

**SECRETS OF EDEN**  
**Chris Bohjalian**

**Reading Group Guide**  
*by Kira Walton*

A NOTE TO THE READER

*In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this book—as well as the ending.*

*If you have not finished reading *Secrets of Eden*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.*

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

“There,” says Alice Hayward to Reverend Stephen Drew, just after her baptism, and just before going home to the husband who will kill her that evening and then shoot himself. Drew, tortured by the cryptic finality of that short utterance, feels his faith in God slipping away and is saved from despair only by a meeting with Heather Laurent, an author of wildly successful inspirational books about . . . angels.

Heather survived a childhood that culminated in her parents’ murder-suicide, so she identifies deeply with Alice’s and George’s daughter, Katie, offering herself as a mentor to the girl and a shoulder for Stephen—who flees the pulpit to be with Heather and see if there is anything to be salvaged from the spiritual wreckage around him.

But then the state’s attorney begins to suspect that Alice’s husband may not have killed himself . . . and finds out that Alice had secrets only her minister knew.

This reader’s guide is intended as a starting point for your discussion of the novel.

1. Re-read the quotes that open the book. One is from a leading voice of Enlightenment rationalism, the other from the Bible. Samuel Johnson speaks about loss and sorrow; the quote from Genesis is about the bonds of marriage. What did you think of this unique pairing when you began reading? Now that you’ve finished *Secrets of Eden*, how do these quotes help shape your understanding of the story?
2. What did you think of the title before you began reading? The phrase “secrets of Eden” appears when Heather Laurent and Reverend Drew are together in New York: “He pulled me against him and said simply, ‘There were no secrets in Eden’” (page 259). What do you think Reverend

Drew means by that? What are the secrets in the biblical Eden? Where is the “Eden” in *Secrets of Eden*? Is it a place? A state of mind? What are the secrets in the story, and who is keeping them? What is gained or lost when these secrets are revealed?

3. Chris Bohjalian is known for writing novels with an evocative sense of place: New England, especially small-town Vermont. How does the setting of *Secrets of Eden* impact the characters? How is it vital to the story? Could these events have taken place in another landscape, another social context? Why or why not?

#### PART I: Stephen Drew

4. The novel begins from Reverend Stephen Drew’s perspective. How would you describe his voice as a narrator? Is he sympathetic? Reliable? What is his state of mind? In the first few pages of the first chapter, what does Reverend Drew reveal about himself? About Alice Hayward’s life and death? What does he *not* reveal? Did you immediately trust his point of view? Why or why not? What words would you use to describe him? Do you think he’d use the same words to describe himself?
5. When he recalls Alice Hayward’s baptism, Reverend Drew remembers the word “there” in a poignant way, comparing the last word Alice spoke to him with Christ’s last words on the cross. Why do you think this simple word —“there”—is given such weighty importance? How is it related to what Reverend Drew calls “the seeds of my estrangement from my calling” (page 13)?
6. Reverend Drew says of his calling to the church: “All I can tell you is I believe I was sent” (page 44). He then delves into a grisly description of the Crucifixion (pages 45–48), recalling the first time he studied it in high school. With what we know about Reverend Drew up to this point, how did this revelation help you understand him? Were you drawn in or repulsed by his fixation?

7. How does Reverend Drew explain his spiritual breakdown? Was there one moment when he lost his faith (Alice's baptism, her death) or was it the result of a series of events? What kind of response did you have to his breakdown? One of empathy? Curiosity? Suspicion?

#### PART II: Catherine Benincasa

8. Before we hear from Catherine in her own voice, we see her through Reverend Drew's eyes. What is your first impression of her from his perspective? Does that impression change once you see things from her point of view? What words would you use to describe Catherine?
9. Catherine says of Reverend Drew, "the guy had ice in his veins . . . a serial-killer vibe" (page 106). How does this compare with how he portrays himself? Do you think Catherine sees Reverend Drew clearly based on what she knows? Is she jumping to conclusions, or making use of her intuition and the hard truths she's learned throughout her grueling years on the job?
10. At one point, Catherine says, "I know the difference between mourning and grief" (page 193). What do you think she means by this? Do you agree that there's a difference? How would you describe the reactions, so far, of Reverend Drew, Heather, and Katie to the terrible events they're faced with—as mourning or grief?

#### PART III: Heather Laurent

11. By the time we get to the section narrated by Heather, we've seen her from both Reverend Drew's and Catherine Benincasa's points of view, and we've read excerpts from her books. How would you describe her? Do you agree with Drew that she's "unflappably serene . . . an individual whose competence was manifest and whose sincerity was phosphorescent" (page 65), or do you agree with pathologist David Dennison's take on her: "'Angel of death. I'm telling you: That woman is as stable as a three-legged chair'" (page 182)?

12. Heather's section begins with her description of her first encounter with an angel: she's a young woman, lost in the depths of depression, and intends to commit suicide (pages 225–232). How would you interpret this moment? What does it reveal about how she deals with the deaths of her parents? About how she sees the world?
13. Reverend Drew and Catherine Benincasa both provide graphic descriptions of crimes and crime scenes—the Haywards' and others—but Heather's memories of the violence between her parents is particularly grim. How do you react to reading these passages?

#### PART IV: Katie Hayward

14. Ending the novel in Katie Hayward's voice is a provocative choice. What do you think of it? You've now seen her from the points of view of Reverend Drew, Catherine, and Heather—how would you describe her? Does she seem like a typical teenager? To borrow Catherine's distinction, is Katie grieving or in mourning?
15. At one point during a conversation with Katie, Reverend Drew says, "it was one good thing to come out of that awful Sunday night: We were all striving to be better people. To be kind. To be gentler with one another" (page 321). Is this true in the case of the people in this novel? Can good come out of such violence, such painful loss? How does each of the four main characters respond? How does the town in general respond?
16. Re-read the interview between Katie Hayward and Emmet Walker (pages 155–160). Think back to when you read it the first time, before you'd finished the book. Did anything give you pause? Is there anything in Katie's responses that reveals what we later find out to be true?
17. The novel ends with a revelation. Did it surprise you? How does the author build suspense throughout the novel? Can you find moments of foreshadowing that hint at the ending?

18. Part I ends with Reverend Drew saying, “If there is a lesson to be learned from my fall...it is this: Believe no one. Trust no one. Assume no one really knows anything that matters at all. Because, alas, we don’t. All of our stories are suspect” (page 101). Do you think all the narrators’ stories—Reverend Drew, Catherine, Heather, Katie—are suspect? Is one of them more believable, more reliable, than the others?
19. Pay particular attention to the minor characters: Ginny O’Brien, Emmet Walker, David Dennison, Amanda and Norman, Alice Hayward. What does each minor character reveal about the narrators? How does each move the story forward?
20. Reverend Drew remembers an intimate moment with Alice Hayward in which she asks him to “Remind me who I am” (page 99). How do you understand this need in Alice? What was she looking for in Reverend Drew? Do you think she got it?
21. Excerpts from Heather Laurent’s books are interspersed throughout the novel. Look closely at each excerpt and at what comes before and after. Discuss why you think these are included, and how they impact your reading based on where they appear. Is there a literal connection between what’s happening in the story and what’s happening in Heather Laurent’s books, or is the connection more nuanced? Does one excerpt stand out to you more than the others?
22. Chris Bohjalian’s readers know that his novels often address a significant social issue. *Secrets of Eden* tackles the tragedy of domestic violence. How did reading this novel influence your understanding of domestic violence?
23. Angels are a recurring image and a major theme in *Secrets of Eden*. Who sees them? When do they appear? How are they described? How do they affect each character differently? In the end, do the angels provide an image of hope?