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From Amsterdam, this is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking, and today's guest, the great American author and investigative journalist, Patrick Radden Keefe, knows irony when he hears it, such as when the patriarch of what would become an infamous family imparted these words to his sons.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: You know, we had such great plans for you, for you to become doctors, for you to get an education, but I can't pay for it. I don't have any money to give you. But then he says, but I have given you one thing, and it's the most important thing that a parent can give a child. I've given you a good name

Jonathan Groubert: And that name is Sackler. Frequent visitors to some of the world's great museums and educational institutions already know that name. The Sackler family name adorns the walls of Harvard, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oxford, the Louvre. The Sacklers are one of the richest families in the world. And they donate lavishly to the arts and sciences. Just where all that money came from was vague, until it emerged that the Sacklers were the owners of Purdue Pharma, responsible for making and aggressively marketing Oxycontin, the blockbuster painkiller that was the catalyst for today's opioid crisis. Opioids are responsible for the overdose deaths of nearly half a million Americans over the past two decades. Patrick Radden Keefe is a staff writer at the New Yorker and in his book Empire of Pain he paints an epic portrait of three generations of the family as well as the indifference to human suffering that built one of the world's great fortunes. The Dutch journalist Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal interviewed him at the Amsterdam public library, the OBA, in September of 2021. And the story's scale is, is so epic that I've left the interview run slightly longer than usual here. So, here is Patrick Radden Keefe.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: You focus most of the, at least the first chapters of the book, quite a big part of the book, on one of the brothers in particular; Arthur Sackler, who died in 1987, which is a decade before Oxycontin, the notorious drug, being introduced. Why focus on him so much? He's an intriguing character. Obviously, he's an art collector and everything. What makes him so important, even though he didn't even live to see Oxycontin, you know, get big?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, it's a great question and one that's come up often. It's funny, I have this colleague at the New Yorker, Jane Mayer, who wrote a wonderful book about the Koch Brothers, Koch Brothers, these kind of big time donors to conservative and libertarian causes in the United States. And when, when we talk about the Koch brothers, were really talking about two Koch brothers, there are four Koch brothers. So there are the two who are

involved in politics. And then there's a Koch brother who collects wine primarily and then a fourth one who collects castles.

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: Castles?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah. And Jane didn't really spend too much time on the wine collecting Koch brother or the castle collecting Koch brother for good reason, because the, the kind of center of her story was about money in politics. For me I suppose you, you could ask a similar question. Why focus a third of the book on Arthur Sackler, this guy who dies before the launch of Oxycontin and there are two answers. One is, I think Arthur Sackler is one of the great characters of the 20th century. I think he was a totally extraordinary figure. To me, he feels like he walked out of the pages of a Saul Bellow novel.

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: Three wives.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yes, three wives

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: That was not extraordinary in and of itself, but they....

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Patrick Radden Keefe: But the overlap was interesting. There's a, there's a period. There is a period in the book where there were three different women living in Manhattan, all of whom went by the name Mrs. Arthur M. Sackler, and I feel like this could only happen in the pre-internet era. But Arthur's connection is actually more, more intimate than that, in the sense that he, I would argue, created the world in which Oxycontin would later do what it did. So, so Arthur Sackler goes to medical school, but as a teenager when his family loses everything during the Depression, he had to work and the way he finds work is in advertising. He writes advertising copy, he becomes the advertising chief for his high school newspaper. He sells, he sells the Chesterfield cigarette ads, he advertises Chesterfield cigarettes to his fellow high school students and he ends up going into the pharmaceutical business, but specifically into pharmaceutical advertising.

And you know if any of you have watched the show Madman, in the 1950's, Arthur is kind of the Don Draper of pharmaceutical advertising. He's, he's got this incredible grasp for how you sell medicines, and he realizes that you don't, it's not really the consumer you sell to, it's the doctor and you sort of seduce the physician because the physician writes the prescriptions. And I interviewed for this book all these old guys, it's all guys in their nineties now who were in the Pharma ad business in the fifties, and they would all say Arthur Sackler invented the wheel, he invented this business. He was so creative, so protean, he had so many ideas.

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: He made valium big right?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: He made valium what it was. When Roche introduced the drug, valium, which at the time was the great blockbuster drug of its era, also known to be addictive. The marketing plan was designed by Arthur Sackler and he made a deal with Roche where he said: I don't want to do a standard fee arrangement, what I want is a series of performance bonuses pegged to the volume of pills you sell and not capped. So it just goes up and up and up and up and up, and the drug then becomes the most successful drug in the history of the pharmaceutical business at the time.

So, he becomes hugely wealthy selling Valium, and so Arthur does die in 1987. But what he does during his lifetime is break down the boundaries between medicine and commerce and kind of set into motion a series of very lucrative conflicts of interest and create a marketing paradigm for how you market a drug that is potentially addictive. And he kind of sets all this stuff up. And then the amazing thing is he dies in '87. And as I tell the story, his nephew, Richard Sackler kind of takes up the, the baton and takes it to its next extreme, with Oxycontin.

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: Just sticking to Arthur for, for a bit, it's, it's, basically it's too, well, it's a very American story, but it's also a deadly cocktail in the sense that it's, you know, Americans love medicine and love painkillers because, you know if you have a problem there's no problem that you cannot fix with either money or a painkillers. And then, on the other hand, it's, it's, it's an addiction to marketing. Whether it's selling a politician or selling, in this case, medicine. It's, it's, those two things that come together and that's where, you know, the ruining of America basically starts right.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I mean, I think that the, so the story in the kind of immediate sense is about this family in this pharmaceutical dynasty. But in in a broader sense it's a story about power and influence and the way in which you can, in the American system - and I'm sure there are aspects of the system here in the Netherlands that are very similar. I mean probably with all things; we Americans tend to take it to an extreme, a certain extreme. But with enough power and influence, if you're canny, there's sort of nothing that can't be bought and there's a whole realm of corruption that's not necessarily illegal corruption. I think of it as a kind of soft corruption, but the revolving door between regulatory agencies and private industry. You know, the ways in which powerful lawyers with good connections can be leveraged to spring you out of trouble when the authorities are coming after you. We see Arthur Sackler do all this and then we see it later with subsequent generations and Oxycontin.

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Elco Bosch van Rosenthal: Until then, until Oxycontin is introduced. Well, even after I guess, but it's parallel tracks because the introduction of the drug, which we will talk about,

was happening and then at the same time you mentioned it in your introduction, the Sackler name was being put on museums, he was collecting art and he really they didn't give interviews, but he really wanted the name to be seen everywhere, right. So he wanted to be a big society person in New York.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I mean you know there's this. So, there's this strange thing, which is that Arthur Sackler's whole business was a conflict of interest, and you really need to read the book to get the full measure of it. But I mean he, he's in pharmaceutical advertising but he also owned, was, was an owner with his brothers of a pharmaceutical company and he also had a medical newspaper which was given free to physicians. But it didn't acknowledge that he owned the newspaper and it had a lot of coverage written by journalist. It was very favorable to the pharmaceutical industry and it advertised drugs, that his brothers made and had handled other adds that came for products that he represented with his advertising agency and none of this is ever disclosed.

So, and then there's leaving aside the issue of the wives, so so for Arthur there was a sense in which he actually wanted to remain anonymous and behind the scenes as much as he could. I think, for fear, that if, if everything was disclosed, people might start asking uncomfortable questions at the same time. He has this desire to emblazon the family name all over the place and I couldn't really understand this. There's, there's a wonderful line. I was talking to an Irish interviewer about this book. I think he came up with this off the cuff and I was talking about the mania of the Sacklers for putting their name thing on buildings, and this interviewer said: So it's as if they had an Oedipus complex, so they have this Oedipus complex, where they're putting up the name and I was trying to understand that and I made this discovery.

I was ways into the research of the book, of this story that I tell in the book about Isaak Sackler, the original patriarch who during the depression, loses everything. His businesses kind of go belly up and he gathers his three sons who were just kids to him and he tells them: you know, we had such great plans for you, for you to become doctors, for you to get an education, but I can't pay for it. I don't have any money to give you. But then he says: but I have given you one thing and it's the most important thing that a parent can give a child. I've given you a good name and he says: you know, if you lose a fortune, you can always go out and earn another fortune, but if you lose your good name, you can never get it back. And it's not too much longer after that that Arthur starts making money and as soon as he starts making money, he starts making donations and as soon as he makes donations, he has his lawyers say: let's be clear, this is a transaction. This is not just charity here; this is a business deal. You're going to put the name above the door, so it's this weird thing where he's, he's trying to kind of obscure his own business relationships but also sort of posit the Sackler name as this, this great emblem of prestige.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Now during the writing process. And I don't know if you unraveled all this in chronological order. But did you develop, perhaps in the beginning, any or some sympathies for Arthur?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I think, if you think, if you read the book, well, let me before I even say that. The, there's a, there's a phrase that I often think about when I'm writing, which is, I've done some screenwriting over the years for Hollywood, nothing that you would have seen because none of it's gotten made.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: It was very niche.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, exactly, very, very niche, so niche in fact that that nobody made it. But, but there's a wonderful adage among screenwriters that when you're writing a villain in a movie it's important to remember that, if it's going to be a good villain, that your villain doesn't think he's the villain in the movie, your villain thinks he's the hero of the movie. It's a whole other movie for the villain and, and in real life most villains don't twirl their moustache and kind of cackle and know that they're the villain. And for me, when I'm writing, I think it's a useful rule of thumb, because it's important to remember that these are human beings and you may stand in judgment of them, but, but the story looks very different to them than it does to you. And I think that even if you are quite harsh with them and your assessment of them, which I am, I would say, with Arthur and some of these others, I'm not looking to caricature these people. I want to understand them. So that would be true if I'm writing about Chapo Guzman or, or anyone else. In the case of Arthur, he's, I mean he's so charismatic, he's this amazing kind of life force, I think it's hard not to be seduced just a little bit.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: But he is also an asshole to his whole family

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Patrick Radden Keefe: He is an asshole. But to me this is what makes him so rich as a character. It is that he can be both, and, and he's one of those people I've written about these people from time to time, who I mean, my last book is about Northern Ireland, Gerry Adams is one of these people too, where everyone around them is kind of obsessed with them and sometimes they, they are obsessed with them and love them. Sometimes they are obsessed with them and hate them, but everyone has a very strong view and even long after these people are dead, you know the kind of riddle of that person, the paradox of that person continues to haunt all the people who knew them, and Arthur Sackler was one of those people.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Let's go to Oxycontin, which, again, was introduced in 1996, it was admitted into the market, set the scene for us because the Reagan years were over, the Reagan revolution was over. There was a big sense of that the government should be small, not too much regulation, right. Is that how they got this medicine Oxycontin approved? Because before people said that Oxycodone, which is, which is part of Oxycontin, was too addictive and therefore it would not be permitted by the Medicine authority. Right, how, how come they, they accepted it even to [inaudible].

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Patrick Radden Keefe: So, there's, there's sort of a broad answer and a specific one. The broad answer would be that there was a reconsideration going on of the way in which pain is treated during this period of time. There were many doctors who felt that, certainly in the United States and the UK and elsewhere, that pain had not been adequately treated. The doctors didn't have a lot of education in pain. The doctors tended to think of pain as just a symptom of another thing and not as a condition in itself, that they should aggressively treat and that they were reluctant to prescribe opioids, these kinds of miraculous drugs that derived from the opium poppy, and that the reason that they'd been reluctant to do that was the fear of opioids being addictive.

So, you know, people used morphine and other opioids for cancer patients, end-of-life care, but it was kind of the solution that you kept on the top shelf, and you reached for it when other things failed or when somebody was at the end of their life. And Oxycontin came along, just at the point where a number of doctors were saying maybe we've been too conservative in our use of these drugs and we've let people suffer needlessly in pain. Maybe we should rethink this. So, the timing was great. The company also made a bunch of claims that in retrospect, were totally bogus about the drug. They said our drug is different from anything that's come before because they had this seal. So, when you say Oxycontin, so Oxycodone is where you get the Oxy from, and that's, that's an opioid. If you have ever taken Percocet, Oxycodone is an ingredient in Percocet and the Contin part is for continuous. So there's a seal that slowly filters the active ingredient into your blood stream over, in theory, 12 hours. In practice it didn't last that long.

And the idea was when you do it that way you can give somebody a huge dose: 80 milligrams. At the time they had a, they had a 160 milligram pill of Oxycontin, pure Oxycodone, way bigger than anything that you would have had, certainly in a Percocet or something like that, and the notion was that you just take it twice a day, you have to take it once every 12 hours, it means you could sleep through the night, it's a great marketing pitch, but wouldn't doctors be worried to prescribe it? That was one concern and then the other concern the company had, as they had previously had a cancer pain drug and they said, now the problem is there's only so many cancer patients. What if we could find a way to market this for other kinds of pain, back pain, sports injuries, fibromyalgia? You know, chronic pain, not even just severe pain. What about moderate pain? That could be tens of millions of people, and that was what they wanted to position the drug for. So how do you do that? Well, you have to overcome the reluctance of physicians to do it, and so you claim that it's not addictive, which is what they did. So that was the marketing pitch.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: So that's how I got permission from the Food and Drug Administration to even?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Well, this is still part of the general background. The specific story is the guy at the Food and Drug Administration who was in charge was a guy named Curtis Wright, who was an official at the FDA, who had to sign off on the drug, say it was safe to sell to consumers and also sign off on the marketing claims that they could make those bogus marketing claims I talked about. He signed off on everything and not too long after that Curtis Wright decided he might be ready to leave government and eventually he gets a job in the pharmaceutical industry. And I give you one guess what company he goes and works for, for three times his government salary.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: 400,000 dollars.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: So, so Curtis Wright was this guy whose job it was to sort of be the gatekeeper and he ends up sort of being the in-house advocate at the FDA for Oxycontin and then goes and joins the company.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: So, it's basically corruption. I mean, not in the most literal sense.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: This would be soft corruption in my view. I mean it's hard. You couldn't even find somebody at FDA or at Purdue Pharma who would tell you that that's appropriate. But it's not illegal and I'm afraid that sort of thing happens all the time. I mean this is, I just saw this again and again and again in terms of industry and government, that a lot of the time it's as simple as; you and I meet, your job is to regulate me, we have to meet because you're regulating me and deciding whether or not you can sell my drug. One day we have coffee and break-out session. And I say; so, how long have you been in government? You ever think about leaving? You ever think about getting a job in industry? If you ever do, you know, we should have a conversation. I've planted the seed, that's it. I've corrupted you. I've done nothing illegal but the ideas You've already been corrupted, I'm pushing on an open door. But I think that that sort of thing happens. That sort of interaction happens all the time and it's hard to legislate, that it's hard to, to control it.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: So, so my premise of this, this company, you know, surfing the wave of the need for small, small state deregulation, that, that wasn't really part of that. It wasn't the case that these authorities just were not very powerful anymore.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: There's some of that. I think that comes later when, when the federal government realizes there's a problem and they're wondering what they can do about it.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Now you mentioned that, that, Arthur, or the Sacklers, they chose to not aim for the patients but for the doctors make their life as comfortable as they as they could. I think you write in a book that they spent, this company. I think, six million dollars a year just for food and taking doctors out to dinner, right?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: 9 million.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: 9 million What else did they do? I mean, how did they, how did they get these doctors to write, you know, hundreds and thousands of prescriptions every year.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: So, so one of the critiques of the way in which pain had been treated was that doctors did not get a lot of formal education and medical school about the treatment of pain, and that was true. That was a totally legitimate critique. The company hired hundreds and hundreds of sales representatives and incentivized them in this interesting way. What they said was: we will give you bonuses. The bonuses will be pegged to the volume of pills that you can get doctors to prescribe. We're going to track it all very carefully and at every other pharmaceutical company, your bonus was capped and at Purdue Pharma, it wasn't. So, the more you get doctors to prescribe, the bigger your bonus is and it gets to a point where you have people making like \$200000 a quarter as a sales rep for Purdue Pharma and they would go out and meet with doctors, wine and dine them, bring them food anyway they could incentivize them.

The sales reps were notoriously often young females, right out of college, often quite attractive going and meeting with you know, harried middle-aged male doctors. I don't mean to suggest that anything untoward was happening. It's a little bit like the conversation just described to you. Every little subtle, dynamic, anything that can give you a tiny edge was, was used and you know I've interviewed a bunch of these sales reps. And they're going on, they're lying, they're saying the drug is not addictive and they, they would identify doctors who are, to my way of looking at things, really irresponsible doctors who were prescribing too much.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: And they were profiting from every prescription.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: They profited from every... So they, those were the doctors they lavished attention on and the company told them to. Inside the company they had a name

for those doctors. They called them whales, which is in Vegas, what you call the big-ticket gamblers.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: They would keep track of how many prescriptions, every doctor, wrote.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Every pill. Which also meant that the company knew that. You know, when you had some little rural osteopath in a tiny little part of Pennsylvania, a 100 miles from anything with a very small local population and he's like firehose-ing Oxycontin in every direction. They knew, because they had those numbers, that they knew that that the volume of pills that they were selling in this area was totally out of proportion to the local population. And it's that time of thousands. And they knew this everywhere because they tracked that data very carefully

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: And this was mostly still, I mean Oxycontin is being used in big cities as well. But this was mostly a flyover country problem back then. Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Vermont.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Initially it pops up in these very specific places. Yeah, Maine as well, it's the, it's these often quite rural, you know, in some cases post-industrial sort of rustbelt type, environment, generally white working class-a lot of people out of work, a lot of people working kind of tough manual labor jobs, a lot of people suffering from pain.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: And the medicine worked. I mean what about the other companies? Because the book obviously focuses on Perdue Pharma and reading the book it's hard to believe that there are other companies as immoral as this company is, but there were plenty more.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: There were. I mean, you know, as I said at the outset, the opioid crisis is a big, complex story. You don't get there with one family. As they say, it takes a village. And there were, you know, I would argue that there is total system failure in terms of every public institution that should have intervened. There are also a whole bunch of other pharmaceutical companies. I chose to focus on the Sacklers because I think that Perdue was first. I think they were the ones who changed the game. There's somebody, I quote in the book, who worked on Oxycontin at the company, who said it was the tip of the spear. So there were many others who came in after, and many of these companies are now dealing with the consequences of that, and so I think there's plenty of blame to go around. I don't mean to suggest for a moment that this is a story in which the Sacklers are the only culprits. I think they were the first and I think they are the most interesting.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Right, right. Was there any particular time in which you could give the Sacklers the benefit of the doubt in the sense that, did they know from the beginning that they were selling a product which was much more addictive than they originally portrayed, or did they just realize that later and didn't jump in?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: I've thought a lot about this. I think this is in large part of story about willful blindness and, in the first instance, part of the reason didn't know whether Oxycontin was addictive or not, as they didn't do any studies on it before they put the drug out there and said that it wasn't addictive. There were a lot of unanswered questions that weren't answered, because they weren't asked in the in the early going. In terms of what I said about the know, the villain in the movie, I am kind of inclined to give them a little bit of the benefit of the doubt in the sense that, so that was just reckless, just purely reckless what they did and greedy. And I think there was a sort of element of wishful thinking. They felt like what, if you know?

Literally they thought for thousands of years humans have struggled with opioids because on the one hand they have these amazing therapeutic benefits, they can make pain go away, it's true, but on the other hand they can be really addictive and we've known that. You go back, you know you can go back a long way. There's a very long literature on this and so there's the hubris of them saying: until us we cracked it, we figured it out. We've got this seal. So I think there's there's hubris and recklessness there, but were for me where it gets really morally grave, is when it turns out that that hypothesis is wrong. And in short order, all those sales representatives, those hundreds of sales representatives who are out across the country like the eyes and ears. They start hearing that people are abusing the drug, people are getting addicted to it, people are overdosing, people are dying and word goes back to headquarters. The company and the Sacklers have long told lies about when that, when they learned you know like what they knew and when they knew it. I was able to substantiate that at a very high level in the company. They knew very soon in the 1990's that there were real severe problems

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Because the people they sent into the field were truly alarmed. Most of them. Some had a conscience.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: I don't know, that they were... Some had a conscience, and even the ones who didn't have a conscience were kind of, would write these notes. I've seen them where they say: you know I talked to the doctor, the doctor keeps talking about the street value of Oxycontin. You know not a good sign when you're when you're selling a controlled substance and these notes would go back. And I guess so. So just on the question of when do you give them the benefit of the doubt? For me my harshest assessment would be and think about it. For any of you. Truly, you have a product, you put it out in the world. It's a smashing success. You're making billions of dollars. People are telling you you're a genius. All

your rival companies are trying to take a page out of your book and do the same thing, and then your employees come in and they say; so, I tell you what it's killing people, it's killing people and, it's probably not an option to stop the train, but I think it might be an option to slow the train down a little and say: hey, let's look at our marketing. Is there's something we're doing wrong. And what's amazing about the Sacklers and their company is when word came back, what they said was full speed ahead.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: I remember, I've done stories on Oxycontin and I think in Florida, where at a certain time the pandemic was, I mean hit pretty hard and we went filming at, I think they called it a pill mill, basically just a doctor's office. But this doctor would have bodyguards, armed bodyguards who would bring him to his car as if he was some, some, Mafioso, basically. Was, was that common practice? This was more mobster than a doctor and you would see it all over. I mean some doctors must have felt guilty, but I guess for some it was just too lucrative.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I mean it's a continuum. You always have crooks. In this case there were many doctors who, essentially, it's like a cash business. You know, people come in, they pay whatever it is that they give you 40 bucks and you give them fake prescription. You give them a prescription for a condition they don't have and then they go to a pharmacy. Sometimes the pharmacy was in on it too.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: The doctors became drug dealers?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: The doctor completely became drug dealers and many of them ended up going to jail. But what is interesting to me is that the company back in Connecticut that's making all the money. I mean not making like \$40 for a phony prescription. It's making billions of dollars every year. They're getting these reports from their sales representatives who are like; I did my call on the clinic in Florida. There was a line of 40 people outside the door. The parking lot is filled with out-of-state license plates. You know some people brought deck chairs because the wait was so long. It doesn't look like a doctor's office and when asked about this subsequently you know people of the company would say: you know it's not our job to judge how doctors practice medicine right.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Right, and that was it?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: That was it.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: When did the tables eventually turn on them?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: I mean, have they?

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Well, there is the settlement we'll talk about, but I mean they they, like you, said in your introduction, you couldn't even find the Sackler name on the website of Perdue Pharma. Quite a bit was written about the Perdue Pharma, but even then, the name wouldn't come up. But that changed at a certain time.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, there are sort of 2 timelines. I mean the first is having to do with the company, and in 2001 newspapers around the country start covering what's happening, because it's clear there's a big problem: Oxycontin is killing people in significant numbers. There's a lot of crime associated with Oxycontin. The New York Times, I tell a story by Barry Meier, who was an investigative reporter at the York Times, who writes a series of really groundbreaking stories about this. So, it starts to catch up with the company. In 2007 there's a federal criminal investigation in Virginia and the company actually pleads guilty and pays the 700 million dollar, 600 million dollar fine, but nobody goes to jail and it doesn't touch the Sacklers. What's really remarkable is that Oxycontin develops, you know people refer to it as hillbilly heroine. It develops a reputation. There's a lot of controversy around the drug and the company, but it doesn't catch-up with the family and this is what's so intriguing to me. The family during this period is still giving money away, still going to ribbon cutting. Their name is still going up left and right. You know they can show up benefits and galas and nobody's asking them impertinent questions.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: How is that possible? How was it possible that nobody made the connection? Basically, I mean there are many good, curious journalists like yourself.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: They did, they, just I mean Barry Meier wrote about it. Barry Meier said this company is owned by the Sacklers. I think they had, I think a few things happened. They had scrupulously kind of distanced themselves in the public eye from, from the company. They had very aggressive lawyers who, any time anybody started to think about writing about them, the lawyers came at them like a ton of bricks. They had PR spin doctors. I mean here are these amazing emails that I got, where there would be some really awful article about Perdue Pharma and what happened at the company. And the article will get circulated internally at the company and they'll say it's not too bad. They didn't mention the Sacklers till the end. So he's a sort of strange sense in which the company takes the takes the brunt of the negative coverage and the family is protected. There's a, there's a quote actually from a family lawyer that I quote in the book, who said the objective is to protect the family at all costs. There's something almost, kind of mafiosi about this, this tendency, so it doesn't catch-up with them really until 2018.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Would all this have been different if the most, most deaths would not have been in fly-over country? I mean the politicians don't go there as much as they... I mean. If this was a Washington, New York, Los Angeles problem, would it have been solved earlier? Or not solve, but you know more people would have been alarmed?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: It's a fascinating question and I don't really know how to answer it. I mean maybe, but the flip side of that is, you know, it's interesting cause there's a whole language that we now use to talk about the opioid crisis, where you may, may have already said it, and if I haven't I will. But when I talk about people who have been addicted to Oxycontin, I call them victims and I think there's an effort to destigmatize this kind of addiction in part because, and I haven't explained this part yet, but what the Sacklers and Perdue, did once, once it became clear that people were dying from the drug, they made this kind of fascinating pivot where they said: well, the problem isn't the drug right, it's the abusers, it's these reckless people with, you know, with poor moral character who would really be addicted to anything. They kind of want to be addicted. Guns don't kill people, people kill people, and this is, I'm afraid, a powerful strain in a kind of American libertarian thought, and it sort of took hold. And I think that was another way the family was insulated and the company was insulated.

But I talk about victims. I think it's good. We're sort of stigmatizing people who struggle with these drugs and but there are many people who say rightly, where was all this talk about victims during the crack epidemic, when these people were black in the 1980's? And so, I don't know. I mean the crack epidemic was in the cities. It was. It was, you know, people who were, were not powerful and were often, you know, kind of marginalized and disenfranchised by society who, who suffered there. But I don't know that the feeling of urgency was any greater there.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Now, while reading the book, I kept wondering, and I'm not a psychologist and I believe neither are you. But it would have, I mean it maybe would have even helped the Sackler's case if they would have shown remorse in some sense. But they don't do it in any sense, not now, not in '96

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I mean it's the weirdest thing, the, the you know. You try really hard to understand people. I interviewed many, many, many, many, many people who've worked for the family and known the family and worked at the company over the years. And one of the things that's so startling is that there are people who told me; you know I went to them ten years ago and said you give all this money away. What if you set up a foundation and put a 100 million dollars in it, which is nothing to you, and said this is to help treat the opioid crisis, the victims of the opioid crisis, and it would have been, and they could have at that point. Then they could today look back and say: look, for ten years we've been doing X, Y and Z. There's always been resistance, I think, for a number of reasons.

I think that rhetorically, they didn't even want to acknowledge that there was an opioid crisis. One of the one of the amazing emails that I got from just quite recently that's in my book, is Mortimer Sackler Junior, a second generation Sackler, I think in 2019, in an email to family members talking about the "so-called opioid crisis." So, this is the way they talk in private. So, I think some of it they don't want to acknowledge the opioid crisis. Some of it is this: this desire to demonize the people, to essentially say; the people get addicted to drugs, it's kind of on them. It's not, you know nothing to do with us. So why would we show any sympathy? It is a fear that they would appear to be conceding wrongdoing.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Right. And they are aggressive until the very end. You mentioned in the book John Oliver, the comic, who has done several segments which you can find on YouTube on Oxycontin and the Sackler family, and when they find out that he's doing these segments they're, they're suing him or at least trying to see him or warning him with letters and everything, and that's very common right. They're trying to stop people from, stop you from writing?

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Yeah, I mean, I think that this was a.... It was a tactic and I think it worked for a long time, this kind of heavy-handed you know somebody wants to say; hey, it seems there's problems with this drug rather than say; we're very interested. My goodness is our drug killing people that makes me uncomfortable. What they would say; is you'll be hearing from my lawyer and, and it worked for a long time. All right, it didn't work with John Oliver, didn't work with me. I mean I don't think it works any more.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Right. Your book came out in the US. I think you said April right, which was conveniently, at a convenient time. There were lawsuits going on and in September there was a settlement in which the Sacklers were, I think the, the plaintiffs were about, like thousands of states and cities and individuals, right? And they sued them and I think they have to pay for four or five billion dollars, the Sacklers, which is not a lot of money.

00:40:09

Patrick Radden Keefe: It's not a lot of money for them. No, I mean they, they just to clarify, they ended up in bankruptcy. So it's not that they were sued and those, those cases went to trial. What happened was there were more and more and more lawsuits against the company and eventually against the Sacklers themselves. And they did this amazing thing in 2019, where they said: company has got no money anymore and they kicked it into bankruptcy and you may be wondering, 35 billion dollars in revenue. How does the company has no money anymore? So it turns out that for ten years the family had been quietly siphoning money out of its own company. They took more than ten billion dollars out of the company and then, when all these lawsuits came, they declared bankruptcy for the company. And the outcome of the bankruptcy which has just been finalized this month is that they will give up their interest in the company. They have pledged to pay four point five

billion dollars to help remediate the opioid crisis, but they will make no acknowledgment of wrongdoing and this bankruptcy judge is going to insulate them from any future liability. So all those thousands of lawsuits, none of them can proceed. They've all been stopped permanently. So there's no future liability for the family, [inaudible] not from any lawsuits relating to any of this.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: Which, if you have as a family 12 billion dollars or 11 billion dollars and you have to pay through this system four billion. But then you're immune. You're basically off the hook.

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Patrick Radden Keefe: Absolutely and, and to put a finer point on it, I was interested in this because the thing about the 4.5 billion dollars. So first of all, the cost of the opioid crisis at this point is more than two trillion dollars, 4.5 billion is, it sounds like a lot, but it's not a lot. The other respect in which it's not a lot is that, so the family has roughly 11 billion dollars, an 11 billion dollar fortune. That's the estimate. They going to pay the 4.5 billion out over nine years. They insisted and I did some research and talked to some people who invest big fortunes for high net worth families and I said: if I have an 11 billion dollar fortune, what kind of annualized rate of return can I expect? Just in terms of interest and like a very conservative investment portfolio, they said five to six percent. So I said okay, so say I have a 4.5 billion dollar penalty that I need to pay out, but I can pay it out over nine years. And they said, oh, you don't have to touch your principal, you can just pay it with your return. When you're done paying the penalty, you'll be richer than you are today. So it's one of these kind of interesting things. I think about billionaire math. Right as we see .45 million dollars and it seems like a lot, and they see 4.5 million dollars over nine years and they think will be better off at the end.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: I mean with that conclusion: does your book, do you feel vindictive in a sense or not at all? I mean their name has been damaged forever. It's, it's you know, the Metropolitan. Most of these museums don't use the Sackler name anymore.

00:43:18

Patrick Radden Keefe: I believe some, I would say most still do. Till, I mean the trick is that these are, as I mentioned earlier, it was a transaction right, so that that means it's contract and the binding contract. So many of these museums which would like, they've all said that they want to take future money, but they're scared to take the name down.

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Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal: But would it be fair to say that after this whole saga that they came of out this really good.

Patrick Radden Keefe: Well, I think it depends on how you look at it. I mean I mean yes, in terms of justice and accountability, and money, this is a story of impunity and, and I actually

think we haven't given away too much tonight, if you do read the book, you'll see that impunity is in some ways its subject. It was always going to end this way. This is a story in which the bad guys, we're always going to get away with it in the end. The one bit of solace that I think people can take comes from that story about Isaac Sackler, where he said the most important thing that you can give a child is a good name and money is fundable. You lose a fortune, you can earn another fortune, but if you lose your good name you can never get it back and the name is coming down. You know it's come down at NYU and it came down from the Louvre. The Serpentine Sackler Gallery is now just the Serpentine again. It came down from Tufts University. There was an interesting, I took personal interest in an interview that the head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art gave to Time magazine, the Met Gala, this big annual kind of event, and the head of the Met did an interview time magazine and was asked: what about the Sacklers? What about the Sacklers? Will the Sackler wing remain in the Sackler wing? And he said we are considering that right now we are having active conversations about whether we'll take the name down or keep it up. And. and then he said I've been reading this book, Empire of Pain. Which I mean who knows what they'll do, but I'm encouraged...

00:45:16

Jonathan Groubert: That's Patrick Radde Keefe, speaking to Dutch journalist Eelco Bosch van Rosenthal here in Amsterdam last 29th of December, 2021. Keefe is also the host of the Wind of Change podcast detailing how the song by the Scorpions may have been a cold war weapon. I just had to listen and it's fascinating. Speaking of fascinating, did you know that you can go to our website, www.john-adams.nl/videos, where there's a link to the video of this extraordinary event? We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at www.john-adams.nl. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do, you get a discount to future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz. From Amsterdam, this was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.