Discussion Guide



The Song of Our Scars
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Chronic Pain

Summary

A doctor's personal and unsparing account of how modern medicine's failure to understand pain has made care less effective. Warraich, himself a sufferer of chronic pain, considers the ways our notions of pain have been shaped not just by science but by politics and power, by whose suffering mattered and whose didn't. He weaves a provocative history from the Renaissance, when pain transformed into a medical issue, through the racial legacy of pain tolerance, to the opiate epidemics of both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, to the cutting edge of present-day pain science. The conclusion is clear: only by reckoning with both pain's complicated history and its biology can today's doctors adequately treat their patients' suffering.

Questions

1. The author, Dr. Warraich, is a physician as well as a patient (he has chronic back pain). How have his own experiences living with chronic pain informed the way he treats his patients?
2. If pain is subjective, how can the person experiencing pain describe how they feel to others, like their physician and their loved ones, to help them understand the experience?
3. How have different societies, in different geographic settings and in different time periods, explained and treated pain? Which theories of pain felt meaningful to you?
4. How is pain related to power?
5. Is pain a symptom of an underlying condition or a disease in itself?
6. What is the role of empathy in providing excellent medical care?
7. How can physicians and other health care providers make pain management more patient centered?

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