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Chapters And Verse

Plumbing The Depths Of Desire

There's a great line from a movie to the effect that talking about love is like dancing about architecture. And if there's a topic tougher to explore than the mysteries of why we love then its trying to define desire—that powerful and often unrequited force.

“Desire remains one of the last taboos, perhaps more so than eroticism”, writes Lorna Crozier in the introduction to *Desire in seven voices*, a book of essays that includes award-winning writers and poets Susan Musgrave, Bonnie Burnard, Shani Mootoo, Dionne Brand, Evelyn Lau, Carol Shields and, of course, Lorna Crozier herself. “The only way I could ask the other women to do it was because I was putting myself in the same terrifying position,” Crozier confesses.

The essays are as different as the women who penned them, digging deep into the spiritual, moral and sexual implications of the dance with desire. “Desire is a word – like soul – that is almost impossible to define,” says Musgrave, whose essay is a raw, honest look at the side of desire that is all wound up in lust. “Desire was two bodies banging together in the dark,” she writes in her essay titled *Junkie Libido*. Not so for Bonnie Burnard, who begins her treatise with the disclaimer: “The idea of discussing desire does not entice me very much.” So when the authors gathered together in our studio for a conversation, Burnard began by defining her most powerful desire as one for privacy. “In having to write this, I was taken back to my basic position as a human being and that is to privacy. Hard to come by in a tv studio. So here was the question: Within that privacy, when is desire spoken about? “With women, it's often made to be funny. It is assumed, among women, that we've had many of the same experiences, many of the same feelings, idiocies and jubilations around desire.”

Bonnie talked about her children – now young adults – and said she felt sorry for them because their entire world is so sexual. “The images, what they are supposed to wear and buy, it's inescapable for them and it should, instead, be a private entitlement. I want my kids to know that there is more, that this is one orchid in the garden but there are many other flowers in that garden – including friendship.” At one point, when her children were teenagers, Burnard says they talked to her about everything. “Many things were discussed. At one point I said “I think there should be a little bit of repression around here – repression can be a good thing!” I

remembered that when Burnard had written her Giller-award winning *A Good House*, she had trouble articulating the desires of her characters because, after writing about them for four years, she said she was “reluctant to intrude”.

These seven essays explore desire as both a source power and of distress. “There is, of course, a scientific explanation for this emotional disturbance we call desire,” writes Musgrave. She explained that “when I have that feeling – of desire, I become somebody I don’t want to be. I start not even being able to talk properly. I become an idiot – I can’t sleep or eat...and I get a pimple on the same spot on my chin...so I think it has to be something chemical.”

For Crozier, whose husband, the poet Patrick Lane, also joined our conversation as the token brave male, desire is often about something you can’t have. This doesn’t mean, although it can be true, that it’s a forbidden thing, but, rather, out of reach at the moment. Lorna’s essay is a poignant longing for a lover who is far away. “Desire should be a longer word, multi-syllabic. There’s such a distance in it; a wish for the absent to be present,” she writes. Patrick Lane agreed: “We don’t write our love poems when we’re making love. We’re busy making love at that moment. We write our love poems when we are apart from one another. That tremendous sense of longing and desire that travels the great distance is an exquisite sort of feeling – which embodies a great deal of suffering and fear and joy.” This response causes Susan Musgrave, who wrote her own essay for this book before her husband, Stephen Reid, was jailed for 18 years for his part in an armed bank robbery in Victoria, to echo that “... with desire came loss, and fear: loss of innocence and fear that pleasure would have to end.”

She also talked of her friend, Tom, who is mentioned in her essay. Tom had a “desire for desirelessness” that Susan said she could not understand. “I argued with him that to be desireless was to be dead. But I now know what he wanted was to desire nothing - to have within himself everything he needed. Now I understand.”

It was an amazing, often difficult conversation. But we’ll give the last word to Lorna Crozier, who wrote: “Desire is a restless ghost...arriving in shapes we least expect.” Perhaps that is the only way to define the last taboo.