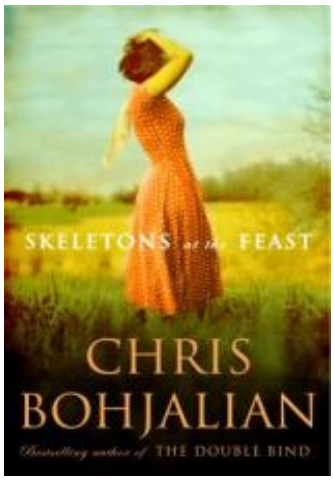
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Skeletons at the Feast

by Chris Bohjalian



About the Book

In January 1945, in the waning months of World War II, a small group of people begin the longest journey of their lives: an attempt to cross the remnants of the Third Reich, from Warsaw to the Rhine if necessary, to reach the British and American lines.

Among the group is eighteen-year-old Anna Emmerich, the daughter of Prussian aristocrats. There is her lover, Callum Finella, a twenty-year-old Scottish prisoner of war who was brought from the stalag to her family?s farm as forced labor. And there is a twenty-six-year-old Wehrmacht corporal, who the pair know as Manfred?who is, in reality, Uri Singer, a Jew from Germany who managed to escape a train bound for Auschwitz.

As they work their way west, they encounter a countryside ravaged by war. Their flight will test both Anna?s and Callum?s love, as well as their friendship with Manfred?assuming any of them even survive.

Perhaps not since **The English Patient** has a novel so deftly captured both the power and poignancy of romance and the terror and tragedy of war. Skillfully portraying the flesh and blood of history, Chris Bohjalian has crafted a rich tapestry that puts a face on one of the twentieth century?s greatest tragedies --- while creating, perhaps, a masterpiece that will haunt readers for generations.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you know?or are you yourself?a veteran of World War II? Discuss what you know of the war and any reminiscences that veterans may have shared.

2. Both of Anna?s parents are members of the Nazi Party?though it is clear that they are not die-hard believers. Living on their farm in rural Prussia, they are largely sheltered from the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews. As Germans, do

you think they share responsibility for the Nazis? actions even if they didn?t know the full extent of what was happening? Why did they join the party? Did they have a choice? Consider Helmut?s teacher who questions the boy about his father?s loyalty to Hitler and the consequences of resisting. If failure to join meant death for you, what would you have done?

3. A group of POWs is brought to the Emmerich family?s farm to help with the harvest, including a Scot named Callum Finella. He and Anna fall in love. What brings them together? Does the kindness of the Emmerich family, and Callum?s love for their only daughter, change his view of the German people as a whole?

4. We meet Uri on the train to Auschwitz. What kind of man is he? How does he behave on the train? Imagine yourself in those deplorable conditions. Do you think you would seize the opportunity for freedom and jump as Uri did, leaving behind your family to an uncertain future?

5. While arguing with Anna about what is really happening to Jews, Callum says, ?Suppose my government in England just decided to ?resettle? the Catholics?to take away their homes, their animals, their possessions, and just send them away?? What if this was happening where you live? What actions would you be willing to take to protect your friends and neighbors? At what point would the risks have been too great?

6. To survive, Uri impersonates a German soldier, stealing papers and uniforms from soldiers he either kills or finds dead. Discuss the events that lead up to his first killing of a Nazi. Discuss his reaction to what he has done (page 59). Do you believe his actions were warranted?

7. Although the world is essentially collapsing around them, Anna and Callum fall in love, Theo cries over leaving his beloved horse behind, and Mutti carefully drapes the furniture in sheets to protect it before they flee their home ahead of the Russians. What do these simple, ordinary actions reveal about them as people? About the human capacity for hope?

8. Theo is only a child but he feels lacking in comparison to his older brothers Werner and Helmut, both off fighting in the war. What kind of child is he? Does he fit in with his peers? Why doesn?t Theo tell his mother about his foot? What does this reveal about him? Does Theo change over the course of the novel?

9. Describe Cecile. What kind of woman is she? What keeps her going in spite of the cruelty and degradation she suffers every day? How is she different from her friend Jeanne? Do you think you would act more like Cecile or Jeanne in the same circumstances?

10. In Chapter Eight, Helmut and his father, Rolf, try to convince Uncle Karl to leave his home along with the Emmerichs. He refuses, keeping his daughter, daughter-in-law, and grandson with him in spite of the danger. Why won?t he evacuate? Why won?t he let the women and the child leave? On page 118 he refers to them and their way of life as ?skeletons at the feast.? What does he mean by this?

11. Describe the circumstances that bring Uri and the Emmerichs together. Why does he choose to stay with them after running alone for so long? How does he feel about them initially? How do his feelings for them change?

12. On page 178, Callum is thinking about bringing Anna home with him to Scotland after the war. How does he think she will be received? Why is he troubled?

13. During their long march from the prison camp to the factory, Jeanne and another prisoner find soldiers? rations and eat them. They do not wake Cecile to share them with her. Why? In the same circumstances, what would you have done?

14. Given the odds of success, would you have been brave enough to attempt to escape with Cecile and her friends?

15. Describe Mutti. What was she like at the beginning of the war? At the end? What does she view as her primary responsibility? On pages 291?293, she remembers burying the young German pilot whose plane crashed in her park. Why was burying him?and the enemy Russian soldiers?important to her?

16. How does Anna change as the novel progresses? Why does she feel the need for personal forgiveness at the end? Is she right to feel guilty?

17. Discuss the importance of hope in survival. Which character is the most hopeful? Which character is the most defeated? What moments at the end of the novel symbolize hope most poignantly?

18. Discuss the legacy that Mutti?s generation left for Anna?s. As a nation, what kind of legacy are we leaving for our children?

Author Bio

Chris Bohjalian is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of 24 books, including THE PRINCESS OF LAS VEGAS, THE LIONESS, HOUR OF THE WITCH, THE RED LOTUS, MIDWIVES and THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT, which is an HBO Max limited series starring Kaley Cuoco. His other books include THE GUEST ROOM; CLOSE YOUR EYES, HOLD HANDS; THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS; SKELETONS AT THE FEAST; and THE DOUBLE BIND. His novels SECRETS OF EDEN, MIDWIVES and PAST THE BLEACHERS were made into movies, and his work has been translated into more than 35 languages. He is also a playwright ("Wingspan" and "Midwives"). He lives in Vermont.

Critical Praise

"Bohjalian has shown a prodigious gift for exploring how people are transformed."

Skeletons at the Feast
by Chris Bohjalian

Publication Date: May 6, 2008
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Hardcover: 384 pages
Publisher: Crown
ISBN-10: 0307394956
ISBN-13: 9780307394958