

## A 1960s celebrity safari gone awry

### "The Lioness"

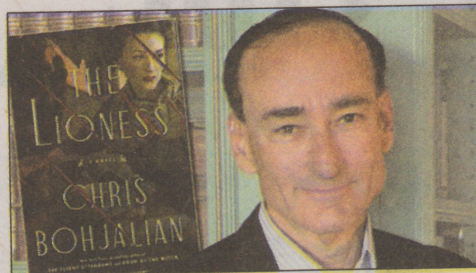
Chris Bohjalian, Doubleday, 2022

After years of disappointing gossip columnists by staying single, Katie Barstow, 1960s Hollywood's brightest movie star, marries David Hill, a Los Angeles gallerist. Such a great event, Katie decides, demands an exotic honeymoon: a photo safari in the Serengeti, where she, David, and seven other well-known Hollywood figures will gaze at wild animals by day, enjoy cold gin and tonics in late afternoons, and dine on roasted game at night before sleeping in tents made into "islands of civilization" by Tanzanian tour guides and porters.

The guests (all present at Katie's expense) include Katie's psychologist brother and his wife; Katie's best friend Carmen Tedesco and her screenwriter husband; Katie's publicist and her agent; and Terrance Dutton, the black actor who has starred opposite Katie in a recent movie. They are, according to the thrilled but absent press, "the lions of Hollywood." Katie herself is often styled "the lioness."

At breakfast on the second day of their tour, the Americans are in the midst of admiring the beauty of the giraffes before them. Suddenly, the animals look up, spook, and pace out of sight, frightened. Equally suddenly, a band of Russian-speaking white men storm up, shooting. The shocked Americans are herded into two different Land Rovers, their guards either shot outright or loaded into trucks.

From here, the story proceeds piecemeal, told from the points of view of each guest or guide in turn, in short chapters beginning with scenes of shootings at point-blank range, killings with bare hands, or jaguar and hyena attacks. Balancing the astonishingly vivid gore of these scenes are vignettes of the victims' previous lives. To an extent, the back-stories serve to create depth for characters who are initially indistinguishable: we find, for example, that Terrance Dutton has endured such racism that he won't even set foot in his native state of Tennessee, and that he and Katie, though deeply attached to each other, decided they



couldn't be lovers without jeopardizing their careers. We find that Carmen Tedesco's husband, alone of the male characters, is a coward, whereas Reggie Stout, Katie's publicist, is a war hero.

But even Bohjalian can't develop 10 characters in 300 pages, so he deftly uses the vignettes to drop hints about the reason for the abduction, thus creating intellectual suspense in a thriller that opens, "Oh, I can't speak for the dead. And I won't speak for the missing. ... Of course, I am also confident that the missing will never be found."

Only a writer of Bohjalian's expertise could dare to write a thriller whose opening pages suggest few of its characters survive. As he explains, he was inspired to try it by "the nexus of quality television and literary fiction." One can easily see the influence of this genre-crossing in his juxtaposition of short scenes and flashbacks, a technique that would be extraordinarily effective in a TV miniseries. (Apparently such a miniseries is already being considered.)

The adjectives "quality" and "literary" hint, accurately, that there is more to "The Lioness" than action: we hear of Lumumba and the Simba rebellion, of the damage the Cold War is doing to Africa, and of the racism that affected Hollywood in the era of Sidney Poitier. Throughout, the scenery of the Serengeti, which Bohjalian visited just before the pandemic, is stark and beautiful.

Whether Bohjalian's genre-crossing is successful in the long run is something readers must decide for themselves. The depth of betrayal and corruption is as depressing as following its slow revelation is challenging. And the violence makes the book an unwise choice for bedtime reading.



### One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

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