EPISODE NAME: Vermont Author Chris Bohjalian discusses his new book: The Night Strangers

Today on Across the Fence just in time for Halloween is a dramatic ghost story from Vermont's best-selling author Chris Bohjalian. I'll talk with Chris about The Night Strangers, a novel connected to Lake Champlain and the airplane accident called miracle on the Hudson. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson. More than 20 years ago crisp and jelly and found something odd in his 19th century Victorian home in Lincoln. It was that of discovery that would form part of his new book the night strangers to unravel the mystery of what he found at home and how it connects to the book and I want to welcome Chris to the program. Thanks so much for being here always great to see you.

Chris.: It's great to see you two thanks for having me on.

Judy.: So what was the discovery in your home?

Chris.: There is a door in my family's basement in a dank dark corner. I thought it was a coal chute. I remember finding out three days after we moved into the house carrying a load of laundry down to the basement and I saw the door. So I put the load of laundry down when to open the door and discovered it was nailed shut. So I did the only sensible thing I did the laundry and vowed never to go into that corner of the basement again.

Judy.: Nailed shut for a reason probably.

Chris.: Probably. It would be three years before I would man up get the crowbar acts and pliers go back down to the basement and pulled the door open and behind it I found nothing. I know intellectually of course it was a coal
chute. Nevertheless behind that door I found an 18 inch deep compartment in the rear walls were sealed shut with thick wooden beams not plywood thick beams. So I mailed a door back in place ran upstairs and was happy to find the dining room walls were not bleeding but I knew that behind that door was a story and that door was an entry to a novel. It was only a matter of time.

Judy.: So fast for down to 2009 and something else happened that capture the imagination of the entire country.

Chris.: Absolutely right. January 15, 2009 I was in my library in link in writing in the afternoon when I saw on the computer there was a plane and down in the Hudson River. It was like millions of people around the world I raced upstairs to buy television set and I watched live on television the evacuation of flight 1549. Captain Chesley Sullenberger's miracle on the Hudson and it might even the shape of the over wing exit doors that I thought of another door to door two stories below me. The door in my basement and I was off and running on a novel that would become the night strangers.

Judy.: That was the start of your book. Did you know what was going to be included in the book? You knew that or you knew the plane but how are those two going to mesh in what was going to be the outcome?

Chris.: When I start a book I had absolutely no idea where it's going I depend completely on my characters to take me by the hand and lead me through the dark of the story.

Judy.: Really?

Chris.: All I knew was this: I wanted to do a story of a pilot who isn't Sully Sullenberger. It's a post Sullenberger world so we're all aware of flight 1549 and the miraculous bit of flying the captain Ellenberger accomplished. In my story it would be a pilot who lives off at of Burlington International Airport. Experiences of double bird strike just like Sullenberger as double engine failure and tested ditches jet and Lake Champlain.

But unlike Sully Sullenberger the low wingtips of is regional jet are caught in a wave from one of the ferries that are coming to the plane's rescue in the plane pitch polls or cartwheels and 3/4 pastures die on impact or drown but not my captain he lives. And that was the premise of the book what is it like to go through life in a post sully Sullenberger world if you're the pilot whose plane cartwheels. How you deal with the regret the remorse the sense of on believable failure and despair. That was going to be the book and all the ghosts
were going to be metaphoric. I was a third of the way and the manuscript and all the sudden is a metaphor ghost became literal ones.

Judy.: Which I think is one of the most interesting parts of the book because you see the story then from a whole different perspective.

Chris.: You do and that was one of the real difficulties of writing this book I don't normally right ghost stories.

Judy.: Right!

Chris.: I wanted the dead to be every bit is interesting and authentic and vibrant as a living how you create this back story for dead people?

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about the research you did. Let's first talk about how you got all the information and of planes water crashes because that is fascinating.

Chris.: I began by interviewing pilots. I interviewed wonderful wonderful pilots right here in Vermont such is john Weber who flies for delta Carolyn wood a neighbor of mine in Lincoln who flies for Aero Wisconsin and regional jets. To understand what are their lives like as pilots at 35,000 feet and then back on the ground. One of the things that no one could tell me was this. What is it like to be in a plane that's upside down in the water capsized starting to sink. There are not a lot of people you can talk to about that. I remember that great 1982 movie an officer and a gentleman with Richard here in the dunk tank so I needed to go with a dunk tank. I went to survival systems and I spent a day understanding why air crafts crash and getting wet. All together I was dunked in the simulator four times and the simulator comes so far since an officer and gentlemen. Instead of an egg that rolls into a swimming pool imagine a 40 foot cutaway of an airplane fuselage that dangles above a 100,000 gallon tank of water and can be configured for 56 different aircraft. For my scenario they can forget it for regional jets the kind that lives off out of Burlington International Airport put me in the flight deck as if I was my fictional captain and dropped it into the tank rolled it 180°so I was upside down and in the most complicated scenario I had 28 seconds to get away from the yoke the 5 point shoulder harness open the flight deck door upside down swim into the passenger cabin find the front exit door open it and swim to the surface. Most fun I've ever had not at the Champlain valley fair.

Judy.: Fun you say? I would've been frightened.
Chris.: It's terrifying absolutely terrifying and there so many things you do not
expect whether it's this new falls of water the burning water up your nose in
your throat or the sense of disorientation. The fact that everything is different
because you're upside down. The doors that in theory open this way open this
way. Even the 5 point shoulder harness. They warned me they said when you
spin the harness the first time you're not going to spin it 360° because you're
going to be scared and you're going to be upside down and you're going to have
one of your belts still trapping you into the seat. Don't panic they said just spin
it again. Sure enough I spotted the first time I felt trapped and realized we
don't panic just spinning it again.

Judy.: So we should mention there's a lot of safety issues involved with you
doing this. There were divers in the tank and they would not let anything
happen to you.

Chris.: There's no way I would've done this if there was any risk at all. They
were so clear that first of all there was always a scuba diver in the tank
watching me. I was there that day with three National Guard aviators so
therefore divers in the tank one for each of us. Secondly if I completely
panicked and even a scuba diver couldn't get me out they were just left the
simulator at of the tank and the water would instantly drain.

Judy.: These are some of the details you used in the book to describe what
happens when a plane goes down. What are some of the other tapes so that you
found out from people who fly to be safe on a plane or give you a better chance
of escaping should the worst happen.

Chris.: Here are three rules that they taught me that no flight attendant had
ever told me. First of all rule number one is this if you ever told to brace for
impact of course you'll be an obedient passenger you will curl your hands over
your head for a look into a ball and you'll be friggin terrified and the result is
that your feet will be on your seat because you'll be in this fetal position egg.
That's bad because when your plane hits the ground your seas going to break
and is going to collapse onto your ankles breaking the bones. The plan will
come to a stop and you realize my gosh would of should of could of. So rule
number one is you put your knees at a 90° angle and your feet flat on the floor
between your seats so when the plane hits the ground your seat breaks your
bones don't. Rule number two is this the rule of five. We all assume that
airplane accidents are 100% fatal they're not. 92% of the accidents the NTS
investigate have survivors. One of the ways you can increase your chances of
being among those survivors is being within five rows of an exit. Why five
rows? Because when your plane comes to a stop it's going to be a rugby scrum
in front of those doors and windows and the closer you are you better chances of getting out. And rule number three is this when your flight attendant holds up the emergency information card and says in the event of a loss of electricity bloom and 80 green lighting will be due to the nearest exit. Bear in mind it probably won't if you're ever in a situation where you need the illuminating green lighting its bedlam. The cabin might be filled with smoke everyone's laptops Carry-ons and books were all over those green lights so you will want to know your physical cues notably headrests. Counts the headrests to the nearest door say you know I'm six headrests from the exit. You can find them in the dark and in the smoke.

Judy.: Let's move on to other aspects that are in the book?

Chris.: I can't wait to get on a plane.

Judy.: Yeah really. So tell me a little bit about the aspect of the other women who are in this story. Witches herbalists naturalists I don't know what you want to call them but that's the whole mother part of the book something else you had to learn about.

Chris.: I did. When I started this book I dropped my pilot and his wife and their twin girls into a creepy Northern New England fictional village. It is creepy and there seems to be all these women who are strangely helpful.

Judy.: O in by the way there is a door in the house in the basement.

Chris.: Precisely like my door. To understand who these women would turn out to be I spent a lot of time with shamans. Understanding their culture what they bring to the party and they were wonderful absolutely delightful and I feel a little guilty that in the book they are so friggin scary and dangerous.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about that too because basically they're interested in the twins and tell us a little bit about why.

Chris.: My pilot and his wife have twin daughters and their 10. One of the things we love about ghost stories. The thing that gets adrenaline going and endorphins going is that our characters are in jeopardy. We as readers know more always then the characters. In this case we suspect pretty early on that all the women in this community are interested in the Twins' not simply because they want to teach them about herbs and spices and strange interesting tropical plants they grow in their green houses. That's part of the
fun of the book as parents worrying about these children who clearly are in increasing amounts jeopardy.

Judy.: It's interesting too because the parents are very preoccupied with what else is going on with the pilot which is post-traumatic stress and what he's dealing with being haunted by these ghosts from the flight.

Chris.: You're absolutely right. Emily the pilot's wife is so worried about Chip her husband this guy who used to have the right stuff. Now he's a shell. He sleepwalking through life he has issues going on that could you go only could begin to understand involving the demons that are dogging him. She's not an absentee mother by any stretch in fact she's so focused on are has been that she's not paying enough attention to her girls and she's not paying enough attention to all of these neighbors who are so interested in her girls. I think that's part of the fun of the book too you're constantly wanting to say to Emily wake up lookout for the girls.

Judy.: This isn't normal. So let's talk a little bit as the story progress is and we come or the end of the book we find out the reason why they're so interested in these girls is because they need them. Specifically one and they need her blood.

Chris.: They do.

Judy.: For a very creepy ceremony and might say.

Chris.: Thank you I'm glad. Ceremonies like that don't normally figure in my fiction.

Judy.: Right it was very unusual but it all fit.

Chris.: And again I had a great time learning about all these interesting rituals from shamans. Especially how do you remove the dead spirit from a living human being.

Judy.: That was fascinating because I had never thought of that.

Chris.: It was fascinating to me to and I was chatting with these individuals who have done what they call white table work. I had a delightful time with them and I must confess I had a delightful time writing this book whether it was the terrifying plane crash scenes or the nightmares that dogged the pilot. Which our nightmares that I had when I was writing this book because I was so focused on air crashes or the time I spent shamans understanding the undead.
Judy.: Right and the whole point they were trying to get these ghosts the undead to leave the pilot and go to where they need to be so that he could go on to his life without them haunting him.

Chris.: Yeah.

Judy.: Part is ceremony which I loved was that they needed some blood and I dog eared this because I thought it was pretty funny. The women were talking and she said. That you're a New Englander you're supposed to be frugal you're wasting the blood which just made me roar.

Chris.: Thank you; that and there are couple of lines like that in the book that were great fun to write as a New Englander. A pinch of rosemary makes everything better.

Judy.: What is your next project that you're working on do have something that you're working on?

Chris.: I do hopefully we will be chatting a year from now about a book called the sand castle girls. Which is a big sweeping historical epic like skeletons at the feast set in 1915 in Turkey Armenia and Syria about the Armenian genocide and a girl from Boston 22 who follows her father into this cauldron. It is inspired in part by the deaths of my Armenian great grandparents who died in the Armenian genocide.

Judy.: Oh my goodness. To learn more about Chris and all of his books you can go to lose website Chris Bohjalian.com you can order books to the site learn about the groups or find out about Chris’s upcoming book signings. I want to thank you so much for joining me today.

Chris.: It's always a pleasure to see you Judy thanks.

Judy.: That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on across the fence.

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