



The Jackal's Mistress by Chris Bohjalian

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Discussion Questions

- 1.** In the novel's opening scene, Libby and Joseph survive in part because the intruder underestimates them. In the many daring encounters they experience together, how do they turn their vulnerable identities into an advantage? How do they disguise their strength?
- 2.** Libby excels in the men's world --- from running the mill and defending her loved ones to negotiating with Union troops. As a newcomer and an interloper, what made her a good match for her husband, Peter?
- 3.** How do Sally and Joseph endure the traumas of their past and the constant threats they face throughout the novel? What sustains their devotion to each other?
- 4.** How did literature prepare Weybridge for the horrors and contradictions he would witness as a soldier? How did he maintain stamina in both mind and body?
- 5.** In chapter 14, Weybridge tries to help Jubilee understand the abolitionist cause, while in chapter 20, Joseph gives Weybridge a grim dose of reality about what life will be like after the war. What perpetuated the system that kept Joseph and Sally from being truly free?
- 6.** Jubilee nicknames Weybridge "Jackal" because she is wary of the enemy's cunning ways. How does their relationship reflect the precarious balance of trust that teeters in other aspects of the storyline, on land, where dominance and control kept changing hands?
- 7.** In the novel and in the true story that inspired it, what do we discover about the human capacity for kindness and healing, and the ability to rise above the destructive roar of the crowd (even when the roar is stoked by power brokers who benefit from the discord)? Ultimately, what do you think Libby's real motivation was in protecting Weybridge? Would you have been willing to take that risk? Was Dr. Norton willing to take the risk only because he was being self-serving?
- 8.** Libby, Emily and Jubilee all must endure months of not knowing the fates of their loved ones who are at war. In their situation, is hope a positive force, or is it a liability?
- 9.** What transformations does Libby undergo during the final showdown in chapter 23? What does the scene reveal about her essence and the essence of the community she married into?
- 10.** Who are the Henry Morgans and John Mosbys of the modern world, waging brutality under the guise of civility?
- 11.** As you read the epilogue, how did you react? What was erased in the aftermath of the Civil War? What persisted?
- 12.** What surprising details did you learn about this chapter in history? What family stories of war and survival have been passed down to you? How do those lives and stories compare with the ones portrayed in the novel? In what ways can fiction sometimes reveal the truth more fully than nonfiction?

13. How does Chris Bohjalian's storytelling --- in THE JACKAL'S MISTRESS and in his other novels that you have read --- bring to life the intersection of chance and choice in a unique way?

Author Biography

Chris Bohjalian is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of 26 books. His 26th book, THE AMATEUR, arrives in August. The paperback of THE JACKAL'S MISTRESS goes on sale in January.

He writes literary fiction, historical fiction, thrillers, and (on occasion) ghost stories. His goal is never to write the same book twice. He has published somewhere in the neighborhood of 3.5 million words.

His work has been translated into 35 languages and become three movies (MIDWIVES, SECRETS OF EDEN, and PAST THE BLEACHERS) and an Emmy-winning TV series (THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT). He has two other novels in development for TV series as well.

He is also a playwright, including THE CLUB in 2024; MIDWIVES in 2020; and GROUNDED (now WINGSPAN) in 2018.

His books have been chosen as Best Books of the Year by the Washington Post, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Hartford Courant, the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, Kirkus Reviews, Booklist, Bookpage, and Salon.

His awards include the Walter Cerf Medal for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts; the Sarah Josefa Hale Award; the ANCA Freedom Award for his work educating Americans about the Armenian Genocide; the ANCA Arts and Letters Award for THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS, as well as the Saint Mesrob Mashdots Medal; the New England Society Book Award for THE NIGHT STRANGERS; the New England Book Award; Russia's Soglasie (Concord) Award for THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS; a Boston Public Library Literary Light; a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for TRANS-SISTER RADIO; a Best Lifestyle Column for "Idyll Banter" from the Vermont Press Association; and the Anahid Literary Award. His short story, SLOT MACHINE FEVER DREAMS was a finalist for Best Short Story from the International Thriller Writers Association and the audio production was an Audie Finalist. His novel, MIDWVES was a selection of Oprah's Book Club, and his novel, HOUR OF THE WITCH, was a Barnes & Noble Book Club pick. He is a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He has written for a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, including The New York Times, The Washington Post, Cosmopolitan, Reader's Digest, and The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine. He was a weekly columnist in Vermont for The Burlington Free Press from 1992 through 2015.

Chris graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Summa Cum Laude from Amherst College. He has been awarded Honorary Degrees as well from Amherst, Champlain College, and Castleton University.

He lives in Vermont with his wife, the photographer Victoria Blewer.

Their daughter, Grace Experience, is a young actor in New York City. Among the audiobooks she has narrated are all or part of are THE PRINCESS OF LAS VEGAS; HOUR OF THE WITCH; THE

FLIGHT ATTENDANT; THE GUEST ROOM; THE LIONESS; THE SLEEPWALKER; and CLOSE YOUR EYES, HOLD HANDS.

From: <https://chrisbohjalian.com/bio/>

Reviews

I am in awe of Chris Bohjalian. He is a true American original who has mastered every genre he has tackled: literary fiction, historical fiction, mystery, thriller and horror. Not since SKELETONS AT THE FEAST has he depicted the harsh realities of war and the impact on those affected by it like he does in THE JACKAL'S MISTRESS. It is destined to be a classic worthy of Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, and is easily one of the most powerful novels I have read in a long time.

Set towards the end of the Civil War, the book introduces readers to an extremely brave woman. Libby Steadman, aka the Mistress, has been running the homestead and gristmill with her niece, Jubilee, and two freed slaves: Sally and her husband, Joseph. This is all occurring as Libby's husband, Peter, a Confederate soldier, is being held captive in a Union prison.

"THE JACKAL'S MISTRESS is an unforgettable read that cements Bohjalian's placement on the literary Mount Rushmore of American writers and should appeal to readers of all genres."

Libby's life is about to be changed forever by the unexpected arrival of Captain Jonathan Weybridge, a Union soldier and an English professor from Vermont. He is severely injured during a brutal battle that costs him most of his right leg, as well as two fingers on his left hand. The Union medics do all they can for him before having to evacuate the area, leaving him in an abandoned Southern home that neighbors Libby.

Sally finds Weybridge and brings him to Libby's place for further caring. Had she not stepped in when she did, he surely would have died. Jubilee tags him with the nickname "Jackal," and it sticks. Once he finally regains full consciousness and is able to share his identity and background, they surprisingly take to him and his calm demeanor. He left a wife and child back home in Vermont and is just as eager as anyone to see the end of this bloody war, followed by a safe return home.

Of course, word will spread about the possibility of an injured Yankee in the area, and Libby is already not very popular because of her freed slaves and her husband, whose father is from the North. There will be more than one instance when all of their lives are in danger, and they make for some of the most suspenseful reading I have experienced in quite a while.

The plan ends up being an extremely risky one. There is an attempt to transport Weybridge to Harpers Ferry disguised as a corpse in a coffin built by Joseph, but it will be nearly impossible to pull off. The hope is that Weybridge will be returned to the Union Army, and then he will do what he can for Libby regarding the whereabouts or potential death of her husband.

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Read-Alikes

The Girl From the Channel Islands by Jenny Lecoat

After fleeing Vienna, Hedy Bercu, a Jewish woman living on the island of Jersey, is forced to hide in plain sight during the German occupation and to survive must depend on her own courage, her community, and a German soldier she befriends.

The Girl Behind the Wall by Mandy Robotham

A city divided. When the Berlin Wall goes up, Karin is on the wrong side of the city. Overnight, she's trapped under Soviet rule in unforgiving East Berlin and separated from her twin sister, Jutta. Two sisters torn apart. Karin and Jutta lead parallel lives for years, cut off by the Wall. But Karin finds one reason to keep going: Otto, the man who gives her hope, even amidst the brutal East German regime. One impossible choice... When Jutta finds a hidden way through the wall, the twins are reunited. But the Stasi have eyes everywhere, and soon Karin is faced with a terrible decision: to flee to the West and be with her sister, or sacrifice it all to follow her heart?