



How's the Pain?

Pascal Garnier , Emily Boyce (Translator)

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Death is Simon's business. And now the ageing vermin exterminator is preparing to die. But he still has one last job down on the coast and he needs a driver. Bernard is twenty-one. He can drive and he's never seen the sea. He can't pass up the chance to chauffeur for Simon, whatever his mother may say. As the unlikely pair set off on their journey, Bernard soon finds that Simon's definition of vermin is broader than he'd expected... Veering from the hilarious to the horrific, this offbeat story from master stylist, Pascal Garnier, is at heart an affecting study of human frailties.

How's the Pain? Details

Date : Published June 11th 2012 by Gallic Books (first published January 1st 2006)

ISBN :

Author : Pascal Garnier , Emily Boyce (Translator)

Format : Kindle Edition 160 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Noir, Crime, Cultural, France, Novels

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From Reader Review How's the Pain? for online ebook

Gram says

A delightfully dark and quirky tale about a handful of oddball characters whose paths cross after Simon, an elderly vermin exterminator - who's really a contract killer - hires the naive Bernard to drive him to his next kill.

Along the way, Simon is introduced to Bernard's alcoholic mum & failed shop owner, Anais and Bernard's first ever lover, the feisty single mum Fiona and her baby daughter and poop machine extraordinaire, Violette. Later, Simon becomes embroiled in a not quite forgettable one night stand with retired taxidermist and hopeless romantic, Rose. For a few hours afterwards, he contemplates retirement and a cosy future with Rose.

Oh, and - now and then - Simon shoots people.

For reasons which will become clear, the book's ending is given away in the first few pages, but that doesn't matter at all. Just sit back and enjoy the wonderful black humour and delightful descriptions packed into this book's all-too-brief 160 or so pages.

Highly recommended.

Andrew Caldwell says

Incredible book! A handful of tragic and brilliantly described people meet over the course of a week. Each of them is pain, physically, emotionally spiritually. As their lives intersect there are out-workings of peace and confusion, hope and hopelessness in equal measure.

With out any spoilers the book can be boiled down to this A hit man and a tragically optimistic sidekick go on a road trip! The pathos is extremely well done as is the writing.

This is a super book and I want to give a very special shout out to Emily Boyce the translator for Gallic books, it is superbly translated.

I can't wait to read more, Gallic Noir!

Melinda says

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More amusing than heavy noir. The adventure has a few misfires as plans derail. As with any road trip, plenty of amusing characters stumbled upon. Life changes for all parties involved including spectators. No ones life will be the same in the end.

Story has an overall balance with the scales leaning towards clever satire with a touch of gritty.

As always the translation is well done, great job by Emily Boyce.

Elaine Tomasso says

I would like to thank Netgalley and Gallic Books for allowing me a free copy of How's The Pain? Never having read Mr Garnier's work I was interested to see what it's all about. Firstly it should be noted that it is more a novella than a full length novel but it seems to be the right length for what it has to say (plenty). It opens with Simon preparing for his suicide and then flashes back to how he got to that point. Simon is a pest controller, only the pests in question are human. He is on his last job but is seriously ill so, on a whim, he hires Bernard to drive him to the job. What happens on the journey is seriously funny.

The contrast between Simon and Bernard is stark. Simon doesn't much care for people and seems to be hard through and through whereas Bernard is pretty thick, naive, unambitious and easily taken advantage of but he is full of goodness with a kind heart. It is never said why Simon picks him as his driver but, at the end of his life, maybe he wants a little light in his life or, more in keeping with his character, he wants to corrupt a simple soul.

Mr Garnier packs a lot in to this short novel - human relationships, alcoholism, manipulation and through it all the malignant presence of Simon and his illness, the metaphor of sick body reflecting the sick mind. As I said the novel is savagely funny but Simon's manipulation of Bernard is heartbreaking. If you want a short, sharp read which is out of the ordinary in the crime genre then I heartily recommend How's The Pain?

Brian Kindall says

It's an existential world we live in – godless and dark. Pascal Garnier – author of How's The Pain? - knows this. And yet he can't quite seem to let his characters completely descend into that bleakness without a little humor, and maybe even some hope. Garnier can't let them suffer and thrash around without a little humanity.

The book's main character is Simon, an old hired killer out to perform one last job before he retires. He's meticulous about his profession and indifferent to his victims. He tells people he is an exterminator, and approaches his work as if he were simply ridding the world of another pest. But when he picks up a naïve young man named Bernard and hires him as his driver, Simon finds himself examining his own life in ways he doesn't expect. Through his galumphing good-hearted approach to being alive, Bernard soon entangles Simon in a humorous set of domestic circumstances that carries him into a world he has spent his whole life avoiding, even disdaining. It's a world of snot-nosed kids in diapers and trailer parks and backyard barbecues. It's a kitsch world where people find pleasure in pet taxidermy and junk shops and daytime television. Although it's set in France, this is not the quaint world of the French countryside we are used to being served. Bernard, it turns out, is just too likable for Simon to resist. The jaded killer sees something in his driver's naiveté that's enviable. It's the very thing Simon hasn't allowed himself in his long life – a sort of ignorance-is-bliss approach to life that makes this dark world a little brighter, even happy and fun.

Pascal Garnier offers this tale with a large dose of poetry. Even when he's writing about something so unsettling as death, he does it with an off-kilter beauty that permeates the entire novel. "The life drained out of her body like oil from a drum." "His voice bounced off the ceiling vaults like a trapped bird." And Garnier doesn't dwell gratuitously on the actual violence. It gets only a mention as it's happening. He instead, rather tastefully, focuses his story on the world from which that violence arises. Thrill seekers will find this book unsatisfying, but lovers of great writing will be enthralled.

Monsieur Garnier himself left the world a couple of years ago. But he left behind a dozen or so gems, all recently translated into English and available for our pleasure. It's highly worth a reader's time to delve into their bleak, humorous, and beauty-laden pages.

Alan says

like a Simenon noir (eg Black Snow), and not just because it is set in France with some Belgium thing going on too. It is as dark, and violent and God-less, but funnier and messier. Not as thrilling maybe or as bone chilling, and with less complex characters. I prefer the tightness of Simenon, here the writing is full of similes, some surely taking the piss (in one a man bounces off across the beach like a tennis ball, and in the next chapter someone else bounces off like a beachball), and often awkwardly memorable (knees like banister knobs). But there's no pause in the narrative; if I may join in the figure-of-speech fun, it drives straight towards the brick wall of death at full speed. I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Tuck says

funny and affective noir set in presentday france with some classic character studies, insightful social/political/economics commentary. and bonus! little known facts about french mineral water and pop singer.
story is how a cold blooded, solitary hitman solves his health care problems.

Julie says

I went to a 'Book Spa' with a bibliophile friend and this was one of the books suggested for me. I had not heard of the Author before and had no preconceived ideas on what it would be like. I was hooked immediately. Dark humour, well observed cameos of human nature and it makes you think. Very French. It is a short book so hard to write more without spoiler alerts. I would definitely read more by this author. Big thanks to Lucinda from Mr B's Book Emporium for your insightful recommendation!

J. says

At the heart of this story is an unlikely friendship between a naive twenty something man and an elderly gent on the cusp of retirement. The road trip and unlikely friendships are the stuff of great films. Simon Marechall who claims to be an 'exterminator of vermin' at the end of his career meets Bernard an aimless but good soul who he employs as his driver so that Simon can complete his last job. They set out from Val les Bains to Cap d'Agde. On the way they meet other characters a shallow young lady with a baby and an older lady who is a taxidermist and takes a shine to Simon. Bernard's alcoholic mother Anais has a few chapters dedicated to her as a portrait of her failed life unfurls. We know more about Anais by the end of the story than we probably know about the books protagonists.

This is another one of John Banville's recommendations. I admired the writing style, a moped fades into the distance "leaving a long rip through the fabric of the sleeping city", "time did not follow its usual course in hotel rooms; it stagnated like the dead arm of a river" his shoes sit quietly at the base of the bed. "On the dot of eight o'clock, the TV news signature tune spread like a powder trail down the row of caravans, the newsreader's chubby face replicated endlessly". The ordinary and everyday is present but it's given a touch of poetic resonance.

Even though the story seemingly lacked character depth, I still felt invested in the characters. Even the clinical violence in the book seems mundane, every day and lacks the gratuity of other books about hit men. There is no real dogged pursuit of an individual. When there is it is almost anti-climactic. This book is different, darker, more circumspect and particular than a lot of noir. Simon's age lends a poignancy to the story. There is a healthy dose of existentialism. This would make a great film as it would fit well with what world cinema produces on a yearly basis. This is offbeat Gallic noir. I liked Garnier's style, noir in name noir in nature.

Josh says

(2.5) I've been a fan of Garnier's work for a couple of years now (most notably The A26), but this one was sort of a letdown. Reading it before a trip and during a flight, I knocked it out pretty quickly, yet it didn't have the oomph I usually get from the ending of one of his novels/novellas. This is not a mandatory read for fans of his prose and action, but I wouldn't say it's a total waste if you're looking for one of those quick reads that will leave you entertained (mostly).

jeremy says

pascal garnier, the prolific french author of noir fiction and children's literature both, is enjoying some posthumous stateside recognition with a number of english translations. *how's the pain? (comment va la douleur?)* is the tale of simon, an aging hitman as he embarks upon his last job. with the unintended involvement of some secondary characters, the ornery and misanthropic killer's final hit turns out to be more difficult than expected. with moments of dark humor, garnier's novel is an entertaining and diversionary read.

the shark was drowning its sorrows inside its glass cage. it turned this way and that for no apparent reason, taking no notice of the opaline jellyfish and shoals of multicoloured fish swimming out from clumps of soft seaweed. there was not much to choose between aquatic life and life on earth; either could be equally boring. the proof was in the amphibians which had dithered between the two for thousands of years without ever making their minds up, or the valium-drugged crocodiles whose sleepy eyes peeked above the surface of muddy pools. like simon, who stood watching them, all these creatures seemed to be on standby, waiting for something that was always just out of reach. over-excited kids pressed their noses against the glass, banging their horrid chubby little hands against the walls of the tanks. their shrieks ruined the silence of this other world. from the looks on the faces of their harassed parents, it was clear many would gladly throw their offspring to the piranhas. the world might well end in the same murky green waters that spawned humanity.

*translated from the french by emily boyce

Ross Cumming says

This is the second Pascal Garnier novel that i've read recently and can thoroughly recommend both.

'How's The Pain' tells the story of Simon, a hit man, posing as a pest controller, who befriends Bernard, a young man currently recovering from an industrial accident, after losing two fingers. Bernard agrees to become Simon's driver for a particular job that he must undertake. Bernard needs the money to help support his alcoholic mother and tide him over till he finds a new job. Along the way they pickup Fiona, a single mother and her baby Violette, after seeing her being assaulted by her abusive boyfriend.

The motley cast of characters are brilliant and there's a lot more humour, albeit very dark humour, in this novel compared to the other Garnier novel that I've read. The action takes place in very mundane settings such as supermarkets, filling stations, a caravan site and an aquarium and this adds to the charm of the book. Garnier starts the book with the ending, so all along we know what's going to happen, we just don't know how they'll arrive there.

I quickly becoming a fan of Garnier's 'Gallic Noir' books and I know I'll be back for further helping soon.

Andy Weston says

The translated title is "How's The Pain?"

A great title for this book which comes from an African country who greet each other with these words.

I fear I am getting a bit addicted to these "noir" novels. I chose "The Devil All The Time" as my favourite book of 2012.

I urge you not to read the blurb on the back, unless you do so now, and forget about it when you get round to reading it.

It's an innocent sort of blackness that works for this novel. Ordinary characters surround the protagonist, and again, that makes the idea of the novel work so well.

Shades of the great Dan Rhodes books, and a bit of Long Midnight of Barney Thompson.

I will search out more Garnier, and certainly more "noir".

Chris says

I received a free copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. The title of this Garnier novella comes from an African greeting. Rather than ask how one is doing, it is their custom to ask "How's the pain?" That sums up the tone and style of this darkly humorous tale perfectly.

This is my fourth Garnier book and I must say that he uses the novella style to maximum effect. Precisely the correct length so that the humor remains sharp and the darkness does not overwhelm—a perfect balance.

I am becoming quite a fan of Garnier. He is clearly a master of the noir novella, so much so that I started off

by comparing him favorably to the great noir masters yet now I believe that I should stop making comparisons altogether because his voice is so distinctive and original.

Ironic, yet realistic. Darkly fatalistic yet quite funny at times. Vicious and unredeemed/unredeemable characters that nonetheless are sympathetic because of their understanding and acceptance of their own flaws.

Each Garnier work is a jewel in its own right and this is no exception.

Jim Coughenour says

This is the third book by Garnier that I've read – and each time I begin by thinking, *this isn't Simenon*. The prose and plots skirt the parodic, but each time I'm caught up in the story. This is pure escape lit, a mini-genre of *roman gris* as translator Emily Boyce defines it – "touches of brightness lightening the grim outlook of *noir*." The characters and settings are bleak indeed, but as with the other Garnier books, still sparkle with a very wry wit. It takes some brilliance to start with a suicide and keep the reader chuckling to himself all the way through.
