Stephanie Dowrick was co-founder and Managing Director of the Women's Press, London, from 1977 to 1982 and is now its chair. Her novel Running Backwards Over Sand has been translated into Swedish and Dutch. She currently works part time as fiction publisher for Allen and Unwin.

Stephanie Dowrick's Intimacy and Solitude will touch everyone who picks it up. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the book is its uncanny ability to make sense of conflicts in our personal relationships.

According to Dowrick, the book is a pursuit of meaning in the events which are closest and most significant in our lives. What is it about intimacy that rewards or eludes me? Why am I alone when I want to be with someone else? Is solitude an easy escape for me from the dilemmas which intimacy poses? Why don't I know what I want? Out of this pursuit of meaning, says Dowrick, comes a changed sense of power and of choice. "Allowing people to make sense of things is empowering," she says. "I think a particular strength of the book is that it actually unravels things in a fairly detailed way—you're not just told that things are as they are, but why things are as they are."

What does she want people to do with this knowledge?

"When people are feeling most distressed, they are also feeling stuck. This book suggests there are always other ways of looking at conflicts. Often conflict comes from wanting two things at the same time. You might want a close family situation, but also be desperate to be alone. But if you were to have the aloneness you would miss the other, and if you were to have only the other, you wouldn't get what you need from being alone."

Dowrick describes intimacy as not only a willingness to engage with the inner life of another person, but more importantly, as a willingness to be changed by that. She embarked on the book in the late 70s and early 80s. "It was informed by that congruence of sexual politics, psychoanalysis and literature which was so much part of my politics at that time." Yet, while many people at the time were rethinking sexual politics, they still often felt powerless in relationships. "They had huge amounts of rhetoric available to them about international affairs or local politics. But when it actually came closest to heart and home, people neither had language nor solutions. And that this was particularly painful for people who, through their political beliefs, had begun to feel that they could analyse almost any situation."

Dowrick thinks that people nowadays don't want all-embracing solutions. Rather, they want to discover other ways of looking at things, and to establish that what happens in their lives doesn't happen without a reason. Things can be changed. She also feels that many who might most benefit from this book will shy away from it.

"A lot of people would immediately discard such a book because the subject causes them pain and distress and they prefer not to know. And that can be particularly true of political people who are often engaged with one issue after another, one struggle after another, and who often immensely enjoy confrontation of whatever kind because it saves them from looking inside themselves."

She rejects the criticism that this quest for meaning is an obsessive absorption with the self. "I'm suggesting that until you've understood what's going on inside yourself you will be projecting lots of distress outside yourself. I'm not arguing for a life of introspection. I'm a politically-minded person myself, but I've also seen people who have no inner nourishment become burned out. When people divide the world so strenuously into us and them, as happens in political groups, it can create real problems. People refuse to take on a common humanity with other people. For example, people might speak very boldly about what they are doing for others and at the same time be trampling on people in their own life or political group. Part of the reasons such eruptions become so common within these groups is because people are afraid of the contempt of their comrades or to look at personal issues in a useful or compassionate way."

"In Intimacy and Solitude I am saying that through knowing yourself and through knowing your insufficiencies, your inadequacies, your weaknesses and your conflicts, you can actually feel much closer to other people. I'm not arguing a case for self-absorption, on the contrary I'm saying people are self-absorbed or absorbed in their own issues, only when they lack self-knowledge. Only when they have some self-knowledge do they expect less of other people and can get more from other people."

In the chapter on Women and Men Dowrick examines why so many people are so afraid of that inner exploration. She cites heterosexual relationships where the man will so often require the woman to experience his feelings for him.

"If she has to live out his feelings for him as well as for herself, she's taking on a huge amount of emotional labour, which of course can never be spoken about openly, because neither of them really knows what's going on. But it is very stressful for the woman. If she leaves him and this collusion has been going on, he is of course distraught and either immensely angry with her, or he will feel so lost and pathetic that he has immediately to..."
get into another relationship so that another woman can carry his feelings for him and allow him to be what he regards as a comparative rational, unfeeling person."

Dowrick suggests that women and men almost inevitably understand intimacy differently. There are several things that they can do about this, she says:

“One is to try to articulate what it is that they understand and want; the other is to learn to listen to what the other person is saying. Perhaps most important of all is to back off. A man and a woman are very unlikely to fully meet each other’s needs. And the extent to which they can take care of themselves will have a converse paradoxical effect. The more each can take care of him or herself, the more likely they are to be able to meet in intimacy and not just out of some kind of woeful neediness.

“And yet,” she adds, “so many people spend their lives searching for the Ultimate Rescuer—somewhere there is a relationship that will save you, save you from yourself. A relationship should not be asked to fulfil all a person’s needs. It’s important to spend time with yourself which isn’t focused on the absence of another person.

“So I tried to move away from this ideal of the one-to-one connection.

This is not to say that satisfying one-to-one connections should be denigrated; they can be an enormous blessing. But it’s not what people should necessarily be hanging out for, because in hanging out for it they are missing more modest goals that they’re more likely to achieve through friendship.”

When Intimacy and Solitude was first released in New Zealand in October last year it became an instant seller. “It was greeted with relief that someone living in the Australian Pacific region had actually written a substantial book around these very complex and common questions.

“And I think the warmth of the response was accentuated by the realisation that this was not just another self-help book from America. It’s very different from many American books on the subject. It is not a heterosexist book. It takes into account that people’s self-esteem is affected by their class. But I also make it clear that people who are privileged economically can feel devastating emptiness inside. But at the same time, if you are economically without privilege, it’s also incredibly hard to feel good about yourself. And then there’s the story-telling quality. I am also a writer of fiction and I think those skills help the reader immerse themselves in the text.”

How much of her own experience is reflected in the book? “I don’t want to be regarded as someone who’s got their life in order and wants to be promoted to guru status. The book came about as a result of my own feelings of insufficiency and lack of knowledge. And that has stayed with me. There is always more to know. You are always up against your own human failings. But you can have somewhat different attitudes to them, instead of endlessly blaming yourself. Learn to be a little easier on yourself and then you will begin to be a little easier on other people.”

Stephanie Dowrick’s Intimacy and Solitude ($19.95) is published by William Heinemann. It is currently in its fourth Australian reprint, and was released in Britain on 4 June.

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