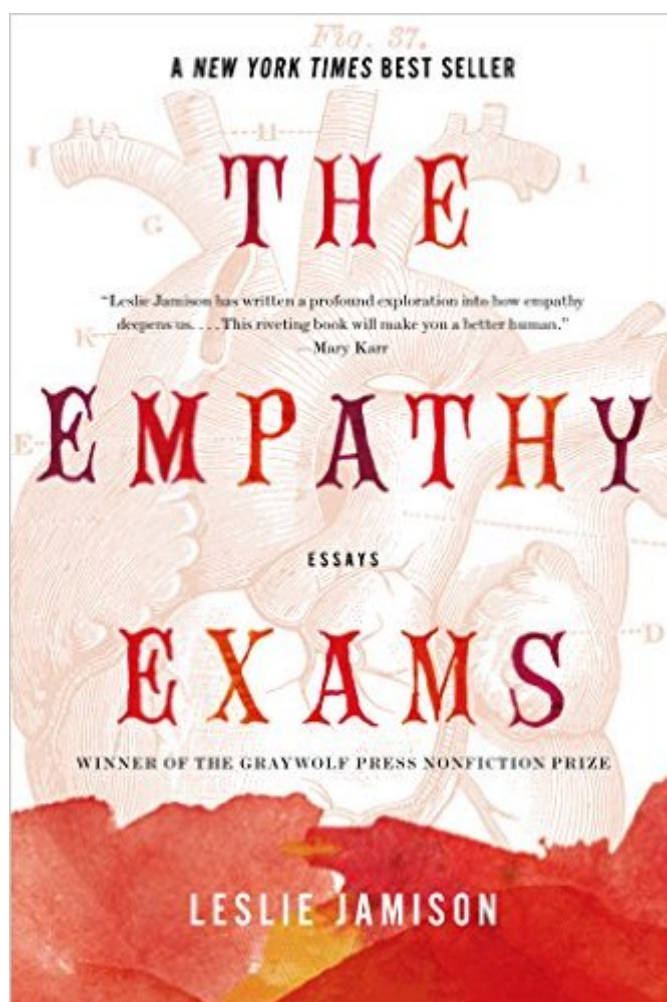


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The Empathy Exams: Essays



Synopsis

From personal loss to phantom diseases, *The Empathy Exams* is a bold and brilliant collection, winner of the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize, *A Publishers Weekly Top Ten Essay Collection of Spring 2014*. Beginning with her experience as a medical actor who was paid to act out symptoms for medical students to diagnose, Leslie Jamison's visceral and revealing essays ask essential questions about our basic understanding of others: How should we care about each other? How can we feel another's pain, especially when pain can be assumed, distorted, or performed? Is empathy a tool by which to test or even grade each other? By confronting pain—real and imagined, her own and others'—Jamison uncovers a personal and cultural urgency to feel. She draws from her own experiences of illness and bodily injury to engage in an exploration that extends far beyond her life, spanning wide-ranging territory—from poverty tourism to phantom diseases, street violence to reality television, illness to incarceration—in its search for a kind of sight shaped by humility and grace.

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Customer Reviews

Leslie Jamison's "The Empathy Exams" has deservedly been praised by critics, but that's not what brought me to buying and reading it. I'd read some of the essays here in various publications. Before you buy the book, I recommend a quick Google search to find one or two of the essays floating around the 'net; read those and you'll get a good idea if you want to continue with Jamison for a full book. I hope you do; it's a terrific collection, as I said.

The more concrete essays (like the one about Morgellons disease or the one about the Barkley Marathons) are quite good. The rest of them are well-written, but I couldn't get past the author's tone. And I can't even quite put my finger on it, but let me try. Jamison says, "Part of me has always craved a pain so visible--so irrefutable and physically inescapable--that everyone would have to notice." Pain is a very personal thing, and these are a bunch of essays about different kinds of pain. And no matter whose pain it ultimately is, Jamison finds a way to turn it around and bring it back to her. Even in the Morgellons disease essay, she ends basically wondering if she herself has Morgellons. I didn't care for this. It feels like appropriation. Sure, Jamison addresses this almost directly in her last essay, and sure, maybe I'm one of those people who don't feel comfortable with the expression of pain, but all that means is that I didn't find the book as enjoyable as I wanted to.

This quote by Susan Sontag serves as a central tenet of this book of essays. Jamison's intent is to explore the ways that empathy allows each of us to understand the pain of the other as a part of your own. In accepting that merging of her boundaries, she learns the underlying unity of pain. "No trauma has discrete edges" within the person. But also trauma cannot occur in isolation. I respect the underlying premise of these essays, and I think the goal is reached in pockets of Jamison's prose. However her line of thought is often distorted or too broadly amorphous. The language is not easy to read in a sitting. Ease of transition is not a necessary element for me in judging writing, however she can be just too confusing. I understand the trope she is painting as the observed sufferers are seen as part of the observer, but it is often done in too abrupt a transition. Although her intent is clearly not to offer her own pain as primary or unique, it appears often enough to be tiring and ultimately overdone. The topics of the essays are in fact quite fascinating in scope. She explores such diverse topics as those people who act as patients to train medical students to sufferers of the rare and controversial Morgellons disease in which people find crystals and threads emerging from within them. The chopping of the chapters with her philosophical musings tend to lead the mind off the frame of the topic rather than more deeply in exploration. All in all it felt as if she just couldn't get out of her own way which is a shame because this book held a lot of promise..

We all carry emotional burdens and scars. What does it mean to identify with and acknowledge that pain in others? Is it like being a tourist in a foreign land, with aspects of immersion and voyeurism? In *The Empathy Exams* by Leslie Jamison tackles these questions and more through essays that chronicle her encounters with people dealing with physical or emotional pain, as well as her engagements with larger cultural traumas and their constructs. The essay as a literary form is

underrated, and I really wanted to love this collection. By its very nature, the essay is grounded in the personal, which can make for evocative writing in the right hands. But Jamison's collection veers into self-obsession in too many places, and what is strutted out as deep analysis comes off as nothing more than sound and fury. The writing in *The Empathy Exams* isn't consistent and some essays careen into a hodgepodge of digressions and confessions. I'm fine with Jamison revealing her guilt and anxieties—it's a book of essays about empathy after all—but Jamison lays it on thick. What I hoped to find in this much-hyped collection was intellectual honesty and emotional truth. What I got was something of a mixed bag. Jamison's writing is a blend of the journalistic and personal, with a heavy-hand on the personal. She seeks to understand—so I think the intellectual honesty is there—but her earnestness feels strained, like a singer hitting high notes she has no business hitting. In fact, I cringed every time Jamison tries to paint experiences, which are obviously grounded in realities far removed from her own, with poetic, hazy brushstrokes to make them her own. Ugh. Like a form of appropriation. The sad irony: This kind of writing actually screams a lack of empathy. In the title essay, one of the better ones, Jamison tells of a time she worked as a medical actor portraying 'patient profiles' for doctors in training. She alternates fictional case profiles with profiles of herself and recalls the time she got an abortion and the emotional fallout from that. It's poignant. In "Devil's Bait" Jamison examines Morgellons disease, a mysterious condition that has baffled the medical establishment and has become a catchall for people who develop skin ailments like lesions and growths that can't be explained. Jamison enters the tight-knit community of Morgellons sufferers and documents her conversations with them. It's a look at the pain and shared bonds of their collective hysteria. By far, this foray into medical anthropology was my favorite. In "The Immortal Horizon" Jamison meets a group of wilderness ultra-marathon runners and explores their drive to push their physical and mental limits. Jamison is piercingly insightful here. She notes how one runner describes his motivation for participating in the Barkley races: "He wants to achieve a completely insular system of accountability, one that doesn't depend on external feedback. He wants to run a hundred miles when no one knows he's running, so that the desire to impress people, or the shame of quitting, won't constitute his sources of motivation. When it's midnight and it's raining and you're on the steepest hill you've ever climbed and you're bleeding from briars and you're alone and you've been alone for hours, it's only you around to witness yourself quit or continue." In that single epiphany, Jamison zooms in on the irony of reaching that physical nirvana from a state of isolation. It's empathy and anti-empathy juxtaposed together. In the concluding essay, "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," Jamison goes full feminist tilt and delves into how women and their pain have been depicted in literature and popular culture. Very smart

writing here. Unfortunately there are also essays that fall flat. These, I noticed, are the ones that chronicle her experiences abroad. One describes her meeting with the Mexican literati and considers the violence inflicted by the drug cartels and how the trauma of that has been channeled through art and poetry. Another discusses an assault Jamison experienced while teaching in Nicaragua. The writing gets thin here. Overall, *The Empathy Exams* is just more style than substance for me. Sometimes I wished she focused more on the reporting in her essays; when she does her writing is illuminating. It shouldn't be about doing your utmost to analyze and understand and filter, but doing more to listen to others and the world around you. That's true empathy.

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