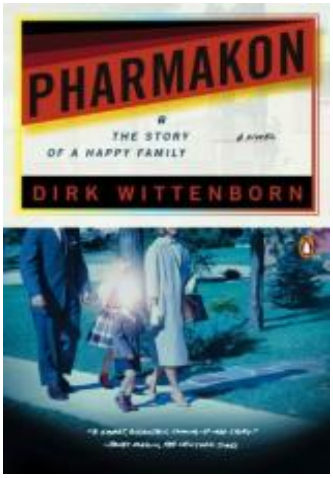
Pharmakon (or The Story of a Happy Family)

by Dirk Wittenborn



About the Book

As a writer, Zach Friedrich is aware that the story of his own life --- like that of every man --- truly begins with his father. The protagonist of Dirk Wittenborn?s **Pharmakon** is just four years old when he spies something odd in a family photo album and realizes that the facts of his existence are more complicated than he thought. But only when he?s an adult does Zach appreciate the full irony of how deeply his family?s history is intertwined with the birth and rise of modern psychopharmacology.

Zach opens the narrative three years before his own birth when his father, Will Friedrich, is ?a thirty-three-year-old untenured, overworked, hollow-eyed ambitious associate professor of psychology at Yale with a wife, four children, a mortgage, and eighty-seven dollars in his bank account.? He will go on to achieve both wealth and fame but in 1951, Will is still desperate to prove himself and blissfully unaware of how his ambitions will soon result in two deaths and nearly destroy his family.

At that time, Yale is ?the Promised Land for psychologists? and Will is fortunate that an early success had gotten him there --- but his career is stalled and he can?t even afford decent Christmas presents for his kids. As he sits nursing bitterness and beers in the faculty club, Will stumbles upon the opportunity he?s been waiting for.

Psychiatrist Bunny Winton is beautiful, wealthy, and the only female faculty member at Yale medical school in 1951. While stationed in the New Guinea during World War II, she learned about an indigenous plant with curious properties. The local headhunters? shaman would use kwina (AKA *gai kau dong*, GKD, or The Way Home) to soothe away bad memories and help the tribe deal with the tragedies of life. Desperate to help a soldier so traumatized by the savagery of his wartime captivity that he attempts suicide, she prescribes this primitive antidepressant. It seems to work --- but the soldier is killed in battle before she has a chance to see if there are any long-term side effects. Winton has left *gai kau dong* behind --- until Will overhears her reminiscences and shows up at her door with two satchels full of kwina leaves and a proposition she can?t refuse.

The two begin testing GKD first on rats and then on humans and the results are impressive. One subject overcomes his fear of heights and becomes a pilot, another becomes less angry and stops hitting her child, but Casper Gedsic --- a lonely, suicidal freshman --- undergoes an even more stunning transformation.

When Will first meets Casper, he is impressed by both the scholarship student?s obvious genius and his debilitating awkwardness. It is, in fact, pity that prompts Will to include Casper as a subject despite Winton?s objections. Yet Will is unsettled by Casper?s metamorphoses into a glib, confident young man. He suspects he may simply be envious of Casper?s sudden sexual and financial success but Will is a man who?s based a career on his unerring instincts and, when the experiment is over, Casper, Will, and everyone in their orbit --- including the yet-to-be-born Zach --- will feel the repercussions of their emotional tampering for the rest of their lives.

From the prim and proper 1950s through the strung out hippie era and the amped-up 80s, Wittenborn takes us on one family?s journey through personal upheaval and a nation?s unruly relationship with drugs --- both pharmacological and recreational. Brilliantly imagined and ruefully funny, **Pharmakon** is a classic American epic about family, ambition, and the price we are willing to pay for happiness.

Discussion Guide

1. Based on the results of his and Winton?s experiment, did Friedrich have a moral imperative to pursue the development of GKD?

2. What obligation, if any, do you believe the conductors of experiments like Will and Bunny?s owe to their test subjects? Do you know the guidelines for testing the psychoactive drugs so widely prescribed today?

3. How might the events of the novel be altered if Will knew that Bunny had dosed him with GKD at the conclusion of their testing on rats?

4. What do the parrots as a group --- and Gray in particular --- represent in the novel?

5. Besides Casper, are there any other characters for whom something could be said to serve as both their ?cure and the poison??

6. Why do you think Casper chose not to drown Zach? Was that his initial intention when he escaped? Do you believe he killed Jack?

7. Have you, like teenage Zach, ever wondered if you were crazy? Do you think it?s more ?normal? to wonder if you?re crazy or to be certain that you?re sane?

8. Zach takes up fly-fishing because, he claims, it was ?the only part of my father?s life my mother did not feel the need to share? (p. 259). Would the Friedrichs have made better parents if they had been less happy as a couple?

9. Did Casper ultimately attain his desired revenge on Friedrich? Do you think that such a desire, on Casper?s part, is morally justifiable?

10. Are today?s psychopharmaceuticals a poison or a cure?

11. What is it about Will that makes him a successful psychologist and a disappointing father?

12. How did you read the meaning of the last line of the novel?

Author Bio

Dirk Wittenborn is a novelist and screenwriter whose books have been published in more than a dozen countries. He is the Emmy-nominated producer of the HBO documentary *Born Rich* and the coauthor and coproducer of *The Lucky Ones* , a feature film about American soldiers returning from Iraq. He lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"In **Pharmakon**, Dirk Wittenborn has given us a haunting illustration of the Tolstoyan maxim that every unhappy family is unique in its unhappiness, though in fact no one who has ever been part of a family can fail to feel pangs of recognition as they follow the saga of the Friedrich family across three tumultuous generations. **Pharmakon** is an ambitious and memorable novel."

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