

The Body Hunters

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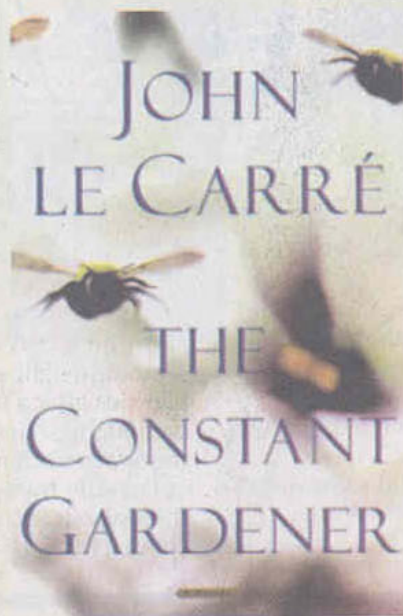
Shortly before I started work on my book *The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What to Do*

About It,^[1] a friend gave me John le Carré's newly published novel, *The Constant Gardener*, and urged me to read it right away. I did as I was told, and found the tale apposite, to put it mildly.

The villain is a global pharmaceutical company called Karel Vita Hudson (KVH). The heroine, Tessa Quayle, is the wife of a low-level British diplomat stationed in Nairobi, Kenya. She stumbles across evidence that KVH is testing a dangerous tuberculosis drug, called Dypraxa, on powerless and unsuspecting poor Africans, and not reporting the resulting deaths. When she threatens to expose the company, she is brutally murdered, and the British government colludes in the cover-up. Her husband, Justin Quayle, a seemingly docile civil servant at first, becomes obsessed with finding out why his wife was murdered and by whom. He finally does, and at the end of the book, he too is murdered. In between the deaths, we follow Justin's gradual awakening to the ruthless activities of a corporation too powerful to be accountable to anyone.

Now *The Constant Gardener* has been released as a film, starring Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz and directed by Fernando Meirelles. It is both better and worse than the book. Visually, it is stunning. The many aerial shots of Kenya show the stark beauty and sweep of the African countryside, and the film also conveys in its urban scenes the miserable overcrowding and hopeless poverty in Nairobi, something the book only suggests.

Where the film most improves on the book is in its treatment of the main characters. Fiennes and Weisz portray the relationship between Tessa and Justin as touching and believable, something the book fails to do. Le Carré presents Justin as self-contained



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to the point of inertness and seemingly with no serious interests beyond his garden. It hardly seems plausible that such a man would throw over his career, and risk his life, to investigate the death of his wife. In this film, Justin is revealed as not so much passive and narrow as controlled and quietly determined. And Weisz portrays Tessa, a passionately uninhibited champion of the poor and downtrodden, as a shrewder and more perceptive woman than the one we find in le Carré's book; she does not share her discoveries about the drug companies with her husband for fear of compromising him. As in the book, Tessa's murder takes place at the beginning, and we come to know her through flashbacks. But Fiennes's face at hearing of her death, controlled and virtually immobile, somehow manages to convey the enormity of his loss as well as his determination to find out the truth about her death.

The film falls far short of the book, however, in telling us what KVH (for some reason renamed KDH in the film) was up to; it never explains why every institution that might have interfered with the company, including the British government, was colluding with it. We only get hints. We are told in passing that KDH and the people it controlled coerced poor Africans into acting as guinea pigs by denying them medical care unless they took part in company experiments; but we learn little about the rules which prevent that sort of coercion in prosperous countries but not in poor ones. We're told that deaths were covered up literally; bodies were thrown into a lime pit and their existence denied. But we learn little about why that was done, or why companies conduct clinical trials (that is, tests on human beings) in the first place, and why they find it advantageous to do so in Africa.