

Thriller portrays Vietnam legacy

**"The Red Lotus" by
Chris Bohjalian
Doubleday, 2019**

Austin and Alexis look like the perfect couple. Even the assonance of their names draws smiling attention. And they have a story: they met six months ago, when Alexis, an ER doctor, sutured the bullet holes in Austin's arm after he was shot by a crazy man in a bar. So when Austin takes Alexis to Vietnam on a bicycle tour, all the other people on the tour assume the two are about to marry. Then Austin insists on taking a long solo bike ride to the place where his uncle was killed and his father was wounded in the Vietnam War—and disappears. Aided by the tour guides, the local police and an FBI agent, Alexis begins her search. All they find is a package of energy gels that Austin always carried on bike rides ... but in the morning, the police find Austin's body. He

was apparently the victim of a hit-and-run crash with a truck on one of the switchbacks of a mountain road. End of sad story.

Except it isn't. Alexis returns to New York, grieves, thinks back, examines the picture she took of an odd injury she noticed when she identified Austin's corpse. When she meets his parents, she finds that the site he wanted to visit alone was many miles from the places his father and uncle served. Talking to a veterinarian friend, she finds that the little scars on his hands he said were cat bites were probably from a rodent. The more she investigates, the more she finds that Austin has lied to her again and again. As she struggles with her sense of betrayal and increasing suspi-

cions, other voices in the novel gradually inform the reader about genetic changes in rats that survived Agent Orange. It seems they carry certain viruses to which they are immune, but which are incurable in human beings. That means, among other things, that there



One-Minute Book Reviews

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are fortunes to be made by isolating these viruses and selling them to small countries that want powerful deterrents but can't afford nuclear warheads. The scientific research being done is, of course, a secret as dark as the black market with which it's connected. As Alexis' inquiries come nearer to the

truth, they put her in great danger.

Like Bohjalian's previous thrillers, this one is informed by excellent research. The

early chapters linger a little on the beauty of Vietnam and the fortitude with which its people have rebuilt a country torn by the horrors of bombing and biological warfare. The beauty and horrors come together in the term Red Lotus, which is both Vietnam's exquisite national flower and the code name the black market uses for its product. As always with Bohjalian's books, there are powerful, remorseless villains

who think nothing of ridding the world of people who stand in their way and care only for money and power. Such people are more than plot gimmicks. Behind their lack of feeling is Bohjalian's sorrow and guilt about the destruction of a war whose evils have lingered long after America's withdrawal.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels are set on Boyd Hill Road.



Chris Bohjalian

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