



State of Wonder

By Ann Patchett

2011

Genre & subject

Jungles

Scientists

Medicine

Adventure fiction

Synopsis

A researcher at a pharmaceutical company, Marina Singh journeys into the heart of the Amazonian delta to check on a field team that has been silent for two years--a dangerous assignment that forces Marina to confront the ghosts of her past.

Author biography

Patchett was born in Los Angeles, California,^{[8][9]} to Frank Patchett, a Los Angeles police captain, and Jeanne Ray, a nurse who later became a novelist. She is the younger of two daughters. Frank and Jeanne divorced when she was young, and her mother remarried, moving the family to Nashville, Tennessee when Patchett was six years old.^[10]

Patchett attended St. Bernard Academy, a private Catholic school for girls in Nashville, Tennessee run by the Sisters of Mercy.^{[3][4][8]} Following graduation, she attended Sarah Lawrence College.^[11] She later attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts,^[3] where she wrote her first novel *The Patron Saint of Liars*.^{[3][9]}

She received the 2002 PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction in the same year, for her novel *Bel Canto*.^{[1][2]}

In 2010, she co-founded the bookstore Parnassus Books with Karen Hayes and it opened in November 2011.^[12] In 2016, Parnassus Books expanded, adding a bookmobile to piggyback on the success of food trucks and expand the reach of the bookstore in Nashville.^[13] In 2012, Patchett was on the Time 100 list of most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine.^[14]

Patchett's other novels include *The Patron Saint of Liars* (1992),^[3] *Taft* (1994),^[4] *The Magician's Assistant* (1997), *Run* (2007),^[5] *State of Wonder* (2011), *Commonwealth* (2016), and *The Dutch House* (2019).^[6] *The Dutch House* was a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.^[7]

Discussion starters

1. How would you describe Marina Singh? How has the past shaped her character? Discuss the anxieties that are manifested in her dreams.

2. What drew Marina to her old mentor, Annik Swenson? Compare and contrast the two women. How does Annick 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?
3. 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 Annick?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. What do you think happens to Marina after she returns home?
11. What is the significance of the novel’s title, State of Wonder?

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