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Love, war and penicillin

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In this age of antibiotics, when we have pills for everything, it's hard to forget that only 70 years ago, people regularly died from simple infections. Not just the sick and the old, but healthy children and adults succumbed to infections contracted from something as simple as a skinned knee.

The development of penicillin during World War II changed all this. But it wasn't an easy process: The molds were fussy, the medicine was unstable, production was tricky, and a war was on, so time was of the essence.

Penicillin is the essence of "**A Fierce Radiance**," the second novel from **Lauren Belfer**. Like her first book, "City of Light," which was set in turn-of-the-20th-century Buffalo, N.Y., this novel is filled with precise (but not overdone) historical detail, descriptions of a city that make it feel like home, compelling characters, and an intricately twisting plot.

Claire Shipley, a photographer for Life magazine, is present at the first human trial of penicillin, shooting photos for the magazine. The drug works, but there's not enough of it and the patient ends up dying. Claire's work on the story introduces her to a team of researchers at the Rockefeller Institute, and she begins a relationship with one of the doctors. Claire -- divorced and raising a son alone -- has more than a journalistic interest in the subject: She lost her daughter to septicemia when the child was just 3.

But "**A Fierce Radiance**" isn't a romance set against the backdrop of war -- it's a much more interesting and original story. As Claire continues work on the penicillin story, one of the Rockefeller scientists -- the sister of her new lover -- dies in a suspicious fall, and some of her crucial research turns up missing.

Also, the Army has gotten involved with penicillin production, theoretically governing research at pharmaceutical companies; those companies are supposed to

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be spending all their time on penicillin production but in fact are working just as hard on penicillin's "cousins," which is where the real profit will be.

And Claire is sorting through her relationship with her wealthy investor father, who was out of her life for several decades but now is back in it, doting on his grandson.

Plus, the police are investigating Nazi sympathizers in New York.

It may sound like there's a lot going on in "**A Fierce Radiance**," and there is. But Belfer keeps a tight rein on the plot and never lets the pacing go slack, while at the same time creating nuanced, complex characters.

The family and relationship angles are well drawn and realistic, while the medical side is fascinating and thought-provoking, especially when it comes to weighing money against lives.

Belfer skillfully synthesizes all of these elements into a smooth, exciting story: It reads like a beach book, but has a lot more substance.

"**A Fierce Radiance**" by **Lauren Belfer** (Harper, 532 pages, \$25.99)

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