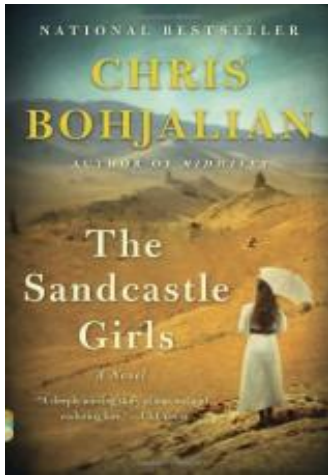


# The Sandcastle Girls

by Chris Bohjalian

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## About the Book

Over the course of his career, *New York Times* bestselling novelist Chris Bohjalian has taken readers on a spectacular array of journeys. *MIDWIVES* brought us to an isolated Vermont farmhouse on an icy winter's night and a home birth gone tragically wrong. *THE DOUBLE BIND* perfectly conjured the Roaring Twenties on Long Island --- and a young social worker's descent into madness. And *SKELETONS AT THE FEAST* chronicled the last six months of World War Two in Poland and Germany with nail-biting authenticity. As *The Washington Post Book World* has noted, Bohjalian writes "the sorts of books people stay awake all night to finish."

In his 15th book, *THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS*, he brings us on a very different kind of journey. This spellbinding tale travels between Aleppo, Syria, in 1915 and Bronxville, New York, in 2012 --- a sweeping historical love story steeped in the author's Armenian heritage, making it his most personal novel to date.

When Elizabeth Endicott arrives in Syria, she has a diploma from Mount Holyoke College, a crash course in nursing, and only the most basic grasp of the Armenian language. The First World War is spreading across Europe, and she has volunteered on behalf of the Boston-based Friends of Armenia to deliver food and medical aid to refugees of the Armenian genocide. There, Elizabeth becomes friendly with Armen, a young Armenian engineer who has already lost his wife and infant daughter. When Armen leaves Aleppo to join the British Army in Egypt, he begins to write Elizabeth letters, and comes to realize that he has fallen in love with the wealthy, young American woman who is so different from the wife he lost.

Flash forward to the present, where we meet Laura Petrosian, a novelist living in suburban New York. Although her grandparents' ornate Pelham home was affectionately nicknamed the "Ottoman Annex," Laura has never really given her Armenian heritage much thought. But when an old friend calls, claiming to have seen a newspaper photo of Laura's grandmother promoting an exhibit at a Boston museum, Laura embarks on a journey back through her family's history that reveals love, loss --- and a wrenching secret that has been buried for generations.

## Discussion Guide

1. Though **The Sandcastle Girls** is a novel, author Chris Bohjalian (and fictional narrator Laura Petrosian) based their storytelling on meticulous research. What can a novel reveal about history that a memoir or history book cannot? Before reading **The Sandcastle Girls**, what did you know about the Armenian genocide? How does this history broaden your understanding of current events in the regions surrounding Armenia?
2. What lies at the heart of Armen and Elizabeth's attraction to each other, despite their seemingly different backgrounds? What gives their love the strength to transcend distance and danger?
3. The novel includes characters such as Dr. Akcam, Helmut, and Orhan, who take great risks opposing the atrocities committed by their superiors; Bohjalian does not cast the "enemy" as uniformly evil. What do these characters tell us about the process of resistance? What separates them from the others, who become capable of horrific, dehumanizing acts?
4. Discuss the bond between Nevert and Hatoun. What do they demonstrate about the traits, and the trauma, of a survivor? How do they redefine motherhood and childhood?
5. Bohjalian is known for creating inventive, authentic narrators for his novels, ranging from a midwife to a foster child. Why was it important for *The Sandcastle Girls* to be told primarily from the point of view of a woman? How was your reading affected by the knowledge that the author is a man?
6. In chapter 9, Elizabeth courageously quotes the Qur'an to appeal to the conscience of the Turkish lieutenant. What diplomacy lessons are captured in that moment? For the novel's characters—from aid workers to Armenians who tried to convert—what is the role of religion?
7. When Laura describes the music of her 1960s youth, her steamy relationship with Berk, her belly-dancing aunt, and other cultural memories, what is she saying about the American experience of immigration and assimilation? Culturally, what did her grandfather sacrifice in order to gain security and prosperity in America?
8. Discuss the various aid workers depicted in the novel. What motivated them to assist in this particular cause? Do Alicia, Sister Irmingard, and Elizabeth achieve similar outcomes despite their different approaches? What overseas populations would you be willing to support so courageously?
9. Does Ryan Martin use his power effectively? How does Elizabeth gain power in a time period and culture that was marked by the oppression of women?

10. The vivid scenes of Gallipoli bring to life the global nature of war over the past century.

As Armen fights alongside Australians, what do we learn about the power and the vulnerabilities of multinational forces? What did it mean for his fellow soldiers to fight for a cause so far removed from their own homelands, and for his own countrymen to rely on the mercy of outsiders?

11. At the end of chapter 19, does Elizabeth make the right decision? How would you have reacted in the wake of a similar tragedy?

12. How do Laura's discoveries enrich her sense of self? Discuss your own heritage and its impact on your identity. How much do you know about your parents' and grandparents' upbringing? What immigration stories are part of your own family's collective memory?

13. As she tries to explain why so few people are aware of the Armenian genocide, Laura cites the fact that the victims perished in a remote desert. The novel also describes the problem of trying to document the atrocities using the cumbersome photography equipment of the day. Will the Information Age spell the end of such cover-ups? For future generations, will genocide be unimaginable?

14. Which aspects of **The Sandcastle Girls** remind you of previous Bohjalian novels you have enjoyed?

## Author Bio

Chris Bohjalian is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of 20 books. His work has been translated into over 30 languages and three times become movies.

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*, *Bookpage* and *Salon*.

His awards include the Walter Cerf Medal for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts; 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 novel, **MIDWIVES**, was a number one *New York Times* bestseller, a selection of Oprah's Book Club, and a New England Booksellers Association Discovery 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 and Champlain College.

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 CLOSE YOUR EYES, HOLD HANDS and THE GUEST ROOM.

Photo Credit: Victoria Blewer

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