free Press* since 1992.

Author Bibliography

A Killing in the Real World, St. Martin's Press, 1988.
Hangman, Carroll & Graf, 1991.
Past the Bleachers, Carroll & Graf, 1992.
Water Witches, University Press of New England, 1995.
Midwives, Harmony Books, 1997.
The Law of Similars, Harmony Books, 1999.
Trans-Sister Radio, Harmony Books, 2000.
The Buffalo Soldier, Crown, 2002.
Idyll Banter: Weekly Excursions to a Very Small Town, Harmony Books, 2003.
Before You Know Kindness, Harmony Books/Shaye Areheart Books, 2004.
The Double Bind, Shaye Arehart Books, 2007.
Skeletons at the Feast, Shaye Arehart Books, 2008.

Author Filmography

Past The Bleachers – 1991, Hallmark Television, starring Richard dean Anderson, Barnard Hughes, and Glynnis O'Connor.
Midwives – 2001, Lifetime Cable, starring Sissy Spacek, Peter Coyote, and Terry Kinney.
Buffalo Soldier – purchased by Lifetime Cable for production.

If you liked The Double Bind, you might like ...

Lucky: A Memoir, by Alice Sebold, Scribner, 1999.
Body Surfing, by Anita Shreve, Little Brown, 2007.
Exposure, by Kathryn Harrison, Random House, 1993.
An Invisible Sign of My Own (2007) by Aimee Bender
The Lavender Hour (2007) by Anne LeClaire
The City is a Rising Tide (2006) by Rebecca Lee
Him, Her, Him Again, the End of Him (2007) by Patricia Marx
The Master Bedroom (2007) by Tessa Hadley
Mirror Lake (2003) by Christopher Greene
The Drowning Tree (2004) by Carol Goodman

Web Links

The Picture of Compassion, article by Chris Bohjalian about the inspiration for *The Double Bind*, the story of photographer Bob Campbell, <http://www.bohjalian.com/campbell-story.htm>.

Contact the Author

Via mail – Chris Bohjalian, c/o Amanda Urban, International Creative Management Inc., 40 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019.
E-mail - chris@chrisbohjalian.com.

Book Reviews

Booklist Reviews: 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. (Reviewed December 15, 2006 - Copyright 2006 Booklist Reviews).

Kirkus Reviews: 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 invests him with mystery; when he dies in Burlington, Vermont, he leaves behind photographs from 1960's issues of *Life* magazine. Eartha Kitt, Dick Van Dyke, and Muddy Waters – they are 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 – in the end she sets out to decode them. Had the homeless man actually been 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. (Copyright Kirkus 2007, Kirkus/BPI Communications, all rights reserved).