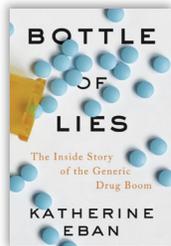


Bottle of Lies: The Inside Story of the Generic Drug Boom
By Katherine Eban, ISBN 978-0-06-233878-5



Katherine Eban's *Bottle of Lies* is a remarkable piece of investigative journalism, one she has been working on for over a decade, though the story she tells has roots digging even decades deeper. The focus of her narrative is the Indian pharmaceutical company Ranbaxy Laboratories. Founded by the Singhs in 1961, Ranbaxy was operated by the family for the majority of its years of operation. Despite being worth billions of dollars, the Singhs ran Ranbaxy like the family-owned-and-operated corporation it was. The company essentially folded in 2014 when it was absorbed by Sun Pharma in the wake of enormous controversy, including recalls and reports of glass fragments in prescription capsules.

But, as Eban herself admits in her opening Author's Note, her interest in generic prescription drugs did not start with Ranbaxy. In 2008, the host of an NPR radio show called *The People's Pharmacy* reached out to Eban with concerns expressed by his listeners that their generic drug replacements for brand-name pharmaceuticals were not working. Patients with an established brand-name drug regimen found themselves relapsing when their prescriptions switched to the cheaper, more affordable generic version. Eban did what investigative reporters do best--she investigated. Her first piece on generic drugs was published in *Self* in 2009. It was her reporting for that first article that inspired *Bottle of Lies*.

Ranbaxy was the focus of an investigative follow-up piece Eban wrote for *Fortune* in 2013. It was in May of that year that the corporation's corrupt manufacturing and management practices became the center of media attention. Felony charges were brought against the company in the United States as the result of more than half a decade of FDA investigations, sparked by the actions of a single whistleblower: Dinesh Thakur. The company pleaded guilty, to the tune of a \$500 million dollar settlement.

Ranbaxy's fall from grace--it went from winning awards for brand trust to publicly pleading guilty to multiple felony drug fraud counts--consumes the majority of Eban's narrative. Her key protagonist, Dinesh Thakur, is the former employee turned whistleblower who brought evidence of the company's malpractice to the FDA. Thakur's journey, from a respected employee at Bristol Meyers-Squibb, one of America's prestige brand-name pharmaceutical companies, to one who resigned amidst a cloud of controversy at a generic drug company in India, provides a lens through which Eban encourages her readers to view the web of lies and deceit that dominate the generic drug industry.

The Ranbaxy news is already over half a decade old at this point. There is some semblance of justice as one reads, knowing the bad guys got caught, so to speak.

Reading *Bottle of Lies* is like watching *The Untouchables*--you know Elliot Ness got Al Capone in the end, because Capone died in jail. But you still watch the movie because you want to know how--and that's why you need to read *Bottle of Lies*.

Though Thakur dominates much of the narrative, other crusaders of pharmaceutical justice make noteworthy and repeated appearances, such as FDA inspector Peter Baker. Baker uncovered the unsettling reality that generic drug companies not only manufacture and distribute defective drugs to American consumers, they do so around the world. Often, the generics shipped to third-world countries in Africa are those that did not pass muster to be sent to the United States. We may not be getting the good stuff, but Americans are also not the ones getting the worst stuff.

At the heart of the generic drug controversy is the very definition upon which they are based: bioequivalence. As long as a generic drug has the same amount of active ingredient (give or take) as the name-brand drug for which it is being substituted, it is considered an equal substitution. But there is a lot more to prescription medication than active ingredients, and not all generics are created equal. At the end of the day, do generics cost less money to purchase at the pharmacy than name-brand prescriptions? Oftentimes, insurance covers the full cost of the generic, rendering it seemingly free to the average consumer. But the real cost of generic prescription medication is often that of patient health.

If you have ever taken a generic prescription medication, you need to read this book, especially if you take a generic prescription medication on a regular basis.

*Disclosure: Katherine Eban spoke to a class I attended as a journalism student at NYU about her reporting on Ranbaxy, and the process by which she conducted her investigative reporting.

Review by Jeanette S. Ferrara, MA