

## Doubleday Reading Group Guide

### The Sleepwalker

A Novel

By Chris Bohjalian

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Guest Room* and *The Sandcastle Girls*

When his calendar permits, Chris Bohjalian is available to meet with reading groups via Skype or speakerphone. Visit <http://www.chrisbohjalian.com/reading-group-center> for details.

### Introduction

“A dark Hitchcockian novel,” according to *The Washington Post*, **The Sleepwalker** is the story of a talented architect and devoted mother who vanishes from her bed one night—leaving a trail of deeply unsettling questions in her wake. Annalee Ahlberg had a history of sleepwalking, suspended in parasomnia, the eerie borderland between dreaming and wakefulness. As Annalee’s husband and daughters search for clues that will bring her home, their discoveries only lead to more troubling revelations. When police detective Gavin Rikert extends a seemingly innocent invitation to Annalee’s older daughter, Lianna, he reveals a secret history. How does he know so much about Annalee’s past? And what does he really know about where she is now?

A mesmerizing tale from one of our most gifted storytellers, **The Sleepwalker** raises provocative questions about the desires lurking deep within the soul. We hope this guide will enrich your reading group’s discussion. There are a few **spoilers**, so you might consider holding off on reviewing this guide until everyone on the group has finished the novel.

### Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What were your initial theories about Annalee’s disappearance? As the characters reacted to the evidence, what did they reveal about themselves?
2. When you read Annalee’s emails, along with reminiscences of her, what were your impressions? What was it like to get to know her through Lianna’s eyes?
3. Does Warren’s career as a literature professor (specializing in poetry, no less) enhance his ability to cope with his wife’s sleepwalking, or is science the only way to understand it?
4. How does the relationship between Lianna and Paige compare to the relationship between you and your siblings? What determines whether siblings will take care of each other or become rivals?
5. **Spoiler alert!** Lianna looks like her mother and takes on some of Annalee’s responsibilities even though she is only twenty-one years old. Is it ethical for thirty-three-year-old Gavin to date Lianna, or is he the key to her healing?

6. The author provides detailed images of how a missing person's body might look after being ravaged by a river. How did this description affect you? Does the physical body or the psyche or the soul play the primary role in making us who we are?
7. **The Sleepwalker** takes place in the year 2000, just before the dawn of smart phones and the profusion of social media. How does this make for a better storyline?
8. Lianna has a talent for magic. Why is she drawn to creating illusions, and to being in control of the reality behind them?
9. As the Ahlbergs confront the role of genetics in their family tragedy, what issues are raised about the heart of our identities? Are the Ahlberg girls shaped more by nature or nurture?
10. **Spoiler alert!** How did you react as you read about the court cases of defendants who were sleepwalking (and the sexual assault accusations Gavin faced when he was younger, described on page 177)? Who is responsible for protecting society from the crimes of a sleepwalker?
11. How would you describe the portrait of a marriage that emerges in the novel? How was trust formed and tested between Annalee and Warren? Did secrecy strengthen or weaken their relationship?
12. In the end, when the meaning of the italicized passages became clear, what did you discover about the nature of guilt? Could anything have prevented Annalee's disappearance?
13. **Spoiler alert!** What does sexsomnia tell us about the human sex drive? When Lianna has sleep sex with Gavin for the first time, is she having an encounter with his true self?
14. What surprising facts did you learn about sleepwalking, and sleep in general, as you read this novel? If you were a sleepwalker, what would your strongest impulses be?
15. In a review for *Library Journal*, Barbara Hoffert observed that Chris Bohjalian "never writes the same book twice. From the rural Vermont-set *Midwives* to the historical *The Sandcastle Girls* to the close-at-hand dystopia of *Close Your Eyes, Hold Hands*, he charts crucial moments in different settings and with different sensibilities." Although he is a master of variety, what common strands appear in his depictions of humanity? How did *The Sleepwalker* enhance your experience of other Bohjalian novels?

### **About the Author**

Chris Bohjalian is the author of numerous books, including *The Guest Room*; *The Sandcastle Girls*; *Skeletons at the Feast*; *The Double Bind*; and *Midwives*, which was a number one *New York Times* bestseller and a selection of Oprah's Book Club. His work

has been translated into more than thirty languages, and three of his novels have become movies (*Secrets of Eden*, *Midwives*, and *Past the Bleachers*). He lives in Vermont. Visit him at [www.chrisbohjalian.com](http://www.chrisbohjalian.com) or on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Goodreads, and Litsy

*Guide written by Amy Clements*