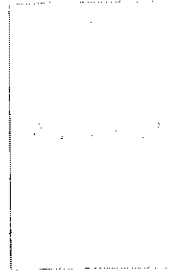




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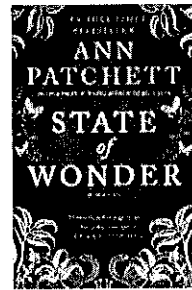
About This Book
Discussion Questions
Author Biography

State of Wonder
by Ann Patchett

List Price: \$15.99
Pages: 384
Format: Paperback
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Publisher: Harper Perennial



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About This Book

Ann Patchett has dazzled readers with her award-winning books, including **The Magician's Assistant** and the *New York Times* bestselling **Bel Canto**. Now she raises the bar with **State of Wonder**, a provocative and ambitious novel set deep in the Amazon jungle.

Dr. Marina Singh, a research scientist with a Minnesota pharmaceutical company, is sent to Brazil to track down her former mentor, Dr. Annick Swenson, who seems to have all but disappeared in the Amazon while working on what is destined to be an extremely valuable new drug, the development of which has already cost the company a fortune. Nothing about Marina's assignment is easy: not only does no one know where Dr. Swenson is, but the last person who was sent to find her, Marina's research partner Anders Eckman, died before he could complete his mission. Plagued by trepidation, Marina embarks on an odyssey into the insect-infested jungle in hopes of finding her former mentor as well as answers to several troubling questions about her friend's death, the state of her company's future, and her own past.

Once found, Dr. Swenson, now in her seventies, is as ruthless and uncompromising as she ever was back in the days of Grand Rounds at Johns

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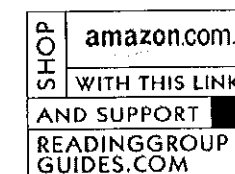
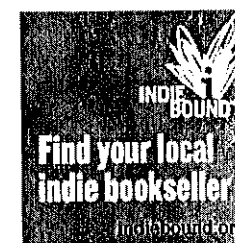
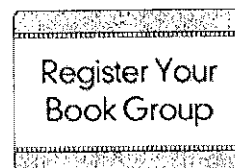
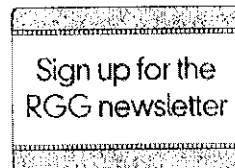
Hopkins. With a combination of science and subterfuge, she dominates her research team and the natives she is studying with the force of an imperial ruler. But while she is as threatening as anything the jungle has to offer, the greatest sacrifices to be made are the ones Dr. Swenson asks of herself, and will ultimately ask of Marina, who finds she may still be unable to live up to her teacher's expectations.

In a narrative replete with poison arrows, devouring snakes, and a neighboring tribe of cannibals, **State of Wonder** is a world unto itself, where unlikely beauty stands beside unimaginable loss. It is a tale that leads the reader into the very heart of darkness, and then shows us what lies on the other side.

[top of the page](#)

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe Marina Singh? How has the past shaped her character? Discuss the anxieties that are manifested in her dreams.
2. "Marina was from Minnesota. No one ever believed that. At the point when she could have taken a job anywhere she came back because she loved it here. This landscape was the one she understood, all prairie and sky." What does this description say about the character?
3. Talk about Marina's relationship with her boss, Mr. Fox. Would you call what they share love? Do they have a future? Why does he want Marina to go to the Amazon? What propels her to agree?
4. What drew Marina to her old mentor, Annik Swenson? Compare and contrast the two women. How does Annik see Marina? Barbara Bovender, one of Annik's caretakers/gatekeepers tells Marina, "She's such a force of nature. . . . a woman completely fearless, someone who sees the world without limitations." Is this a fair assessment of Annik? How would you describe her? How has the elderly doctor's past shaped the person she is and the choices she has made?
5. Describe the arc of Marina and Annik's relationship from the novel's beginning to its end. Do you like these women? Did your opinion of them change as the story unfolded? Why didn't Marina ever tell anyone the full story of her early experience with Annik?
6. Consider Annik's research in the Amazon. Should women of any age be able to have children? What are the benefits and the downsides? Why does this ability seem to work in the Lakashi culture? What impact does this research ultimately have on Marina? Whether you are a man or woman, would you want to have a child in your fifties or sixties? How far should modern science go to "improve" on nature?
7. In talking about her experiences with the indigenous people, Annik explains, "the question is whether or not you choose to disturb the world around you; or if you choose to go on as if you had never arrived." How does Marina respond to this? Did Annik practice what she preached? How do these women's early choices impact later events and decisions? How does Annik's statement extend beyond the Amazon to the wider world? Would you rather make a "disturbance" in life, or go along quietly?
8. Talk about the Lakashi people and the researchers. How do they get along? Though the scientists try not to interfere with the natives' way of life, how does their being there impact the Lakashi? What influence do the Lakashi have on the scientists?
9. Would you be able to live in the jungle as the researchers and natives do?



Is there an appeal to going back to nature; from being removed from the western constraints of time and our modern technological society?

10. What role does nature and the natural world—the jungle, the Amazon River—play in Marina’s story? How does the environment influence the characters—Marina, Annik, Milton, Anders, Easter, and the others? Annik warns Marina, “It’s difficult to trust yourself in the jungle. Some people gain their bearings over time but for others that adjustment never comes.” Did Marina ultimately “gain her bearings”?

11. Marina travels into hell, into her own Conradian “heart of darkness.” What keeps her in the jungle longer than she’d ever thought she’d stay? How does this journey transform her and her view of herself and the world? Will she ever return—and does she need to?

12. What is your opinion of the choices Marina made regarding Easter? What role did the boy play in the story? Do you think Marina will ever have the child—one like Easter—that she wants?

13. What do you think happens to Marina after she returns home?

14. State of Wonder is rich in symbolism. Identify a few --- for example, Eden Prairie (Marina’s Minnesota home), Easter (the young deaf native boy), Milton (the Brazilian guide) --- and talk about how Ann Patchett uses them to deepen the story.

15. State of Wonder raises questions of morality and principle, civilization, culture, love, and science. Choose a few events from the book to explore some of these themes.

16. What is the significance of the novel’s title, State of Wonder?

[top of the page](#)

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The Chronicle

Q&A with Ann Patchett

By Danielle Muoio | August 27, 2012

Ann Patchett is a renowned novelist—a recipient of the Orange Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award for her novel “Bel Canto.” This summer, the Class of 2016 read her book “State of Wonder” as their summer reading assignment. State of Wonder follows the life of Marina, a 42-year-old pharmacologist whose profession leads her to the Brazilian jungle. Outside of civilization, Marina tries to overcome mistakes in her past and forms a close bond with her mentor, Dr. Swenson.

Patchett spoke with the freshmen class Aug. 24 about her process as a writer and the inspiration behind the book. The Chronicle’s Danielle Muoio talked with Patchett after the event about the various themes in “State of Wonder,” the ethical questions it raises and how the plot is relevant to a Duke student.

The Chronicle: What was the main idea that caused you to write “State of Wonder”?

Ann Patchett: The idea of wanting to write about strong women characters and also wanting to write about a teacher and student grown up, [who] find each other again. I think those were the two main impetuses for the book.

TC: Marina is both a strong woman and haunted by demons from her past. Can you talk a bit about her character development?

AP: There are certain things I want people to think about, like the idea of loss and the idea of finding out who we are. We all, as we get older, decide who we are... [and] we build all of these walls both to protect ourselves and also to establish ourselves. It’s interesting to me to think about those walls getting knocked down and finding out who the person really is underneath them.

TC: You discussed how a lot of the book reviews painted Dr. Swenson as a villainess, which you personally did not intend. What is your perception on how your strongest female character got an interpretation that was different from what you imagined?

AP: I don’t have much of a reaction to reviews in general because so often they seem wrong and the good ones seem just as wrong as the bad ones. Everyone will say, “Weren’t you thrilled with that review,” and I’ll say “Oh they got it all wrong.” So to me it’s just interesting how people interpret the book and what people find. If someone thinks Dr. Swenson is a hero or a villain, it says more about them than about me.

What’s interesting about the way I work is that I detach from my books when I finish them and I don’t care.... My heart is completely on to the next thing. Someone will come up to me and talk about a book they read 20 years ago and I’m like, “I don’t even remember.” I’ve never read them again and I really break from the book. It’s good, because people ask me things and I think, “Oh, that’s interesting, that’s a good opinion to have.” But it doesn’t excite me or hurt me one way or another.

TC: It just seems strange that a character that was intended to show strength was interpreted in such a different way.

AP: It’s sort of like in the movies, how when an actress gets to be a certain age and she suddenly becomes a villain, [such as] Julia Roberts playing the evil stepmother instead of Snow White. It’s like once you get to a certain age you can’t be the hero anymore. So it’s not just that Dr. Swenson is powerful, it’s also that she’s older.

TC: How do you think the mentor-mentee relationship in the book fits in with the fact that this was a college summer reading book?

AP: I’m sure at a place like Duke absolutely everyone is going to find the teacher that really speaks to them and you think, “That’s the person I really want to be.” We just shape ourselves and a lot of that is through teachers that we admire, especially if our pursuits in life are intellectual. If instead of going to college you joined a gang, it might be the gang leader that you’d want to shape yourself around. Or if you were in prison and you got out, perhaps it would be your parole officer. We all have archetypal heroes in our life that we either try to be like or not be like and that’s how we figure out who we are.

TC: Is there anything else college students could take from this book and apply throughout their college experience?

AP: Marina going so far outside her comfort zone is a little bit like going to college—you’re packing off and leaving your family and going into this world

where you don't know people, don't know the customs and have to share a room with a stranger. All of these things really shake you up and help you figure out who you are and what you want... Those jarring experiences are often the things that make us grow. It really is applicable to going off to your first year of college.

TC: You mentioned that the fertility drug wasn't the main point of the story, but were you trying to raise any ethical questions with that plot line?

AP: It seems like a good idea that people could keep having babies when they wanted them, but at some point it becomes ridiculous. It's not up to me to say at what point it becomes ridiculous, but it's worth thinking about. We don't get to stay 20 forever... We shouldn't get to just have all of our options open forever.

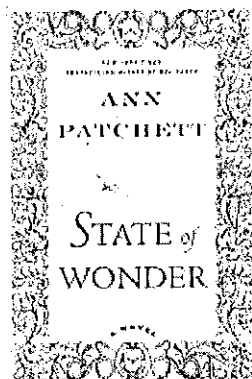
I'm not saying what's right and wrong, but I'm saying that this is worth talking and thinking about. It's fun for me to put those issues into a book—someone said to me once, "You've purposely muddied the ethical waters," and I thought, "Well aren't the ethical waters by their very nature muddied?" If they were always clear there wouldn't be an ethical problem because we would always know. These are the things we need to figure out.

TC: It seems like "State of Wonder" raises a lot of ethical dilemmas. Is this something you strive to do in all of your work?

AP: I throw a lot of things into the pot and I get very different people in very different settings. But the weird thing is all of my books have the same exact basic theme, which is that a group of strangers are thrown together by circumstance and form a society or family—it's like "Lord of the Flies." Even if I think I'm not doing it I say, "Wow, look I've done it again." I've taken a bunch of people who don't know each other, stuck them in an isolated environment and then made them figure it out.

TC: Is there anything else you're currently working on or thinking of working on?

AP: I finished a book just last week. It's non-fiction and called "This is a Story of a Happy Marriage." It's very personal and it felt very risky and I had a really good time with it. There's a huge difference between me writing fiction and nonfiction—nonfiction is a lot easier and more fun and fiction is a lot more challenging. I enjoyed working on this and I'm going to miss it. I never miss the novels, but with the nonfiction I always think, "Oh, that was fun."



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Years ago, Marina Singh traded the hard decisions and intensity of medical practice for the quieter world of research at a pharmaceutical company, a choice that has haunted her life. Enveloping herself in safety, limiting emotional risk, she shares a quiet intimacy with her widowed older boss, Mr. Fox, and a warm friendship with her colleague Anders Eckman. But Marina's security is shaken when she learns that Anders, sent to the Amazon to check on a field team, is dead—and Mr. Fox wants her to go into the jungle to discover what happened.

Plagued by trepidation, yet propelled by her sense of duty, Marina embarks on an odyssey into the unknown, down into the Amazonian delta, deep into the dense, insect-infested jungle to find answers from the company's research team. Led by the formidable Dr. Annick Swenson, the scientists are looking into the development of a new drug that could have a profound impact on Western society. But the team has been silent for two years and the daunting Dr. Swenson does not like interlopers inserting themselves in her work, as Marina well knows. The eminent and fiercely uncompromising doctor was once her mentor, the woman she admired, emulated, and feared. To fulfill her mission, Marina must confront the ghosts of her past, as well as unfulfilled dreams and expectations—a journey that will force her to make painful moral choices and take her deep into her own heart of darkness.

A rich narrative dense with atmosphere and full of deeply realized characters, packed with amazing twists and surprises-encounters with an anaconda, cannibals, death, and birth-*State of Wonder* is Ann Patchett's most enthralling and confident novel, a tale that will leave readers in their own state of wonder, examining their own values and beliefs.

Early reviews for *State of Wonder*

"A spellbinder from bestselling author Patchett...Thrilling, disturbing and moving in equal measures - even better than Patchett's breakthrough *Bel Canto* (2001)."
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Patchett is a master storyteller who has an entertaining habit of dropping ordinary people into extraordinary and exotic circumstances to see what they're made of. [An] expansive page-turner...Patchett's fluid prose dissolves in the suspense of this out-there adventure...that readers will hate to see end."
— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"A superbly rendered novel...Patchett's portrayal is as wonderful as it is frightening and foreign. Patchett exhibits an extraordinary ability to bring the horrors and the wonders of the Amazon jungle to life, and her singular characters are wonderfully drawn...Powerful and captivating."
— *Library Journal* (starred review)

"In fluid and remarkably atmospheric prose, Patchett captures not only the sights and sounds of the chaotic jungle environment but also the struggles and sacrifice of dedicated scientists."
— *Booklist*

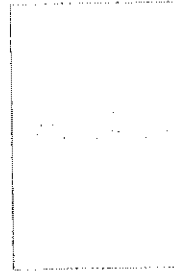
SUMMARY

In a narrative replete with poison arrows, devouring snakes, scientific miracles, and spiritual transformations, *State of Wonder* presents a world of stunning surprise and danger, rich in emotional resonance and moral complexity.

As Dr. Marina Singh embarks upon an uncertain odyssey into the insect-infested Amazon, she will be forced to surrender herself to the lush but forbidding world that awaits within the jungle. Charged with finding her former mentor Dr. Annick Swenson, a researcher who has disappeared while working on a valuable new drug, she will have to confront her own memories of tragedy and sacrifice as she journeys into the unforgiving heart of darkness. Stirring and luminous, *State of Wonder* is a world unto itself, where unlikely beauty stands beside unimaginable loss beneath the rainforest's jeweled canopy.

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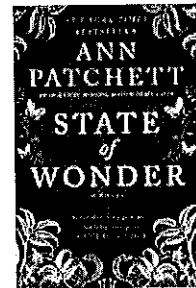
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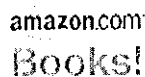
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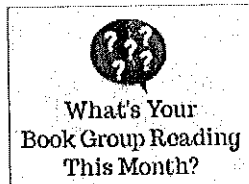
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Author Biography

Ann Patchett was born in Los Angeles in 1963 and raised in Nashville. She attended Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. In 1990, she won a residential fellowship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she wrote her first novel, **The Patron Saint of Liars**. It was named a *New York Times* Notable Book for 1992. In 1993, she received a Bunting Fellowship from the Mary Ingrahm Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College. Patchett's second novel, **Taft**, was awarded the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for the best work of fiction in 1994. Her third novel, **The Magician's Assistant**, was short-listed for England's Orange Prize and earned her a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her next novel, **Bel Canto**, won both the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize in 2002, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was named the Book Sense Book of the Year. It sold more than a million copies in the United States and has been translated into thirty languages. In 2004, Patchett published **Truth & Beauty**, a memoir of her friendship with the writer Lucy Grealy.



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Ann Patchett is the author of five novels: the *New York Times* bestselling *Run*; *The Patron Saint of Liars*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year; *Taft*, which won the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize; *The Magician's Assistant*; and *Bel Canto*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Orange Prize, the BookSense Book of the Year, and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is also the author of two works of nonfiction: the *New York Times* bestselling *Truth & Beauty* and *What Now?* Patchett has written for many publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Gourmet*, the *New York Times*, *Vogue*, and the *Washington Post*. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

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