Book Reviews

A Tale of Two Pharma Whistleblower Novels

*Big Pharma* and *Killer Drug*
By John Mack and Jane Chin

My summer reading included two novels about the pharmaceutical industry that featured industry whistleblowers and/or were written by whistleblowers.

The first novel I read was *Big Pharma, The Novel*, written by John Prieve, a former pharmaceutical executive. The story is summarized in the promo thusly: "As Jack Ford ascends the corporate ladder within Alsace Pharmaceuticals, a powerful Fortune 500 company, he is exposed to the ultimate in corporate espionage, deception, and graft. To avoid federal prosecution for his own illegal promotional and contracting practices, Jack is forced to cooperate with Food and Drug Administration agents assuming the unwanted role as a corporate whistleblower."

The other novel I read, *Killer Drug*, is the second by Peter Rost, a well-known whistleblower and former Pfizer executive. His first book, *The Whistleblower: Confessions of a Healthcare Hitman*, was a whistleblower tell-all that told the story about his case against Pfizer (for more on that, see "[Peter Rost: Whistle Blower, Pharma Blogger, ???]").

To quote the promo for *Killer Drug*: "The CIA on June 26, 2007 declassified secret documents that revealed the Agency had relations with commercial drug manufacturers, whereby they passed on drugs rejected because of unfavorable side effects. *Killer Drug* is a thriller about one such drug company. In the book, however, the agency is in cahoots with the drug company (Xenal) to specifically manufacture a drug that kills people, by which I mean mosque-going Muslims throughout the Arab world!

**Separating Fact from Fiction**

Although whistleblowing figures prominently in both novels, the two are as different as night and day. *Killer Drug* is the night—very dark and not much depth regarding real-world Pharma marketing practices—whereas *Big Pharma* is the day—shedding light on real-world pharmaceutical marketing and sales practices.

*Killer Drug* is completely fictional—unless you believe that there really are corporate executives that hire assassins to kill whistleblowers and other corporate executives. In fact, about 80% of the characters in the book are murdered by other characters!

One reviewer on Amazon.com, “Grisham Fan,” whom I suspect is really an alias for the publisher or even Rost himself, “actually” believes drug companies do this sort of thing! “Much of the story,” says Grisham Fan, ”is actually very realistic, and makes you wonder what Rost really knows about the drug industry.” Realistic is hardly a phrase I would use to describe this book.

Whatever Rost knows about the drug industry, his goal in this book is certainly not to tell us and thereby educate us in an entertaining way about the real-life business of the pharmaceutical industry. He does, however, attempt to provide action and exotic locales. I just wish there were more details.

John Prieve’s book, on the other hand, is chuck full of factual information about how the drug industry manages and manipulates managed care clients. *Big Pharma* is too bland and mundane to be a thriller—not a single person is murdered and the CIA never enters the story. This is just how I imagine life in a real drug company!

Let’s take a closer look at these books, starting with *Big Pharma*.

**Big Pharma**

Jack Ford, the main character in *Big Pharma*, is a lowly physical therapist with a limited career path. Jack needed to change careers and make lots more money so that he could stop arguing about money with his wife, Lexi, who dreams of shopping in the nice shops along the Champs Elysees. Lexi also fantasizes about Jack wearing nice suits, oxford shirts, and the winged-tip shoes that pharmaceutical sales reps prefer. After Jack told her of his decision to become a pharmaceutical sales rep, Lexi decided to give him a little “reward” in bed. Hey, it could happen!
Jack dutifully climbs the corporate ladder until he is exposed to the ultimate in corporate espionage, deception, and graft! According to the promo copy: “To avoid federal prosecution for his own illegal promotional and contracting practices, Jack is forced to cooperate with Food and Drug Administration agents assuming the unwanted role as a corporate whistleblower. While Jack provides insider information that will ultimately penalize Alsace [the name of the drug company he works for] and change an entire industries’ promotional practices, he experiences profound life changes. But not before the greedy, soulless Alsace corporate executives exact their last revenge.”

Frankly, I have forgotten what revenge the bad corporate executives wreaked upon Jack, so I’ll let Jane Chin, President, Medical Science Liaison Institute LLC, take it form here.

A Review by an Insider
[The following is excerpted from Jane Chin’s original review of Big Pharm. Jane warns that her review contains plot spoilers. Don’t worry, the plot is not as exciting as the pharma marketing details that you’ll learn about.]

John Prieve described his book, Big Pharma, as “A medical thriller set in the pharmaceutical industry that weaves together fact and fiction into a fascinating tale of greed and power.” I’m not sure about the “medical thriller” part, but I guarantee you will find a greed-ridden [story] reading in this book.

I found Big Pharma to be an easy read and the kind of book that you can carry onto airplanes if you have a few hours to spare and aren’t at the liberty of firing up your company laptop to type up your business plans. Big Pharma can also be a good way for you to strike up a conversation with your seat mate. Unless, of course, you happened to sit next to someone from AMSA’s PharmFree initiative or Public Citizen or who is wearing a No Free Lunch pin, in which case you may be doing most of the listening about how corrupt the pharmaceutical industry is regardless of what Big Pharma described.

Anyway, Big Pharma wouldn’t give you much to counter your seat mate’s arguments of industry greed, deception, and corruption.

Those of us who have worked in “big pharma” and “big biotech” may read John’s book and experience what I experienced: much glee (“I bet he’s talking about {competitor company}”; those guys are totally unethical!), some relief (“I guess other companies did that too…”), a twinge of guilt (“I didn’t know we weren’t supposed to do that…”), and some reproach toward the author (“Isn’t this industry’s reputation bad enough without more fuel to the flame?”). I always thought it ironic at how much the industry restricted its constituents from their public opinions, and the slew of recent books published by ex-industry employees (Reidy’s Hard Sell and Rost’s The Whistleblower) paint a less-than-flattering picture of the drug mother ship.

Unlike Reidy’s and Rost’s books, which are reality-based, Prieve’s story is “fictionalized reality” and blends an element of truth into what is mostly a fictional character. I imagine that the protagonist Jack Ford is a composite of many characters whom we may recognize working at our industry, even today: a workaholic and opportunistic person who ignores ethics when they become inconvenient. Indoctrination and repeated brainwashing by Jack’s company, Alsace Pharmaceuticals, has turned someone who started out with stars in his eyes into a convicted felon.

If this sounds a bit far-fetched, that’s because the story’s fictionalization wasn’t as satisfying for me as the bits in the book I know had truly happened (happens?) in the pharmaceutical industry. Those of us who have worked in industry and especially “carried the bag” can identify which parts in the book are based in reality and which are based in fiction. Sometimes I thought the fiction clouded the real juice in the story: dine and dash “programs”, doctors who have played drug companies to extract handsome “side business” incomes, and executives who talk about patient care one minute then ways to manipulate the system the next minute.

[Mack: Here’s a passage from the book that demonstrates its commitment to describing how things work in the managed care market. When Jack was promoted to a National Account Manager, his job was to get Alsace’s products on the formulary of a big insurance company. He already wined and dined and bribed the Pharmacy Director, but he still had to sweeten the deal to get the P&T Committee to consider adding a new drug.

Prieve describes what the typical P&T Committee is interested in: “up front discounts, back end rebates, market share tiers, volume tier incentives, VIP monies, research grants, estimates on product failures, non-compliance with products, estimates on hospital admissions or emergency room visits, additional physician office visits, loss of existing rebates or discounts on current products, and substitution with new drugs through the pharmacy

Continues…
mail order service.” No mention at all of quality of care outcomes or other such patient benefits!

My biggest criticism of the book is my bias with the protagonist Jack Ford: I didn’t find him very likeable, and that was before he became an adulterer. It was like having to choose between whom I detested more - Jack Ford or the Alsace Executives who framed him. Although the book evolved through the years of Jack Ford’s career and his rise up in Alsace, I’d have liked to see more “character development” (no pun intended) with Jack, especially in situations where his value system is chipped away by one ethical compromise over another.

There are many pharmaceutical employees today who have faced tremendous internal conflict over what they believe is ethical behavior versus what their executives may be demanding of them. I know that most of our industry’s constituents have very strong sense of ethics and value systems, and they are sometimes forced to choose between toeing the line and sleeping well at night. I wish we had a better representation of these constituents in Big Pharma. It would also give readers who are not familiar with the pharmaceutical industry a palpable sense of conflicts of interest and how this is a very human traits rather than just a drug industry issue.

I hope Big Pharma can open up a dialog within pharmaceutical companies to see how executives can be consistent with their messages and actions.

Thanks for that review, Jane!

**Killer Drug Review**

With regard to **Killer Drug**, there’s no such hope of it generating much real world dialog unless it’s about methods of killing people or how to hype a book (more on that later).

As far as the writing craft, I agree with Steve Woodruff who wrote an “accelerated review” of the book on the Impactiviti blog:

“I read a fair number of thrillers, and enjoy the craft of great writing, so there are clearly aspects of Killer Drug that reveal it as a rookie effort. Many of the characters are 2-dimensional; the good and bad folks are pretty much black and white with little nuance. Character development isn’t full-flowered; plot elements are a bit thin, and often far-fetched. Even a really bad pharma company wouldn’t be pulling the stunts attempted by those at Xenal Pharmaceuticals in this tale. Stylistically, I found myself sensing that the author was trying hard to craft his words - at times, the writing just felt a bit forced.” (See “Killer Drug: An Accelerated Review.”)

Nevertheless, Rost does make an attempt to compensate for this lack of character development, by providing action in faraway locales rather than limiting the action to executive suites and fancy resorts like Big Pharma does. In fact, **Killer Drug** is more like a movie script than a novel. Undoubtedly, the author hopes for a movie deal.

The book starts out with the murder of George Papadimitrou, a Xenal executive, on his way to the FBI with incriminating documents. He was shot with a poison dart and careened off a cliff in his “beautiful BMW convertible.”

**Much Murder and Mayhem Follows**

But before all that, we are introduced to Alex McGraw who needs to find a new job in the pharmaceutical industry. He’s already a one-time whistleblower and he’s getting the cold shoulder from his current company. But Xenal Pharmaceuticals needs someone to replace good old George right away! And they ain’t too careful about doing a background search. Alex is hired immediately.

Actually, someone did do a background search on Alex. But the fact that Alex was a whistleblower fit this person’s plan to take over Xenal.

And so it goes, as everyone plots to kill or incriminate everyone else. In the end, Alex becomes a serial whistleblower and works to overthrow Xenal. As he says early on in his career at Xenal, “With all the ugly stuff pharma companies have done in the past, I guess it was just a matter of time until one started killing its own employees. I just can’t believe that I ended up there.”

Behind it all is the CIA, which needs Xenal to produce Convulsor, a drug that is useful because it kills people. Imagine that!

“The CIA and the Defense Department will in all likelihood become primary customers of Xenal,” says Xenal CEO, Judith Metcalf. “This was a direction we took quite deliberately. We realized that we could use our skills to save human lives in the defense of our country and not limit ourselves to traditional pharmaceuticals. Not surprisingly, it may become one of our most profitable areas. You can’t hope for a more reliable customer than the leading government in the free world.”

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I won't give the ending away as far as the hero is concerned. But I already alluded to the fate of the Muslim world as Convulsor is launched by the CIA:

"[The newspaper article] reported that a number of mosques in a certain Mideast country had seen their number of worshippers drop dramatically. There also were rumors circulating that attendees at mosques around the globe, that had attracted fundamentalists and hosted suspected terrorist cells, were succumbing to a strange disorder that resulted in blisters, violent behavior, convulsions, and death. As a consequence, mosques that had once been filled to overflowing now had virtually emptied, with many worshippers blaming an American/Israeli conspiracy for the alleged, mysterious plague. In response, a U.S. Government spokesman denied such charges categorically."

"They did it," said Alex.

Yes, Alex, they did and thanks for that Charlton Heston, Planet of the Apes, moment!

The Rost Hype Machine
It is not possible to write a review of a Rost novel without discussing the hype that he has built around it.

These days, Rost promotes his wares on TWO blogs: his own Question Authority and Brandweek's NRx, where he has recently taken up the role of resident blogger after the departure of Jim Edwards. Unfortunately, there is now very little difference between the two blogs—both are Rost promo outlets (see "The Rost Self-Promoting Spin Machine is in Full Gear!" and "What's Brandweek's NRx Strategy?").

On August 10, 2007—the same day the book was published and announced—Rost posted this to Brandweek' NRx blog:

My new book - KILLER DRUG - on Amazon's top 25 legal thrillers list!

My new book "Killer Drug," launched today, is already on Amazon's top 25 legal thrillers list. As someone reading what I'm writing every day on this blog, I thought this might interest you . . .

A few days later, on Question Authority, Rost claimed that "KILLER DRUG Monday evening: #35 among legal thrillers."

But could these ratings have been manipulated by Rost and/or his publisher as one anonymous commenter to my Pharma Blogosphere blog pointed out on August 14, 2007?

"I cannot believe the incredible spin Rost placed on his book," says the anonymous commenter, "...posting how it reached #24 on Amazon.com! Anyone can get their publisher to buy a few thousand books and watch rankings increase. But, now...it's back where it belongs...#92,454 and is not ranked in the legal thrillers anymore! He deleted my posts from his website because I simply checked to see if it was #24 by using the link that HE provided...and since his book wasn't even in the top 100, I simply made him aware of the fact since Amazon is updated on an hourly basis! I was a fan of Rost, but now I am sick of his shameless plugs and lack of integrity regarding the Madison Avenue promotion of his book. From now on, my two most reliable sources with relevant information regarding my industry will come from Mr. Mack and Mr. Silverman! Thank you guys for keeping it real and informative with just a hint of sarcasm!"

Some bloggers in the Pharma Blogosphere™ are growing weary of Rost’s self-promotion. Pharm Aid, for example, submitted this comment to one of my posts on the subject:

"Since coming to Brandweek NRx, I have received so many self-promotional e-mails from Rost," said Pharma Aid. "I almost started filtering him...but then thought better of it. I've decided to blog about his self-promotion..."

Pharm Aid continues to monitor the progress—or lack thereof—of Killer Drug sales on Amazon.com with weekly reviews of its online ratings.

As of this writing (August 16, 2007), less than one week after Rost's promo posting, Killer Drug is ranked #239,194 on Amazon.com overall and does not even appear on the micro-genre "Legal Thrillers" list, which includes only the top 100 books in that category.