

# *Painkiller*: Purdue Pharma and the opioid epidemic dramatized

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*Painkiller* is a Netflix dramatic series directed by Peter Berg. Created and written by Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster, the series is based on the 2003 non-fiction work *Painkiller*, by Barry Meier, and the 2017 *New Yorker* article, “The Family That Built an Empire of Pain” by Patrick Radden Keefe.

The six-episode series is a powerful condemnation of Purdue Pharma, its executives and its chairman and president Richard Sackler in particular. Any honest, observant viewer is likely to extend the condemnation to the profit system as a whole, which is entirely willing to sacrifice untold numbers of lives in exchange for cash flow.

Many of the tragic and appalling circumstances of the opioid crisis are well known by now. They have been treated in streaming series such as *Dopesick*, as well as numerous books and articles. This does not take anything away from *Painkiller* or minimize its significance. Such exposés are needed more than ever, particularly in light of the COVID pandemic and the bloody, US-provoked Russia-Ukraine war. The mini-series further and valuably contributes to the portrait of the American ruling elite as murderous and predatory.

Meanwhile the opioid disaster continues. According to the CDC, in the US, in the 12-month period ending in January 2023, there were approximately 109,600 drug-overdose-related deaths, a rate of 300 per day.

To tell the story of *Painkiller*, the miniseries utilizes both depictions of the leading executives at Purdue, and composite characters representing some of the victims.

Each episode of *Painkiller* begins with a real-life account given by a person affected by the OxyContin crisis, including parents who have lost children to addiction.

“The death of my son, Patrick,” explains one mother, “isn’t fiction. He died at age 24 ... after having ingested just a single OxyContin. And I will tell you that time does not heal all wounds. Grief is not a process. It’s a lifelong weight on our heart and on our soul.”

Another laments: “My daughter, Elizabeth, died because of opioid addiction. She was full of life and love and I miss her. I miss everything about her. Every day I wake up and I make sure I look at her because I never want to go a day without remembering the joy that she brought me.”

Yet another: “This is my son Matthew Stavron. He was addicted to OxyContin and he’s no longer here with us. I miss him. He was beautiful, I loved him. I miss his charming smile and I miss those, ‘I love you, Mama’ and those hugs;”

And this: “We lost our son Riley at 28 years old. He became addicted to OxyContin from a back injury. Uh... He tried his hardest to... get right and get straight again and get sober, and he just couldn’t do it. He was a wonderful kid, he had the biggest heart you ever saw, and our lives will never be the same.”

In the first episode, the series introduces Edie Flowers (Uzo Aduba), a fictional-composite African-American lawyer from Virginia, who serves as our guide through the complex events. We learn that she worked years

earlier for the US attorney’s office in Roanoke, Virginia investigating Purdue Pharma.

In the interests of dramatic coherence, the creators of *Painkiller* have compressed a myriad of lawsuits against Purdue, which occurred over the course of more than a decade, into “composites” as well. The series deals primarily with the early phase of the legal battles, leading up to Purdue Pharma officials pleading guilty in 2007 to the petty crime of “misbranding” and agreeing to pay a mere \$634.5 million in fines for claiming the drug was less addictive and less subject to abuse than other pain medications, an outright and life-threatening lie.

Flowers participated in that Virginia case, and much embittered by its result, less than a slap on the wrist, she travels to Washington D.C. years later to be interviewed by a law firm that is now pursuing a class action suit against Sackler and Purdue. This is the essential framework for the series, enabling Flowers to describe for the lawyers’ benefit how OxyContin came to be and how the Sacklers made their fortune.

She begins by telling the trio of attorneys about the patriarch of the family, Arthur Sackler, Jr. (Clark Gregg), who died in 1987. He was a psychiatrist who realized that he could make more marketing new medicines than being a doctor.

Edie tells the lawyers that Arthur Sackler “started this whole thing.” He was a psychiatrist “at the eve of the pharmaceutical revolution. In those days, the go-to move in mental health was a lobotomy. But lobotomies are a one-shot deal. No repeat customers. Arthur realized with the right pill, he’d have a customer for life. And he branded the new pill... A lobotomy in a bottle.”

The appalling Arthur, Flowers further explains, over images of this original Sackler, found out he was a better salesman than a physician, so he went ahead and bought two things: “A drug company and the country’s largest medical advertising agency.” Arthur Sackler grasped that marketing was the future of pills and “he hit the jackpot when they got the contract for Valium, creating the world’s first blockbuster drug.” (Arthur: “The drug you never knew you needed.”)

Arthur Sackler “may have created the modern pharmaceutical business,” continues Edie, “and made the family millions,” but it is his nephew Richard (chillingly played by Matthew Broderick), who unleashes a “monster” drug.

Flowers points out that Purdue took “one type of heroin wrapped in a time-release coating and swapped it for a much stronger one ... Richard had his designer drug ... And then Richard Sackler combined two of the most addictive substances: greed and opium.” The result was OxyContin.

Sackler hits upon the brilliant idea of sending out a squad of provocatively dressed female representatives like Britt Hufford (Dina Shihabi) and her protege Shannon Schaeffer (West Duchovny). These “little sexy aliens,” according to the film’s narrative, invade rural America, “zipping from town to town in their Porsches, handing out coupons for free opioids. Getting people hooked on their product.” The young women receive exorbitant commissions doing whatever it takes,

including selling themselves, to get doctors to prescribe Oxy. One character describes the highest-dose pill as “OxyCoffin.”

Flowers labels this small army of salespeople as “drug dealers in ponytails,” pushing “heroin in a pretty little pill.”

Individually embodying Purdue’s countless victims is Glen Kryger (Taylor Kitsch), a North Carolina auto-shop owner and family man prescribed the powerful drug after suffering a back injury on the job. Once addicted, Glen tragically loses everything, including his loving wife Lily (Carolina Bartczak). Before his unhappy end, he is recruited by Purdue to appear in a testimonial video singing the praises of Oxy’s benefits.

Richard conjures up visions of his Uncle Arthur to help him navigate through the process of turning Oxy into a blockbuster drug.

Revisiting the earlier events, Edie recalls getting a new boss, a U.S. attorney from Virginia named John Brownlee (Tyler Ritter), for whom she has great hopes in the battle with the Sacklers.

She points out that Purdue needed the US Food and Drug Administration to approve the drug. Initially reluctant, the FDA’s Curtis Wright (Noah Harpster) is eventually coopted by the company.

According to *Painkiller*’s script, Wright finally “approved the language Purdue needed. Their marketing plan for OxyContin hinged on a handful of words from the drug application signed and sealed by the FDA. ... ‘Delayed absorption, as provided by OxyContin tablets, is believed to reduce the abuse liability of the drug.’ What that means is that the FDA officially said that OxyContin is believed to be safer than anything else like it. It all comes down to those two words: ‘is believed’...”

Flowers observes that this phrase enabled those “little Purdue Malibu Barbies” to do “the exact same thing as every crack dealer in every corner in America, except they are getting rewarded for it, getting made rich off of it...They’re out on the streets, and they know, and they are getting their nails done. My mother was turned into a vegetable because of this.”

The pressure was mounting on Purdue. Edie remarks that the first US attorney “to pop” was Jay McCloskey of Maine. McCloskey sent a letter in February 2000 to 5,000 physicians in Maine, warning them about increasing problems with OxyContin: “I believe OxyContin to be the biggest criminal and social threat in Maine.” (McCloskey ends up working for Purdue.)

Edie recounts that “Richard and Purdue went out and bought the most expensive lawyers money could buy.” They included Mary Jo White, appointed by President Barack Obama in 2013 to head the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC); Howard Shapiro, general counsel for the FBI from 1993 to 1997; and Rudy Giuliani (Ned Van Zandt), whom Arthur refers to at one point as a “swamp creature.”

Although executives at Purdue were facing significant jail time in 2007, Edie relates that “Rudy called Congress. Congress called the White House. The White House called the DOJ [Department of Justice]. The DOJ called... Brownlee.

“Brownlee essentially had to cut a deal...And that’s how the f---g game is played. Half a million people die, and guys like Richard Sackler make a phone call in the middle of the night and absolutely nothing changes.

“Calling it [the 2007 agreement] a slap on the wrist would be an exaggeration. Purdue was making \$30 million a week. And the worst part... the very worst part of it all is that Purdue didn’t have to stop. They got to keep making OxyContin.”

In a postscript, *Painkiller* informs us that it “is estimated that over 300,000 people have died over the past two decades from overdoses involving prescription painkillers like OxyContin.”

As of “March 2023, final approval for Purdue Pharma’s bankruptcy is still pending. No member of the Sackler family has been criminally charged in connection with the marketing of OxyContin or any overdose deaths involving the drug.”

Moreover, the “Sackler family ‘is believed’ to be worth over 11 billion dollars,” despite the billions in fines they were ordered to pay.

*Painkiller*’s strongest elements is the presence of the real family members who introduce the various episodes, adding weight to the series’ indictment of the pharmaceutical corporations and the whole rotten system of health care for profit (the pharmaceutical companies made \$550 billion in the US in 2021).

These introductions came about by accident, as it were. Netflix’s legal department required “a standard disclaimer in front of every episode,” director Berg told the *Hollywood Reporter*. This didn’t “sit well” with the director, who proposed finding families with children who had died from OxyContin and have them read the disclaimer.

When Berg solicited participants, “the early response bowled him over. ‘We put a request out in just the Los Angeles community for any parents who would be willing to do this and tell their stories. And within the first 10 hours, I think we heard from 80 L.A.-area families who had lost children to OxyContin,’ Berg recalls. ‘OxyContin, you can almost think of it as a war. It’s an epic war that’s been going on for way too long with a very high body count.’ The director goes on to state his support for the writers and actors strike.

Berg propels the drama in a dynamic way. In addition, the horror of what the Sacklers are doing is incarnated in Broderick’s lethally understated performance. As narrator, Aduba aptly frames the complex structure and Kitsch as Glen anchors the series in a working class setting.

The series also contrasts the case of Edie’s brother, Shawn (Jamaal Grant), an imprisoned crack dealer doing hard time, with that of the untouchable, billionaire Sacklers. Thrilling and disturbing are the Purdue “Barbies” Shihabi and Duchovny, portrayed as vamp drug pushers, thoroughly imbibing the Purdue Kool-Aid.

Noteworthy as well is the culminating scene of a Purdue Miami rave/party that illustrates the corruption and depravity of the corporation—which clearly has nothing to do with human health. But neither do the Sackler family’s philanthropic efforts. They donated a small portion of their blood money to museums and galleries that willfully shut their eyes to the tainted source of the funds.

It is an astonishing list. The 2017 *New Yorker* article points to some of the “Sackler” contributions to art and culture: “The north wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a vast, airy enclosure featuring a banked wall of glass and the Temple of Dendur, a sandstone monument that was constructed beside the Nile two millennia ago and transported to the Met, brick by brick, as a gift from the Egyptian government. The space, which opened in 1978 ... is known as the Sackler Wing.”

Arthur, Mortimer and Raymond Sackler, all physicians, “donated lavishly during their lifetimes to an astounding range of institutions, many of which today bear the family name: the Sackler Gallery, in Washington; the Sackler Museum, at Harvard; the Sackler Center for Arts Education, at the Guggenheim; the Sackler Wing at the Louvre; and Sackler institutes and facilities at Columbia, Oxford, and a dozen other universities.”

Although the Sacklers obviously bear major, criminal responsibility, they are hardly alone. We pointed out in reviewing *Dopesick* that the “pandemic has witnessed vast and legal price-gouging and profiteering by Big Pharma. The industry has no interest in boosting vaccine manufacturing capacity that would push down prices for poorer nations, nor in eradicating a virus that has proved to be a gold mine.” *Dopesick* and *Painkiller* make an unanswerable case for the takeover of these enterprises run by sharks and their transformation into public utilities operated according to the health needs of the population.

As the WSWS recently argued: “Capitalism’s death march must be stopped in its tracks.”



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