

Battling in the Painkiller Trenches

The aspirin industry's large companies, "selling equally effective products with big potential profits," act as an excellent laboratory for understanding the machinations of the free market. In *The Aspirin Wars*, Charles Mann and Mark Plummer provide a lively and informative account of the business end of aspirin's history.

The Aspirin Wars: Money, Medicine, and 100 Years of Rampant Competition

by Charles C. Mann and Mark L. Plummer. Harvard Business School Press, 1991 (1993, paperback). \$16.95.

by Shari Rudavsky

When people talk about the drug wars these days, they are rarely referring to aspirin. In fact, of all the contentious legal and illegal drugs on the market, aspirin appears to be one of the more innocuous members of the pharmaceutical cornucopia. Yet, Charles Mann and Mark Plummer have managed to write a gripping account of the internecine struggles among the various pharmaceutical companies that have produced aspirin and other pain killers over the course of this century. The more-than-300-page culmination of Mann and Plummer's effort, *The Aspirin Wars: Money, Medicine, and 100 Years of Rampant Competition*, takes the reader from the first marketed aspirin medicine to today's debate on what the "miracle" drug can and cannot treat, all with a concerted attention to detail and style.

Mann and Plummer have done an exhaustive job of research, combining personal interviews, company archives, court decisions, and a host of other sources to compile a history of a product that for many readers will be a staple of their medicine cabinet, desk drawer, or purse pocket. This book could have been of the boring take-two-aspirin-and-wake-me-in-the-morning variety. But *Aspirin Wars* has a feel of fictionalized non-fiction that keeps you swallowing the story.

In The Beginning: Bayer

After a brief modern-day prologue, Mann and Plummer take the reader back to late nineteenth century Germany where Carl Duisberg, a young executive of a local dye company, Farbenfabriken Bayer, was trou-

Shari Rudavsky is a doctoral candidate in History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania.

bling over how to expand the company's business into some venture that offered greater success than a new shade of dye. His answer: a promising new compound that seemed to alleviate fever and pain. From this proto-aspirin grew what was in 1990 a \$2.668 billion painkiller industry.

Duisberg, whom Mann and Plummer paint as the father of aspirin, transported



In Canada, "Aspirin" is still used as a brand name. [Sterling Health]

his already successful drug across the Atlantic at the turn of the century, hoping to tap new markets for painkillers. Instead, within the course of a decade, the German Bayer company's American plant became a corporate prisoner of war. Once the hostilities ended, the Americans showed little interest in returning this particular spoil and auctioned the plant off as alien property to the highest bidder. Sterling Products became aspirin's new U.S. producer.

Begun as a patent medicine company, Sterling planned to use the Bayer name and the Bayer aspirin product as an international calling card for pharmaceutical legitimacy. The fact that the paternal Bayer company was still producing the same product—although no longer in the

U.S.—did not deter Sterling in the least. Thus was fired the first salvo in what Mann and Plummer refer to as the aspirin wars: the constant competitive struggles among the makers of this cure-all drug, as well as between the producers and the government agencies that have regulated its marketing.

Adam Smith Would Have Been Proud

As Mann and Plummer show, the history of aspirin competition provides an object lesson in abject capitalism. They write: "In capitalist societies, such a situation—companies selling equally effective products with big potential profits—virtually guarantees furious competition, the type Adam Smith had in mind when he wrote of the awesome powers of the 'invisible hand,' the free market. And, indeed, the ten firms [that currently produce analgesics]...have a record of industrial warfare that could serve as a chapbook to the means—honest or unscrupulous as they may be—by which modern corporations vie for superiority. Their struggle provides a vest-pocket history of the mixture of marketing, litigation, technology, and competition that characterizes so much of business, and of life, in this century. Another way to put it is that the annals of aspirin give a glimpse of the incredible lengths to which people will go to put something in a box and sell it."

Aspirin Wars is by no stretch of the imagination a vest-pocket history (unless one wears a very large suit) nor is it a story of people merely putting drugs in a box and selling them. Rather, the book includes tales of international maneuvering, a variety of courtroom battles, and medical breakthroughs all under the

rubric of tracing aspirin's career trajectory through pharmaceutical history. In the interest of enlivening their tale, Mann and Plummer have ferreted out minutiae about the history of aspirin that would make for good cocktail conversation at almost any gathering.

Even more amazing is that every one of these seeming asides has a role to play in the drug's ascension to public prominence. Consider, for instance, the patent business in general, rife with such anecdotes as Sterling's origins, which Mann and Plummer describe in an appropriately dry tone: "a producer of No-To-Bac, a nicotine cure that left users constipated; and the California Fig Syrup Company, producers of a laxative. (The pieces of the infant company were, one observes, synergistic.)"

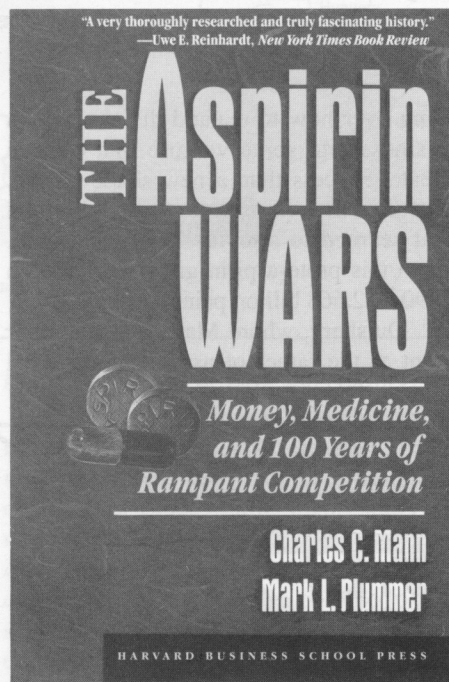
Behind such quips one can sense a synergistic collaboration between the two authors. Mann, a freelance journalist, and Plummer, an economist, have drawn upon the assets of each of these professions in the *Aspirin Wars*. Mann's journalistic training reveals itself in the extensive interviews woven artfully into the text that help bring much of the recent dry economic history to life. Only occasionally does one sense a tension in style that might arise from the somewhat uncommon literary marriage of an economist and a journalist.

Outside the Business Arena

Certain oversights in *Aspirin Wars* may prove problematic to some readers. Mann and Plummer say in their acknowledgments that they were attempting to examine the "history of a commodity." There are several ways to go about such an investigation, and the tack the authors take at times may not necessarily be the most intriguing. From its opening in an unadorned Food and Drug Administration conference room, the book follows the history of aspirin primarily through drug developments, corporate competition, scientific studies, and political permutations. The authors pay close attention to the personalities involved in each stage of these games: we learn the motives of the pharmacists who devised the various pain relievers, the company executives who marketed them, the physicians and researchers who tested their efficacy, and the government officials who attempted to determine their safety.

Missing from this broad picture, however, are the consumers. To their credit, Plummer and Mann do discuss

various advertising campaigns that took place throughout the century. But these campaigns arise in the context of competitive maneuvering between companies, rather than as a pitch to the stressed-out office worker or housewife choosing how to get "fast relief." Nor do they spend much time discussing the way physicians might decide which "two aspirin" to prescribe before seeing their patients in the morning. The reader is left wondering whether the drug companies ever received any written feedback from their customers (before the 1-800 hotline) and



if so, what complaints and compliments such missives contained.

Mann and Plummer also gloss over the changing history of aspirin advertisements. The book does contain a few obligatory reproductions of advertisements, but the authors present these ads only in the context of whether they proved economically successful, and/or legally viable. Such monetary measure of success may mirror the concern of the companies themselves, but it also obscures what has come to be known as the subliminal side of advertising. Because of the emphasis on the political and pharmaceutical history of aspirin, the book's transitions from time period to time period are often abrupt, jumping from one time-line event in the history of aspirin to another. This almost dogged attention to the "great" events of aspirin's history leads the authors to underplay events without clear political or pharmaceutical overtones—occurrences that sometimes tell a more

subtle tale of aspirin's appeal.

For instance, Mann and Plummer mention the medicine show-esque promotions of aspirin in Latin America, but do not delve into the deeper meaning of such cultural clashes. The image of company trucks equipped with movie projectors touring rural Andes village to host outdoor viewings of the film "Agiles Patinadores" (Agile Skaters—as in ice skaters) suggests that the story of aspirin is more than an economic and political struggle among pharmaceutical companies; it has cultural and social ramifications that Mann and Plummer unfortunately leave unexplored. What cultural attitudes towards pain does the use of aspirin over the past century connote? Why is aspirin so readily marketable wherever it goes?

Of course, the easy answer to this question lies in the medical fact that aspirin works. It alleviates not only headaches but a host of other ills, from fevers to menstrual cramps to swollen joints. In addition, as Mann and Plummer detail at the end of the book, in the past five years aspirin has been heralded as a potential preventive drug for heart attacks. Mann and Plummer do an excellent job of describing the physiological aspects behind aspirin's success. Their descriptions of the pathways of aspirin and the numerous medical studies done on it convey the science without sacrificing style. But in the end, their emphasis, like that of their subjects the drug companies, remains on the market share figures. Aspirin may contain all these wonderful properties, the authors conclude, but the predominant question is still which brand moves fastest off drugstores' shelves and why.

"Brane Fude"

At the beginning of this century, Washington D.C.'s commissioner of pharmacy, Robert N. Harper, began marketing his own version of a pain reliever, billed as "Cuforhedake Brane Fude." The Commissioner ran into trouble with the law in a landmark case that would act as a precedent for scores of false promotion suits against pharmaceuticals. After hearing presentations from a number of scientific experts, the jury concluded that Harper's home-brewed pain remedy was in fact misrepresenting itself as having nutritional value, a decision that set a new standard for accuracy in advertising. Mann and Plummer's book does not purport to be a cuforhedake; but with its fine writing and thorough research no one could dispute that it is brane fude. ●