The OxyContin Story

By Bruce Bawer

The prescription painkiller OxyContin was released by Purdue Pharma in 1995; the six-part TV series *Painkiller,* created by Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster and directed by Peter Berg, was released by Netflix in 2023.

'Painkiller' Official Trailer (One Media Coverage Youtube)

During the intervening 28 years, Purdue's flagship product brought even greater riches to the company's already rich president, Richard Sackler; brought relief to a good many patients suffering from severe pain that was otherwise untreatable; and brought tragedy to countless families as legitimate patients became addicts and then death statistics and as perfectly healthy people, many of them very young, began using the drug recreationally and, caught in the grip of its addictive power, ended up in morgues all over America.Out of this grim history, Fitzerman-Blue, Harpster, and Berg have made a remarkably captivating drama. It recounts the story of OxyContin by following the lives of several characters, most of them fictional composites. Edie Flowers (Uzo Aduba), an investigator for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the western district of Virginia who has seen the lives of her mother and brother destroyed by the crack epidemic – and who serves as our narrator – recognizes early on that OxyContin is leading

America down a similar path.

Glen Kryger (Taylor Kitsch), a mechanic, is put on OxyContin after suffering a workplace accident. And Shannon Schaeffer (West Duchovny), recruited just out of college to join Purdue's army of pretty, perky, and pushy young sales reps, is brainwashed by the firm, and by her mentor, Britt Hufford (Dina Shihabi), into believing fervently in the little blue pill's ability to deliver happiness to patients – and wealth to its merchants – until, eventually, reality comes crashing in on her.

The one major character drawn from real life is Richard Sackler (Matthew Broderick), president of Purdue Pharma, who himself also starts out as a true believer in the magical powers of OxyContin. Purdue was purchased jointly by Richard's father, Raymond, and Raymond's brothers, Mortimer and Arthur, all of them doctors and all of them partners in an array of businesses.

The most formidable of them is Arthur (Clark Gregg), who is famous for making Valium a record-breaking success and whose name, at the time our story takes place, adorns museums, university buildings, and hospital wings around the country. (There's a whole Wikipedia page titled "List of things named after the Sackler family.")

In a flashback, we see Richard as a schoolboy, hearing from Arthur the story of how Alfred Nobel transformed his image from "merchant of death" to "man of peace" by establishing the Nobel Prize; by making big donations to important institutions, explains Arthur, he's doing the same thing for the name of Sackler. He's a fascinating character, and so, in his own eccentric (indeed, rather goofy) way, is Richard, who, when Purdue faces the prospect of financial catastrophe after Arthur's 1987 death, is inspired by his uncle's Valium triumph to formulate and market the ultimate wonder drug.

When that drug, OxyContin, proves to be far more powerful than morphine, Richard's father and uncle are wary. "Abuse is gonna be a real issue," one of them says. But Richard's eyes are on the prize. "We're gonna give a lot of people their lives back. We're gonna take away a lot of pain." Cut to an auditorium full of pretty – and utterly ignorant – twentysomethings being trained to push the product. Until recently, they're told, pain hadn't been seen as "something to treat in and of itself." Indeed, "doctors don't respect pain."

But the reality is that "pain is no longer something we have to tolerate. It's something we can overcome." Cut to these girls calling on doctors, flashing broad, winsome smiles while distributing discount coupons and blue plushies designed to look like giant OxyContin pills. One of those doctors, dismissing this sales army in high heels as a bunch of "cute little dandelions," tries to tell Shannon the truth about the concoction she's pitching: "You're dangerous, and you're dumb…. You're a f******g drug dealer."

But he's the exception to the rule; other physicians tend to be more like Glen's GP, who blithely keeps upping his dosage as his resistance inexorably builds. After all, who doesn't trust the FDA?

Ah, the FDA, the story of whose approval of OxyContin makes up much of *Painkiller*'s second episode. The FDA, we're told, is "a small government agency" that trusts pharmaceutical firms to file honest reports about the results of clinical trials and that more or less rubber-stamps their applications.

But one man at the FDA, Curtis Wright (Noah Harpster), does have serious questions about OxyContin, and keeps denying it approval. Robert does his best to massage the man's ego, even arranging for a scientific paper by him to be published, but Wright holds firm: unfortunately for Purdue, they've been stuck with "the one guy [at the FDA] who gave a shit." But finally, after Purdue puts Wright up in a luxury hotel suite –

and, it's implied, supplies him with sex – the approval comes through. A year later, Wright leaves the FDA to work for Purdue.

With FDA approval secured, Purdue launches a staggering marketing blitz. We're shown excerpts from TV news stories calling it "the fastest growing drug in America" and "the most heavily prescribed narcotic in the country." We see Purdue reps telling doctors in a hotel conference room that if they don't prescribe OxyContin they're committing malpractice.

But we also see the dark beginnings of the opioid crisis. We see two girls snorting OxyContin in a car outside a pharmacy, then driving off and crashing the car. We see people being prescribed OxyContin who obviously don't need it. We see a long line outside a drug store, and a truck driver shipping "OxyContin mules" to another drug store.

We see OxyContin addicts committing crimes to support their habits. We hear that this whole ugly business has gotten to be too much for local police departments to handle and that more and more doctors are raising the alarm. During a harrowing visit to a morgue, Edie witnesses the dreadful toll that Richard's wonder drug has taken. Glen, who's tried unsuccessfully to quit OxyContin, ends up buying it illegally and snorting it.

Eventually the crisis hits the national news, and the bosses at Purdue respond by blaming it on abuse by "junkies." The firm bribes doctors with trips to pain-management seminars – i.e., free vacations – and with paid speaking engagements. One bought-off pill-pusher declares that OxyContin is addictive in only one percent of cases, causing a doctor at one hospital to comment: "I've got an ER full of the one percent."

Summoned to testify in Congress, a Purdue official prevaricates about what the company knew about abuse of OxyContin and when it knew it. This lie, told under oath,

provides Edie with a crime for which Purdue can be indicted. What she doesn't count on, alas, is the ability of rich companies to escape responsibility by hiring well-connected lawyers.

Painkiller is four hours and 42 minutes long — almost an hour longer than *Gone with the Wind* — and, unable to turn it off, I watched the whole thing in one sitting. That's how engrossing it is. The sequences about Glen and his family alone could be spliced together into a fine movie of normal length. What makes them work is that they're written and directed in a self-assured, low-key manner: the filmmakers know that they have solid material here and that they need only present it as straightforwardly as possible in order to make an impact.

In other sequences, however, one has the impression that the filmmakers are insufficiently confident in their material and feel a need to pep things up. For example, there are needless flashbacks, lasting only a second or two, to scenes we've already seen; there are busy, noisy montages that are intended to drive home points that have already been made; and there are deliberately herky–jerky cuts that are meant to ramp up the tension, which doesn't need ramping up.

Some bits reject realism entirely: in one scene, Richard is accused by the ghost of his late uncle Arthur of destroying the family reputation (whose importance to Richard has already been adequately explained to us); in another, Edie's boss and his male colleagues at the District Attorney's office, apparently smelling Purdue's blood, break out into bizarre wolf calls.

As for Edie herself, she's a useful storytelling tool, although in the first episode she pays tribute at length to government bureaucracy in a fatuous speech (excerpt: "I'm a bureaucrat. There's no civilization without bureaucracy") that I dearly wish the writers had omitted. No, as a rule, government bureaucrats aren't the heroes, and private

corporations aren't the villians.

Broderick, for his part, is mostly admirable, if sometimes rather cartoonish. (In one scene, riddled with angst and consoled by an uncle, he's suddenly Leo Bloom again in *The Producers* being buoyed by Max Bialystock.)

All in all, however, *Painkiller* does an impressive job of telling a dark and gripping story about a tragic chapter of modern American history – a chapter that ended only with the reformulation of OxyContin to make it harder to snort or inject; with the advent of fentanyl, which is even more powerful – and lethal – than Purdue's product; and with the removal, over the course of the years 2022 and 2023, of the Sackler name from buildings all over the country.

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