



Before You Know Kindness

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Chris Bohjalian, bestselling author of *Midwives*, presents his most ambitious and multi-layered novel to date—examining wildly divisive issues in today’s America with his trademark emotional heft and spellbinding storytelling skill. On a balmy July night in New Hampshire a shot rings out in a garden, and a man falls to the ground, terribly wounded. The wounded man is Spencer McCullough, the shot that hit him was fired—accidentally?—by his adolescent daughter Charlotte. With this shattering moment of violence, Chris Bohjalian launches the best kind of literate page-turner: suspenseful, wryly funny, and humane.

Before You Know Kindness Details

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Carol says

This was mainly an author's attempt to turn a personal held political statement into a novel – a wordy, boring, tedious, over-long novel. His personal rants became invasive after about 100 pages and this was a 400 page book! I read for another 125 pages and could not take it any longer. I don't mind reading other people's points of view (even though different than mine) but not when pretending to be fiction and not shoved forcefully down my throat with a sharp stick.

Jennifer says

I LOVED this book. I don't know why people are saying it was slow moving. I loved the pace. It's a character piece, and the suspense is in the slow and detailed unfolding of their lives and secret thoughts. To me, this book is a lot about what people think every day, but never reveal to each other, and how that affects what they can and can't say (or do) later. And, I liked that the author took a hard stance against animal activists -- not because I have anything against them. Like most of us, I tend to assume that, "Animal activists are GOOD people, because they're saving animals, aren't they???!?!?" And, I didn't think less of any actual animal activists after I read the book. It just reminded me that things aren't always what they seem. An occupation does not define a man -- contrary to popular belief, lawyers aren't necessarily selfish and money-grubbing, actors aren't necessarily narcissistic, doctors aren't necessarily altruistic, and animal activists come in all shapes and sizes and moral character as well. Anyway, I can understand that not everyone enjoyed this book, but I thought it was one of my favorite all-time reads. I loved the dialogue. I thought every moment of the book was packed with meaning. Every detail of every conversation was significant to the story in some small way, I didn't want to miss a word.

But, hey, I'm also a slow reader, so EVERY book is slow to me! HAH!

Audra says

I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone. The book had a slow start & I stuck with it thinking that it would get better, but it dragged on & on. The problem with the book is that you already knew what was going to happen & you think that there will be a climax but it maintains the same pace throughout. When I finished this book I was just happy it was over.

Nina Vandewater says

Wouldn't you know I'd choose the Bohjalian that reviewers here and on Amazon say is his weakest. I think there just wasn't enough here for a 413 p. book. And somehow you weren't in love with any of the characters. Not a difficult read by any means, but nevertheless, a slow go.

If you are a vegetarian or vegan or PETA member, then you might really enjoy this book since it deals with those subjects. You will read a lot about how different animals are killed - so much so that it does make one feel guilty about eating animals and drinking milk. It is also anti-hunting, including deer which are decimating the family garden.

It is the shooting of a deer which leads to our story line which I don't want to reveal. But ultimately, this is the story of 2 families, 1 in particular is on the brink of coming apart. 300 p. probably would have been enough to tell their story.

Anastasia says

I didn't really care for this book very much. I didn't mind the slow pace that much. What bothered me most was that the author failed to establish a separate and believable voice for each of his characters. Even when the reader was privy to a character's thoughts, there was no intimacy in the way the character thought of or referred to a loved one, no language/vocabulary appropriate to the character's age or personality. Perhaps the author inserted his own voice too much into each character. Anyway, I found myself unable to really care about any of the characters.

And another issue I had with the book is the author's portrayal of vegetarians, vegans, and animal rights activists. The portrayals were pretty much all extremes, and when there are lots of stories told about such people, a story focusing on the extreme is accepted as just one story and not representative of all. When there are relatively few stories told about a particular type of person, almost any story told will be read as a description in general of all people in that group. I would say that most vegetarians voluntarily abstain from meat and don't secretly eat Slim Jims and nasty fast food hamburgers. Most vegans don't lecture and berate other people about their food habits, and instead, make sure to bring their own food to social events so as not to make a scene for other people. Most animal rights activists like and care about people as well as animals. Bohjalian's book has the potential to create false stereotypes.

Alisa says

A character study, requires a patient reading (well, listening in my case) that allows the plot to develop while gaining a fairly deep understanding of each member of the Seton clan. The relationships are simple on their face, complicated by the very passions and character traits that are prized by their owners. The exploration of how individuals associate ideas together, especially between parents and children, was interesting. The underutilized relationships of adult siblings, and how their spouses become friends and true family over the years, is also a part of the story, often reflecting how our siblings see traits and habits that we ignore or don't see in ourselves. As one of forty plus first cousins, it was great to read about how the cousins in this story fed off each other, pushed at each other, and experienced their relationship with their shared grandmother. Though I think the plot was tied up a bit too neatly, I did appreciate considering how these relationships might evolve over the years, with a bit of gratitude that this disaster would allow a different appreciation of each other.

Sara Johnson says

I liked this book quite a bit better than the last Bohjalian novel I read (*Night Strangers*). As vegetarian I found the focus on an animal rights activist and his family very interesting. My biggest annoyance about it was that when he was referring to any of the child characters (especially the two girls), or having one of the adults think about the child characters, he often used "the child" or "the girl", etc. Perhaps he's done this with other books and I just haven't noticed, but it really stood out to me in this one - and it was super annoying. But obviously not enough to keep me from reading it :)

Anne says

No matter how many Chris Bohjalian books I read, he always seems to have more. Like his most famous book, *Midwives*, this one concerns a single tragic incident (here the shooting of a father by his own daughter), and then builds a story around the question of intent (did the daughter shoot her father accidentally or did she knowingly pull the trigger?). The question is never definitively answered, but the way each character in the book decides to view the situation affects their interactions with everyone else, and crucial decisions they make about each other and their own futures. Unlike *Midwives* and some of Bohjalian's other novels (*Trans-Sister Radio* and *Buffalo Soldier*, for example), I didn't find this one as compelling. I found the behavior of the daughter - while perhaps realistic - incredibly annoying as she attempts to hide crucial information about the night of the shooting. The father is also a vegan animal rights activist who is portrayed as a borderline psychotic because of his beliefs - which don't actually seem all that crazy. So much of what threatens to tear the family apart post-shooting seems focused on this group he belongs to. While I appreciate a story that points out the ills of working too hard at the expense of one's home life - I thought the negative treatment of vegetarianism and veganism in the book completely odd. Perhaps this is a result of living in a part of the country where non-meat-eaters are basically mainstream, but I just didn't see it as creating as much conflict in life as this man's choices seemed to. I feel like most of Bohjalian's books could serve as excellent springboards for discussions among high school students about the difference between right and wrong, and all the gray areas in between. This one is definitely no different, but certainly not as complex or riveting as others he has written.

Jen says

I was listening to this book on audiobook and was excited about it because I loved *The Double Bind* so much. However, this book I didn't connect with at all. Bohjalian seemed to try too hard on the complex sentences - William Faulkner he is not. And the plot was just so convoluted. By the fifth disk I felt that I had heard the same parts of the plot at least five times, and I KNEW I couldn't have cared less about the vegetable garden. So, on the sixth disk when the disk seemed to be damaged for at least five of the middle tracks, I decided to put myself out of my misery and just shut it off.

Terry says

Meh. I liked "Midwives" enough to give this one a try (but mainly because I'm out of books to read, too poor to shop, and too lazy at the moment to go to the library, and this book was crammed in my nightstand from

some long-ago time when someone loaned it to me). I guess what I didn't like about it is the fact that at the end of the book I sort of shrugged and said "so?"

You meet a circle of people and a tragedy occurs and then the circle of people go through the various stages of grief and...that's about it. You get to know these people pretty well, but, you don't necessarily care very much about them, especially since the one person most physically affected by the tragedy is also the most unlikable character (among several, frankly), and the author works hard, I think, to MAKE him unlikable; therefore, I don't care too much about what happens to any of them.

I also had a hard time believing a fairly sheltered, reasonably self-possessed, upper middle class Vermont-living 10-year-old (TEN!!!) would happily, willingly suck down a beer and a half a joint under the most minimal of peer pressure, but, maybe I'm just starry-eyed. I dunno. The ten-year-olds I once worked with just would have wrinkled up their noses. The middle school kids? Absolutely.

The book may have worked a little better, actually, as a young adult book, if it had focused on the 12-year-old more, now that I think of it. Well, whatever. Like I said...meh.

Kit says

I really enjoyed Bohjalian's book "Midwives" but I just couldn't get interested in any of the characters in this book. I pushed through it, thinking it would get better, but at the end, I still didn't care about any of these people.

Carol says

I read this book because my friend Heidi recommended it. The last books she recommended to me were The Hunger Games series so I was fairly sure I would enjoy reading this. Plus I really liked the book Midwives by the same author.

Yes, I did like the book and enjoyed reading it. I'm not sure I liked the way the entire plot was disclosed in the prologue of the book but the development of the story was enjoyable reading. This was a story of family and relationship which is always a winner for me. Throw in strict over the top veganism,(FERAL was depicted as a cutthroat group and I do like animals), gun control, the mandatory New York mention of 911, and class awareness and you have a good read.

Spencer's convalescence was a nightmare even in someone as motivated as he. The dreams about the crabs partially explained his veganism but not his obsessions to the detriment of his family with the rights of animals. I was glad to see the changes that occurred in him by the end of the book.

Amy says

I'm on the fence on this book. The topic of gun control, animal rights, and veganism was definitely interesting, but I struggled a bit with the author's portrayal of the animal rights issue. I was struck by how a few of the characters were so one-dimensional -- practically a stereotype -- and these were, with the exception of Spencer, all people on the side of animal rights. His other characters are so well developed with

both positive and negative characteristics (everyone is humanely flawed) that you would have thought he'd make these other characters not so negatively one-dimensional. He turns it around at the very, very end, but it was just a bit too late for me. I kept wondering if he had an ax to grind with some vegan or maybe he's just an avid hunter:)

Candice says

This is one of my favorite books, and I was happy that our book group voted to discuss it later this week. I wanted to share this with the group, and I wanted another chance to read it. I liked it just as well the second time. I liked it for several reasons. First, it takes a complicated issue and (no, I'm not going to say it makes it simple because it doesn't) looks at it from all angles. When 12-year-old Charlotte picks up a hunting rifle from the trunk of her uncle's car and accidentally shoots her father, Spencer, the communications director of an animal-rights organization (FERAL), we can see the consequences of that action.

The injury is described in horrific detail. The cases for and against hunting are presented, as well as the issues affecting the animal-rights movement. Spencer's life with his disability is made real by the heart-wrenching scenes where he tries to make do with one arm. I thought the characters were well-developed and while not all were very likeable, all were understandable. Even the little baby, Patrick, was a real person and someone I could enjoy.

When I read something like this, it shows me why I will never be a writer. I liked the way it ended with (I won't give anything away here) something that the grandmother had mentioned to Charlotte and her cousin during the summer. I liked the descriptions. It had to have taken a lot of thought and a lot of research to create a book like this, and the efforts were evident on every page.

Rob says

Having been a huge fan of all Bohjalian's previous books, *Before You Know Kindness* was at the top of my list to read when it came out. Taking on vegetarians, vegans and gun control, this book tackles a lot of topics and does so with finesse.

Underneath all of the central topics, as in most of his books, family and relationships are at the heart of this book. And what tragedy or difference can do to a family, a relationship. What I enjoyed about the book was that Bohjalian did not clearly make a stance on whether he thought hunting was wrong, or that people should not eat meat. Although, it was obvious that gun control, and learning how to properly care for a gun was foremost in his mind.

Overall, another great book by Bohjalian! I enjoyed the characters and their development. I especially enjoyed the ending which was well worth the wait and truly made the entire book for me. If you're new to his writing- I think once you read this you'll do what I did and devour his entire catalogue! Happy Reading!

Rose says

I am a fan of Chris Bohjalian, having read several of his books and I do plan to read him again. I have

especially always liked the thoughtful treatment he gives complex and delicate issues and his skill for great character development.

However, in *Before You Know Kindness* my disappointment is in the fact that it was over 400 pages long, and easily could have been pared way down to the theme's essential issues. I felt he was being repetitive many times. I also found the ending wrapped up a little too neatly for my taste.

Kate S says

This is the book I knew Bohjalian had written. I enjoy his style. I like his writing and his voice. I do not always like his subject matter. This look at a family as they each address a traumatic event was fabulous. I did not always like the characters, but I did find them mostly believable. The ending may have been a little rushed, but I felt the impulsiveness and misguided beliefs of a 12 year old made it more understandable. I am so glad I picked this book up at a library sale and was able to read it here at the end of a summer in my own life. I can imagine revisiting these characters.

Jill says

I am a little unsure how I feel about this book. There is a lot here: gun control issues, animal rights issues, pre-teen drug/alcohol use, multi-generational relationships, etc. I did appreciate that the initial defining moment (a twelve year old girl accidentally shoots her father) didn't go down the expected "Janie's Gotta Gun"- (apologies to Aerosmith) road but I still didn't think the book was as good as it could have been.

It seems to me that many famous authors today could use slightly stronger editors; the books are good but suffer from sections that drag or are incredibly repetitive. Are the editors afraid of offending one of the prize writers? This is one of those books that would really have benefitted from some strong trimming. There were times I wanted to say, "I get it, we don't need to dwell on this/return to this."

I would only recommend this book to people who are already fans of Chris B. or have strong feelings on gun control/animal rights who might be interested in those angles of the story.

Ellen says

This book focuses on an extended family dealing with the aftermath of a tragic accident involving a rifle. The man who is shot, Spencer, is an animal rights activist whose dedication to his job and inflexibility regarding his vegan lifestyle are starting to wear on his wife and teenage daughter. Also involved in the story are Spencer's wife's brother and his family, who have their own problems to sort through. I enjoyed reading about the families' different ways of dealing with the tragedy and watching Spencer relax his hardline stance after his injury. I did feel that the animal rights activists portrayed in the book were dealt with a bit unfairly.

I suppose that Bohjalian was trying to focus on extremists rather than those with more moderate views. But as a vegetarian who avoids wearing leather, I found it a bit annoying how often he mentioned that non-leather items were unattractive or clunky. In almost any shoe store you can find many styles of non-leather shoes, and it can be quite difficult to tell which are real and which are fake without feeling or smelling the

shoes. So seriously, come on. Also, the several mentions of how animal rights activist characters found themselves more sympathetic to animals than to human beings grated, too. Actually, I think that some extreme animal rights activists probably do feel that way, but I also think it's unlikely that even the most extreme animal activist cares more for animals than for his or her own family members.

I enjoyed discussing the book with Mom's book group at the Lynchburg Public Library in March. Wish I could discuss more books that I read!

Miriam says

I'm just going to come out and say it: I really didn't like this book. I picked it up because I really enjoyed Bohjalian's *Midwives* and although I disliked *The Double Bind*, I thought I'd give him another chance. I think this will be my last Bohjalian book, at least for a while.

The plot was somewhat interesting and could have been salvaged if it was approached differently. But the story arc was so odd and didn't lead up to anything. There was something that resembled a climax but that came very early on in the book. The rest, both before and after the central event, was pretty much comprised exclusively of characters thinking things. I got so sick of reading different characters' thoughts. And Bohjalian was so awful at describing these thoughts. It felt like the whole book was just a stream of consciousness of each character. He did nothing to alter his style when he described the thoughts of a 10-year-old girl or a 70-something grandmother. I found myself not believing a word anyone in the story was thinking.

There was also the fact that I found all of the characters very flat and boring. None of them developed at all throughout the book. And honestly, I kept getting them all confused because there was nothing distinct about any of them.

The last thing I'm going to say is that Bohjalian included so much unnecessary description that got ridiculously boring and tedious to read. He described the outfit of every new character he introduced as well as the main characters at each new scene. He described each character's thoughts about the silliest things that didn't have anything to do with the plot and added nothing to the book. A lot of the characters themselves added nothing to the book, and only served to confuse me more because I kept forgetting who they were.

To sum up, I didn't like this book. It took me forever to finish because I didn't like reading it. I would not recommend it.
