

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Friends Who Read and Readers Who Are Friends,

One of the remarkable gifts of book clubs is the way they bring us together to celebrate one of our greatest needs as people: what stories can mean to the soul. It's ancient. It's a part of what links us — whether we are meeting in a living room, a restaurant, or over Zoom.



So, first of all, thank you for joining together to talk . . . books.

Second, thank you so much for reading *The Red Lotus*. Color me grateful.

I am thrilled you are spending time with Dr. Alexis Remnick, an ER doctor, as she tries to unravel the mystery of her boyfriend's disappearance in Vietnam. But what always interested me about this novel was less the slow-burn thriller aspect than the character examination of Alexis. Who is she? What makes an ER doctor such a rare breed and, yes, so special? It is her story, as much as her missing boyfriend's, that always had me excited to return to my desk at six in the morning and — very much like all of you — see what would happen next.

I hope you enjoy traveling to Vietnam and Manhattan with her.

And may you always have a book you love by your bedside.

All the best,

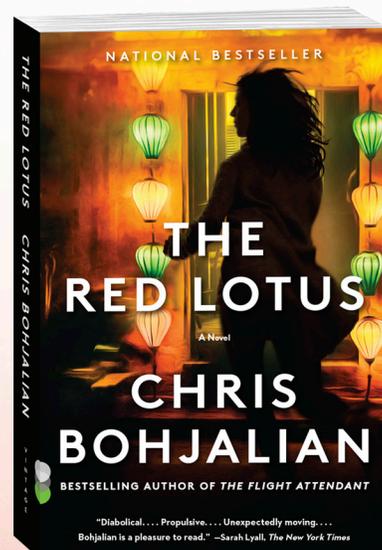
Chris Bohjalian

**"Diabolical.... Propulsive....
Bohjalian is a pleasure to read."**

—The New York Times

"The perfect mystery."

—Fiona Davis, *Travel + Leisure*

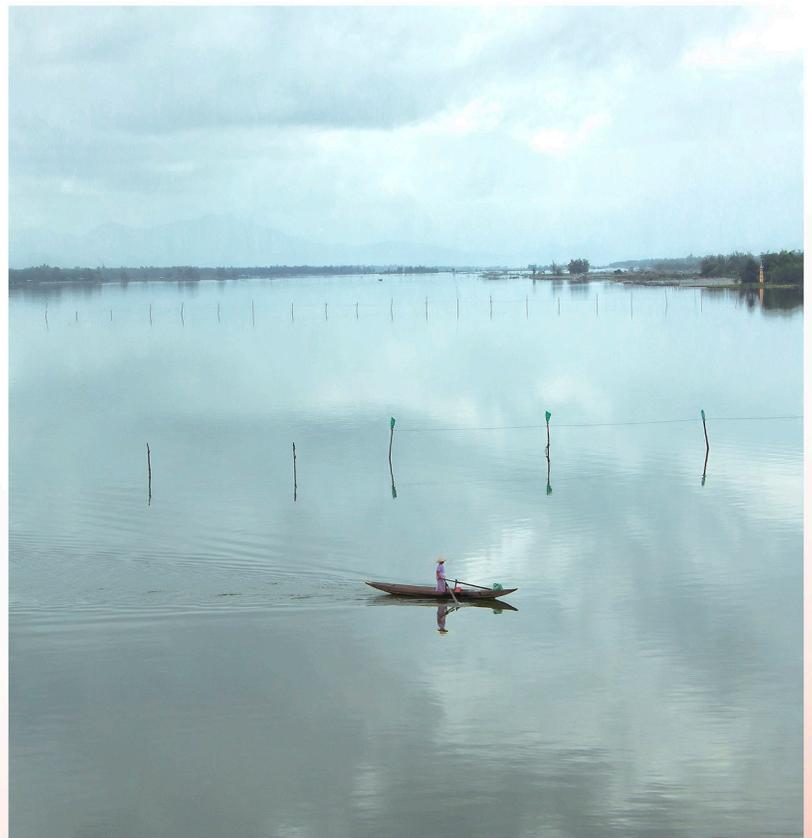


TRAVELING WITH CHRIS THROUGH VIETNAM



As part of my research for the novel, my wife and I went on a bike tour of Vietnam, very much like the one on which Alexis and her boyfriend embark. This photo is outside the City of the Dead near Hue. I almost called the novel *The City of the Dead*.

One of the undercurrents of the novel is the legacy of the Vietnam War — or what the Vietnamese call the American War. It was important to me to interview veterans on both sides and try to convey what Vietnam was like then — and now.





This is the road on which, in my mind, Alexis's boyfriend vanishes: first the flatland along the South China Sea, and then the steep, arduous climb up the Hai Van Pass. I asked one of our Vietnamese biking guides what his parents did during the American War and he said they were both Viet Cong. They worked on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "They'd build it; you'd bomb it. They'd build it; you'd bomb it. That went on for years. After the war, they were part of a very successful construction business," he told me with a smile.



My wife asked a fisherman we met on the bike tour whether he harbored any resentment toward the United States for the cataclysmic damage we as Americans rained down on his country: the bombing, the napalm, the Agent Orange. He answered philosophically, “We fought the Chinese for eight hundred years for our independence. We fought the French for eighty. We fought you for a decade. You were a footnote to our quest.” And while the carnage we left in our wake seems unforgivable, it was clear that he forgave us. While cities such as Hue lost a lot of their history in the war, a great deal still remains across the nation — and that is a remarkable gift.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THE RED LOTUS*

1. Alexis's work as an emergency room doctor has shown her that life is short – and full of unexpected horrors. How do you think the trauma she's seen in her career affects the choices she makes early in her relationship with Austin?
2. What initially attracts Alexis to Austin? How does their “meet-cute” in the ER set the tone for their relationship even before Austin disappears?
3. The Vietnam that Alexis experiences on the bike trip is full of natural beauty and thriving cities, but references are made often to the destruction that the country faced during the war. How do events of the Vietnam War loom over the action of the book despite it being set in the present? Have you ever traveled somewhere that felt deeply immersed in its past?
4. Rats are a recurring motif throughout the narrative and noted for their ability to survive chemical warfare and wreak havoc by carrying pathogens. They're also a common – albeit loathed – aspect of life in cities like New York and Ho Chi Minh City. How are rats being used as a metaphor in this story? What “rat-like” qualities do characters like Austin and Douglas possess?
5. Why do you think Alexis insists on investigating Austin's death when she returns home from Vietnam? What reasons might she have for trying to solve the mystery beyond the fact that the victim was her boyfriend?
6. Ken Sarafian connects personally to different aspects of Austin's murder: he's a Vietnam vet, and his daughter was the same age as Alexis. Do you think these personal connections help or hinder him more as he moves through the investigation?
7. Alexis's relationship with her mother is complicated, but loving. How do you think Alexis grows to understand her mother more after Austin's death?
8. Taleen Sarafian observes that the “red lotus” plague is named after a beautiful flower that “sinks at night” and “rises again at dawn.” Where else in the novel do you see themes of resurrection?
9. Written before the COVID-19 pandemic—and published just as the crisis began to spike in the US—*The Red Lotus* is an eerily prescient take on the devastating effects of global disease and the role of healthcare workers and first responders. What did reading *The Red Lotus* teach you about pandemics? Did it change how you think about COVID-19 and its aftermath? Why do you think stories about biological warfare and “new plagues” are so consistently scary?
10. How did you understand the motivation behind the creation of the “red lotus” pathogen? Do you think it was solely about money, or was there another reason so many doctors and scientists might have collaborated on something so dangerous?
11. *THE RED LOTUS* is Chris Bohjalian's twentieth novel in a diverse body of work. If you've read any of his other books, what distinct qualities—of plot, character, theme, mood, and style—make them uniquely “Bohjalian”?