



## The Pain of Pleasure

**Amy Grace Loyd**

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While New York City prepares for a hurricane, the staff and patients of a headache clinic brace against a storm of their own making in Amy Grace Loyd's novel *The Pain of Pleasure*.

A doctor unpacks the consequences of prescribing joy and pleasure to a disappeared patient, Sarah. Dismissed from her last post, a new nurse, Ruth, will do anything that her job requires. Watson, the clinic's benefactress who attributes her own headaches to her philandering husband and errant son, enlists Ruth to obtain Sarah's journal, hoping to use it against the doctor if she needs to. As these mismatched people huddle together, avoiding the threatening winds and rain, Sarah's chronicled erotic secrets link them further—and in more ways than they know.

Using each character's graphic, confessional histories of inner turmoil and sparring, the plot builds toward chaos. Conversations between Watson, the doctor, and Ruth reveal rifts: Ruth reports to Watson; Watson monitors the doctor; the doctor protects Sarah's journal from them both. Tension and suspense are generated by descriptions of religion as a refuge for immigrants, as a storm shelter, as a "roar which lies on the other side of silence," and as a life force. And Sarah's sexual explorations run below the roiling narrative, grounding it.

Musical and literary experiences in Watson's home and in bars result in additional, frantic scenes. The book's tone is reflective and probing. Periodic wind reports are used to track the hurricane and to inform understandings of what's going on beyond the clinic. Drama is induced by interplays between pleasure and pain and healers and downtrodden people. The cast, alienated and battered by the storm and their relational struggles, must unite to survive in St Gabriel's sanctuary.

MARI CARLSON (July / August 2023)

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