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Part philosophical meditation, part cultural critique, this profoundly original work explores the nature of physical suffering. Elaine Scarry bases her study on a wide range of sources: literature and art, medical case histories, documents on torture compiled by Amnesty International, legal transcripts of personal injury trials, and military and strategic writings by such figures as Clausewitz, Churchill, Liddell Hart, and Henry Kissinger. Scarry begins with the fact of pain's inexpressibility. Not only is physical pain difficult to describe in words, it also actively destroys language, reducing sufferers in the most extreme cases to an inarticulate state of cries and moans. Scarry goes on to analyse the political ramifications of deliberately inflicted pain, specifically in the cases of warfare and torture, and she demonstrates how political regimes use the power of physical pain to attack and break down the sufferer's sense of self. Finally she turns to examples of artistic and cultural activity; actions achieved in the face of pain and difficulty.