When pain is a symptom, as is often the case when pain is acute or related to cancer, it is easy to explain, at least in cartesian terms, and relatively easy to treat. When pain is understood to be a disease, as is often the case with chronic pain, it becomes much more difficult to conceptualize and to treat.

Melanie Thernstrom, author of *The Pain Chronicles*, is a creative writer by training and by calling. Nothing she encounters is taken at face value: she needs to explore, and she needs to find expression. She also has personal experience with chronic pain. This makes her unusual, because rather than rely on the elusive “cure,” she has embarked on a journey of trying to grasp what pain actually is.
“cure,” she has embarked on a journey of trying to grasp what pain actually is, what it has meant for humanity through the centuries, how its perception has changed, and how present-day science has profoundly altered the way it is understood. She chronicles her exploration through trying to comprehend her own pain. Pain physicians travel a similar route. When they start out, they see pain as something they can simply treat; as they journey, they come to understand the limitations of medical treatment and to understand that chronic pain is so internal and personal that it can only be greatly altered by the person experiencing it.

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The book progresses through considering pain as metaphor, history, disease, narrative, and perception. Thernstrom borrows from Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor when she describes the process by which diseases are understood metaphorically until their pathology becomes clear. Archetypically, tuberculosis was consumption and syphilis was retribution until their infectious causes had been identified. Pain has been imbued with many meanings—spiritual, romantic, glorifying, transformative, or punitive. Does the fact that chronic pain can now be understood as a neuropathologic process bring it closer to being accepted in the same terms as tuberculosis or syphilis? Understanding pain as a pathological process has in many ways detracted from centuries-old mechanisms that had allowed humankind to live with what is a “defining aspect of mortal life, a hallmark of what it means to be human.” It still has not been explained exactly how pain perpetuates pain, why individuals with identical pathology experience pain differently, or why chronic pain seems more a biopsychosocial phenomenon than a strictly neuropathologic one. Pain is, after all, a perception, which is how Thernstrom continues...
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