

## ***The Law of Similars* Discussion Guide**

### **ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of Chris Bohjalian's *The Law of Similars*. In this riveting novel, a lawyer risks everything to protect a young woman whose practice of alternative medicine leads to a legal inquiry and raises profound questions about the links between hope and hubris, love and deception.

### **ABOUT THIS BOOK**

In his widely acclaimed, controversial novel, *Midwives*, Chris Bohjalian described the trial of a midwife who is accused of manslaughter when a home birth goes tragically wrong. In *The Law of Similars*, Bohjalian weaves a compelling tale around homeopathy, an arena of alternative medicine steeped in controversy and ambiguities. Once again, he creates a world in which passionate beliefs and desperate needs fatefully collide with the strictures of the law and the prejudices of society.

During the two difficult years following his wife's death in a car accident, Leland Fowler devotes himself entirely to raising his small daughter, Abby, and to his job as a Chief Deputy State's Attorney in Vermont. The strain of making Abby's life as normal as possible, of spending exhausting days in court prosecuting petty criminals, and of negotiating the sometimes treacherous twenty-mile commute between his home and office finally takes its toll. Suffering from a chronic sore throat impervious to conventional medical treatment, Leland seeks the help of homeopath Carissa Lake. In an office decorated with evocative murals of Paris and a ceiling sparkled with painted stars, Carissa provides a cure not only for his sore throat, but for the aching loneliness that lies at the root of his symptoms.

A magical Christmas Eve with Carissa reawakens Leland's ability to love and to dream about the future. His dream is abruptly shattered the day after Christmas, however, when he learns that one of Carissa's patients has fallen into an allergy-induced coma and the patient's wife has accused Carissa of having suggested a dangerous treatment for her husband's asthma. As the State's Attorneys Office gears up to investigate Carissa, Leland finds himself in the center of the controversy, face-to-face with a moral and ethical dilemma of enormous proportions.

### **Reader's Guide**

- 1) Carissa Lake is a psychologist as well as a homeopath. In what ways do these two disciplines reinforce each other in her treatment of patients? What effect do her questions about his personal life have on Leland? Does the success of Leland's cure depend on his willingness to trust Carissa?
- 2) How does Richard Emmons's motivation for trying homeopathy differ from Leland's? Do you think that his fear of the long-term effects of conventional medicine is realistic and that Jennifer too willingly accepts the authority of the medical establishment?
- 3) Within a week of taking Carissa's medication, Richard's skin clears up and the aches in his joints diminish. In light of this, do you think his decision to give up the inhaler and pills he took for his asthma was reasonable? Do his actions justify Jennifer's opposition to homeopathy or do they indicate a flaw within Richard himself? Should Carissa have recognized that Richard's demands for more medication were a prelude to his decision to take matters into his own hands?

4) The two events at the heart of *The Law of Similars* occur almost simultaneously on Christmas Eve: Leland and Carissa make love for the first time and Richard attempts to medicate himself by eating cashews. What do these events reflect about the character of each man? Are there similarities between the risks they both take in hopes of creating a better future for themselves?

5) When Leland realizes that Carissa might be charged with a criminal offense because of Jennifer's accusations, why doesn't he leave Carissa's house immediately? Is it wrong for him to put his feelings for Carissa above what he knows he should do as a lawyer? Discuss the distinction he makes between the "ethical" thing to do and the "moral" thing to do. [p. 135]

6) Carissa readily admits that she made a joke about eating cashews to Richard in the health food store. Do you think "Richard Emmons was an idiot who mistook an offhand remark...for medical advice"? [p. 139] Or did Carissa fail to live up to an essential professional obligation to answer Richard's questions responsibly even in a light-hearted conversation?

7) At what point does Leland cross the line between his commitment to upholding the law and his commitment to Carissa? Should he have reported his involvement with Carissa to his boss and the state trooper immediately, even though no criminal charges were pending? Should he have refused to interview Jennifer Emmons?

8) Carissa accuses Leland of treating her like a criminal when he first questions her about her conversation with Richard, and Leland makes the same accusation when his boss presses him for the details about his relationship with Carissa. How do these two occasions differ from each other, and what do they reveal about Carissa's and Leland's understanding of the situation and its likely consequences?

9) Why does Carissa agree to doctor her notes on treating Richard? Do you think her deference to Leland is excessive? Does his insistence that she is only protecting herself from a possible miscarriage of justice exonerate her for participating in what she correctly believes is an illegal act? Do you think her ultimate decision to leave the United States was the only one she could have made in order to live as she wanted to?

10) Each chapter is introduced with a quotation from the works of Dr. Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy. How do they add to your understanding of the book? Discuss their function as a backdrop--or gloss--for the actual events of the plot.

11) What is the significance of Leland's increasing dependence on the arsenic pills he takes from Carissa's office? How do his reactions over the course of the novel--from his initial exhilaration to the unpleasant physical symptoms and fears he suffers at the end--relate to the law of similars that informs homeopathy?

12) When *Midwives* was first published, it led to an often heated debate about the literal and metaphoric place of birth in our culture. Do you think *The Law of Similars* will stimulate an equally earnest discussion about the role alternative medicine should play in health care?

13) Chris Bohjalian has said that *The Law of Similars* is about forgiveness. How successful are the three main characters--Leland, Carissa, and Jennifer--at forgiving themselves and each other?

