



June 2nd, 2015
Amsterdam

The Empathy Exams by Leslie Jamison starts with an essay interweaving her experiences as a medical actor, testing the empathy of student doctors, with her experiences as herself a recipient of medical care, yearning for the empathy of her own doctor. But what is empathy and why do we need it? If you feel bad, why would you want another person to feel as bad as you, what use could that ever have? Or do you only need kind words? If so, then how real do the emotions of a person empathizing need to be?

The beauty of Jamison's essays is that they are essays in the classical meaning of the word. They are not opinion pieces – they are that only in the sense that Jamison tries different opinions on for size, sees how they fit. And then she moves on to try on another point of view. She is practicing empathy, and in doing so, she is asking questions rather than telling us what the world is like.

Asking questions rather than providing answers is a task that seems most suitable for fiction, and indeed Jamison is also a fiction writer. In 2010, she published the well-received novel *The Gin Closet*, about two women competing in vulnerability: an alcohol-addicted former prostitute and the personal assistant to a neurotic inspirational writer. But in *The Empathy Exams*, Jamison is not only asking questions, she's also showing us things about the world. As she has said, her essays are somewhere midway between fiction and journalism.

Jamison makes us meet people who have Morgellons syndrome, a belief that there are fibers or parasites coming out of their skins, and that they have to counter these by scratching and by using medicine that's suitable for cattle. She makes us meet people who try to complete the Barkley Marathons, a 160 kilometer ultrarun through harsh nature that few people ever finish. With Jamison, we travel to Brooklyn and Bolivia, to Mexico, to Nicaragua, to an American prison, and especially, in an act of what we could call empathy, to the inside of her head.

Just like *The Gin Closet*, *The Empathy Exams* received glowing reviews. "It's hard to imagine a stronger, more thoughtful voice emerging this year," wrote Olivia Laing in *The New York Times*, and of course, the book was high on that paper's bestseller list.

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