

## Interview with Chris Bohjalian

By Deb Courtney

With 11 successful novels under his belt, several of which were bestsellers, Chris Bohjalian no longer wonders if he is a professional writer.

“I’ve been full-time, nothing but a novelist for 16 to 17 years,” he said in a recent phone interview. “But I didn’t know for sure I would be a professional writer until after my third novel was published and was in production to be a Hallmark movie.”

Indeed, having received more than 250 rejections before making his first sale, the articulate Vermont resident understands the persistence required to make the transition from writer to author.

“Plan A was not working, so I considered Plan B. Cosmo was still publishing fiction at that time. I gathered a lot of them and tried to understand what constituted Cosmo fiction—then wrote that.”

For Bohjalian, that Cosmo sale started him down the right track. His 11th novel, *Skeletons at the Feast*, is just out in paperback. Perhaps his best known work, *Midwives*, was an Oprah Book Club pick and a Hallmark movie starring Sissy Spacek.

Has being a novelist been a breeze since that third book? Not so much. Though his work has been translated into 25 languages, and sold more than 3.5 million copies worldwide, writing is still a job, like any other.

“I don’t have writers block,” he says. “Not because I’m so talented. Because I found long ago that if a scene isn’t working, it’s because I don’t know enough. So, I go speak with people, conduct whatever research is necessary.”

Bohjalian starts his workday at 5:30-6 a.m. He writes fiction until 10:30-11 a.m. “On good days I focus on the work,” he says. “No Facebook or e-mail.” From around 10:30-2 p.m. he conducts research—maybe lunch with a victim’s advocate, or lunch with an EMT, or simply reading secondary materials.

His writing day ends around 2:30-3 p.m., after which he goes to the gym or for a bike ride. In the evenings he catches up on e-mails, does interviews, and works on whatever digital marketing his books demand.

This scheduled approach works in part because his books have long lead-in periods, and typically are research-intensive.

“A book like *Midwives* gestated for six months before I wrote a single word—in that six months I did a lot of research. Interviewed moms and dads, midwives. Other books demand little before I start, but lots as the book moves along. An example would be *The Buffalo Soldier*. This is a ‘he said, she said’ story of loss and grief. As I was writing, it began to change a little, and I did more research into foster care and biracial adoptions.”

While his process has remained much the same over the course of his career, Bohjalian has seen a number of changes in the publishing industry. In 1988, when Bohjalian’s first novel was published, his publisher put together signings, a small tour, took out ads in targeted publications, and sent out books for review, hoping it was widely and well-reviewed.

“In this day and age newspapers have shrunk so dramatically and readership has shrunk horrifically,” he says. “You can’t count on a tour to be especially helpful. Publishers are really trying to figure out how to sell books online. What is the best way to

use the Internet? A lot of my time is spent online, publicizing my books.”

“Here’s the great gift of the digital age to the novelist: when I started 20 years ago, the author was a two-dimensional disembodied photo at the back of the book. Now, readers have the opportunity to connect with authors one-on-one on the Internet, and authors have the opportunity to connect with our readers in ways that were impossible 20 years ago.”

He notes having 1,500 “friends” on Facebook, of whom he might personally know 100.

“It’s one of the ways my life has changed. All of a sudden I am trying to become accessible to all these wonderful readers.”

However, he does not confuse being accessible to readers with celebrity of any sort.

“If Angelina [Jolie] walks into a library, the earth is going to tremble. If Margaret Atwood walks into the Cineplex, no one will notice. Novelists aren’t celebrities in the way we think of the term celebrity. There’s nothing especially glamorous about who we are or what we do.”

Writing for Bohjalian is far less about glamour and far more about hard work, and with no guaranteed results. “A book like *Skeletons* I knew right away the voice, but had no idea how it would end. The characters take me by the hand and lead me through the dark of the story.”

With this process comes a certain amount of false starts and dead ends. He has at least five manuscripts between 20 and 500 pages that exist only in that form in his archives, because he realized that each project was not a book that needed to be finished. He is comfortable letting go.

“Entrepreneurs talk with great eloquence about having to fish or cut bait on a project. If it isn’t working, let it go. Publishing a bad book does no one any good. Doesn’t benefit readers, and denigrates my legacy—whatever that is.”

While he is comfortable letting go of manuscripts, he is definitely interested in staying connected to his readers. You can find him on Facebook and MySpace and follow his exploits in small-town Vermont in his weekly column for the *Burlington Free Press* at [www.burlingtonfreepress.com/section/](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/section/)

### Sidebar

#### Facts About the Author

- Rejections before first sale: 250
- Title of an unsuccessful story: *The Corned Beef Who Talked to God*
- Favorite book not written by self: *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink
- Pizza Topping: onion and peppers
- Vacation spot: Motisi, Italy
- Preferred physical activity: biking

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