

THE EMPATHY LESSONS

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In the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland, lies Marian House I, a building that mimics a palace with ballroom-like concrete stairs marking its entrance. The House provides rehabilitative and transitional housing services for women exiting prison, as well as their children. In the forty years since its founding, it has been the go-to place for women attempting to regain the skills necessary for their reentry into society. And, with services including drug and mental health counseling, employment assistance, financial literacy skills, and life coaching, it has successfully served over 1,800 women (“History”).

Individual and group academic lessons are one of the key offerings provided at the Marian House, and each year the group holds a graduation ceremony for women who receive GEDs and other degrees (“History”). These women learn far more than basic reading and writing skills: each month, an MFA candidate from Columbia University’s writing program arrives to teach a creative writing workshop (“Home”). Considered both therapeutic and liberating by the women involved, the program offers them a safe setting to explore some of the trauma they’ve experienced (Thalheim and Weiner). Previous prompts have asked participants to write about a mistake they’ve made, their first kiss, or the craziest thing they’ve ever believed (“Home,” “Additional Writing Prompts”).

Essayist Leslie Jamison currently leads this workshop in Baltimore, widening her breadth of writing and teaching experience (“About”). The first two prompts provided by her workshop are particularly intriguing:

1. Write about a time when you were a stranger in a strange place.
2. Write about a time when you were a stranger in a familiar place.

While some may consider these not too different from other questions, such as “What is the story of your name?” and “Coffee or tea?”

they take on a deeper meaning when considered in relation to Jamison's essays, particularly those in *The Empathy Exams* ("Additional Writing Prompts"). Jamison is directing the women at the Marian House to write from viewpoints she is all too familiar with: the relatable "stranger in a strange place" and the paradoxical "stranger in a familiar place"—two lenses that encapsulate Jamison's works as a whole.

Jamison is no stranger to these prompts, nor to the desire to converse with both the formerly and currently imprisoned.¹ Her first major assignment as a journalist was a magazine profile on a man named Charlie, who was imprisoned in the Beckley Federal Correctional Institute in West Virginia for mortgage fraud. Charlie was an ultramarathon runner—he once ran the Sahara Desert coast to coast—and Jamison's profile would contemplate what it was like for a man who lived in motion to be locked up in a six-by-six cell ("Authors"). Charlie, a young man from Tennessee, a "father of two, professional repairer of hail damage, TV producer, motivational speaker, documentary film star," is the focal character of "Fog Count" (133). The essay is an exploration of what it means to be imprisoned, both physically and mentally, bound by the rules and regulations of a higher authority.²

Jamison describes at length how she, too, felt imprisoned when she visited Charlie, from before she arrived until after she left. She recounts in an interview relying on her memory of the six-hour conversation they had, for the prison forbade bringing along a recorder or even a notebook and pen (Green and Jamison). Throughout the experience, Jamison is a stranger in a strange place: she doesn't know where to go (the lower security "Satellite Camp," not the main building), what to wear (nothing khaki, and definitely not a skirt), what she may bring (just quarters for the vending machines), what to talk about (she lets Charlie lead the conversation), if she can hug him (yes), if she can sit next to him (no), if she even belongs there (unanswered) ("Fog

1 "Authors of Injustice" provides the stories of two more inmates with whom Jamison has conversed over the years. Much of *The Recovering*, as well, includes the stories of inmates, such as in "Reckoning."

2 Though Jamison once acknowledged that "Fog Count" is "unbearingly depressing" (Green and Jamison), it has moments of inspiration. Charlie, for example, discusses his sense of "inner mobility"—while his body was imprisoned, his mind was not ("Fog Count" 147).

Count”).

This isn't the first—or the last—time that Jamison is a stranger in a strange place. In “Devil’s Bait,” she devotes an entire essay to those afflicted with Morgellons disease, a controversial and unproven illness with supposed symptoms including fibers crawling out of one’s skin. She narrates her visit to a conference in Austin where those stricken with Morgellons gathered to discuss the latest research and treatments available. Though Jamison herself does not suffer from Morgellons, she hopes to use this visit to question her understanding of empathy: “How do I inhabit someone’s pain without inhabiting their particular understanding of that pain?” (“Devil’s Bait” 39-40).³

Visiting those in pain appears to be a common theme in Jamison’s works. In “Short Term Feelings,” her critical and emotional response to the movie *Short Term 12*, Jamison asks herself what it means to leave the pained characters “locked in the fictive suffering of their fictive world, while I returned fairly easily to mine.” On leaving Charlie in prison, Jamison writes, “three o’clock is when one of us goes, the other one stays” (“Fog Count” 148). And on departing from the Morgellons conference: “I spend a day in their kingdom and then leave when I please” (“Devil’s Bait” 46). However, Jamison’s contention that she is merely a visitor to others’ pain begins to fall through, for she inhabits her own world of pain.

In both *The Empathy Exams* and her newest collection of essays, *The Recovering*, Jamison describes the pain she has experienced. She writes about her father’s absence during her childhood, flying around the world and cheating on his wife (“Blame” 77). Her parents divorced when Jamison was eleven, and she continued to live under the intellectual shadow of her equally absent older brothers (“Blame” 78). There’s the eating disorder she’s struggled with throughout her life (“Abandon” 39), in addition to intermittent self-cutting (“Female Pain” 191). She’s had extensive surgeries on her heart and one on her jaw after falling twenty feet from a vine (“Empathy Exams” 7,

³ As Jamison does not clearly define “empathy” (“Jamison offers no all-purpose definition of empathy,” Suzanne Koven writes in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*), this essay will not either. However, she does allude to various definitions throughout *The Empathy Exams*, especially in her first, titular essay: “Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges” (5) and “Empathy is a kind of care but it’s not the only kind of care” (17). “Inhabit[ing] someone’s pain” is just one of her many denotations.

“Female Pain” 208). She’s been hit by a car (“Midwest, Redux”). She’s aborted a pregnancy (“Female Pain” 217), she may or may not have been date-raped (“Wonder” 8), and she’s been punched in the face and mugged (“Morphology” 72). She’s been pained by multiple ex-lovers. Most significantly, she writes about her genetic predisposition to mental illness and alcoholism. Jamison suffered from both of these afflictions during most of her twenties, blacking out nearly every night (“Shame” 156).⁴

Jamison is a pained woman—this is something she has often acknowledged⁵—and she’s even questioned her own tendency to dwell extensively on this pain; she once asked, in a letter to a friend, “Why the fuck am I talking about this so much?” (“Female Pain” 187). A different question she raises, though, may actually provide her with an answer. Commenting on the Morgellons conference, she wonders, “Does giving people a space to talk about their disease—probe it, gaze at it, share it—help them move through it,” or, more unfortunately, “deepen its hold?” (“Devil’s Bait” 54). Though she leaves this thought unanswered, one critic wonders the same: “Does giving people a space to talk about their pain—to probe it, to write books about it—help them move on from it, or simply deepen its hold?” (Barrett).

An ex-boyfriend likely believes the latter, calling Jamison a “wound-dweller” (“Female Pain” 186). One writer, in her essay “Blood, Ink, and Pain: An Excavation,” instead considers Jamison a “wound-hunter” and contends, “she does not passively ‘dwell’ on past wounds; she seeks them out and interrogates them” (Patton 35). Another writer agrees, stating that “Jamison sometimes seeks out pain,” and “it seeks her out as well” (Garner). It’s true that many of Jamison’s essays cross the border between mere observation of others’ pain into actually soliciting it; she’s repeatedly thought of doing so as an “excavat[ion]” (“The Book”).⁶ But given Jamison’s background in

4 Laura Miller from *Slate* reminds readers of other aspects on Jamison’s life: “a cool, accomplished, loving mom,” “Harvard undergrad,” “Iowa Writers’ Workshop at age 21,” “summer in Italy,” “Ph.D. from Yale,” “published first novel at age 27,” “New York Times best-seller at age 31,” and “director of the nonfiction program at Columbia University’s School of the Arts” (Jamison qtd. in Miller).

5 Many critics consider this to be a hallmark of *The Empathy Exams*. *The Kansas City Star*, for example, writes that her “self-awareness may be the collection’s greatest strength” (qtd. in “Empathy Exams,” *Graywolf Press*).

journalism, her tendency to take on an investigative role is understandable. Critics unfortunately fail to consider her curiosity when determining her “excavations” to be encroaching on voyeurism⁷ (Tsai; Laing) or engaging in “poverty tourism”⁸ (McAlpin).

Critics who call *The Empathy Exams* an extended exercise in wallow and self-pity are missing the point entirely. *The Empathy Exams* is not just a book about empathy—it is an exploration of what it means to live a life in pain, whether it is your own or someone else’s. At its core, *The Empathy Exams* is a how-to book on empathizing with strangers in our lives, from imprisoned people like Charlie to those afflicted with Morgellons. It is true that Jamison is a wound-seeker, for she seeks out the wounds of those whom society would rather ignore: the wrongly convicted (“Lost Boys”), the addicts (“Immortal Horizon”), the wounded (“Devil’s Bait”), the poor (“Pain Tours”), the innocent (“Fog Count”), the immigrants (“La Frontera”), the incarcerated (“Authors of Injustice”).

But those who view Jamison as simply a wound-seeker fail to understand her message. She is actually a stranger in a familiar place. Though she may not have experienced the exact pain someone else is going through, she is all too familiar with pain. Jamison writes that just as no one believed she had a (potential) parasite in her ankle (“Devil’s Bait” 34), doctors do not believe Morgellons is a real condition (“Devil’s Bait” 29). Therefore, she was readily able to empathize with the “strangers” who believed they were infected (“Devil’s Bait” 54). And though she’s never been physically imprisoned like Charlie (“Fog Count”), she feels the pain of being locked up mentally, enslaved by alcohol: “my father told me drinking wasn’t wrong, but it was dangerous. It wasn’t dangerous for everyone, but it was dangerous for us” (“Blame” 76). Jamison demonstrates that familiarity with pain leads to familiarity with empathy—even empathy for strangers.⁹

6 Jamison once wrote that Joan Didion “excavates a truth at once uncomfortable and crystalline”; *The Washington Post* uses these same words to compliment Jamison (“Empathy Exams,” Graywolf Press).

7 Ed Vulliamy, author of *America: War along the Borderline*, writes that Jamison “picks her way through a society that has lost its way, a voyeur of voyeurism” (“Empathy Exams,” Graywolf Press).

8 *Little Village* offers another take on Jamison’s “tourism”: “The thrill of following Jamison the tourist is that her mind is an extraordinary analytical machine capable of producing sublimity” (“Empathy Exams,” Graywolf Press).

Paul Bloom, a leading psychologist at Yale, is famous for his “case against empathy” and for his theory that empathy does more harm than good. His argument hinges on the belief that we don’t apply empathy to strangers. He declares that “the key to engaging empathy is what has been called the ‘identifiable victim effect,’” our ability to identify with the victim at hand—an ability that is obviously not applicable to a stranger (Bloom). Jamison’s review of *Short Term 12* was written before *The Empathy Exams* and references Bloom’s theory (“Short Term Feelings”). While Bloom seemingly takes aim against empathy, Jamison presents an even more compelling argument for empathy. Jamison is able to deconstruct Bloom’s argument by introducing a method of identifying with the victim, as someone familiar with pain, rather than a stranger to it.

Jamison deepens her approach, providing a framework by which one can identify with the so-called stranger. In the titular and first essay of *The Empathy Exams*, which can be considered both prerequisite reading and a summation of the following ten essays, she establishes three interconnected methods for identifying with a stranger. Exploring the etymology of the word “empathy”—“from the Greek *empathia*,” which translates to “into feeling”—Jamison presents the first method: “enter another person’s pain . . . by way of query” (6). This query leads to the second method: “voic[ing] empathy”¹⁰ (3). And lastly, a study that found participants “imagining the pain of others activates the same three areas (prefrontal cortex, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex) activated in the experience of pain itself” suggests that one need only imagine pain to be empathetic (22).¹¹

The Empathy Exams as a whole can be thought of as Jamison’s

9 *The Recovering* provides another example of exploring the pain of the familiar and the stranger: Jamison includes stories of famous writers who were addicts, in addition to strangers she has encountered throughout her life, such as in “Chorus.” An earlier title of *The Recovering* was *Archive Lush*, in reference to the years Jamison spent examining the archives of famous authors for her dissertation at Yale (Aylor).

10 Jamison does acknowledge, though, the importance of listening: “often the way to feel better isn’t talking about your own problems but rather listening to someone else’s” (Sparks and Jamison).

11 Referencing her elder brother who is facially paralyzed, Jamison writes at length her own experience waking up one morning and trying to imagine what it would be like to not be able to move her facial muscles (“Empathy Exams” 22). Additionally, Charles D’Ambrosio writes that *The Empathy Exams* is “an exploration of . . . the poverty of our imaginations” (“Empathy Exams,” *Graywolf Press*).

examination of her own lifetime of pain and her empathic sensibilities. A more impactful reading, however, would interpret *The Empathy Exams* as Jamison's lesson on how to be empathetic: recognize the pain in your own life and you will be able to empathize with others. If after reading *The Empathy Exams*, anyone can go out into the world with a greater awareness for empathy—whether directed towards a loved one or a “stranger” such as a woman at the Marian House or an individual suffering from Morgellons—Jamison will have accomplished something important.

Jamison's contention that “empathy isn't just something that happens to us—a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain—it's also a choice we make” is particularly poignant (“Empathy Exams” 23). She leaves it in the reader's hands to put this increased understanding of empathy into action. Choosing to identify one's own pain, and thereby enhancing one's ability to be empathetic towards strangers, can lead to profound change. Bravely identifying pain allows one to be more compassionate and understanding, lifting the spirits of the stranger, who may in turn seek to act in an empathetic manner as well. This recognition of and response to pain has the potential to increase connection and unity in the world at large, breaking down the barriers we have placed on ourselves and each other.

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