

## A Compassionate, Literary Airplane Thriller

Chris Bohjalian, *The Flight Attendant*. Doubleday, 2018.

Cassandra Bowen wakes slowly in a posh Dubai suite, hung-over, ashamed of her one-night stand, and puzzled that she is still in bed last night's lover. She thought she'd left. She *should* have left. She's a flight attendant, and at 11:15 she has to be back in her own hotel room and ready to be shuttled to the airport for the return flight with the rest of the crew. Miserably, she shrugs off her shame, sits up, and looks at Alex Sokolov, hedge fund manager, the passenger in 2C, the latest of many lovers who've liked her because she's a drunk and easy . . . . And his throat has been cut. Next to his side of the bed, there's a vodka bottle with a broken neck and a sharp edge. Did she murder him? She hopes not, but she's been blackout drunk so many times that she knows all about memory gaps. Terrified, she destroys what "evidence" she can as she hurries to her own hotel room. She changes into her uniform, and although she panics when her friend knocks on her door, and again as the airplane's takeoff is held up, she manages to keep up her professional standards on the flight, and hopes it's over. But of course it can't be. In Dubai, Alex's body is discovered, Cassie's presence in his room is established, and soon she is answering to the FBI. Even more alarmingly, she senses that she is being followed. As her life spins out of control, Cassie resorts to the conditioned subterfuge of functioning alcoholism, lying and making disastrous "investigations" that impede the efforts of her intelligent lawyer, Ani Mouradian.

As she stumbles from one error, one drink, and one lover to another, Cassie clings to her only clear memories about her night with Alex. First, he was kind to her, warmly sharing his love of Russian literature with her. Second, his colleague Miranda stopped by the room late at night to talk about the next day's meeting, bringing a bottle of vodka which the three of them shared. The memory is accurate – except the woman, neither named Miranda nor a colleague of Alex's, was a professional assassin working for Russian oligarchs. She is introduced to the reader in an early chapter, and her share of the narrative gives the book's title a double meaning: she becomes the chillingly professional attendant of Cassie's flight.

The dual point of view allows Bohjalian to keep up the plot's accelerating pace by switching perspectives, repeatedly withholding information that would allow readers to anticipate the book's direction. The climax of that technique comes in final pages that explode with a revelation that has been prepared but has almost certainly gone unnoticed. What stays with the reader after the book is closed, however, is Bohjalian's parallel portraiture of two very different women, each with painful memories of her father that has affected her life's choices, and each – again very differently – a victim of abuse from men in positions of power. Whether professionally dealing with thoughtless treatment from passengers, or capably serving remorseless men to whom "paranoia is a survival skill," Bohjalian's admirably portrayed flight attendants inhabit a literary world far above the patterns of commercial airplane reading.