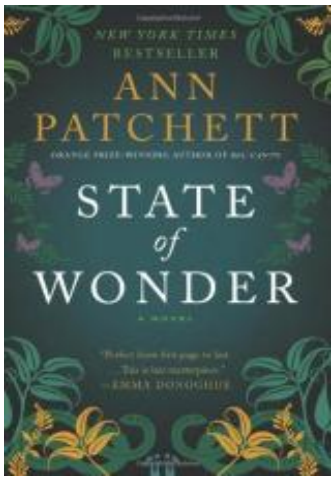
State of Wonder

by Ann Patchett



About the 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 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.

Discussion Guide

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 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?

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 Annick?

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?

Author Bio

Ann Patchett is the author of novels, works of nonfiction and children's books. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the PEN/Faulkner, the Women's Prize in the UK, and the Book Sense Book of the Year. Her novel, THE DUTCH HOUSE, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her work has been translated into more than 30 languages, and *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. President Biden awarded her the National Humanities Medal in recognition of her contributions to American culture. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is the owner of Parnassus Books.

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