

Painless

Marty Thornley

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Painless is a difficult to put down, gory horror thriller with gut-wrenching twists and turns.

Marty Thornley's unsettling *Painless* is a medical thriller with a touch of horror in which desperate people turn to a mad scientist for relief.

The prologue lays the groundwork for this gruesome and unsettling story. In it, a boy tries to help his mother after a car accident; his attempts end up killing her. That personal touch with death shatters his psyche, setting him on a lifelong path that's beyond his immediate recollection.

In the present, Greg, whose life is in a shambles after a construction accident left him in chronic pain and addicted to pills, is desperate for work and redemption. He turns to a clinical trial that promises a cure. Dr. Menta, a talented physician, heads the trial. He has perfected a revolutionary technique that blocks pain receptors but still allows for full sensation. Menta's procedure involves a cycle of placebos and a secret injection before a full surgical treatment.

Greg arrives at the trial along with several other patients. Menta hones his new technique on animals, but it's the human patients who are the focus. They also suffer from chronic pain and dark pasts. Their backstories focus on the time before their accidents, and their clear, ever-present desire to rid themselves of their pain is engaging.

Despite the initial successes of the trial, things go awry. The prose becomes increasingly more unsettling, as when a friendly golden retriever who's undergone the treatment turns rabid and obsessively chews his legs to the bone after a fresh injury. As each patient proceeds along the treatment plan, they too grow insane and self-destructive. Scene details and character actions paint a disturbing picture that's hard to look away from.

Character conversations are realistic, imparting information and moving the story forward. One of the patients slips up and expresses a dark desire that hints at her fate, but the others ignore it as an accident or a misheard outburst. As the patients descend into madness, so too do their thoughts. Their voices become violent and gruesome following bizarre psychological triggers.

The bulk of the book is devoted to establishing character backstories, though, with subtle hints about Menta and the treatment's true nature. After its tipping point, the story is rushed, becoming hyperfocused on detailing gore and body mutilations. The ending avoids resolutions in favor of an epilogue that sets up a potential sequel.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (December 21, 2018)

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