

Book

Pharma in the jungle

How to make pharmaceutical R&D worthy of James Bond-like drama? It's not easy, but Ann Patchett gamely tries. An American drug company based in the dull stretches of Minnesota is racing to develop the holy grail of fertility drugs—a simple pill to allow women to get pregnant at any age. The stockholders are rubbing their palms rapaciously at the mere thought.

Deep in the far reaches of the Amazon rainforest along the banks of the Rio Negro, the Lakashi tribe have been living quietly, procreating without fanfare well into their eighth decade. An elusive but brilliant scientist, Dr Annick Swenson, has discovered that these women gnaw on the bark of a rare tree deep in the jungle, and that the bark imparts fertile longevity that would make an IVF clinic blush.

However, Dr Swenson has been taking her own sweet time on the research and the pharmaceutical company is growing impatient—especially as she has eschewed all forms of contact. They don't even know exactly where she is. So the company sends a fellow scientist, Anders Eckman, to track her down and report on the state of drug development. Unfortunately, native Minnesotans don't do well in the Amazon, and within weeks Eckman is dead of a febrile illness.

Thus his lab partner—our heroine—is dispatched to uncover the details of his death. Marina Singh is a loner pharmacologist, having quit her obstetrics-gynaecology residency at Johns Hopkins after a horrendous medical error, oddly enough under the auspices of the imperious department chair, none other than Dr Annick Swenson. As is often the case, the senior physician abandoned the junior physician in the face of medicolegal calamity, and we know who was left to face the flames.

Marina suffers the various insults of the tropics during her hunt for the elusive Dr Swenson—flotillas of insects, lost luggage, venomous snakes, psychogenic side-effects of antimalarials, intermittent fevers, generalised disorientation. Despite carefully crafted prose, none of these misadventures have the sizzle of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which is manifestly beating in the background of Patchett's novel.

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The pharmacological drama—and, dear medical reader, you would be forgiven for thinking that this phrase is an oxymoron—is that the bark of the magical tree turns out to confer immunity to malaria, in addition to fertile longevity. The scientists realise that the drug company would quickly pull the financial plug when it becomes apparent that the goal of the scientists is to help the world's poor fight mosquito-borne parasites, rather than help wealthy western women achieve pregnancy in their sixth and seventh decades. The industry wants a block-bluster fertility drug, not a pennies-per-pill malaria vaccine. Hence the secrecy of Dr Swenson, and her refusal to update the drug company and its anxious stockholders on her progress.

Somehow, the frissons of Big Pharma and the tenacious scientist bucking the system for malaria over infertility just doesn't have the scintillations of a good, old-fashioned Cold War thriller. (The CEO of the drug company—when he

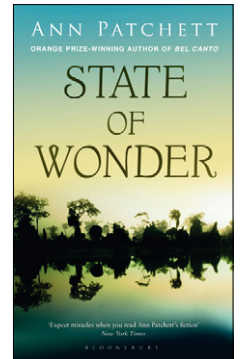
does make an appearance—lacks the cloak-and-dagger bite of a Kremlin operative, even if he is having a covert affair with the mid-level researcher who is our heroine.)

Of course, Marina Singh and her former mentor Dr Swenson have a past to work out, but even this human element doesn't offer much resonance. Practising physicians who have experienced medical error and the devastating, lasting emotional ramifications, will find that this portrayal does not come close to the real McCoy. Adding novelistic drama to a medical error is wholly unnecessary, since real errors tend to be sufficiently dramatic—at least to the involved parties—on their own. The fact that the good Dr Swenson has been nibbling the ambrosial bark herself and has managed to become pregnant—and pre-eclamptic—at the age of 72 years, and that her former underling who quit midway through training is the only available MD to perform the emergency C-section in the teeming Amazonian jungle—is not how most medical errors get worked out.

State of Wonder is well written, and the author is talented—her novels have garnered critical acclaim, including *Bel Canto* which won the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2002. But for high drama, pharmaceuticals and their vicissitudes don't quite cut it, even if you stick them in the loneliest outpost of the Amazon. Maybe next time we ought to try a sci-fi show-down between drug companies and insurance companies. Now that would be an Armageddon worth watching.

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