

BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES ANN PATCHETT'S NOVEL

STATE OF WONDER



BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Ann Patchett's novel State of Wonder

Paperback novel published by HarperCollins, New York, 2011.

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Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the paperback edition of *State of Wonder*. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion was written by Jo-Ann Zoon and Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed. Herbert is the founder of Bookclub-in-a-Box and an international speaker with more than 30 years experience as a teacher and school librarian. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for State of Wonder

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder*

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BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your book club.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more "hands on" support, feel free to contact us.

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences. You can contact us via our website (www.bookclubinabox.com), by email (info@bookclubinabox.com), or by phone (1-866-578-5571). We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a book club discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

- Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)
- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (Not necessarily from the novel.)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (Not applicable to all novels.)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourselves

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Keys to the Novel

Author Information

Background Information

INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Sent into the jungles of Brazil, 42-year-old research biologist Dr. Marina Singh embarks on a journey into the unknown.

Vogel, the American pharmaceutical giant for which Marina works, is funding the classified research of Dr. Annick Swenson, who for decades has been mostly left to her own devices while developing a revolutionary new fertility drug for post-menopausal women, a virtual “*Lost Horizon for American ovaries.*” (p.26) The formidable Dr. Swenson has cut off communication with the company, insisting that in order to protect her subjects — the primitive Lakashi tribe whose female members bear children well into old age — her remote jungle location must remain secret.

In the wake of the reported death of Marina’s colleague, Anders Eckman, who died of a fever while trying to unearth details of the drug’s progress, Vogel president Jim Fox orders Marina to Brazil to locate the elusive Dr. Swenson and report back on her research. Marina’s personal motivation for making the trip has more to do with finding out what happened to her friend and long-time lab partner.

Plagued by trepidation, yet propelled by her sense of duty, Marina journeys from her quiet home in Minnesota deep into the Amazon rainforest. Faced with an array of life-threatening perils from snake-infested rivers, to suffocating heat and a tribe of cannibals, Marina is also confronted by her own ghosts from the past. Chief among them is the eminent Dr. Swenson. As

notes

Marina's former teacher, Swenson is the woman Marina most admired, emulated, and feared while a resident in gynecology at Johns Hopkins University. Swenson has cast a shadow over Marina's career ever since.

We follow Marina on her interior psychological journey. With unfulfilled dreams and expectations, as well as unresolved ghosts from the past, the American pharmacologist faces painful moral choices and learns unexpected truths about herself as she journeys far from familiar territory "*down a river into the beating heart of nowhere.*" (p.165)

Keys to the Novel

Set up as both a mystery and an adventure novel, *State of Wonder* is unusual in that the main character is a doctor, not a detective. The story is built around a mysterious fertility drug that would allow women to give birth well into old age. Patchett's medical investigators offer us forensic detail about the questions, boundaries, and morality of medical research, third-world geography, environment and society, as well as the impact of intervention on both people and nature.

The setting of any novel is a deliberate choice, but in Patchett's case, the Amazon works well because of its relative isolation. Without cell phones, the jungle location allows the ideas being offered to be seen away from other complicating factors.

As a result, we can wonder freely about what it all means.

Author Information

- Ann Patchett was born in 1963 in Los Angeles and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, where she lives with her second husband and their dog. Also a part of her very close community are her husband's ex-wife (a friend), her step-grandchildren, and childhood friends.

- As a child, Patchett knew she wanted to write fiction. A quiet and obedient schoolgirl with a Catholic upbringing, she has often talked about how a childhood spent praying to statues and dreaming of miracles was the perfect preparation for her life as a storyteller. Not a regular churchgoer, she describes herself as both adoring and struggling with her faith. She has written warmly of the childless nuns who taught her and has said that in a way, they were her role models.
- Patchett studied creative writing, first at Sarah Lawrence College in New York and then at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she met her first husband. They divorced a year later and Patchett returned to Tennessee, working as a waitress and at *Seventeen* magazine, where for nine years, her talents went largely unrecognized.
- Before her 30th birthday in 1992, Patchett made her literary mark with her first novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, set in a Catholic home for unmarried pregnant women. The book is intensely emotional and unusual in combining a religious theme with a deep interest in women's psychology influenced by feminism. It was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1992 and subsequently made into a TV movie.
- Since then, Patchett has written six more novels, including the prizewinning *Bel Canto* (2001), a stylish, psychological thriller that mingles terrorism and opera with a hostage-taking at a lavish diplomatic party in South America. Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction, *Bel Canto* catapulted Patchett into the ranks of best-selling authors.
- Patchett departed from fiction for 2004's *Truth & Beauty*, the heart-breaking account of her longstanding friendship with gifted writer Lucy Grealy, whose childhood disfigurement from cancer of the jaw precipitated a tragic descent into addiction and eventual death from a heroin overdose in 2002.
- In her latest novel, *State of Wonder*, Patchett shares a number of similarities with her central character, Marina:



**Thanks for previewing this
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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print or PDF format, just visit:**

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