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*Chris Bohjalian , Cassandra Campbell (Reading) , Alison Fraser (Reading)*

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Over the course of his career, *New York Times* bestselling novelist Chris Bohjalian has taken readers on a spectacular array of journeys. *Midwives* brought us to an isolated Vermont farmhouse on an icy winter's night and a home birth gone tragically wrong. *The Double Bind* perfectly conjured the Roaring Twenties on Long Island—and a young social worker's descent into madness. And *Skeletons at the Feast* chronicled the last six months of World War Two in Poland and Germany with nail-biting authenticity. As *The Washington Post Book World* has noted, Bohjalian writes “the sorts of books people stay awake all night to finish.” In his fifteenth book, *The Sandcastle Girls*, he brings us on a very different kind of journey. This spellbinding tale travels between Aleppo, Syria, in 1915 and Bronxville, New York, in 2012—a sweeping historical love story steeped in the author's Armenian heritage, making it his most personal novel to date. When Elizabeth Endicott arrives in Syria, she has a diploma from Mount Holyoke College, a crash course in nursing, and only the most basic grasp of the Armenian language. The First World War is spreading across Europe, and she has volunteered on behalf of the Boston-based Friends of Armenia to deliver food and medical aid to refugees of the Armenian genocide. There, Elizabeth becomes friendly with Armen, a young Armenian engineer who has already lost his wife and infant daughter. When Armen leaves Aleppo to join the British Army in Egypt, he begins to write Elizabeth letters, and comes to realize that he has fallen in love with the wealthy, young American woman who is so different from the wife he lost. Flash forward to the present, where we meet Laura Petrosian, a novelist living in suburban New York. Although her grandparents' ornate Pelham home was affectionately nicknamed the “Ottoman Annex,” Laura has never really given her Armenian heritage much thought. But when an old friend calls, claiming to have seen a newspaper photo of Laura's grandmother promoting an exhibit at a Boston museum, Laura embarks on a journey back through her family's history that reveals love, loss—and a wrenching secret that has been buried for generations.

## The Sandcastle Girls Details

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# From Reader Review *The Sandcastle Girls* for online ebook

## Michael says

I found this to be a moving story and great means to bring to life through fiction many key elements of the Armenian Genocide (“The Slaughter We Know Next to Nothing About”). Because of Bohjalian’s Armenian ancestry, the work is obviously a labor of love for him. He walks the tricky line between the need to draw as many readers as possible with an engaging and hopeful human story and the goal of imparting the truth of the brutal events of civilian starvation, rape, and slaughter. He achieves this by moving between a modern character, Laura, a middle aged woman slowly delving into her Armenian heritage, and characters in 1915 who are involved with the events in Aleppo in Syria, either as victims or people trying to mitigate the crisis.

Elizabeth Endicott is a young American woman, fresh out of college, who arrives in Aleppo, Syria, with her father and others working the philanthropic organization Friends of Armenia to provide food and medical care to refugees deported from their communities marched long distances from what is now central Turkey. She soon immerses herself in aiding a large group of naked and starving women and children brought to the town square. She learns from their stories that their men have mostly been massacred or conscripted into forced labor. She befriends a woman who was married to a doctor and once lived in the U.S., who now serves as a proxy mother for an eight-year old orphan. The reader gets dark looks along the way into the horrific past experiences of these two refugees, while Elizabeth only understands enough to drive her need to see her compassion rewarded with some evidence of success (which I as a reader hungers for as well).

It was satisfying to see Elizabeth progress as a character. When facing the appropriation of food supplies being delivered to a refugee camp in the desert at Der-el-Zor by Turkish soldiers, she boldly shames them into sparing half the wagons. When she learns how all the women in Aleppo are to be marched to this apparent death camp and the children put into an orphanage, she takes the courage to wangle a way to keep her new friend and child with her at the American legation quarters. She also defies her father by forming a close friendship with an Armenian man, Armen, who survived a massacre in the city of Van and has come to Aleppo looking for news of his wife and child among the evacuees.

Elizabeth slowly learns from the American consul and from some German military engineers that an intentional genocide is in process. Feeling powerless to change Ottoman policies, the diplomat sets his hopes in getting documentary photographs taken by the Germans past the information blockade to the Western press. The fate of these photos is a key mystery in this story. I can say that the Germans are sent off to the fight with the Ottoman forces at Gallipoli and that Armen, after giving up on finding his family, ends up fighting there with the Australian and New Zealand forces.

Back to the future, Laura is learning more of the history of the genocide through archives at a museum in the Armenian dominated community of Watertown outside of Boston where she once saw rare documentary photos as a college student. She asks herself: “How do a million and a half people die with nobody knowing? ...The short answer to that ... You kill them in the middle of nowhere.”

As a reader, bouncing back and forth from Laura’s life story and 1915 took me away from my immersion in the historical tale. However, the approach did allow me to get hooked on the mysteries that underlie how it was that Armen and Elizabeth survived and came to be her grandparents. That known end also helped in giving me the strength to face the horrors of the historical events and tragedies among many of the characters. I presume that such a narrative device will help other prospective readers.

I don’t think the romance between Elizabeth and Armen was overdone. Largely it develops through

correspondence, which Laura ends up getting access to. Elizabeth first fully feels her love for Armen while she composes a letter to him and gets stuck on how to end the closing. “Come back” she writes, then reconsiders:

*She has written these last two words without trying them out in her mind beforehand and worries that she is plaintive and despairing all alone in that line, a window into her heartbreak. She contemplates adding the word ‘soon’, but she isn’t sure if that would make the short sentence any more appropriate or any less needy. In the end she does not add a period. Instead she writes the two words ‘to me.’*

*She studies the sheer nakedness of the sentence and the meaning in those brief syllables.*

*‘Come back to me.’*

*The words leave her wistful and satisfied at once. When life is stripped down to tending the starving in the square and the sick in the hospital, why should propriety matter at all?*

### **Some extra historical resources**

I made some annotated links here because so many people are fuzzy on the details and crave an understanding of the ongoing debate about whether the term “genocide” should be applied to these mass deaths.

#### *Overviews*

1. Armenian Genocide, Wikipedia
2. Cohan, Sara (2005). "A Brief History of the Armenian Genocide" (PDF). *Social Education* 69 (6): 333–37.
3. Kifner, John (7 December 2007). "Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview". *The New York Times*.

These are excellent “short courses” and were very helpful to broaden my knowledge. The short Cohan article had the following map, which reveals the geographical scope of the events. Red lines are deportation routes and dots site of deaths, with size proportional to magnitude. Small black dots are staging areas and larger ones concentration camps. Areas in gray show extent of historical Armenia and pink its current boundaries after independence was attained from the former Soviet Union.

#### *Memoir*

3. Balakian, Grigoris (2009), *Armenian Golgotha*.

Bohjalian acknowledges good input on his novel during its writing from Peter Balakian, who edited this well received memoir of his father.

#### *Photo collections*

4. “Photos of Armenian Genocide”, Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, National Academy of Science of the Republic of Armenia

The second one shows children lined up to get into the orphanage on Kharput (Harput), called Orphan City.

5. Wegner, Armin, “Armenian Deportees: 1915-1916”, Armenian National Institute.

The German soldier photographer in “Sandcastle Girls” seems to be based on Wegner, who defied policies and took pictures of Armenians deported to the Syrian desert camps and later was arrested, but not before getting some of his photos out.

#### *Current debate over labeling the massacres as a genocide*

6. Simon, Scott, “Battle Over History”, CBS News 60 Minutes, Feb. 28, 2010

7. International Association of Genocide Scholars, “An Open Letter Concerning Historians Who Deny the Armenian Genocide”, October 1, 2006

In this excellent story, Simon covers some of the history of the Armenian tragedy and gets the Turkish Ambassador to defend the official national stance: “There were deportations and tragic things happened.” President Obama claimed in his campaign he believed genocide is an accurate term for the events, but Turkey remains too much of an ally for him to push the issue. When a Congressional acknowledgement of the genocide came up for a vote in 2007, the counsel of six former Secretaries of State helped push President Bush to lobby against its passage. That the Turkish Republic convicted the ruling triumvirate of the “Young Turks” of war crimes after the war, with citation of their Armenian policies included, is a reasonable sign to me of Turkish condemnation of actions of the rulers of the Ottoman Empire.

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### **Rachel says**

I am not one to read historical fiction very often. I saw this on a First Reads giveaway and was lucky enough to win a copy. After reading it, I've determined that I need more historical fiction in my life!

I found it difficult to read this at first, because it is filled with so many interesting, as well as shocking details. I have no prior knowledge of the Armenian genocide that took place, and I found myself deeply invested in reading and understanding each detail of the story. Because of the historical setting, and the fact that there are a number of characters involved, you have to read this book at a time when you can give it the proper attention that it demands. I found I could only read 50 or so pages at a time, not because the story was uninteresting, actually quite the opposite. I wanted to understand and digest the entire story. I found myself emotionally attached to many of the characters, and I loved how the story came together. I will openly admit that I even cried toward the end, both out of happiness and sadness for the concluding events.

I am so glad that I was able to read this book. I don't know if it is Chris Bohjalian's own ancestry or his talent for historical fiction, but his writing is powerful in that it lures the reader into the characters and history equally, leaving you thoroughly satisfied that you've read a wonderful tale and enhanced your understanding of an important event in history. Thank you Chris Bohjalian, for reminding me of the satisfaction that comes with a well written piece of historical fiction.

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### **Britany says**

100 years ago (April 24, 1915) over a million Armenians were forced out into the desert and brutally murdered in a plot to rid the world of their race. An event that isn't taught in history class and has almost

disappeared into history as a result. I had no idea that this event had happened in the midst of everything else going on in the world during this time.

Chris Bohjalian takes an interesting approach to this story line. Bouncing between present day journalist in Bronxville, NY to 1915 Aleppo where Elizabeth Endicott's story begins. It all starts with a picture of a starved woman showing up on the front page of the newspaper for Laura Petrosian to begin understanding her history and how these two women are tied together.

The beginning took a little bit for me to understand how the novel was laid out, but once I took hold, I couldn't let go. Powerful book about a time in history that is mostly forgotten.

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### **PorshaJo says**

Review to come.

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### **Melissa Crytzer Fry says**

What a heartbreaking, but moving story. I'm always appalled at how incomplete (and one-sided) "history" seems to be – or at least the history that is taught in schools. Historical fiction books like this, I believe, would do wonders for generating interest in history! In *The Sandcastle Girls*, Chris Bohjalian has illuminated one of the world's dirtiest secrets: the Armenian genocide.

Told in multiple points of views – by American volunteers, Germans, Turks, Armenian refugees, present-day ancestors of refugees – the story bears witness to the horrific cruelty and murderous scenes of the Armenian genocide (warning: some of the scenes are very descriptive and difficult to read). But layered within that darkness is also hope intertwined with multiple love stories - between man and woman, mothers and daughters, and family.

I waffled on my rating - between a 3.5 and 4 – simply because I felt a disconnect with the present-day narrator, a NY-based granddaughter of a refugee survivor. For me, her curtness and frequent "asides" felt almost flippant when placed next to the heartbreaking narrative of the genocide portions of the story (which were SO well done). And while I didn't necessarily agree with a plot point at the end of the novel and questioned the motivations of one character in particular (which I won't reveal, as it is a spoiler to be sure), the beautiful prose of this book and the story itself carried me along at quite a clip. This is a novel I won't soon forget.

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### **Connie says**

WOW. This book may make Mr. Bohjalian move to the top of my favorite author list. Where he gets ideas for his stories I don't know, but he is a master at weaving historical events into a beautiful story.

I am ashamed that I knew nothing of the Armenian Genocide.....was never taught nor even mentioned in history classes that I can recall. And that is a tragedy in itself. These atrocities should be taught and never

forgotten. Thank you Chris Bohjalian for bringing this history to light.

This story is told in two time frames, one in the 1915's-1916's in Aleppo where thousands of Armenian refugees (mostly women and children) were marched through on their way to their deaths. This is where Elizabeth learns of the horrors of war, and meets a young Armen with whom she falls in love. The second time frame is the present day where their granddaughter Laura learns the history of her family quite by accident.

In this story the two time frames worked for me.....I felt I was Laura, learning about something in history I knew not a thing about. I feel that if it had all been told from Elizabeth's viewpoint that I would have been overwhelmed with all the horror, suffering and evil. Being given small parts of the story to piece together made a bigger impact on me. I was able to "digest" the horror and really bond with the goodness in so many of these characters....and there was a lot of goodness.

I also appreciated that this was a love story, and a beautiful one amidst all the ugliness. The bond between the women in this story also touched my heart. I was rooting for these women to survive. The writing flows and this bitter and sad history, though heart wrenching is beautifully told. I will not soon forget these Sandcastle Girls.

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## **Dem says**

The Sandcastle Girls by Chris Bohjalian is a powerful and unforgettable historical novel depicting the Armenian Genocide. It is an epic story of love and war that will leave you pondering on the facts long after you have finished this novel.

This Novel is set in two timeframes. The past 1915 to 1916 and the present.

The book takes us back to a time when the First World War and the Armenian genocide of 1915-16 . Elizabeth Endicott arrives in Syria along with her father, they have volunteered on behalf of the Boston based friends of Armenia to deliver food and medical aid to refugees from the Armenian Genocide. Elizabeth has only the most basic grasp of the Armenian language and a crash course in nursing but she is equipped with a will and determination to help in any way she can. Elizabeth becomes friendly with Armen an Armenian man who has just lost his wife and child . Armen joins the British Army in Egypt and he and Elizabeth corresponds in the form of letters and their friendship develops.

When we move to the present in the novel we meet Laura Petrosian who is a novelist and is researching her family history and learns of the love and the secrets buried for years.

I first came across this novel in a newspaper review and knew immediately this was my kind of book and ordered it. I was ignorant to the atrocities that took place in during the Armenian Genocide but after reading the account here I was saddened to realise that I had not been made aware of this through history classes at school or in previous books. But thanks to Mr Bohjalian I have learned so much from this book. This is one of those historical novels that while you are reading you are also back and forth to your computer to check on places and details described in the story.

This is one of those novels not for the faint hearted and while there is a love story running alongside the horrors of Genocide, it's the horrors of what happens to the Armenian people that will make you shudder and

weep.

I found this a powerful, insightful, touching and unforgettable novel and the only reason I did not give it five stars was the fact that the novel jumps back and forth between time frames way too much and I found this very distracting especially in the first half of the novel.

I wish the author had included a map of the regions he wrote about as I think it would have been so helpful. Overall a 4 star read for me and a book I will be recommending for a long time to come.

**Pam says**

WOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOW!

I started this book a few days ago and I have to tell you that I am only able to read it in small bites. The book is so good and so very disturbing that I can feel myself becoming an emotional wreck! It has taken me about 10 days to get through this book. Not because it wasn't good, but because it is just THAT good. I can actually say for the first time in a very long time; I savored every single word of this book.

The subject of the book is the Armenian Genocide in Aleppo and the Ottoman Empire of 1915 and 1916. I am embarrassed to say that I had no idea that this even happened. How can humans do this to other humans? How is it that someone can feel so far superior to someone else that it is OK to commit these despicable acts?

I'm not sure if I am going to be able to express my feelings about the journey that this book and this author has taken me on. The characters; Elizabeth, Armen, Laura, Hatoun, Nevert, Helmut, Eric and Orhan. Each one of these characters (and more) made such an impact in the story. At times, I felt that I was right there beside each of them urging them on or saying "No, please don't do that or please don't go down that alley". Many times, their actions would take my breath away.

This is an absolute MUST read for everyone. It is disturbing, yes, but the writing is so \*ing good (hows that for expressing myself).

Thanks Chris for another wonderful journey.

I have been fortunate to receive this book from Doubleday through Net Galley as an ARC.

### Tania says

Books can do different things. They can entertain you, educate you, provide some escapism etc. Sandcastle girls did so many things for me. Firstly it made me weep, it gave me nightmares, it made me really feel for all the victims and survivors of the Armenian genocide. None of the other books I've read about the holocaust/Rwandan genocide has affected me this deeply. This may be because some of these books were



documentaries, which makes them a bit more clinical, and some of them were biographies, which makes it more difficult to see the big picture. The fact that this is a novel based on history, allowed the author to give you the big picture, as well as focus on individuals, and to keep the stories very personal. I knew nothing about this part of history and find it shocking that something like this can just be forgotten. *Sandcastle girls* is about more than the Armenian genocide, it also tells a beautiful love story. I think what worked very well is the fact that the author constantly switches between the two stories, as this helps with the balance of the book. If the whole book played off in 1915, I think the story would have been too morbid. This novel is exquisitely written, and I will be reading the rest of Chris Bohjalian's titles. I strongly recommend this to anyone with an interest in history, or who loves books that really touch your heart.

**The Story:** One woman's journey into her family's past reveals a shocking story that has never been told. 1915, Aleppo, Syria. When Elizabeth Endicott steps off the boat from Boston, armed only with a crash course in nursing, nothing could have prepared her for the atrocities she is about to face. For Aleppo is the arrival point for the hundreds of thousands of Armenians who have been forced to march out of Turkey and through the desert to die. There Elizabeth gets to know Armen, a young Armenian engineer who has already lost his wife and infant daughter in the Genocide. When Armen travels to Egypt to join the British army, he begins to write to Elizabeth, and slowly realizes that, unless he can find his way back to her, he risks becoming lost forever. Present day, New York. Laura Petrosian has never really given her Armenian heritage much thought until an old friend calls, claiming to have seen a photo of Laura's grandmother advertising a museum exhibition. As Laura embarks on a journey back through her family's history she'll find a tale of love, loss - and the hidden story of a nation in mourning.

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## Candi says

*"How do a million and a half people die with nobody knowing? ... You kill them in the middle of nowhere."*

In 1915, amid the turmoil of the First World War, a million and half civilians including women and children perished during the Armenian genocide. Many were executed and others died a slow, painful death as they were forced to march from their villages in the Ottoman Empire through the harsh and unforgiving Syrian desert. Either I slept through history class or this horrific event was simply not taught in school. I'm going to have to assume the latter. This historical fiction novel by Chris Bohjalian was very well-written and certainly a powerful eye-opener.

The story alternates between two timelines and two settings, a technique that seems to be so very popular in current fiction. One timeline takes us back to 1915 and the brutal landscape of Aleppo and the deserts of Syria. The other places us in present day New York as an Armenian descendant and writer, Laura, researches the history of her grandparents. Initially, I found the transitions between the timelines to be a bit jarring, but as I learned more details everything fell into place; I settled easily into the story and was completely absorbed.

Elizabeth Endicott, along with her father, arrives in Aleppo in 1915 as a volunteer through the humanitarian efforts of the Boston-based group, the Friends of Armenia. While in this turbulent land, they shelter at the American compound as guests of the American consul, Ryan Martin. Along with Elizabeth, the reader gets a shocking view of the atrocities being carried out by the Turks as they attempt to create a homogenous country, free from Armenians. A group of deportees, women and children, have just arrived and the glimpse of the torture they have endured is simply heartbreaking. Fortunately, there are also flashes of humanity as

others provide assistance and compassion to these tormented souls in what little way they can. Even the small acts of two German soldiers, allies of the Turks, and that of a Turkish soldier himself will restore a little bit of your faith in mankind. Elizabeth will eventually cross paths with Armen, an Armenian engineer who has fled his homeland after losing his wife and daughter in the confusion of the deportations and the slaughter. When Armen leaves to join the fighting with the British Army in Egypt, a tender friendship is nurtured through a series of letters between him and the young American woman. Hope is sustained by four simple words, *"Come back to me."*

While the contemporary storyline was less compelling, it did help move the narrative forward as Laura conducts her research on the genocide and her Armenian ancestors. As Laura slowly uncovers details and secrets through her probing, the reader also learns a wealth of information about Elizabeth and Armen. The history is necessary, important and harsh. The generosity, determination and honorable actions of several characters is heartwarming and reassuring. I found the ending to be bittersweet and this book to be a great tribute to the wrongful loss of so many innocent lives.

*"But history does matter. There is a line connecting the Armenians and the Jews and the Cambodians and the Bosnians and the Rwandans. There are obviously more, but, really, how much genocide can one sentence handle? You get the point."*

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## **Melissa says**

I can honestly say that this was the ONE book I was DYING to read all summer. I vacillated whether or not to purchase it just so I could get my hands on the thing as soon as it was released. I refrained and waited on the library copy. It was \$20 saved.

What I liked:

- Setting/historical significance: I knew nothing of the Armenian genocide. How did I not know that between 1 and 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered at the hands of the Turks during WWI? High School and college history: Fail. Thanks to the author for trying to frame the atrocities within the limitations of a novel. Also...I love any historical fiction dealing with war – especially WWI & II.

What I didn't like:

- No maps: This book, in essence, is a geographical novel. The majority of the story focuses on location: the battlefronts, death marches, Egypt, Syria, The Ottoman Empire – seriously – how hard would have been to include a map in the front pages of the book? So many times I wanted to reference where the characters were at any given time – especially Armen and his trek to Syria, then to the front lines and back again. Putting the book down and Googling a map of the Middle East at the turn of the century was a major distraction.

- Alternating narration: This is common in novels – alternating voices of characters, time periods (future v. past), etc. Some are successful, (The Forgotten Garden) some are not (The Sandcastle Girls). In my reading experience, novels generally alternate narration at the end/beginning of chapters. In this novel...it alternated within a chapter – between paragraphs! Oh my gosh! One moment I'm reading about Elizabeth Endicott's care of the ailing Armenian refugees, the next paragraph, I'm in Boston with her granddaughter at a middle school concert. Did not work. At all.

- Storyline: Now I'm nitpicking – but -- the relationship between Armen and Elizabeth didn't resonate with me - no chemistry; the “story within a story” about the survival of photographs taken of Armenian refugees did not seem the least bit plausible (and if it is based on historical fact – it would have been nice of the author to include a reference); the ending – I felt totally manipulated.

Sorry 4 & 5 star ratings – for me, this was a huge disappointment.

I hope others enjoy it more than I did.

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## **Diane S ? says**

4.5 This book was incredibly difficult for me to read, and yet without books like these horrific events and the people who survived them would be forgotten. The Armenian genocide of 1915, is not something we learned in school and Bohjalian does a masterful job of presenting it in all its honesty and horror. Yet amongst the cruelty, there are instances of love and kindness and caring, even by those who were ordered to carry out these atrocities. Human people, with real human feelings, yet just as with other atrocities committed in the past and even now, there are not enough people to help or to even question. Things like this should not have happened and yet we trust that brilliant authors will continue to write heartbreaking stories to enlighten the reader. Well done and a fantastic book. ARC from NetGalley.

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## **Chrissie says**

ETA: No, I didn't really like this book. I just gave it three stars because I am glad Bohjalian wrote a book about the genocide. The narration was off, I didn't like the two threads, particularly the modern one, and parts are written for the movies, i.e .way too theatrical, and yes even fluffy! I have changed the rating from three to two stars.

On completion:

I will give this three stars. Part of the problem is that there are two threads, a historical one and a modern one. I generally do not like that. The author did this to lighten the tone because the subject matter is so very d-i-f-f-i-c-u-l-t!!!! Bohjalian states this in an interview at the end. All genocides, and the horrific events of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Turks in 1915, are really horrible. 1.5 million Armenians were killed. What is related is taken from history. These are the facts that must be acknowledged, and yet Turkey continues to deny what they did. I think it is great that such a well-known author tackles this topic in an easy to read book of fiction. It has romance and suspense; the ingredients that attract people toward a book of fiction. Bohjalian maybe has hopes for a film version? I could imagine this almost being written for that purpose. Whether you like books like that is up to you. It definitely does teach much of what should be known about this genocide.

If you have not before read about the Armenian genocide of 1915, this may be a good book to start with. There are many other books written on this topic. There are wonderful biographies. Here follows a link to my Armenian shelf for other detailed and excellent books: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/list/...> . The most comprehensive is: Armenian Golgotha

What is my view of the narration by Cassandra Campbell and Alison Fraser? It is patchy; some sections good, some sections less so. It is very disturbing when gruesome events of the Armenian genocide are spoken of in a light and sometimes even flippant tone. This does not happen consistently. Chapter 9 takes us to the refugee camp in Der Azore. Here, Campbell's voice carries just the right lilt. She well expressed people of different nationalities. Perhaps part of the difficulty in narrating this book is that given the seriousness of the topic, we the listeners demand a performance with no errors.

Concerning the thread set in modern times, there is a lighter often jovial tone. It is tricky to capture both this joviality and switch to a respectful tone when the events are about the genocide. The author's words in the modern thread are often sarcastic. To say such words in a flippant manner is not incorrect. Laura, writing of her grandparents says:

*But history does matter. There are lines connecting the Armenians and the Jews and the Cambodians and the Serbs and the Rwandans. They are obviously morbid. Really, how much genocide can one sentence handle? You get the point. Besides, my grandparents' story deserves to be told, regardless of their nationalities.*(chapter12)

How much of the inappropriateness is the result of the author's choice of words and how much is the fault of a narrator? This quote shows you that here it is the author's words that are "disrespectful". What can Alison Fraser do? She must say this in a flippant manner! One cannot criticize her for this. (Please see "IN CHAPTER 7" and "THROUGH CHAPTER 6" for other examples.) I am not quite sure where to put the blame, but the book is far too often disturbing to listen to/ read. This has nothing to do with the brutality of the events. The events of the Armenian genocide must be told, but with both the right words and intonations.

#### IN CHAPTER 7:

I have begun chapter 7. The audio narrator is currently Alison Fraser. I know, this is crazy, but I have trouble concentrating on the author's text! I focus instead on which narrator is speaking! Even in the middle of a chapter the audio narrators (Cassandra Campbell and Alison Fraser) and the book narrators (Elizabeth Endicott, the paternal grandmother, and Laura Petrosian, the granddaughter writing a book about her family) change. This isn't a compliment. What I do want to point out now is a compliment. Laura Petrosian, the author, is very funny when she speaks of ethnic Armenian stereotypes: Armenians are "nice, industrious and capable of weaving attractive rugs"! Or maybe that is a compliment of Fraser.....

#### THROUGH CHAPTER 6:

I am listening to the audiobook. There are two narrators: Cassandra Campbell and Alison Fraser. For me their super American, kind of flippant tone is irritating.... particularly Campbell's. Then when Fraser speaks she is cooler and yet I STILL feel a sarcasm and disdain that is sometimes inappropriate. Her tone is so different from Campbell's. I cannot figure out if it is the words of the author or the tone of voices that irritates me. Or am I supposed to be irritated. I am kind of confused by my reactions. I do not understand what is bothering me.

OK, I found an exact example where I can point out what is wrong with the narration. Laura Petrosian is writing about her Armenian grandfather. In this case the narrator is Alison Fraser. The text reads:

*Why did my Armenian grandfather have a lamb chop every morning for breakfast?*

And the answer follows:

*It is because he could. It is just that simple, because he could!*

The tone that Fraser uses comes out meaning exactly what those words say. However the real meaning is more. The tone should imply the idea that her grandfather wasn't able to eat that lamb chop before, and that is why it was important to eat it now, every single morning. Always, because he couldn't before. How do you get this across? By pauses, by voice inflection, by the speed with which the text is related.

Then the narrator changes to Campbell. Elizabeth and her father are disputing over the appropriateness of bringing some of the Armenian refugees into the American compound. Elizabeth insists on bringing two in, and she wins over her father. After this confrontation, the lines read: "she skips down the corridor". And what does that mean? Does she skip because she is happy? She won over her father!? Or does it mean that she is not aware of the seriousness of the whole situation? If you read this text you get no hint from any tonal variation, you can figure out yourself what those words mean. However when the text is read out-loud, you do get a message. I hear a flippant tone, which is extremely irritating.

If one reads a text of horrible import too smoothly or even too exaggeratedly the whole sense can be misunderstood! Tone is important. It is one of the things we cannot get across properly here on internet. Maybe I am nitpicking, but for me the narration is not working.

Maybe my view will change as I continue, but I am not pleased so far!

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## **Barbara says**

The *Boston Globe* , 7/17/12, had a fine review of this book, which recounts the horrors of the Armenian genocide in 1915. Initially I was hesitant whether I wanted to read this, since I was so disappointed by Bohjalian's *Secrets of Eden*, but because he excelled with *Skeletons at the Feast* I decided that this would be interesting. I have entered the waiting list at my library.

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It seems logical that while reading this book, my thoughts would often turn to the much better known Holocaust, which occurred to *my* people. Bohjalian has written this novel as a remembrance to *his* ancestors of the Armenian Genocide, which has sometimes been termed, " the Slaughter You Know Next to Nothing About". Viewing it from this perspective, one can certainly say that he has issued a Tribute to those people and aroused public awareness. Many will remain apathetic about this, but let us not forget there are amongst us everywhere, Holocaust deniers . Moreover, with each new generation there appears to be a greater lack of knowledge of such earthshaking events. So, from these preceding thoughts, I commend him for this saga.

This has been an ambitious undertaking for Bohjalian, who has approached his plot with a multi-generational, time- alternating narrative. In part, this has served to enrich the story and demonstrate how our ancestors have actually influenced our lives. At times, I found this feature of travel from the past to the present, from one character to another, an annoying distraction. This would often occur within a matter of a very few pages. Occasionally, a character would be dismissed, or ignored for a few chapters and I would be

required to search my memory to recall this individual's place in the story. Nevertheless, Bohjalian has astutely and creatively woven the characters' situations into a clear and intriguing portrayal of their time and situations.

Much of the background material has been carefully researched, according to his acknowledgements. He has claimed that the people in these tales are loosely related to his relatives.

When reading Bohjalian's accounts I was immediately captivated by his entry into the nearby town of Watertown, Massachusetts. I have always been quite familiar with the Armenian neighborhood there, with its wonderful groceries and restaurants. But here I confess a familiar omission in my life. Although I passed through this town as recently as a week ago and have seen several Armenian cultural buildings, I have never set foot inside one of these places. I have been to Holocaust Museums in Israel, London, Boston, Washington DC and elsewhere and shed many tears with others in attendance; but I have failed to pay homage to the Armenian Cultural Museum so nearby. So, Chris Bohjalian, you have accomplished an important thing with one of your readers- I'll go there- soon!

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### **B the BookAddict says**

I do like this concept; a novel where the main character is writing a novel. Laura, a writer from suburban New York is stumbles upon evidence that her grandmother lived through the genocide in Armenia in 1915. The book moves between modern times and the life of her grandmother revealing a wonderful story of determination, charity, love and family secrets. I love it when a book shows the reader occurrences in history we which may not been aware of. Armenian history was not new to me but this novel did also shows a personal account of the human side to such events. Bohjalian is a master storyteller. A definite 4★

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### **Dan Radovich says**

In my opinion, this is the best work from Bohjalian. Knowing his passion for this subject made the experience all the more meaningful. This is so much more than a powerful history story, it is a wonderful love story - the love of an author and his heritage and craft. Thank you for bringing this story to us, Chris.

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### **Lou says**

Love and war.

This story of fiction deals with events from the past that are true.

The author successfully ingrains in your mind the stark reality of war and the tragic accounts of the brave characters contained within.

Women who have lost it all, no clothes on their backs or food to eat eyewitness to brutal slaying and murder of their kin to live and tell the tale.

You will learn of the genocide of 1915, a time of slaughter 'The Great Catastrophe,' a year you possibly wont forget once you finished reading this story.

A people unknown to many disappeared. The plight of the Armenian people will weigh heavily in your heart

and thoughts.

You will have a lesson in loss and new-found love, human courage and perseverance in the face of human tragedy and adversity. This story is a testimony on how these characters, and people in general, can move forward in life and have another chance to make a future and have some normality, be happy, with this distant but close to heart tragedy in their past.

One I hope Oprah picks up as part of her book club I definitely recommend it.

He does it right telling as it is when he writes, making us feel the smells, the colors, places and the people. This did not get high rating from me for thrill or eloquent prose but for the truth the story talks with of the darkness of hearts and the stark consequences of hatred and racism.

**“That belly dancing may also give you the impression that my childhood was rather exotic. It wasn’t. Most of my childhood was unexceptionably suburban, either in a tiny commuter enclave outside of Manhattan or in Miami, Florida. But my grandparents’ house was different. My aunt really did belly dance until she was forty, and there really were hookah pipes ( no longer used, as far as i know), plush oriental carpets, and thick leather books filled with an alphabet i could not begin to decipher. There was always the enveloping aroma of cooked lamb and mint, because my grandfather insisted on lamb chops even for breakfast: lamb chops and a massive cereal bowl filled with Frosted Flakes and Cocoa Puffs, eaten with yogurt instead of milk.”**

**“You think i want to demonize the Turks. I don’t harbor no grudge. The first boy i ever kissed-seriously kissed, that is, not dry, awkward pecks on the cheek or the lips-was Turkish. He knew i was Armenian. I knew he was Turkish. Hormones mattered far more than history.”**

**“They were somewhere in the desert between Adana and Aleppo. The women were sitting upright, their legs straight before them and their hands tied to the stake behind them so the pole pressed hard against their spines. Then six gendarmes took their swords and mounted their horses, and each took a turn racing toward the captives at high speed, and-as if it were a mere cavalry exercise-decapitated one of the women. Hatoun’s mother had been the last woman to die, and so she had witnessed five heads fall into the hot sand like coconuts, including her older daughter’s.”**

**“But Armenian adults? They would sooner be flogged, stripped, scorched, shot, smothered, stabbed, starved, bayoneted, decapitated, drowned, crucified, asphyxiated, eviscerated, axed, hanged, garroted, quartered, pitchforked, impaled, and (if they were female) “outraged.”(This is another word you don’t hear often anymore, at least as a Victorian synonym for rape.) They would sooner succumb to dysentery, typhus, malaria, cholera, pneumonia, infection, sepsis, and the flu. These are all of the ways in which Armenian civilians died in the First World War- at least all of the ways i came across in**

**eyewitness testimonies. Undoubtedly, there are more.”**

For book trailer of this story and video interview visit <http://more2read.com/review/the-sandcastle-girls-by-chris-bohjalian/>

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### **Melodie says**

I was aware of the genocide of the Armenian people back in World War I days, but could only recall that it happened. I believe it was taught as a fact in world history in the junior year of high school. It was just there at the periphery of my brain. No details.

This book filled in all the details and then some. What is so shocking to me in hindsight is that a second such travesty played out in World War II with the Jews! All the signs were there, but went unread until way late. This was not an easy read, but so glad I did. The form rather than the content is what I had trouble with. Jumping round past to present and back again was jarring to me and at times I had trouble remembering details. Then had to backtrack to make sure I understood.

Would not recommend as a summer read, but definitely needs to be on everyone's list.

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### **Connie says**

It's been one hundred years since the start of the Armenian genocide in the spring of 1915. Chris Bohjalian's Armenian heritage inspired him to write this book. The story has two threads--the first set in Syria in 1915, and the other in the northeastern United States in 2012.

Elizabeth Endicott comes to Aleppo, Syria as a volunteer for the Friends of Armenia during World War I. She sees women and children coming to Aleppo from death marches across the desert. The men had already been killed by the Turks who feared that the Armenians would support the Russians in the war. Elizabeth and other humanitarian aid workers try to help the starving, exhausted survivors, but they had few resources for the masses of people. Elizabeth meets Armen Petrosian, an Armenian engineer who lost his family. Armen and Elizabeth are separated when he fights at Gallipoli, but they remain connected through their letters. Armen's friends, two German engineers, photograph the Armenian prisoners, hoping to smuggle out the evidence of the atrocities.

In the contemporary thread, a writer's interest in her Armenian heritage is sparked when her grandmother's picture is featured in an exhibit at the Armenian Museum. She reads her grandmother's letters and diary to find out the horrible events that her grandparents never discussed.

The characters in Aleppo were compelling and real. The romantic couple, the orphaned children, and the aid workers were all characters the reader could care about. The present day characters were not as well developed, but it's only right that the spotlight should be on the victims of the genocide and the humanitarian workers. Although a few parts of the book have graphic descriptions of the dead and dying, it's important that we know about the horrific events in history.



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## Elyse says

Magnificent-Wonderful!

Ambitious subject --I admire the courage and compassionate work it must have taken for the author to write this book: absolutely extraordinary! Only a talented writer could have created an historical fiction --and have it be as enjoyable as this book is (in spite of the profound powerful vital seriousness of the subject).

The writing is breathtaking -- elegantly constructed. I found myself slowing down to savor sentences even as the story had me impatient to turn the next page.

Bohjalian paints a vivid picture of this complicated historical event --giving equal weight of substance, (beautiful narrative balance), and style (ie./love story).

The characters are each richly developed --creating powerful intimacy --

This is thoroughly an enjoyable unforgettable novel -- tender -sometimes brutal -'always' engaging!

"YOU PEOPLE"....."MY PEOPLE".... lol .... should read read this book!

I can't resist: (I'm not giving any plot away what-so-ever here) --but there is reference in the book "Alice in Wonderland" in "The Sandcastle Girls" (by Lewis Carroll).

A 'favorite' child's book in my house when my daughters were still kids: Often driving me crazy for months reciting the Jabberwacky poem...

but here is a quote I picked to share from "Alice in Wonderland", (during the Tea Party) -- [somehow I connect this with "The Sandcastle Girls"]

"Alice began to feel very uneasy: to be sure, she had not yet had any dispute with the Queen, but she knew that it might happen any minute, and then, thought she, what would become of me? They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here; the great wonder is, that there's any one left alive!"

Thank you, Chris, for writing a very rich FINE BOOK! (excellent)! Congrats to you!

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