

Love's Labour

Stephen Grosz. 2025. London: Penguin Random House.

I wanted to read this book as soon as I saw the extract in the *Guardian*. For two reasons largely. First, it is essential that I am aware of the world in which I exist and, more importantly, the world in which clients and potential clients (and supervisees) exist and are subject of discourses and narratives. Second, many years ago, Grosz's first book, *The Examined Life*, became a best seller in 2013 around the same time that I was an inpatient at The Priory. Over a long and hot summer with little going except for lots of therapy and trying to distract myself from an overwhelming desire to kill myself, I read it. More than reading it, I devoured it, along with all the therapy I was coaxed into, under the pretext of helping myself get more of a handle on my psyche to rid myself of suicidal urges, nightmares and desires. In my 'priory cohort', if one could call it that, love manifested itself in two ways: towards one's therapist (or therapists) and/or towards the profession. I was drawn to a career change, and *The Examined Life* offered clarity, unlike all the confusion I felt. Saying that I felt affected by Grosz is an understatement, although I never went back to his work. In hindsight, it is like trying to remember the good feelings from a youthful relationship rather than examining why it failed. I chose not to become a psychoanalyst or psychodynamic therapist like him, which brings me to his second and latest work, *Love's Labour*.

I liked the start of the book, culminating in a striking admission that as he

began my psychoanalysis with the belief that, from the start, Dr Limentani knew what I was all about – that to be a psychoanalyst is to know already. The very opposite is true: psychoanalysis is a particular form of not knowing. Psychoanalysis is two people not knowing together. The process of psychoanalysis is to think together, find meaning together. The only way he could get to know me – that we could get to know me – was through talking and listening.

(p6)

I want to rewrite that as an existential statement:

The very opposite is true: existential therapy is a particular form of not knowing. Existential therapy is two people not knowing together. The process of existential therapy is to think together, find meaning together. The only way he could get to know me – that we could get to know me – was through talking and listening.

I do not think this is a bad positioning statement on existential therapy, so perhaps the labels are all misguided? I certainly like the place of

unknowing front and centre.

I struggle with the ethics of case studies written up in books. For a case study to be ethical, it should be changed enough becoming fiction rather than fact, otherwise, client privacy may be at risk. If not, then I fear for some of the clients. To be the subject of a case study in a rather obscure journal with a small circulation aimed at professionals is one thing, but to end up in a book that will be laid out in the window of every local Waterstones up and down the country is quite another. I am not sure how anyone could really consent.

I speak from experience, as I was in a documentary hosted by the rapper Professor Green where I talked about my father's suicide and my own attempts. I fully consented to the general principles of the project, yet my experience after the documentary was aired was unexpected, as suddenly people from my old life got in touch and the world changed, albeit briefly, as I wondered whether people knew what I had shared. This afflicted me for a couple of months, and I was fully aware when I stood on a rugby pitch with a camera pointed at me it that it would be broadcast. It is quite another matter to find out that what you thought was told in confidentiality to your therapist no longer is. It is unclear to me how Grosz addressed this issue and it is indicative of a broader trend in our profession of veering away from helping to sometimes even causing some harm. I hope, perhaps falsely, that this was properly addressed outside the pages of the book, but I do wonder why it was not included if it was.

There is power in the concept of love being labour that speaks to my understanding of existentialism, bringing me back to Levinas and the idea of truly looking into the face and eyes of the other. For Grosz love is a challenge that requires effort; for clients, for the analyst and, indeed, colleagues. This echoes the wonderful work of Alain Badiou, not an unambiguous existentialist, who explicitly laments that our lack of investment in love and connection reflects the world in which we live in. I found the work thought-provoking, encouraging my engagement with the world, with what matters and viewing things as a choice. Loving is more than finding somebody attractive and swiping a picture, it is about connecting, action, understanding and negotiating with others. I was struck by Grosz's feeling of loving care for his clients.

In the final chapter, 'Hauntings', Grosz's client Tobias brings a dream after coming for ten years. The very idea that a client could be ten years into analytic treatment and not have brought a dream feels wonderful. I found this, and the regular offhand mentions of long therapeutic relationships, reassuring.

Recently, in a supervision group, I remembered in my first placement a supervisee relating how motivated they felt that their number of sessions was reaching double digits. I vividly recall the internal tension I felt with one client

(who I needed to come for twenty out of twenty-four sessions) on the ethics of ‘keeping’ this client in therapy when it was unclear what they were getting out of it. My supervisor, who was trained in the analytical tradition, believed that the client was returning for a reason, even if it was not clear.

Reflecting now, I can see how, irrespective of my beliefs that open-ended work is good, the pervasive attitude of ‘eight sessions and you’ll feel better’ is difficult to shift when it is mostly what is out there in therapy. In the intervening decade, companies like BetterHelp emerged. They place a premium on short-term results and the swapping of the therapist, mirroring apps that pertain to love and lust, such as Tinder. If anything, when I am outside my room and in the world, it often feels like everyone craves things now, but Grosz’s attitude counters this more than any conversation with a colleague. This perspective is widely accepted, endorsed by multiple editors and publicists as appealing to the public.

The book is a good read, well-written and provocative. There are probably better books out there if you have little time or cash, but the lack of existentialism and the light touch should not put you off. As a rather extreme example, I view it a little like dipping into FOX news from time-to-time. While that will not make me a raving MAGA advocate, it is interesting to see what others are saying and doing. This also applies to the psychoanalytic way of being in the world, and mainstream writing styles that likely become bestsellers. Given the spectre of statutory regulation for our profession, I have been casting glances at psychoanalysis and treatment. From my vantage point, it is not the most accessible and there is a huge emphasis on being in analysis before the actual training. I would not personally choose it, I have not, but I understand its appeal both professionally and as a client. I am unsure if it would remain viable under regulation; would a policy wonk who has not been in therapy support years of analysis before training? You might wonder how this relates to existential therapy. I sometimes consider whether analysis, with its long-standing tradition, can endure as it is or if our small corner of the therapeutic world risks getting swallowed up. This book provides valuable insight into the wild and wonderful ways in which people engage with others to try to help them understand their way of being in the world. I have benefited from reading it.

I would recommend it to students and early career therapists as an introduction to the fulfilling career of psychotherapy. This is only the author’s second book, implying that he (and others) can sustain a rewarding career primarily through client work. This offers reassurance for those considering entering the field in today’s professional landscape.

Ben Scanlan