

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Friends Who Read and Readers Who Are Friends,

Books make us better. Fiction makes us more empathetic, non-fiction makes us wiser. Novels encourage us to see the world through someone else's eyes. And talking about books? Well, it's a gift.

I think that's why I cherish book clubs and have met with hundreds of them – and thousands of you – over the years: sometimes in person, sometimes virtually. I've always savored witnessing the ways books move us, surprise us, and make us question things we took for granted.

So, I'm honored you've selected *The Lioness* for your book club. Thank you. I'm hoping you savor the safari and meeting Hollywood star Katie Barstow and her entourage. I love movies and streaming television, and savored my time in the Serengeti and "old" Hollywood researching this novel. From the beginning, I viewed this tale as *The Poisonwood Bible* meets *And Then There Were None* – or, as Jordy's Book Club put it, *Evelyn Hugo* meets *Jurassic Park*. Yes, it's a bit of a thriller, but I hope (like all my books) it's first and foremost a character study. More than anything else I explore in my work, I try to understand why we behave as we do: what's really driving the decisions we make.

And, in this case, that's true whether my characters are battling hyenas with their backs to a baobab tree or recalling their damaged childhoods around a safari campfire, while drinking gin and tonics properly chilled by the kerosene-powered ice maker.

I raise my glass to all of you – and thank you for your faith in what words and reading and books can mean to the soul. I'm so happy we're sharing them in person once more.

All the best,
Chris Bohjalian

www.ChrisBohjalian.com

Facebook, Instagram, Goodreads, Twitter (still), TikTok (badly), Litsy, Hive (when I remember)

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does *The Lioness* demonstrate about the nature of survival? What role do fate, temperament, life experience, and other factors play in determining the probability of perishing?
2. As you read about the three married couples (David and Katie, Billy and Margie, Felix and Carmen), what did you observe about their relationship styles? Which partnership seemed to be the strongest one? Did the single travelers (Terrance, Reggie, and Peter) have any advantages by being solo?
3. In what ways do Juma, Muema, and Benjamin give voice to multiple generations in the period of sweeping social change in their homeland? How does the concept of wisdom shift as their circumstances change?
4. Are Katie's wealth and fame worth the price? How does her ability to bankroll the experiences of her guests affect the relationships—romantic, platonic, and familial—she forms with them?
5. How did you react to the scene on page 89 when a lioness preys on a wildebeest? Is the lioness's behavior much different from that of the kidnappers? If you have housecats, do they share any of the lioness's traits, or are they more like wildebeests?
6. How was Terrance's sense of self transformed by the safari team? Throughout his life, when was he able to feel most at home? When was he forced to play a role, even off-camera?
7. Katie and Billy clearly have different personalities. How did this shape the way they endured their parents' abuse? How did their childhood prepare them for the tragedies that lay ahead in their adult lives?
8. On page 246, Reggie calls Carmen a lioness, saying it with "reverence and awe." In what ways does she earn this title? At the same time, does Reggie qualify as a lion?
9. How were your impressions shaped by the shifting points of view that you were able to see across the chapters? As you read about the key turning points in the characters' life stories, which ones resonated with you the most? Which character would be your favorite traveling companion?
10. In the last line of chapter thirteen, Benjamin says, "I'd rather die charging like a rhino than bleating like a goat." What does the novel say about the impact of death itself, both on the person (or other creature) who is dying and on those who are left behind in the aftermath?
11. The time period of the early 1960s is itself a character in *The Lioness*. What are the most beautiful aspects of this liberating character? What fuels the sinister side of that decade? How did shifting attitudes about gender, race, and sexuality make the 1960s an ideal backdrop for Katie Barstow's tale?
12. What is the effect of the media snippets at the beginning of the chapters? What is special about the fact that Katie and her entourage are almost all artists in some form? Is their profession a liability or an asset? Which characters are best equipped to cope with the brutal realities of the kidnapping?
13. Much of Chris Bohjalian's fiction is interwoven with carefully researched historical fact. What did you learn about the history of the Soviet Union, the CIA, and postcolonial Africa by reading *The Lioness*? What were your initial theories about the motives of the kidnappers in the novel?
14. How does *The Lioness* enhance your impressions of previous novels by Chris Bohjalian that you have read? What is unique about his ability to create characters who reveal the complexities of being human?

SUGGESTED READING

FICTION

The Leopard Is Loose by Stephen Harrigan

Blonde by Joyce Carol Oates

The Old Drift by Namwali Serpell

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

NONFICTION

River of the Gods by Candice Millard

Born Free: A Lioness of Two Worlds by Joy Adamson

West with the Night by Beryl Markham

The Tree Where Man Was Born by Peter Matthiessen

The Measure of a Man: A Memoir by Sidney Poitier

Quant by Quant: The Autobiography of Mary Quant

Imagining Serengeti by Jan Bender Shetler

This Time, This Place by Jack Valenti

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe

The Last Place on Earth by Harold T. P. Hayes

RESEARCHING THE LIONESS: A PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAIN

BY CHRIS BOHJALIAN

I'm often asked how much time I spend researching a novel before I start writing. It varies. *The Lioness* is my twenty-fourth book and, like all of them, it began with a vague premise.

Full disclosure: *The Lioness* is my twenty-fourth published book. There are three others that – thank goodness – never made their way to bookstores and libraries.

The idea was simple: Hollywood's biggest star gets married and brings her entourage with her into the Serengeti on a honeymoon safari, where it all goes to hell fast. I knew it would be historical fiction, a tale set in one of Hollywood's Golden Ages, because how we approach movies has changed dramatically in the last decade, thanks to the wonders of streaming television and (gulp) a worldwide pandemic. That meant I would be doing a deep dive into safaris and Old Hollywood – two research rabbit holes, not one. (I love research rabbit holes. I can get lost for hours in archives, libraries, and online databases or newspapers.)

The first thing I did was go on a photo safari: yes, I lead a hard life as a novelist. But the homework matters, and the fact is I do not believe I could have written *The Lioness* if I did not witness firsthand such things as the frenetic crossing of the Mara River by tens of thousands of wildebeest and zebras – among the largest mammalian migrations on the globe – and see a lioness bring down one wildebeest, and crocodiles snap almost in half two others. (I'm a vegetarian, but a safari can have its circle of life moments.) I needed to see a lioness with her cubs in the wild,





herds of elephants and giraffes, and learn from brilliant guides about the trees and shrubs and birds. I needed to fly over the Serengeti in the front of a tiny plane, as if I were soaring with Meryl Streep and Robert Redford in "Out of Africa." (Cue the magnificent John Barry soundtrack.)

Two other research blessings are worth noting. First, I am married to Victoria Blewer, a fine art photographer who is a much better artist than I am. It helped immeasurably to have her photos, some of which you are seeing here, while I was writing the book. Second, I booked the trip with Thomson Safaris. Their guides, their tents, their knowledge – their attention to detail – made the trip a dream. If you should decide to visit the Serengeti, consider them first. I'm a fan. Also? On your safari, regardless of which outfitter or travel service you choose, you are highly unlikely to endure what my characters do: remember, my novel is set in 1964. My wife and I treasured every moment we were in the Serengeti.



I always have a research journal when I'm writing a novel. It includes my notes from my interviews with experts, snippets of dialogue or observations I may want to include, and key notes from the books I read as background. Among the sections in my journal for *The Lioness* were "Safari Gear;" "Serengeti History;" "Landscape/Foliage;" "CIA/Africa;" and "Really Embarrassing Hollywood Scandals."

And, of course, I read lots of books about safaris and Old Hollywood.

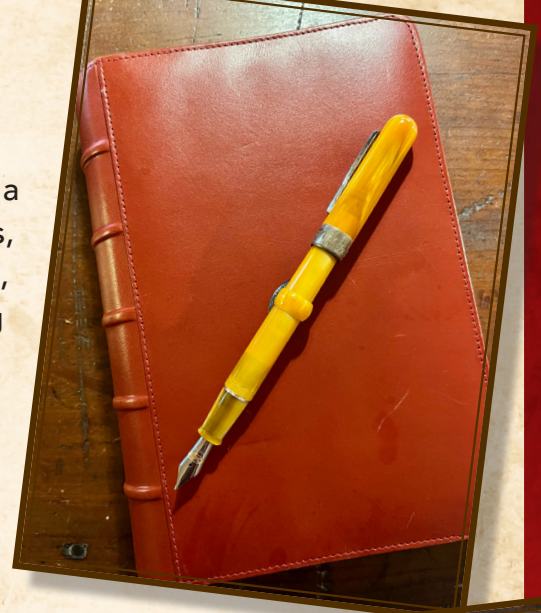
Once I had determined the novel would be set in 1964, I tracked down and devoured magazines about safari travel and Tinsel Town from the era. I'm honestly not sure which were more helpful: the articles or the ads. But both were critical.

When I had a draft, I shared it with people smarter and more knowledgeable than I am about the Serengeti and Old Hollywood – readers who could pick apart the story and highlight my mistakes. The last thing I ever want to do is to wake a reader from what John Gardner has called the fictional dream with a mistake, such as having a leopard attack and devour its prey incorrectly or one of the safari guests use a camera that didn't exist in 1964.

I knew the novel would move among the perspectives of different people, and I wanted to be sure that readers were always aware of exactly who everyone was. So, I decided I would open the book with the safari guest list – a bit like the cast of characters at the start of a play – and each chapter would begin with a movie magazine or newspaper article in which that character is featured. This way readers would always know where the character fits into the puzzle.

Finally, I leave you with one fun fact. At the last minute, we changed the title. Originally, we were going to call the novel, *The Lions of Hollywood* – this is how the little band describes themselves before they know what they're in for – but we feared a book with that moniker would be mistaken for a history of the brilliant men and women who first brought us the movies and made cinema a cultural touchstone.

Happy reading. As one famous screenwriter wrote for one famous actress, "Fasten your seat belts, it's gonna be a bumpy ride."



IF I WERE MIXING THE DRINKS ON YOUR SAFARI... OR AT YOUR BOOK CLUB GATHERING.

BY CHRIS BOHJALIAN

So, you're on a safari and looking for cocktails. There's not a bar for hundreds of miles, but you do have your vintage kerosene-powered ice maker and a case of booze.

Obviously, the classic cocktail is a gin and tonic. Two ingredients – three if you have a lemon wedge handy. You need to be neither a chemist nor bartender to make a pretty good one. Now, I'm a Vermonter so there are two brands of Vermont gin I like a lot: Barr Hill, especially their Tom Cat Reserve which has a touch of honey, and Peregrine Gin from the Appalachian Gap Distillery. I was drinking so many Peregrine Gin and tonics in March, April, and May of 2020 – remember those days? – that I actually named a character in my 2021 novel, *Hour of the Witch*, Peregrine.

Yup, you know you're a novelist in a pandemic when you're naming characters after booze.

But depending on how much alcohol you want to bring with you on safari, there are other options. The key is crafting cocktails that are refreshing and celebratory.

Here are two more that I think pair well with baobab trees, lions, and the fact you are about to sleep in a tent.

First of all, you cannot go wrong with a Negroni. Drop a handful of ice into a shaker, and add three ingredients: Campari, vermouth, and gin. I use a single shot of each, but Stanley Tucci adds two shots of gin. (I am more likely to use two shots in Vermont, where I live, than in the Serengeti. We don't have leopards and hyenas in the Green Mountains. As my parents taught me, "make good choices.") Shake it together well and pour through your shaker's sieve over one big ice cube – or a few smaller cubes. Then, if you are especially ambitious, squeeze an orange peel over the surface and slip the wedge on the edge of the glass. It's a really pretty (and pretty tasty) way to relish the end of the day on safari.

Second, there is always a scrumptious Bellini. It was a Hemingway favorite, especially at Harry's Bar in Venice. (Fun fact: I pored over "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" while writing *The Lioness*.) You don't have to be a seasoned mixologist to make a good one. It's a pair of ingredients: two ounces of peach juice and four ounces of Prosecco, but it's an inexact combination. If possible, use a champagne flute.

Now, savor your safari – or book club gathering. Cheers!