

# One Book, One Valley 2009: *The Double Bind* by Chris Bohjalian

## Discussion Guide

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Fiction writers such as Bohjalian and F. Scott Fitzgerald practice an art form that is based on inventing characters and events. As portrayed in *The Double Bind*, the mental illnesses of Bobbie Crocker and of Laurel Estabrook are also based on another kind of invention: psychotic delusions. These two different forms of making things up have very different consequences in each of their respective settings. Yet both fiction and delusions are imagined worlds with the power to captivate the human mind. Bohjalian himself plays with this idea when he writes of characters from *The Great Gatsby* as though they were real, at least to some of his own characters. What events or characters in *The Double Bind* most captivated you? Why?

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Bohjalian was inspired to create Bobbie Crocker by the real person of Bob “Soupy” Campbell, a Burlington man who had been an accomplished photographer before becoming homeless. Does knowing that this complicated, haunting book is sparked by Campbell’s own true story influence its impact on you? How?

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The novel opens with, and then re-visits through Dan Corbett’s apology letter, the attack on Laurel in Underhill that transforms a beautiful, probably familiar, northern New England landscape--the old logging road in the woods--into a place where ugly events are perpetrated on a woman riding her bike alone. How do powerful stories, whether real or fictionalized, positive or painful, shape the places around us? Do we see places differently because of what has happened in them?

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Characters on the margins of society (the homeless, criminals, drug addicts, the mentally ill) feature prominently in one half of the novel’s double story, while the other side of the story explores what remains of the privileged world of “West Egg” decades after “Gatsby’s 1920’s.” Bobbie and Laurel are the two characters that bind the two stories together, and a new story is created from the combination. How do Bobbie and Laurel link two different versions of American life as portrayed in Bohjalian’s novel?

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Discuss the photographs taken by Bob “Soupy” Campbell, which are interspersed in *The Double Bind*. Do they add to your reading experience? How?

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Did the notes on Patient 29873 by Kenneth Pierce, Attending Psychiatrist, Vermont State Hospital, puzzle you, or did they help to clarify what you were reading in *The Double Bind*? Those notes are a part of the story that suggests a reliable reality, a perspective that we as readers can count on. Do the notes have this effect on you?

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Homelessness and mental illness are two experiences by which an individual life can be devastated. Both are portrayed in *The Double Bind*. Also portrayed are families that have a part in these experiences, and larger communities and organizations that help to support or rebuild lives that are devastated in this way. What does the novel help you to understand about homelessness, mental illness, family dynamics, helping organizations? What questions does it leave unanswered for you?

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Those who experience trauma of any kind can be viewed, and can view themselves, as victims or as survivors, depending on where they are in their recovery process. Who are the victims and who are the survivors in this novel? Why?

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Laurel and Bobbie become strongly linked across time and death, through the box of photographs that document his prior career but also seem to precipitate the delusions that begin to disrupt her life once the photos come into her possession. Laurel is herself a photographer, and is described as retreating into her photography as part of her response to the violence she suffers. Does art help people to heal? What are art’s limits or potential in this regard?

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As readers participating in the One Book, One Valley project, we witness fictional events in common through simultaneous reading of the same story, *The Double Bind*. How has the knowledge that so many of your fellow Valley residents also know these characters, and are thinking about the story at the same time you are, influenced your experience? Has the community setting or the discussion process changed the way you think about the book, or about your own community?