

State of Wonder

by Ann Patchett

About the Book

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.

Praise for the Book

“Expect miracles when you read Ann Patchett’s fiction.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Patchett’s best novel...exciting and unexpected...The wonder of *State of Wonder* is that Patchett poses exxential philosophical and bioethical arguments in a strotly that still speeds along like a literary thriller, reaching a tremendous, deeply emotional crescendo.”

—*Time*

Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers

About the Author

Title: Ann Patchett

American Novelist (1963 -)

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2012 Gale, Cengage Learning

Updated:08/13/2011

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born December 2, 1963, in Los Angeles, CA; daughter of Frank (a police captain) and Jeanne Ray (a nurse) Patchett; second marriage to Karl VanDevender (an internist). Education: Sarah Lawrence College, B.A., 1984; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 1987. Politics: "Roosevelt Democrat." Addresses: Home: Nashville, TN. Agent: Lisa Bankoff, International Creative Management, 40 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

CAREER:

Ecco Press, editorial assistant, 1984; Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, writer-in-residence, 1989-90; Murray State University, Murray, KY, visiting assistant professor, 1992; University of the South, Nashville, TN, Tennessee Williams fellow in Creative Writing, 1997.

AWARDS:

Award for fiction, Trans-Atlantic Henfield Foundation, 1984; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies*, 1986, for "For Rita, Who Is Never Alice"; Editor's Choice Award for Fiction, *Columbia*, 1987, for "The Magician's Assistant's Dream"; residential fellow of Yaddo and Millay Colony for the Arts, both 1989; James A. Michener/Copernicus Award, University of Iowa, 1989, for work on *Patron Saint of Liars*; residential fellow, Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown, RI, 1990-91; Mary Ingrahm Bunting fellowship, 1993; Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for best work of fiction, 1994, for *Taft*; Tennessee Writers Award of the Year, *Nashville Banner*, and Guggenheim fellowship, both 1994, both for *The Magician's Assistant*; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination in fiction category, 2001, and PEN/Faulkner Award finalist, and Orange Prize for fiction, both 2002, all for *Bel Canto*; Alex Award, Margaret Alexander Edwards Trust and *Booklist*, 2005, for *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship* (memoir), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2004.
- (Editor, with series editor Katrina Kenison) *The Best American Short Stories 2006*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2006.
- *What Now?*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2008.

NOVELS

- *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1992.
- *Taft*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1994.
- *The Magician's Assistant*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Bel Canto*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Run*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2007.
- *State of Wonder*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2011.

Work represented in anthologies, including *Twenty under Thirty*, edited by Debra Spark, Scribner (New York, NY), 1987; *Twenty for the Nineties*, edited by Monica Wood, J. Weston Walch (Portland, ME), 1992; and *The Anthology of the Fine Arts Work Center*, Sheepshead Press, 1993. Contributor of stories to periodicals, including *Columbia*, *Seventeen*, *Southern Review*, *Paris Review*, *New Madrid*, *Epoch*, and *Iowa Review*. Contributor of nonfiction to *GQ*, *Outside*, and *Vogue*. Editor, *Sarah Lawrence Review*, 1983-84; fiction editor, *Shankpainter*, 1990-91.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

The story "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica" was adapted as a play; *The Patron Saint of Liars* was filmed for television by CBS, 1997.

Sidelights

Author Ann Patchett has been hailed as one of the most interesting and unconventional writers of her generation. Patchett's power as a writer seems to derive from her unusual ability to make believable the voices of a sweeping array of characters. In 1984, on her twenty-first birthday, Patchett published her first story, "All Little Colored Children Should Learn to Play Harmonica," a narrative set in the 1940s about a black family with eight children. Patchett, a white woman from Nashville, Tennessee, had actually written the story two years earlier when she was a sophomore at New York's Sarah Lawrence College. "Because I was nineteen, I had the courage and confidence to approach such subject matter with authority," she told Elizabeth Bernstein in an interview for *Publishers Weekly*. Patchett described the origins of her diverse characters as occurring in moments of fantasy. "I never thought it was strange to pick these topics," she

recounted to Bernstein. "I just really believe that using your imagination is the one time in your life you can really go anywhere."

The Patron Saint of Liars, Patchett's first novel, shows such imagination. It tells the story of a young pregnant woman who flees from a dull marriage, driving across the country to find a new, different, and unexpected sense of family at St. Elizabeth's, a Roman Catholic home for unwed mothers in Kentucky. Critics pointed out that the novel may strain belief at times, in particular because it provides no contextual sense of hotly debated social issues surrounding marriage and reproduction in the Catholic Church. However, as Alice McDermott, reviewing the novel in the *New York Times Book Review*, pointed out, Patchett's project is to write "a made up story of an enchanted place." Comparing *The Patron Saint of Liars* to a fairy tale, McDermott explained that "the world of St. Elizabeth's, and of the novel itself, ... retains some sense of the miraculous, of a genuine, if unanticipated, power to heal."

Patchett's next novel, *Taft*, also received critical praise, though reviewers' opinions differed as to whether or not this work exceeded Patchett's achievement in *The Patron Saint of Liars*. *Taft*'s action centers around a Memphis blues bar called Muddy's. The black, middle-aged bartender, Nickel, who narrates the story, becomes imaginatively and practically entangled in the life of a white working-class teenager, Fay Taft, and that of her family. Focusing on their relationship, Patchett weaves a multilayered narrative about unconventional kinds of love and improvisational familial ties.

In her critically acclaimed third novel, *The Magician's Assistant*, Patchett continues to explore the themes of unorthodox love, abandonment, and transcendence and the surprising places people go to feel at home. The protagonist and title character, Sabine, has long been in love with the gay magician she assists. As the narrative opens, Parsifal, the magician, who is afflicted with AIDS, dies suddenly from a stroke. Sabine and Parsifal had entered into an unusual marriage, and upon his death, she is embraced by his family, which she had not known existed. Sabine meets her estranged in-laws, and together they try to put together the pieces of Parsifal's past. As Sabine shares her grief, she finds a hint of redemption and a way to transform herself. Veronica Chambers, reviewing *The Magician's Assistant* for *Newsweek*, called it "a '90s love story wrought with all the grace and classic charm of a 19th-century novel."

By the time her fourth novel was released, Patchett had earned a reputation for quality fiction, and that reputation was sealed with the publication of *Bel Canto*. Loosely based on a real-life 1996 hostage crisis in Lima, Peru, *Bel Canto*--an opera term that means "fine singing"--takes place in an unnamed South American country where the vice presidential palace is the setting for a birthday reception honoring a prominent businessman, the chairman of a huge Japanese electronics concern. "The poor host country was throwing a birthday party of unreasonable expense, hoping that Hosokawa might help with training, trade, a factory--something that will make it look like the nation is moving away from drug trafficking," according to *Seattle Times* contributor Valerie Ryan. One of the star guests at this party is Roxane Cross, a revered American opera soprano who has agreed to perform for her biggest fan, Hosokawa. As the lights dim following her aria, the peace is shattered by the invasion of terrorists. The electronics tycoon, the diva, the vice president and sixty dignitaries are taken hostage. "In a marvelously

loopy touch," noted David Kipen in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "the president has begged off to watch his favorite telenovela." Negotiations reach a stalemate, but inside the mansion, hostages and guerillas are oblivious to the action. Instead, as the siege stretches to four-and-a-half months, hostages and terrorists form bonds of friendship and even love inside the mansion; "pretty soon, nobody wants to kill anybody," Kipen observed. However, some characters are not destined to survive.

Thematically, *Bel Canto* is "similar to my other works in that people are thrown together by circumstance," Patchett told David Podgurski in a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* interview. "But I wanted to write a truly omniscient third-person narrative, a 'Russian' novel." The author continued: "I wanted all of the drama as I saw it unfold on television--it seemed so operatic--and to have all that and yet keep it within a narrative that wasn't a potboiler."

Bel Canto received positive notices from many reviewers, among them *Salon.com*'s Laura Miller. "With this scenario, you'd expect [*Bel Canto*] to be populated by the kind of romantic figures found in books and movies like *Chocolat*, cartoonish outlines that invite the reader to stop inside and fancy herself the embodiment of, say, Joyous Sensuality or the Human Spirit. Instead, the characters Patchett has created are just that, characters; they're not empty enough to 'identify' with." *Guardian* contributor Alex Clark applauded Patchett's range. "With bravura confidence and inventiveness she varies her pace to encompass both lightning flashes of brutality and terror and long stretches of incarcerated ennui," he wrote. "The novel's sensibilities extend from the sly wit of observational humor to subtle, mournful insights into the nature of yearning and desire."

What was it about the real-life crisis that inspired Patchett's interest in a fictional retelling? In an essay on the *BookPage* Web site, she recalled her absorption in the unfolding events of 1996: "Very few disasters happen in slow motion: plane crashes, school shootings, earthquakes--by the time we hear about them, they're usually over. But the story in Lima stretched on, one month, two, three." During that time, she added, "I couldn't stop thinking about these people. There is no such thing as a good kidnapping, but I heard the hostages played chess with their captors. I heard they played soccer. There were rumors of large pizza orders." To Patchett, the story had "all elements I was interested in: the construction of family, the displacement from home, a life that was at once dangerous and completely benign."

Following the death in 2002 of Lucy Grealy, Patchett's long-time friend and author of *Autobiography of a Face*, Patchett wrote the memoir *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly* contributor Elizabeth Millard, the author explained: "I give talks about my belief in fiction and the importance of the imagination, and I always say that one thing about my novels is that ... I'm not a character in my books and I like that." Shortly after the death of her emotionally troubled friend, however, in an attempt to deal with her grief, Patchett wrote a piece for *New York* magazine and found herself wanting to write more; *Truth and Beauty* was the result. "When I look back now," she told Millard, "I think it really was a way to sit shiva for a year, to stay on her grave and be unwilling to get up and go on with my life." The author continued, noting that "going over the good times we had together, because things ended on a very bad note, I think it really gave me all the time I needed to feel terrible and to celebrate her. I

feel it would be melodramatic to say the book saved my life, but it certainly put me in a better place." Jennifer Reese described *Truth and Beauty* in *Entertainment Weekly* as a "powerful ... portrait of a fascinating, understandably tormented woman--and of a great friendship.... Patchett's voice--perfectly modulated, lucid, and steady ... makes it both true and beautiful." Donna Seaman, writing for *Booklist*, called it "dazzling in its psychological interpretations, piquant in its wit, candid in its self-portraiture, and gracefully balanced between emotion and reason."

Patchett also served as guest editor of *The Best American Short Stories 2006*. The collection features twenty short stories from a wide range of American writers, from well-known popular writers such as Tobias Wolff, Ann Beattie, and Alice Munro to lesser-known writers such as Jack Livings, Aleksandar Hemon, and Katherine Bell. "Where a short-story collection by a single author tends to repeat patterns, rhythms and themes, there's a much greater sense of serendipity and surprise here," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor. Ellen Loughran, writing in *Booklist*, noted that the author's "introduction provides a graceful entry into the main event."

Most of Patchett's next novel, *Run* takes place over a weekend. It features protagonist Bernard Doyle, a widower whose wife, Bernadette, died of cancer sixteen years earlier, and the father of three sons, two of whom are adopted. Bernard's natural son, Sullivan, dragged Bernard into a scandal that cost him his political career, but Bernard continues to practice law in Boston. His adopted black sons are twenty-year-old Teddy, a dreamer who is leaning toward the priesthood, and Tip, one year older, who is studying at Harvard with the intention of becoming an ichthyologist. They are named for Massachusetts Democrats Ted Kennedy and Tip O'Neill.

As the novel begins it is snowing, and Bernard, who would like his sons to enter politics, has invited Tip and Teddy to a Jesse Jackson lecture. The reluctant brothers purposely arrive late, but Bernard wins out, as he lied about the start time of the event, saying that it was earlier than it actually is. Tip resents his father's efforts, and following the lecture, when Bernard asks them to attend the reception, he expresses his anger, steps off a curb, and is knocked to the ground by Tennessee Alice Moser, a black woman from the poor Roxbury neighborhood. Alice is hit by the SUV that threatened to collide with Tip, and she is rushed to the hospital with serious injuries. The Doyles accompany Tennessee's eleven-year-old daughter Kenya to the hospital, then take her home with them. As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Tennessee has been connected to the family for many years, as has Kenya for her short life.

Central to the story is a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, a family heirloom with a dark past from Ireland. Mary so closely resembles Bernadette that placed in the boys' room, she seemed to watch over them. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Leah Hager Cohen noted that themes include: "Absent mothers who are not entirely absent; present mothers who are not what they appear to be." Cohen noted the issues introduced from the beginning of the novel, including Boston's volatile political and racial history, interracial adoption and the closeness and divides that occur within families.

Cohen commented on a number of questions she felt are not answered by Patchett, including why a healthy and intelligent black mother would give up her sons for adoption. "What does it mean when a white politician adopts black sons in a city where many black constituents live in

poverty? How has their upbringing informed Tip and Teddy's sense of themselves as black men? If Patchett had exhumed her characters' motivations more thoroughly, she might have persuaded readers of the circumstances that led to such a choice. And in so doing she might have elicited deeper sympathy and interest." An *Economist* reviewer wrote: "The novel is well plotted and Ms Patchett's universally sympathetic portraiture produces engaging characters. The writing is seamlessly smooth but never ostentatious, pushing story to the fore." *Publishers Weekly* contributor Andrew O'Hagan, wrote that the book "is lovely to read and is satisfyingly bold in its attempt to say something patient and true about family." Janet Maslin, also writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, wrote that *Run* "shimmers with its author's rarefied eloquence, and with the deep resonance of her insights."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *American Women Writers*, 2nd edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 2000.
- Patchett, Ann, *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2004.

PERIODICALS

- *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 26, 2001, Greg Changnon, review of *Bel Canto*.
- *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 2007, review of *Run*, p. 154.
- *Booklist*, June 12, 2001, Gilbert Taylor, review of *Bel Canto*, p. 1848; March 1, 2004, Donna Seaman, review of *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, p. 1098; April 1, 2005, Gillian Engberg, "The Alex Awards, 2005," p. 1355; October 15, 2006, Ellen Loughran, review of *The Best American Short Stories 2006*, p. 27.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, October 9, 2007, Yvonne Zipp, review of *Run*, p. 13.
- *Daily News* (Los Angeles, CA), July 29, 2001, David Kronke, "Singing Her Praises," p. L16.
- *Denver Post*, June 10, 2001, Glenn Giffin, "Hostage Crisis a Study in Group Dynamics," p. L8.
- *Economist*, September 15, 2007, review of *Run*, p. 103.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, July 31, 1992, Annabel Davis-Goff, review of *The Patron Saint of Liars*, p. 57; October 10, 1997, p. 87; May 21, 2004, Jennifer Reese, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 82; September 28, 2007, Jennifer Reese, review of *Run*, p. 111.
- *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 30, 2004, Deborah King, review of *Truth and Beauty*; October 3, 2007, review of *Run*.
- *Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA), February 10, 2008, Jessica Musil, review of *Run*.
- *Houston Chronicle*, October 7, 2007, Nora Seton, review of *Run*, p. 22.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2004, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 214; April 15, 2005, "Best Books for Reading Groups: Featuring Twenty-Five Titles Ideal for Discussion & Debate," p. S1; August 15, 2006, review of *The Best American Short Stories 2006*, p. 805; August 15, 2007, review of *Run*.
- *Lancet*, January 1, 2005, Andy Brown, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 20.

- *Library Journal*, August, 1997, Kimberly G. Allen, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 134; May 15, 2004, Pam Kingsbury, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 85; July 1, 2007, Sarah Conrad Weisman, review of *Run*, p. 84.
- *Marie Claire*, October, 2007, review of *Run*, p. 73.
- *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 20, 2001, David Podgurski, "Novel Unfolds with the Expansiveness and Drama of Opera" (interview), p. 4; October 3, 2007, Whitney Gould, review of *Run*.
- *Newsweek*, October 13, 1997, Veronica Chambers, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 78; October 15, 2007, Barbara Kantrowitz, review of *Run*, p. 83.
- *New York Times*, May 31, 2001, Janet Maslin, review of *Bel Canto*, p. E7; June 10, 2001, James Polk, review of *Bel Canto*, p. 37; May 13, 2004, Janet Maslin, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. E7.
- *New York Times Book Review*, July 26, 1992, Alice McDermott, review of *The Patron Saint of Liars*, p. 6; October 16, 1994, Diana Postlethwaite, review of *Taft*, p. 11; November 16, 1997, Suzanne Berne, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 17; October 18, 1998, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 36; September 20, 2007, Janet Maslin, review of *Run*; September 30, 2007, Leah Hager Cohen, review of *Run*, p. 7.
- *Observer* (London, England), June 14, 1998, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 18.
- *People*, May 31, 2004, Laura Italiano, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 53; October 1, 2007, Sue Corbett, review of *Run*, p. 59.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 18, 1994, review of *Taft*, p. 233; July 14, 1997, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 62; October 13, 1997, Elizabeth Bernstein, interview with Patchett, pp. 52-53; April 16, 2001, review of *Bel Canto*, p. 42; March 29, 2004, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 47, and Elizabeth Millard, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 148; July 16, 2007, Andrew O'Hagan, review of *Run*, p. 143.
- *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 13, 2001, David Kipen, "Hostage Novel Ropes You In," review of *Bel Canto*, p. E1.
- *School Library Journal*, September, 2004, Francisca Goldsmith, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 236.
- *Seattle Times*, June 24, 2001, Valerie Ryan, review of *Bel Canto*, p. J10.
- *Star Telegram* (Fort Worth, TX), October 3, 2007, Catherine Mallette, review of *Run*.
- *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis, MN), October 7, 2007, "Setting Her Own Pace," interview, p. 1F.
- *Times Literary Supplement*, February 6, 1998, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 21; July 9, 1999, review of *Taft*, p. 21.
- *USA Today*, September 27, 2007, Jocelyn McClurg, review of *Run*, p. 5; April 17, 2008, Carol Memmott, "5 Questions for Ann Patchett," interview, p. 6.
- *Washington Post Book World*, January 18, 1998, review of *The Magician's Assistant*, p. 4.
- *Women's Review of Books*, October, 2004, Mary Cappello, review of *Truth and Beauty*, p. 4.
- *WWD*, September 25, 2007, Vanessa Lawrence, review of *Run*, p. 16.

ONLINE

- *Ann Patchett Home Page*, <http://www.annpatchett.com> (July 6, 2008).
- *Blackbird*, <http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/> (June 6, 2007), "An Interview with Elizabeth McCracken and Ann Patchett."
- *Blog Critics*, <http://blogcritics.com/> (September 25, 2007), Ted Gioia, review of *Run*.
- *BookBrowse.com*, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (August 11, 2004), "A Conversation with Ann Patchett."
- *BookPage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (August 11, 2004), Ann Patchett, "Turning a News Story into a Novel"; Laurie Parker, review of *The Magician's Assistant*.
- *Bookreporter.com*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (August 11, 2004), "On the Road with Ann Patchett, Week 1."
- *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://books.guardian.co.uk/> (August 11, 2004), Alex Clark, "Danger Arias."
- *Salon.com*, <http://www.salon.com/> (August 11, 2004), Laura Miller, "*Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett."*

Source Citation

"Ann Patchett." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 Dec. 2011.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000112009&v=2.1&u=lom_kentdl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000112009

Author Interview

Q: Why did you decide to compress the action of this novel into twenty-four hours, an exceedingly short period of time by novel standards?

A: For all of the characters in the book this car accident set in motion a series of life-changing events. They were all so overwhelmed by what was happening that I never found a point at which I could take a break from the action and say, "Three days later . . ." Because Sullivan has jet lag and Tennessee is in the hospital, their sense of time is shaken up. It meant that at least one of the characters was awake through the entire 24 hour period. By switching the point of view from person to person I could keep the story going around the clock.

Q: How did you prepare as an author for Tip's encyclopedic knowledge of fishes? Is ichthyology a private interest of yours?

A: No, I'm not a closet ichthyologist. I read a lot of evolutionary biology and books about fishes to prepare. Karsten Hartel at the Museum for Contemporary Zoology at Harvard, and Jack Baughman, an old friend of mine who had studied ichthyology in college, were both extremely helpful to me.

Q: If you had to isolate one of the characters from *Run* as the book's protagonist, which would it be, and why?

A: The book really started with the character of Tip because I had always wanted to write about someone who was very smart and obsessed with fishes. I don't think that Tip is necessarily the protagonist but for me he's the emotional center of the story.

Q: How does the process of writing your fifth novel differ from the process of writing your first?

A: I understand my own process now. I know how long it takes me to get started. I know there will be long stretches when I think that what I'm writing is awful. I know how to ignore the voices in my head that tell me to dump the whole book and go get a regular job. When I wrote my first book I was tortured by all of my doubts. Now the doubts come and I just think, oh, you again.

Q: Can you describe how the book's central idea—that of how political responsibility plays out in the smallest and most intimate scale of family life—first came to you?

A: I keep reading the newspaper and looking at all of the hardships in the world and it makes me think about issues of sacrifice and social responsibility. I wonder about the idea of being so privileged that a person as smart as Tip would want to spend his days in the basement of a museum or someone as kind as Teddy wouldn't get farther than his uncle's room in a nursing home. Do we have a moral obligation to use our gifts to help people? Doyle has very clear ideas about this, both for himself and for his sons, but when he's asked to take in a stranger (and a pretty appealing little stranger at that) he doesn't want to do it. These aren't questions that have a right and wrong answer, but I think they are ideas worth struggling with.

Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers

Discussion Questions

Questions for Discussion

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 Annik 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 Annik?
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*?

Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers