

Strong Medicine Short Guide

Strong Medicine by Arthur Hailey

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Characters

In each of his best-selling novels, Hailey assembles a cast of instantly recognizable heroes, heroines and villains, summarizes their backgrounds, ambitions, fears and weaknesses, and puts them in situations in which they act in a predictable manner. Although frequently faced with major crises, these characters are rarely self-questioning or introspective and never escape from their stereotypical roles.

The only significant change Hailey makes in his standard method of characterization in *Strong Medicine* is to place a woman at the center of the story. Celia de Grey Jordan begins her career as a drug salesperson, the first woman ever to hold such a position at Felding-Roth, and she rises through the ranks to become president and chief executive. As the story develops, she demonstrates superior courage, integrity, and foresightedness, never losing faith in herself or her will to fight for what she believes. In 1960, she convinces her superiors not to test Thalidomide on pregnant women, and with the same infallible instinct and sense of ethics, over the next three decades she struggles with the release and recall of Montayne, the hostility of some of her coworkers and her increasing responsibilities as an executive. She also preserves a near-perfect relationship with her children and her husband, Dr.

Andrew Jordan.

Two other important characters represent the dangers and the triumphs of the pharmaceutical industry. Dr.

Vincent Lord is an unscrupulous and bitter scientist who dreams of fame as the inventor of a substance that can counteract the negative side effects of all drugs. By falsifying the results of his research, he manages to place his dangerous invention on the market. In contrast, Dr. Martin Peat-Smith, a biochemist from Cambridge University who is the quintessence of scientific integrity, develops a drug to treat Alzheimer's disease that may have surprising powers as an aphrodisiac.



Social Concerns/Themes

Strong Medicine offers a close look at the functioning of a huge pharmaceutical industry. The author presents precise information about how drugs are developed, tested, approved, and promoted and about how public opinion and the industry itself react to its mistakes and its successes. Although he stresses the drug industry's humanitarian contributions, he also explores a range of abuses, as when the lure of vast profits sometimes obscures a concern for public safety. In the course of the story, the employees of FeldingRoth Pharmaceuticals face a series of problems and crises which are taken as typical of the industry. In particular, they must worry about the testing, release and recall of the drug Montayne, developed to alleviate morning sickness in pregnant women but found to be, like Thalidomide, deadly for unborn children.

The novel also deals with several issues of topical interest. Primary among these are the ethics of laboratory experimentation involving live animals, the ethics of marketing the same drug under many different names, the question of how much the general population should be told about the potential side effects of prescription and over-the-counter drugs and the problem of drug abuse among physicians. Occasional mention of world events, such as the assassination of President Kennedy, serves only to mark the passage of time since the characters' personal lives are not touched by politics in any significant way.



Techniques

The plot and structure of *Strong Medicine* are more linear than in Hailey's prior novels which all feature a medley of stories involving different characters related in various ways to the institution under examination. This novel, in fact, has a definite central character and plot and its few subplots are eventually resolved in decisions Celia makes about the policies and concerns of Felding-Roth. As in other novels by Hailey, the action unfolds in brief episodes filled with melodrama and suspense. When appropriate, the characters discuss the background and procedures of the drug industry, thereby introducing medical and pharmaceutical matters in a believable manner.

The author sometimes seems to ask the reader to assume a skeptical stance toward the drug industry. His overall view, however, is conventionally optimistic, supporting reassuring assumptions about the methods adopted by the industry and showing how its contributions outweigh its abuses. At the end, as Celia prepares for a new battle, this time against critics of an experimental wonder drug, Hailey concludes that, everything considered, the drug industry has been "a benefaction for mankind."



Key Questions

The pharmaceutical industry has come under significant criticism for making certain drugs available to consumers, for withholding other drugs that could benefit society, and for greatly overcharging for some products. Hailey develops some ideas about misguided or corrupt practices in the industry, and the group discussion could raise others and comment on the current appropriateness of Hailey's criticism.

1. What little-known aspects of the pharmaceutical industry does Hailey explain in this book?
2. What personal and professional characteristics make Celia de Grey Jordan an appropriate heroine for this story? Is she believable as an executive?
3. How does the subplot that involves Celia's husband Dr. Andrew Jordan in a battle against drug abuse among physicians complement the main story?
4. Does Hailey take a clear position on the ethics of experimentation on live animals?
5. In what ways does the novel emphasize how the desire for fast profit or for fame can sometimes create risks for the health and safety of the general public? When should the results of experimentation with new drugs be made available?

Literary Precedents

Like Hailey's *Airport* (1968), *Strong Medicine* has some affinities with the muckraking tradition exemplified by Upton Sinclair, whose best-selling novel *The Jungle* (1906) was a well-documented attack on the meat-packing industry in Chicago. Also, Sinclair Lewis relied on careful and detailed research to satirize the medical profession in *Arrowsmith* (1925) and subsequently wrote penetrating fictional analyses of such fields as organized religion, big business, social welfare and hotel management. More recently, Joseph Wambaugh has drawn on personal experience to create gripping stories about police work in the modern city in novels such as *The New Centurions* (1971). Unlike these writers, however, Hailey is less interested in presenting thought-provoking and realistic images of American society than in offering his readers a few hours of entertainment and information.



Copyright Information

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