



In the Land of Pain

Alphonse Daudet , Julian Barnes (Translator)

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As Julian Barnes writes in the introduction to his superb translation of Alphonse Daudet's *La Douleur*, the mostly forgotten writer nowadays "ate at the top literary table" during his lifetime (1840–1897). Henry James described him as "the happiest novelist" and "the most charming story-teller" of his day. Yet if Daudet dined in the highest company, he was also "a member of a less enviable nineteenth-century French club: that of literary syphilitics." **In the Land of Pain**—notes toward a book never written—is his timelessly resonant response to the disease.

In quick, sharp, unflinching strokes of his pen, Daudet wrote about his symptoms ("This is me: the one-man-band of pain") and his treatments ("Mor-phine nights . . . thick black waves, sleepless on the surface of life, the void beneath"); about his fears and reflections ("Pain, you must be everything for me. Let me find in you all those foreign lands you will not let me visit. Be my philosophy, be my science"); his impressions of the patients, himself included, and their strange life at curative baths and spas ("Russians, both men and women, go into the baths naked . . . Alarm among the Southerners"); and about the "clever way in which death cuts us down, but makes it look like just a thinning-out."

Given Barnes's crystalline translation, these notes comprise a record—at once shattering and lighthearted, haunting and beguiling—of both the banal and the transformative experience of physical suffering, and a testament to the complex resiliency of the human spirit.

In the Land of Pain Details

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Mgi says

Daudet's notes for a journal of his own death (over years) from Syphilis...it should be depressing but it is wonderful

Tom says

This book is a series of fragments and notes Daudet made over all the years he was slowly slowly dying of syphilis. He spent most of his time in excruciating pain or doped up on morphine and these jottings are his best attempt at holding forth on the subject of pain. A pretty good examination at the sort of the conflicted internal life of one suffering chronic pain. Weirdly I think this was recommended to me as a comedy.

Book Wyrms says

A rather brief, tragi-comic glimpse through the window of a syphilis sufferer, with aching joints, worrisome fellow patients, and many a morbid joke on death and paralysis.

The actual text of Daudet's words is very brief and the gigantic footnotes concerning places, treatments and people mentioned are large, distracting and far too frequent.

Oddly, these constant footnotes house some of the more interesting tales and information, so the overall feel of the book is that you've visited Daudet during his convalescence, but a psychotic neighbouring patient keeps sticking his head in to shout banal or interesting trivia and, very occasionally, a vivid description of how his left testicle ballooned to the size of a grapefruit. This neurotic resident's final appendix on the relationship of syphilis to many a proudly horny (and short sighted) writer is also quite fascinating.

Somewhat relevant funny link:

Dead Philosophers in Heaven: Heavenly STD Clinic

Danielle Booth says

Painful as it is to read, this is one of the only texts that has confronted me with what living in my own land of pain is like. Pain--so impossible to describe--is here acutely rendered in Daudet's notes, scribbles of desperation, despair, and the helpless void that is living in chronic pain. As someone with a chronic pain condition, I cannot recommend this tome enough to my friends and family, or to anyone who wishes a glimpse at the trials and travails bestowed upon those with constant, physical suffering.

As Daudet writes, he has "no general theory about pain. Each patient discovers his own, and the nature of pain varies, like a singer's voice, according to the acoustics of the hall....Pain is always new to the sufferer, but loses its originality for those around him. Everyone will get used to it except me."

How wretched that the only camaraderie found for those with such pain lies in that of others. Daudet--I thank you.

Robert says

In the Land of Pain by Alphonse Daudet is a set of notes about his ghastly suffering due to *tabes dorsalis*, a form of advanced syphilis that develops over the course of decades and, because it attacks the spinal cord, generates an utterly bewildering set of painful symptoms: no part of the body, or mind, is spared, there is no predictable rhythm or sequence involved, it could be your calf, it could be your trembling hands, it could be double-vision, it could be transient paralysis, it could be a species of uncontrollable jiggling and dancing.

Daudet was a commercially successful French novelist, short story writer, and playwright in the latter part of the 19th century. From adolescence on, he fornicated widely and often. Somehow a lady of court is attributed as having infected him around age 17, but again, decades passed as he succumbed to the excruciating miseries of this malady. When he determined (in the 1880s) that he wanted to write about what was happening to him, he fretted over who might read a work of fiction as not fiction at all...so he kept these notes, which went unpublished for yet more decades and eventually were translated into English, quite masterfully, by Julian Barnes.

I've never read a book quite like this one. Daudet is unsparing in his self-assessment, not as a moralist but as an almost detached observer. The famous French physician Charcot told him he was lost long before he died, but Daudet apparently held no grudge against Charcot for his candor. His ethic, it seemed, was to write as naturalistically as possible, and when he wasn't writing, to minimize the impact his increasing debility had on his family and friends. That, to him, was the essence of courage.

Not long ago I read Reynolds Price's account of his own horrific illnesses; this book goes further in capturing the torture and humiliation of pain but, again, in an unsentimental way. Neither book reflects surrender even as the human body, the flesh, wastes, withers, and rots. Pretty astonishing proof that the body is in some ways a merely inconvenient incident in the life of the self.

Factoid: Arthur Conan Doyle wrote his dissertation for an advanced M.D. on *tabes dorsalis*.

Tony says

IN THE LAND OF PAIN. (2002). Alphonse Daudet, Julian Barnes (trans). *****.

Daudet is one of those French writers that no one reads much anymore. He was very popular during his day, however, and counted other major writers as his friends. Unfortunately, he contracted syphilis at the age of 17, and suffered from its effects for the rest of his life. He was born in 1840 and died in 1897. There was no cure for this disease back then – other than a series of spurious treatments that usually left the patient in worse shape than before he subjected himself to them. During this period, he kept a journal or diary that chronicled his pain as caused by the disease and its treatment. Julian Barnes, a noted British writer and critic, chose to translate this journal and present it to the reading public under the above title. Daudet was not alone in having this disease. Many other famous French writers also went through their lives suffering from the same illness. These included Flaubert, Rousseau, and Maupassant in France, and non-Frenchmen like Heine and Benjamin Constant. Back then, it was almost a mark of achieving manhood to have contracted the disease. “Mercury was widely used to treat syphilis during the 19th century, giving rise to the joke about ‘spending one night with Venus, and the rest of your life with Mercury.’” This is difficult reading – sharing

Daudet's pain with him along with the eventual ineffectiveness of his pain killers. Barnes' has translated the journal directly; he has not put the often random notes into any literary form. It's a short book, but one which will change your opinion of the disease during Daudet's time.

Julian BLOWER says

crude degeneration is such a modernist motif that, just by describing his reality, daudet's writing feels ahead of its time!

Mike says

In the final ten years of his life, dying from the strain of syphilis that caused his body to fluctuate between paralysis and uncontrollable spasms, Daudet compiled this journal of notes on pain for a piece of fiction that he was never able to write. It's a stark and sobering read, with the first half being an attempt to describe living through constant pain and torture: "Are words actually any use to describe what pain (or passion, for the matter) really feels like? Words only come when everything is over, when things have calmed down. They refer only to memory, and are either powerless or untruthful. No general theory about pain. Each patient discovers his own, and the nature of pain varies, like a singer's voice, according to the acoustics of the hall." The second half sketches the daily routines and patients at Lamalou, a sanitarium with therapeutic baths.

While Daudet is a pitiable figure as a once-lauded writer who has been all but forgotten, the introduction makes an even sadder observation that Daudet also plays second fiddle in the list of great French syphilitics (Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Maupassant). The footnotes provide much information about his personal life--especially his treatment for syphilis, which sounds like the most painful, lingering death a person might suffer. In the words of Daudet: "You have to die so many times before you die..." The Land of Pain is one that all people must visit in one way or another throughout life. (The idea of syphilis being a metaphor for life is not lost on Flaubert, who wrote: "Syphilis: everyone, more or less, suffers from it.") For some, their visit to the Land of Pain lasts longer than others. Daudet does not exaggerate, glorify, or put on a brave face. He simply records his impressions as a way to articulate moments in which all communication is impossible. Every journal entry is remembering a past moment because it is impossible to write when suffering through intense moments of pain. His notes, then, become a diary of his survival, even as he is slowly dying.

Sylvester says

Is it possible that one can write beautiful descriptions of pain? I don't know if this is really a "book" so much as a collection of notes, but I was mesmerized. I kept thinking to myself - why hasn't this been done before? (And maybe it has, but I haven't come across anything quite like it.) This is what pain is like from the inside - pain without cure, pain leading to death. And it's incredible.

"My poor carcass is hollowed out, voided by anaemia. Pain echoes through it as a voice echoes in a house

without furniture or curtains. There are days, long days, when the only part of me that's alive is my pain."

"In the morning my hands are obstinately curled up on top of the sheet, like dead leaves, deprived of sap."

Daudet describes his experience at different spas and watering places, where he meets patients of all types - even a few remarkably like himself, which warn him of what's to come. *"My doppelganger. The fellow whose illness most closely resembles your own. How you love him, and how you make him tell you everything."* His descriptions of the symptoms of the other patients, and their conversations, the world of those who live in constant pain - *"At the start of each season at Lamalou the patients, in all their weirdness and diversity, draw comfort from the demonstration that their respective illnesses all have something in common. Then, when the season's over and the baths close, this whole agglomeration of pain breaks up and disperses. Each of these patients turns back into a loner, someone isolated and lost amid the turbulence of life...Only at Lamalou is he understood, only there are people truly interested in his disease.'*

That Daudet was a great writer is undeniable. To write this must have been the most difficult of all subjects. He didn't finish. There came a time when he no longer wanted to dissect his pain, when it was no longer his focus.

Evan says

In the Land of Pain is a quick but rewarding read comprised of the fragmentary notes that French author Alphonse Daudet took as he slowly died during the tertiary, fatal stages of syphilis. What makes it remarkable is the lack of egoism that sometimes plagues similar projects; there are no grand metaphors or dramatic conclusions to end the author's life. Instead, Daudet describes simple things that he can never escape - pain described in analogy to everyday life. The pain, which he describes as always new to the sufferer but quickly boring to loved ones, becomes endlessly new for the reader as well. It is the simple things that make the reader think, and that is why it succeeds.

That's not to say that the book is perfect. By its nature, it is fragmentary. Unevenly written prose is made more complicated by ambiguity in some references, because this was never intended as a final, publishable form. Luckily, Barnes does an admirable job of bringing it all together and highlighting what is great about it. Extensive footnotes illuminate the text, and brief essays on Daudet and syphilis give context. Though I am unfamiliar with the original French text and cannot comment on the fidelity of the translation, it does at least flow marvelously.

Well worth a read.

else fine says

This book, both thoughtful and delightful, would probably be enjoyed by just about anybody. If you find yourself in the position of being diagnosed with something incurable, painful, and chronic, however, this

book becomes something more necessary. How do we face our pain and our ends with clarity and grace? These notes from a fellow sufferer will help light the way.

Wes Hazard says

"Are words any use to describe what pain (or passion, for that matter) really feels like? Words only come when everything is over, when things have calmed down. They refer only to memory, and are either powerless or untruthful." - Alphonse Daudet

This book is kind of remarkable. It's a decade+ chronicle of the persistent, immersive, & excruciating pain endured by one man (Alphonse Daudet, a very well known French writer in his day) that manages to never be self-pitying, redundant or macabre. After having contracted syphilis decades earlier (an experience that was, to some extent, "fashionable" among certain male members of the French literary elite) and living for a long while in the dormant 2nd stage of the disease, Daudet spent the last 12 years of his life consumed by the ever more debilitating pain of the 3rd stage. Writing, and even thinking clearly for that matter, became progressively more difficult as the years went by, but he kept an ongoing series of notes and observations about his pain, the pain of others afflicted with his condition as observed at the health spas he frequented, and how his condition affected him and his family. He had the intention of writing a book about it all, but that never really happened. Here we have the gathered fragments of what he wrote about his ordeal, translated & edited by Julian Barnes (who has done an excellent job).

--It was hard not to be struck by Daudet's *nobility* (if you wish to call it that) in facing his condition head on, never letting his family see him despair or crack, and having a sense of mission/duty with regard to his "obligation" as a writer to capture, as best as possible the essence of his experience.

--As Daudet notes, words come only after the pain has passed (temporarily) but what he manages to get down in those brief pauses...damn. The most lyrical flights you'll ever read about the most miserable experiences you hope you never face, ex.:

"My poor carcass is hollowed out, voided by anaemia. Pain echoes through it as a voice echoes in a house without furniture or curtains. There are days, long days, when the only part of me that's alive is my pain"

"Tonight, pain in the form of an impish little bird hopping wither and thither, pursued by the stabs of my needle; over all my limbs, then right in my joints, but the injection misses its target, then misses again, and the pain is sharper every time."

Shawn says

Recommended by a customer to my husband as a "must read". I, unfortunately, cannot give that same shout of praise. Two of the three stars I give this is for Julian Barnes -- just for being Julian Barnes.

There are some interesting factoids about early writers, as well as syphilis, pain, and drug use among some of those considered "the greatest minds and thinkers of our time". Not interesting enough, however, for me to suggest you bother reading this yourself.

Mark says

Here you have none of Donne's morbid, self-regarding theatrics, but rather a magnificently cleared-eyed account of bodily dissolution.

It must take courage to confront unbearable physical pain with... attention. Daudet emerges from this book an unlikely hero.

C says

It amazes me how "modern" of an illness narrative this is for the time in which it was written. The book consists of a series of meditative fragments, translated by Julian Barnes, of a man suffering with intense pain from syphilitic neural degeneration. So many beautiful, lucid lines like this one: "[there is] no general theory about pain. Each patient discovers his own, and the nature of pain varies, like a singer's voice, according to the acoustics of the hall..."
