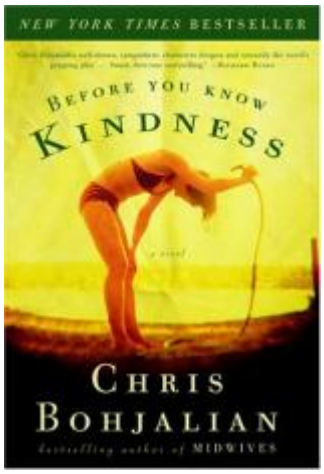
Before You Know Kindness

by Chris Bohjalian



About the Book

For ten summers, the Seton family --- all three generations --- met at their country home in New England to spend a week together playing tennis, badminton, and golf, and savoring gin and tonics on the wraparound porch to celebrate the end of the season. In the eleventh summer, everything changed. A hunting rifle with a single cartridge left in the chamber wound up in exactly the wrong hands at exactly the wrong time, and led to a nightmarish accident that put to the test the values that unite the family --- and the convictions that just may pull it apart.

Before You Know Kindness is a family saga that is timely in its examination of some of the most important issues of our era, and timeless in its exploration of the strange and unexpected places where we find love.

As he did with his earlier masterpiece, **Midwives**, Chris Bohjalian has written a novel that is rich with unforgettable characters --- and absolutely riveting in its page-turning intensity.

Discussion Guide

1. Before You Know Kindness opens with a blunt, clinical description of Spencer's injuries. Is the preface a purely objective report or does it begin to develop some of the general themes of the novel? What does it convey about the Setons and their way of life?

2. Spencer's speech pp. 16-19 and Nan's descriptions of his behavior pp. 27-29 offer varying insights into his personality. Does the tone of the writing influence your impressions of him? What specific details bring out the differences between Spencer's self-perceptions and the way others might view him?

3. How does Bohjalian portray FERAL and the people who work there? Do you think this is an accurate portrait of the animal-rights movement? What reasons might Bohjalian have for modifying their attitudes and activities?

4. Sara thinks, "The problem with Nan-and with John and Catherine, and yes, Spencer when they were all together-was that they could never just . . . be." [p. 38] In what ways is this attributable to Nan and Richard Seton's marriage and the atmosphere in which John and Catherine grew up? Why does Spencer, whose background is so different, demonstrate the same quality?

5. How persuasive are John's explanations of why he took up hunting? What does the argument that hunting "is the most merciful way humans had to manage the herd" [p. 73] imply about the relationship between humans and the natural world? Does John's anguish after the accident alter his view of hunting in general? Do you think that it should?

6. In talking to Willow about Catherine and Spencer, Charlotte says, "Sometimes I get pissed at both of them. I don't think Mom would be the way she is if Dad wasn't this public wacko." [p. 116] Are Charlotte's complaints typical of a teen-ager or does Spencer's profession put an unusual burden on her? Is her criticism of her mother's flirting well-founded?

7. Bohjalian suggests several times that Charlotte may have subconsciously wanted to injure her father. She herself says, "There were lots of reasons for pointing Uncle John's weapon at what was moving at the edge of the garden. . . . " [p. 133] and acknowledges that others might think, *"She was just doing it to get your attention. . . . "*[p. 135] Is this speculation supported by the way Bohjalian describes the accident? By Charlotte's subsequent behavior and her conversations with Willow?

8. The accident and Spencer's permanent disability provide FERAL with an irresistible opportunity to make their case against hunting. Is their decision to bring a lawsuit totally reprehensible? Do the depictions of Dominique, Paige, and Keenan undermine the validity of their case?

9. Self-interest plays a part not only in FERAL's reaction to the tragedy. Are you sympathetic to John's concerns that the lawsuit will effect his professional reputation, as well as his fear that "for as long as he lived he would be an imbecile in the eyes of his daughter" [p. 142]? How did you feel as Catherine vacillates in the second half of the novel between wanting to help her husband and wanting to leave him?

10. "Nan was a particular mystery to [Sara]. Exactly what was it that she didn't want to think about?"[p. 176] Were you puzzled by Nan as well? By the end of the novel, did you feel you had a better understanding of her?

11. What would have happened if Charlotte and Willow had not confessed to drinking and smoking pot on the night of the shooting? Were you relieved that Spencer decided not to pursue the lawsuit?

12. Although the plot revolves around Spencer, at various point in the novel each character moves to center stage to comment on the events and their repercussions. Which members of the family most appealed to you and why? How successful is Bohjalian at capturing their individual points of view and personalities? Did your opinions of them change as the novel progressed?

13. Does Bohjalian present both sides of the controversy in an evenhanded way? Which characters appear to embody his own point of view? What is the ultimate message of **Before You Know Kindness**?

14. Do you think that the issues Bohjalian examines in **Before You Know Kindness** are more important (or more relevant) than the topics he explored in (for example) **Midwives** or **The Law of Similars** or **Trans-Sister Radio**?

15. Why did Bohjalian use a passage from **The Secret Garden** as one of the epigraphs? In what ways is the children's classic relevant to **Before You Know Kindness**?

16. Why did Bohjalian take his title from the poem, "Kindness," by Naomi Shihab Nye, a portion of which serves as the other epigraph?

Author Bio

Chris Bohjalian is the critically acclaimed author of 16 books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers THE SANDCASTLE GIRLS, SKELETONS AT THE FEAST, THE DOUBLE BIND and MIDWIVES. His novel MIDWIVES was a number one *New York Times* bestseller and a selection of Oprah's Book Club. His work has been translated into more than 25 languages, and three of his novels have become movies (SECRETS OF EDEN, MIDWIVES and PAST THE BLEACHERS). He lives in Vermont with his wife and daughter.

Critical Praise

"Once again, Chris Bohjalian dares to tackle the complexities --- and complacencies --- of modern society at its most vulnerable spot, where the personal clashes with the political, where the private is forced to go public. And once again, he forges a drama that will keep his readers on the edge of their seats...perhaps their conscience as well."

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