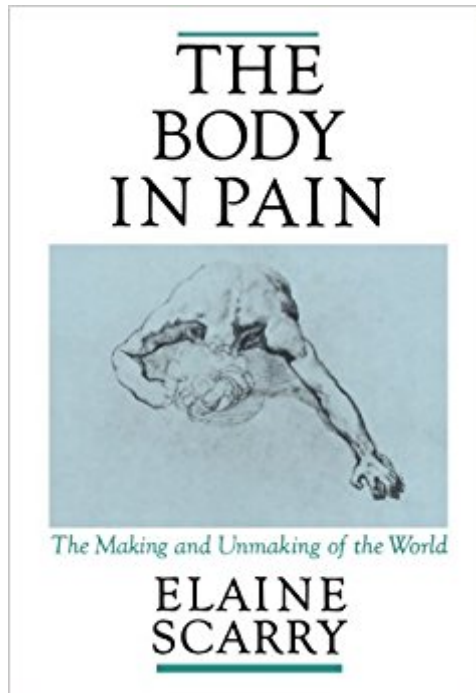


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The Body In Pain: The Making And Unmaking Of The World



Synopsis

Part philosophical meditation, part cultural critique, *The Body in Pain* is a profoundly original study that has already stirred excitement in a wide range of intellectual circles. The book is an analysis of physical suffering and its relation to the numerous vocabularies and cultural forces--literary, political, philosophical, medical, religious--that confront it. Elaine Scarry bases her study on a wide range of sources: literature and art, medical case histories, documents on torture compiled by Amnesty International, legal transcripts of personal injury trials, and military and strategic writings by such figures as Clausewitz, Churchill, Liddell Hart, and Kissinger. She weaves these into her discussion with an eloquence, humanity, and insight that recall the writings of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Paul Sartre. Scarry begins with the fact of pain's inexpressibility. Not only is physical pain enormously difficult to describe in words--confronted with it, Virginia Woolf once noted, "language runs dry"--it also actively destroys language, reducing sufferers in the most extreme instances to an inarticulate state of cries and moans. Scarry analyzes the political ramifications of deliberately inflicted pain, specifically in the cases of torture and warfare, and shows how to be fictive. From these actions of "unmaking" Scarry turns finally to the actions of "making"--the examples of artistic and cultural creation that work against pain and the debased uses that are made of it. Challenging and inventive, *The Body in Pain* is landmark work that promises to spark widespread debate.

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Customer Reviews

Few works of contemporary philosophy are so underrated (not to mention mis-shelved) as this

sweeping study of the relationship between human pain and human creation. I frequently recommend the book to people who have been intimidated by "phenomenology", and who need to return to the roots of this term: the study of raw sense perceptions. To Scarry, pain not only feels negative but actually IS negation. Pain erases all other perceptions of the world, and it also kills language -- the root of our ability to reach out to others and build a world together. The book begins by considering the obvious fact that "intense pain is indescribable," then moves outward into the political consequences of this inexpressibility. Pain survives in the culture, and can be used as a political tool, precisely because of its muteness. This first half of the book, entitled "Unmaking", corresponds well to Dante's Inferno. Through a study of torture and (less helpfully) war, Scarry details the process by which the human ability to create, and thus to be, is destroyed for political purposes. The book's second part, corresponding to Dante's Purgatorio, describes how humans move out of pain by creating the world of made objects. The reading of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that begins this section deserves much wider attention. Scarry reads these texts as an archetypal story of how pain led to creation. Scarry presents this story with a warm, generous, jargon-free style that is welcoming to the intelligent layman. Parts of this book are, perhaps, more dated than others. The latter sections in each of the two halves (the first on war, the latter on the texts of Marx) seem to step down from the pinnacles of each half's beginning.

First, a little background. I took a course in War Literature in college, and one of the excerpts we read was an excerpt from the section in this book on war. It had such interesting points on the topic that I wanted to read the rest of it for a long time, but also knew it was a philosophy book so it never went on any of my wishlists until recently. I put it on my Christmas 2014 wishlist this year, got it on Christmas and began reading it immediately, with almost no breaks for other books or magazines, and finished the book on May 1st, 2015. This book is at times supremely enlightening, and at other times hopelessly dense. How much it is of one or the other depends on the chapter, so I'd like to review each of its five chapters individually. Chapter 1: The Structure of Torture was an equal mix of dense and enlightening. Scarry uses the chapter as a bedrock for the rest of the book, and to introduce concepts of embodiment and disembodiment, how pain works into those structures, and how civilization is deconstructed through torture. However, I got this book primarily for its insights on war, and going through chapter 1 was slow going, and I just read it because I felt I had to. Chapter 2: The Structure of War was an extremely enlightening chapter. It may seem like a hyperbole, but I would say that to read The Structure of War is to understand the concept of war itself.

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