



Book Club Set

# State of Wonder

By Anne Patchette

## About the Author



Ann Patchett is the author of nine novels, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, *Taft*, *The Magician's Assistant*, *Bel Canto*, *Run*, *State of Wonder*, *Commonwealth*, *The Dutch House*, and *Tom Lake*. She was the editor of *Best American Short Stories*, 2006, and has written four books of nonfiction—*Truth & Beauty*, about her friendship with the writer Lucy Grealy, *What Now?* an expansion of her graduation address at Sarah Lawrence College, *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, a collection of essays examining the theme of commitment, and *These Precious Days*, essays on home, family, friendship, and writing. In 2019, she published her first children's book, *Landslide*, illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser, followed by *Escape Goat* in 2020.

A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and the Iowa Writers Workshop, Patchett has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including a National Humanities Medal, England's Women's Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Book Sense Book of the Year, a Guggenheim Fellowship, The Chicago Tribune's Heartland Prize, The Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts, the American Booksellers Association's Most Engaging Author Award, and the Women's National Book Association's Award. Her novel, *The Dutch House*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her books have been both New York Times Notable Books and New York Times bestsellers. Her work has been translated into more than thirty languages.

In November, 2011, she opened Parnassus Books in Nashville, Tennessee, with her business partner Karen Hayes. She has since become a spokesperson for independent booksellers, championing books and bookstores on NPR, *The Colbert Report* (including the series finale), *Oprah's Super Soul Sunday*, *The Martha Stewart Show*, and *The CBS Early Show*, among many others. Along with James Patterson, she was the honorary chair of World Book Night. In 2012 she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World.

Ann Patchett lives in Nashville with her husband, Karl VanDevender, and their dog, Sparky. Click [here](#) to subscribe to her blog, Notes from Ann, featuring book recommendations, exclusive commentary, articles, and more. Follow along with Parnassus Books on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and the bookstore blog, Musing.

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## About the Book



State of Wonder is a world unto itself, where unlikely beauty stands beside unimaginable loss, a tale that leads into the very heart of darkness and then shows us what lies on the other side.

Dr. Marina Singh, a research scientist with a pharmaceutical company, is sent 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. Nothing about the 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 jungle in hopes of finding Dr. Swenson as well as answers to 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, remains as ruthless and uncompromising as she was in her earlier days 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 she asks of herself, and will ultimately ask of Marin.

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## 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 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?

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## Author Interview



**Over the course of all the novels you've written, have you noticed any significant changes to the way you approach the task? Would an outside observer notice any differences watching you when you wrote *The Patron Saint of Liars* versus your most recent novel, *State of Wonder*?**

I love the idea of an outside observer checking to see if my writing habits have changed. It would be a sort of novel audit. I think the change isn't as much in how I write as it is how I live. When I wrote *The Patron Saint of Liars* I had a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. I sat at my tiny desk more or less all day, seven days a week. There was no internet, long distance calls were too expensive, and since it was Cape Cod in the winter there was no place to go. No one needed my attention for any reason. It was a thrill when Elizabeth McCracken and I walked into town for a drink. Back then I pretty much moved into the world of my novel and stayed there until I was finished. Life isn't like that anymore. I spend a lot of my energy trying to carve out time to work and trying to push the world away. I travel so much now, I have responsibilities, I'm married. I have a full and happy life. Still, I look back on those days of never-ending silence and they seem like a dream. Every day felt like it was about three weeks long. I would write and write and write and feel like I couldn't possibly write another word and it would only be eleven in the morning. I'd go to sleep for ten minutes just to have something different to do and then I would go back to work.

**Male authors are often asked about how they approach female voices in their fiction, but I'd love to know your take on writing the men in your stories. Is it more of a challenge to manufacture a male voice than a female one? If you had to pick a man from any of your books as the hardest for you to write, who would you select?**

The way I see it, if I'm writing a character who isn't me then it's all pretty much the same. I have to build a whole new person from scratch. Whether that person is a man



or a woman, from another country, a different race, it doesn't matter. The trick is just to get outside of myself. I don't think, what would a man say? Only, what would this one particular person say? I can't pick one male character that was the hardest to write, I'd have to pick three: Teddy, Tip, and Sullivan from Run. I know nothing about the dynamics between brothers and I found the fact that they were both isolated from each other and completely engaged with each other pretty tricky.

**Something in the plot of State of Wonder reminds me of Richard Evans Schultes, the Harvard professor who sequestered himself in the Amazon, and Wade Davis, his adoring assistant and eventual chronicler in One River. Did Schultes' story or other instances of similar behavior inspire your novel, or was it concocted purely from imagination?**

You are absolutely correct. Dr. Rapp was inspired by Schultes, which I suppose puts Dr. Swenson in the role of Wade Davis. One River was a very helpful book. It was actually recommended to me by a man I met in the ichthyology lab at Harvard when I was working on Run.

**Did you travel to the Amazon in preparation for writing State of Wonder? If so, how was that experience for you?**

I did go to Amazon to research the book. I stayed for ten days, which was about five days too long. It was incredibly helpful to get to see all those trees, the color of the water, the birds and snakes and bugs, but after a while all I wanted was to get out of there. The jungle is so claustrophobic. It just presses in on you from every possible angle. You can't exactly go for a stroll to clear your head. That feeling of having nowhere to go, no way to get out, made its way into the book.

**Not to play spoiler, but loyal Patchett readers will find the familiar territory of opera somewhere in the expanses of your new novel. Were you inclined to**

**include opera as a nod to your past work, or was it perhaps more like a wink towards Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo"?**

You're getting all my references! The first time I saw the Amazon was in Herzog's films, through Herzog's eyes. In all honesty, I could have skipped the trip and just watched "Aguirre: the Wrath of God", "Fitzcarraldo", and "The Burden of Dreams" (the documentary about the making of "Fitzcarraldo") over and over again. The opening scene of "Fitzcarraldo" in which he's making his frantic arrival to the opera house in Manuas made an indelible connection in my mind between the jungle and opera, so the scene in State of Wonder isn't a reference to Bel Canto, it's a reference to Herzog. Renee Fleming was supposed to sing in that opera house and I was going to go with her, but then there was a schedule change and she wound up not going. I was so set on going there with Renee that I couldn't imagine going without her. My one view of the opera house came from the film.

**I've read that you completed State of Wonder in a more limited timeframe than most of your other novels have taken to write. Do you have any insights as to why the prose came faster for this work?**

This was the easiest book I've ever written, with the possible exception of Truth & Beauty. I understood the characters, I understood their connections. I had tremendous fun with all the things I got to make up. Bel Canto and Run were both huge stretches for me, I felt like I was pulling myself up a sheer cliff with my fingernails. Then I came up with another idea for a novel that seemed impossibly hard and I thought, why not forget this, do something fun? State of Wonder was fun. Fun is always faster.

**What are some books you read while prepping State of Wonder, related to its writing or to distract yourself from it?**

Of course, Conquest of the Useless: Reflections on Making Fitzcarraldo, by Werner Herzog, was awfully good (and beautifully written). I read Wade Davis' book, as I

mentioned before. I read all the popular books on the Amazon from River of Doubt to Lost City of Z. My favorite was In Trouble Again; A Journey Between the Orinoco and the Amazon, by Remond O'Hanlon. It's both horrifying and hysterical while the others were only horrifying. What was interesting about all those books is the way in which they all started to blend together. We can all have our own take on the Amazon but at the heart of it there is a very basic theme: bugs, heat, leaves, omnipresent danger. When I wanted to get away from the Amazon I read Henry James. No world is farther away from the jungle than James'.

**When you utilize a setting as rich as the Amazon, it would seem easy to lose your characters in the immensity of the location. Did you find you needed to make a concentrated effort to keep Marina and Annick the center focus?**

Not at all. As I said before, what my short time in the Amazon taught me is how claustrophobic it is. No one wanders off. Marina is obsessed with staying on the path. She knows she has to always come back exactly the way she came or she'll be lost forever. I wound up keeping a hyper-vigilant focus on my characters.

**State of Wonder weighs-in as your longest novel. Was this because the plot demanded it? Was the original manuscript much longer?**

Who knows? Maybe it was longer because it was more fun to write. My friend Liz Gilbert read the manuscript and told me to cut 75 pages from the first half of the book. She said all the scenes needed to stay as they were, all the exchanges, all the facts, I just needed to make it faster by cutting out extra sentences, phrases, and single words. And I did it. It was amazing how easy it was to trim it down.

**Why do you think the Amazon is such a lasting and intoxicating subject matter for literature and film? From David Grann's Lost City of Z to the newest Indiana Jones film, audiences seem to have an insatiable appetite for the setting. What drew you to write a novel set there?**

The Amazon is a giant open canvas for the imagination. You feel like anything could happen there, and that's a great place from which to tell a story. Personally, I needed a place with malaria in which another, highly profitable drug might also be developed. I didn't see it happening in India or Africa.

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<http://blog.bookpassage.com/2011/06/exclusive-interview-with-ann-patchett.html>

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As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...	Loved it!	

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes          No          Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: