Transcript for *"Leave Me Alone! Solitude and Creativity with Vera Brosgol"*

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host doctor Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:16] We spend a lot of time talking about relationships and connections on this podcast, but I think we should be clear that not only is it sometimes okay to wish to be alone, sometimes relationships and connections may be not so great. An imaginative author digs into the world of a full range of relationships through her work. And today we're going to talk about two of her books. Our guest today is Vera Brosgol. She's an author and illustrator who was born in Moscow and moved to the United States when she was five years old. She has published three graphic novels and has written and illustrated several picture books, including The Little Guys and Memory Jars. Her debut picture book, Leave Me Alone, was a Caldecott Honor Book. Her latest book is a middle grade novel called Return to Sender. Vera. Welcome to the show.

Vera Brosgol: [00:02:04] Thanks, Dipesh. It's really great to be here.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:07] So you have worked in quite a few genres comics, animation, storyboards, graphic novels, and now a novel. Tell us how you got started with both writing and illustrating.

Vera Brosgol: [00:02:19] I think like a lot of kids, I've been writing my own stories, illustrating them as long as I can remember. It's always something I've done for fun, but it never seemed like a career option. It was always something I kind of did on the side. But I was very interested in art. It was something my mother really supported. So I went to art school, but I went to art school for animation. That seemed like the most stable of my options. I'd never met an author as a kid. I'd never had a school visit or anything like that. So that's what I wound up doing for a decade. And it was, you know, about as corporate as an art job can get. But I always did my own things on the side. And that's actually how Return to Sender started. It was a story I drew in high school just for fun and put on the internet. So it was really, really fun to kind of come full circle with it, and be able to, you know, rewrite it completely, obviously, as a much better writer, and release it out into the world.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:03:25] Ah, well, I did not realize its origins went that far back. Yeah. So as we mentioned, you moved to the US from Russia when you were very young. Did your family bring books with you when you moved?

Vera Brosgol: [00:03:39] We did. We came to the States as refugees, so we left a lot of things. I think I came with one toy, this bootleg cheburashka. If anybody knows what that is, it's a little monster that doesn't fit anywhere in the zoo. They don't know where to file him, so he arrives in a crate of oranges, and he lives in a phone booth, I think. But anyway, we left a lot of things behind, but my mom made sure to bring books.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: So they're still in this house?

Vera Brosgol: I'm in my mother's house right now. And it's lots of Russian fairy tales. That's the main thing that I remember her reading to me. Just these beautifully illustrated, really old stories. Ivan Bilibin is the illustrator of a lot of them, and a huge influence on my work.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:27] And were the American books that you started accumulating at some point when you were here? Were they also fairy tales or different? Was there a change?

Vera Brosgol: [00:04:37] There were some fairy tales. I remember the Greek myths. I was super into those. But we couldn't really afford books. We didn't have a lot of money. So I spent a ton of time at the library. I lived right across the street from my elementary school. I don't know if I broke in at night or what, but I don't remember school. I remember the library

that was huge. And also just sitting in the bookstore reading anything and everything. I kind of skipped over picture books. I was five when we got here, and I remember, reading more middle grade. I think I was maybe reading ahead a little bit. But a lot of Roald Dahl was huge for me as a kid. I also don't really remember picture books all that much. And we didn't buy many books as a family, but it was a weekly trip to the library where I discovered what the limits were on how many books you could check out at once at my local public library. But, yeah, voracious reader. And the library was a weekly joy.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:20] Yeah. So return to sender. We'll come back to the main story. But as we're talking about your life, the story is rooted in the story of a child who moves to a new school and struggles to belong. Is any of that biographical?

Vera Brosgol: [00:06:04] Yeah. For sure. I was also raised by a single parent. It's a little different for Oliver. He's lost his father in the last year. My parents were divorced.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: When?

Vera Brosgol: As soon as we moved to America. So I was raised by a single mother of three, who didn't speak the language and didn't know anyone here. So we moved around a lot. She was always trying to find a better living for us. And she didn't seem to understand that. Not that moving in the middle of the school year is not ideal. Especially. Yeah, especially for really, really, like, painfully shy kids, which was definitely me. So, just starting over and over and over again was really hard. It would take me a while to get my footing in a new place and kind of make it through the bully gauntlet. But before finding good friends. So that's kind of a little bit what Oliver's going through as well. His family's moving around a lot. They lose their apartment. They stay with family for a while until they finally inherit this apartment in Manhattan that's supposed to be their forever home. But he doesn't really trust it. And I didn't really trust it as a kid, either. Even now, I've been in the same place in Portland for almost 20 years. That's for a reason. And I still feel like at any moment I'm going to have to go.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:23] Sure, sure. Yeah, yeah. So turning for a moment to your picture book, Leave Me Alone, which again, as I said, was just a delight. Could you say a bit more about this story? Because a lot of children's books, the protagonist is a child, but in this case it isn't. Can you tell us more about it?

Vera Brosgol: [00:07:43] Yeah. I got that note when I first pitched it like this. This isn't the protagonist we're used to seeing, but I'm really grateful I was able to do it. I felt like it was really important. It's the story of an old Russian grandmother who would love nothing more than to get her knitting done as winter is coming, but she's got 30 grandchildren crawling all over her. So she packs up all her stuff and goes to find somewhere quiet to try to get it done.

And each location has its version of 30 grandchildren to get in her way, until she finally winds up in a wormhole. Yeah, in a perfect black void where she can finally get it done. But it's a little bit too quiet, so she winds up going home. I think my sort of glib answer is old people aren't that different from little children, and they will tell you exactly what they think and exactly what they want, sometimes at high volume which is what this book is all about. It's all about yelling. But I think it's just a really basic human feeling. I think anyone with a sibling, anyone with a pet, anyone with a parent, anyone with a neighbor knows the feeling of their solitude being encroached on. And I think it's, you know, a pretty basic human need and one that takes a while to learn to ask for and learn to get. So she's able to get it very, very directly with yelling. And I think kids do the same thing. A lot of the time.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:16] Yeah. And it's hilarious how she keeps thinking she'll move to a different place where it's quieter and everything keeps bothering her until she ends up in outer space. And then finally in this wormhole and all. But I will note that being in the wormhole, she does actually get to finish her work, right? She finishes her knitting and then, you know, calmly kind of says, okay, now it's time for me to come back. And all is good at that point.

Vera Brosgol: [00:09:50] Yeah. And I think it's important that there's a moment where she finishes it and something's missing. And I ask kids, like, how is she? What are her facial expressions in this story? How is she feeling here when she's finally in the void? Is she happy she's finally getting to do her favorite thing in the world? How is she feeling now that she's done? And it's a little bit too quiet so it's not enough to be there. Life's more complicated than that. Otherwise, she'd stay there forever.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:23] Two words I used in the introduction really stood out to me when I was reading this book that we often term it solitude when we really want it, and loneliness when we don't want it. Right. And this book seems to walk that edge very nicely, right? That she's searching for solitude. Like, just leave me alone, all of you folks. And then at some point, it did tip over into like, okay, but now I want my connections back. Right. And and she's clearly feeling some loneliness at that point and says, okay, time to go home now.

Vera Brosgol: [00:10:54] Yeah. It's like a constant balance between the two of them.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:58] There's another element to this. There's often books in which the quote unquote adults are often endlessly caring and available. Right. And the classic is like the giving tree. But your protagonist really puts her own sanity first, and she's just yelling leave me alone and just leaves, right? Were you consciously thinking about that dynamic as you wrote this?

Vera Brosgol: [00:11:28] I think, again, like I said, adults, like really old people and really tiny babies are not that far apart. But I think we all have we all have a little kid inside of us, not super far below the surface, closer in some people than others. And that kid isn't always perfectly behaved. And it peeks out when you're pushed kind of tier extremes. I remember my mom wigging out over really tiny things. I remember once we left out her rollerblades and they were stolen. We were little kids, but she completely lost it at us. And it's like there was a lot of other things going on in her life, so she wasn't resourced enough to handle it with perfect maturity. So yeah, I think in an ideal world, you want to be able to get your own mask on as an adult and take care of yourself so that you can show up as your most best equipped, supportive self. But that's in an ideal world. And it's not always possible. We don't live in one of those.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:30] Yeah. If we can achieve it maybe 10% of the time, that would be great, right? I will tell you, when this book showed up, I hadn't had a chance to open it yet. And we were doing a module on children's books with my undergraduate class, and I brought it with me and I said, okay, folks, I'm going to put this book under the document camera so you can all see it on your screens. And I'm going to read through this book and just tell you what I notice about the illustrations and the storyline and everything for the first time, I opened the spine and I said, you can hear the spine cracking. I haven't even opened it yet. And it was so much fun because it was, of course, as I knew, a great book, but it was great for them to kind of see how a reader comes to a book the first time and what they might look for and think and talk about.

Vera Brosgol: [00:13:23] So, yeah, the page turns are really important. You notice that on the firstt time you read something and that's something that plays into making graphic novels as well. You're very careful with how you're directing your reader's attention and always leaving a little surprise to keep them going.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:13:41] Indeed. So your new book which we've mentioned, Return to sender. You talked a bit about what it's about. Do you want to say a little bit more?

Vera Brosgol: [00:13:50] Yeah, yeah. So I mentioned that Oliver has lost his father. His mother is having a hard time, and he's been pushed into kind of a little, little caretaking role with her. She falls into a depression after his dad dies. They've been moving around a lot, and they finally settle into an apartment that they inherit from his great aunt Barb in Manhattan. And that means he's going to a new school again. But it is a very, very fancy private school in Chelsea where all the kids are very rich. Everything's very high tech. There's a satellite, there's wind turbines on the roof. There's a chef making wood fired pizzas for the kids every day. And he's never been around this much before in his life. And the only reason he's able to go there is because his mother's working there as a janitor. So you can imagine how cool all the

other kids are about that. So he's got the requisite bully struggles, but he discovers that the new apartment he's living in has a special feature. There is a mail slot built into the wall of the kitchen with nothing on the other side, and if he puts a letter into the mail slot with a wish on it, it will spit out instructions on how to get that wish to come true. So he gets a small thing that he does that sets off a chain reaction, like a Rube Goldberg effect that will lead to him getting his wish, but it kind of keeps going to balance out. Um, kind of like Newton's third law kind of thing. And, those consequences aren't always positive for other people. So he has to weigh the incredible amount of stuff he suddenly wants with the cost of getting it. And also, the wish that he wants most in the world is to get his dad back from the dead. So he has to think about the consequences of something like that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:39] Right?

Vera Brosgol: [00:15:39] It's also a very silly book. There's attack squirrels and an invisible fighter jet and all kinds of goofy stuff in another dimension. Roald Dahl was a huge, huge influence on what I was doing with it. So, yeah, it's not all inequality and death.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:02] Yeah.

Vera Brosgol: [00:16:03] Just a little bit.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:06] There you go. Just a little bit. Yeah. It does seem to hearken to these traditions, right, of the story of the witches. Like that the genie. You rub the lamp and you have these wishes and you can ask for anything you want. But of course, the consequences are something that people don't necessarily think about. And some of these consequences had some longer timelines to them and, you know, some rather elaborate connections. But, Oliver did seem to, you know, eventually become aware of at least some of them and, and felt genuine guilt about them.

Vera Brosgol: [00:16:41] Yeah, I did a bunch of research for this book, including reading other books about wishes, and one that I really enjoyed was Half Magic by Edward Eager. If you're familiar with that one, he did a whole series of The Tales of magic. I only read the first one, but it's really funny. I think it's from the 20s, maybe. But it's about children who find a magical nickel that grants wishes, but it only grants half the wish. So if you wish to be home, you will suddenly appear at the exact halfway point between where you started and where your house is. So they have to kind of reverse engineer all their wishes to get what they actually want. And I thought that was just a really fun puzzle. As a writer to figure out, but also kind of fun for kids to think about, too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:32] Yeah.

Vera Brosgol: [00:17:32] I read that book after I kind of came up with my own wish mechanic. But I think it's just there's so many different ways to kind of turn wishes upside down. And I came up with my own and it's also a little bit like real life too. You figure out what you want and you have to figure out how to get there. You just get magic to play with, not just a reality.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:58] Indeed, indeed. Your writing in this is really beautiful. You've targeted this to 8 to 12 year old range, but there's these wonderful, unusual words that I think they're not just fancy words, right? They're ways of expanding, I think, kids horizons. There's some of the words that we came across reading it. Katana, which is a Japanese word. I'll need help with pronunciation on this one.

Vera Brosgol: [00:18:31] You know, I need help, too, because I'm not Georgian. I think it's kimmorley just kimmorley.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:36] Okay. And the dumplings.

Vera Brosgol: [00:18:38] Khinkali.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:39] Khinkali.

Vera Brosgol: [00:18:39] Mhm.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:40] Okay. And then in Leave Me Alone, you used the word samovar which is a tea urn. Of course. My class, well they either didn't know the word or they weren't willing to admit that they knew it. And so I taught them a word in the middle of my live reading as well. How did you think about language and vocabulary like this when you're writing for kids just in general?

Vera Brosgol: [00:19:04] Yeah, I don't think about it too much. I guess as the answer, like I said before, I moved around a lot. And one of the places we lived was England. I was 11, 12, 13 when we lived there, and that was really formative. I inhaled books at that age, and a lot of them were by British writers that I'd never encountered before. It was a huge Terry Pratchett fan. And there's no glossary to britishisms, you just figure it out. And I thought the language was so interesting and so hilarious. And I think kids are natural at this, if they don't understand something that's happening, they'll either ignore it or they'll ask a question. They're not going to, like, hit the brakes and walk away. So I just assumed that that's what would happen with my books, too. Like, nobody asks about the samovar, but it's kind of fun to stop near the end of the book and be like, what do you what? What is that? What do you think that is? And they usually get it. It's great. And if they don't, it doesn't affect the story.

It's just sort of extra credit I think. So yeah, I think all language is just a patchwork of places we've been and people we've met. Words get absorbed into the English language all the time. So I think I'm just helping out with that one. I got away with the word gormless. I refer to a small brown bird as gormless.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:31] I remember that. Yeah.

Vera Brosgol: [00:20:32] It's one of my favorite words. But the copy editor flagged it as a britishism criticism and I was like, leave it, just please leave it. I really like that. So maybe some kid will learn what gormless means, I don't know.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:45] You know, many of the books I have had growing up actually were written and published in the United Kingdom as well. I was born there and much of my extended family was there. So that was actually the one place we got to buy books. Not so much in New York where I grew up, but there was this sort of space. Yeah, it was just different, I don't know, like when we went to visit, we could buy those. So I still have British spellings creeping into my writing decades later.

Vera Brosgol: [00:21:16] Yeah. Yeah, same going to school in Canada. Didn't help with that either.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:21] Sure, sure. We talked earlier a bit about loneliness and solitude. And you've written at least these. These two books alone are for different ages. How do you think about writing? About ideas of wanting to be left alone, etc. for children, particularly at different ages. Are there different ways you approach it?

Vera Brosgol: [00:21:44] Well, this is this one. This question kind of gets at my heart a little bit because I think it's still something I wrestle with a lot. I think defining the two is pretty important. So to me, loneliness is a disconnection from other people and solitude is a connection with yourself. And I think Oliver has lost pretty much everything early in his life. And he has very, very little agency. So he feels pretty lonely. But the older woman and leave me alone because she is an adult is a bit more powerful. She does have agency. She can leave an environment that she doesn't like and go somewhere else and find solitude and connect with herself, and then come back to where she came from. A little bit more resourced. So that's not something kids get very often. They don't get a lot of access to solitude. And I think that's something that's important for them to get space to practice and figure out what the healthy balance is. And that's tricky for some people. It's tricky for me. If you grew up with a lot of loneliness, to figure out what you actually want. Like you're so hungry for connection, it's hard to turn down a social invitation and take, you know, an evening to yourself because you don't trust that there will be more social invitations in the future. So I think that's

something that comes with maturity. And learning to take the time to listen to yourself, it's advanced, but it's really, really important. So I think that's something that comes up in all of my books. Another one to call out, I think, is Be Prepared, which is a memoir about going to a Russian summer camp where, spoiler alert I also had a hard time making friends and like finding the space in nature to listen to myself and realize that acceptance from the popular kids is not the most important thing.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:50] Mhm. Mhm. Indeed, indeed. Yeah. It also makes me reflect, uh, how sometimes we almost allow solitude to happen for certain children or even adults, particularly if they're different in some way. Developmentally delayed or things like that or other conditions where we kind of set them aside and say, well, they seem happy on their own, but are they really. It's hard to know.

Vera Brosgol: [00:24:19] Mhm. And could they even tell you if you asked them. It's a real skill to pay attention to your body and identify an emotion and a physical feeling that goes along with it. And yeah I think very few people get taught that at an early age. They're very lucky.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:40] Indeed. Indeed. It really nuances. So many of the things we talk about at Reach Out and Read about relational health, the health of relationships and how to how to think about that. And, you know, the other thing that stood out in Return to Sender, in particular, was how so many of the kids at the school Oliver goes to have what superficially appear to be social connections, but they are really so superficial, and there's not necessarily a depth or a trust or a reliability to them in different ways.

Vera Brosgol: [00:25:12] Yeah, I did some of the research I did for writing that book was talking to friends who live in Manhattan, who kind of move in that world and have kids in those schools, and obviously their parenting is impeccable, but they just kind of told me about kids who don't see their parents because they're always working and they're raised by nannies and drivers and aren't really allowed to interact with the city. They're just slurped into these, like, cars. The second they leave the building and taken to their tutor and their life is very sterile. Like, they don't have exposure to people different from them or even people who they're biologically related to. So I thought that was really interesting. Like providing materially for your kids is not enough, which for sure, we know.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:06] Another element in this book is also about socioeconomic class, right, about people having access and Oliver having not as much. How much did that play into your thinking about this book, this kind of thinking about the class differences there?

Vera Brosgol: [00:26:24] That was something I've been aware of my entire life, since, you know, we came to the country as refugees. I felt like we always were the poor kids in any

environment we lived in. Things just didn't feel very stable. Especially like when my parents divorced. Everything changed all the time. And I couldn't help but compare my home life to that of the other kids in my class, other homes that would go to to see if we were normal. And I think kids are often doing that. And I think adults are often doing that. We live in capitalism. And that whole engine is driven by us wanting things we don't already have. So we're constantly being fed images of what our lives could be like if we just pay some money for them. It's endless. Children are absolutely exposed to it. And there's just a bottomless amount of people to compare ourselves to. So I really wanted to write about that. I practice Vipassana meditation. That's something I picked up a few years ago, and that teaches that all suffering comes from craving. Like wanting. Craving a reversion. Wanting things to be different from the way that they are. And that felt like it applied really, really well to this story too. All of Oliver's unhappiness appears the second he starts wanting things he doesn't have. And it doesn't mean that you should be a doormat and just accept things exactly the way they are. But it's an opportunity to investigate why you're unhappy. What you think is missing in your life, and whether the next shiny thing you're chasing is actually going to solve it or not.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:10] And to maybe take advantage of the solitude to ask yourself those questions and connect with yourself, as we noted earlier.

Vera Brosgol: [00:28:18] Exactly. Yeah. Go sit in a dark concrete box for ten days and you will come out with all the answers.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:26] There we go. So this has been a wonderful conversation. Well, two questions. What are you working on now? Will your next project be a graphic novel, a picture book? Because this is your first foray into doing something that was mostly text heavy and not as much of the illustrations.

Vera Brosgol: [00:28:48] Yeah, yeah, this was a new one. I'm really, really glad my editor trusted me enough to get to try it. I really, really loved writing prose. I'd love to do it again. Because it is much faster than doing a graphic novel. But you can tell about the same scope of a story, I think. I think my stories are like film length or graphic novel length or prose novel length. Those are the ideas I seem to keep coming up with. Picture books are much harder. So I have another idea for a middle grade horror novel that I'm really excited about. We'll see if it's prose. I hope so. But if it's not, I think it would work as a graphic novel. But I'm also illustrating a picture book that my friend Laurel Snyder wrote about a kids blanket with separation anxiety.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:41] So nice.

Vera Brosgol: [00:29:42] I'm really excited about that one. I have to figure out how to draw a blanket emoting without it being terrifying.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:51] I look forward to seeing that. Yeah.

Vera Brosgol: [00:29:53] Me too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:56] Last question. If you could have a consequence free wish, what might that be?

Vera Brosgol: [00:30:04] This is a hard one, and I really need to have a good answer for this, because I'm going to get this question a lot, aren't I?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:10] Okay. I'll give you an answer that you can decide if you want to agree with it or not.

Vera Brosgol: [00:30:15] Okay.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:15] An emoting non terrifying blanket. Right.

Vera Brosgol: [00:30:23] 32 drawings of an emoting non terrifying blanket. That's the glib answer. My sincere answer probably would tie back to what I said about people feeling like they need more. I'd love world peace. That would be awesome. But how do you actually get to that? And I think it's maybe that is just like all the wealth and resources are redistributed evenly, and everyone feels like they have enough, so they don't immediately start fighting over it again. I think that would solve it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:54] There we go. Indeed.

Vera Brosgol: [00:30:56] Is it airtight? I'll poke at it somewhere later, but that would be nice.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:01] Yeah it would. Vera, thank you so much. It was a delight to read these books and enjoy and experience them and share them with others, and to have this conversation with you.

Vera Brosgol: [00:31:10] Yeah. Thanks so much for talking about feelings with me. I really enjoy it.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:17] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. We talked today about solitude and about um, having to spend time connecting

with oneself. I recently came across in a book by Jenny Diski called On Trying to Keep Still, a passage that explored exactly this. She starts off by saying, what people always say about being alone for long periods is some variation on the theme of the immense and unimagined difficulty of having to confront oneself, a concealed self which lurks unnoticed below the requirements of everyday sociability. Coming face to face with yourself is how they describe it. You really find out who you are, they say with a look of agonisingly acquired wisdom, implying an inevitable dark night of the soul. What I have discovered during those periods of being as alone for as long as possible, is that I'm extremely good at passing the time and taking pleasure in passing the time, reading, idling and pottering, rarely bored, hardly ever restless, sometimes miserable, often dissatisfied with myself and the world without finding out an iota more than that about who I am. Because that is pretty much what I'm like in company, too. The agony of solitude passes me by until, because social guilt and self-analysis are never far away. The lack of agony at being with myself becomes an agony of lack of self. Why is being alone not excruciatingly painful, not a dread voyage of discovery, and of my unsuspected inner reaches I brood. Where's the humbling insight into my deepest workings, the interior suffering, the anguish of the solitary soul faced with its own naked, unbearable image? Where is the suffering artist? Imagination.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:33:06] Creativity. Anything? Where's the through a dark, glassy. Now face to face, the truth eventually dawns on me that this absence of painful confrontation with the shadow interior is, in fact, my moment of self-discovery. I find nothing more monstrous, chimerical, interesting, or elaborate than solipsism. Certainly nothing substantial, just the echoing vacancy of a shallow vessel, an empty container with nothing evident in it at all. Its perfect hollowness is merely a swatch temporarily by inputs of reading, music or television. I hankered when I was at home and subject to interruption, the not excessively demanding presence of others for long periods of solitude in which to think uninterrupted time, when at last reliably alone I could be myself. My agony is not what I find in the stillness of being alone, but what I do not find. She then goes on to think about how writing engages with all this, and she says, and I wondered why writing a book about what being alone is really like about Insubstantiality and emptiness. A book about these things. For why? To describe what is. To show, show and tell. Why? Who do I want to convince and of what? No one. Nothing. In any case, as I imagined the book. The blank pages which suit the subject so well filled with words. Black marks smearing the white paper with the doing.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:34:38] Looking, wondering, narrating that keep the underlying emptiness underlying. And then she goes on to end the passage by saying, why make narrative meaning out of it when there is neither narrative nor meaning involved? Because it passes the time? But doing and the kind of doing that is writing is an inability to come to terms with emptiness. In fact, an attempt to escape from it, to turn emptiness into substance. Narrative marks on a page. And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach

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