

# Stephen Vizinczey



IMAGE: ZOE CORMIER

*In Praise of an Original*

According to Stephen Vizinczey, great literature can never be created in a publishing system that simply wants to mass-produce what it believes “the market” desires. The sad consequence of focusing only on the demands of a notional book market is nothing less than “the end of literature.” As he writes in *Truth and Lies in Literature*, “Great writers are not those who tell us we shouldn’t play with fire, but those who make our fingers burn.”

I AM NOT SURE that such an unabashedly light-hearted book about sex as *In Praise of Older Women* could be successfully published in these times of gender and sexology studies, on the one hand, and Internet pornography-for-all, on the other, but it sure was a breath of fresh air when it first hove into view in 1965. Vizinczey was living in Canada then, but *In Praise* was too hot for Canadian publishers, so Vizinczey published it himself.

I read it soon after I arrived in 1968 – Vizinczey and I were both from Hungary; both of us had left in the wake of the 1956 Revolution (I had no choice in the matter; my mother made decisions for me back then), and some people were curious as to what I thought about this book. There is a bit I couldn’t agree with about Canadians being more interested in drinking, money, and TV than in pursuing perky-breasted women of indeterminate age, but I loved the self-deprecating, elegant, middle-European tone of the novel, and I wished I had met young András Vajda, the perfect anti-hero, charming, vulnerable, oversexed. “Boy soldier and virginal pimp, and doomed in adolescence to work out his natural bent for amorous adventure in a Budapest ruled by commissars, András learns about ‘older women’ the hard way ...” and he keeps learning after he arrives in Canada, now faced with the repressed sexuality of Canadians.

I loved Vizinczey’s observations about virgins and the Couchiching Conference and made a note of going there, if only to see what goes on in the bushes between liberal-minded talkfest attendees. As for the apparent attractions of older women, how – upon much, much later reflection – could anyone argue with the obvious?

In the postscript of my edition of the book, Vizinczey writes: “... there are very few truthful erotic novels. In literature, as in life, Eros is denied by desperate exaggerations – by pious tales. Dirty jokes and horror stories, born of dissatisfaction with the nature of our species.”

When I first met Stephen, he was still elated by the success of his book, and told great stories about how he had hand-sold every copy to booksellers across Canada and had proved that most of them were neither prudish nor discouraged by his having to sell the books for cash on the spot. He could not offer the sale-or-return terms publishers offered, nor did he have a warehouse that could handle packaging and shipping. Eventually, *In Praise* was published in the US and UK and became an international publishing sensation. That Stephen sued his US publisher in no way undermined the success of the book.

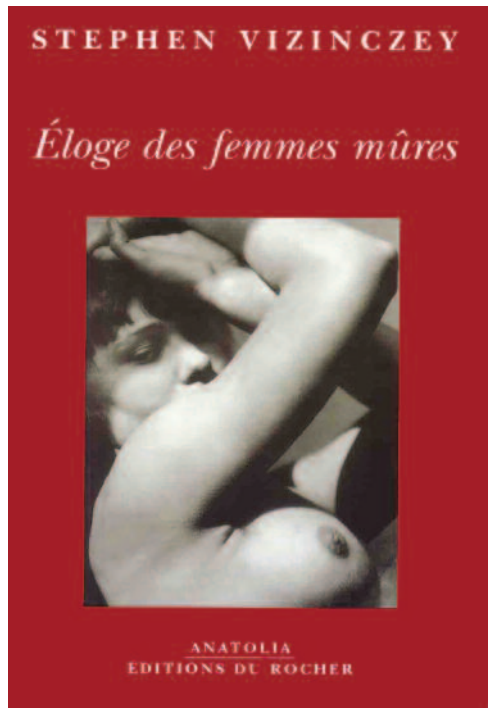
Stephen's next book, *The Rules of Chaos*, is an entirely different

species. It is a serious examination of, among other things, the delusion of power. He wrote this collection of essays as an extension of his *Spectator* article in which he predicted that the USA would lose the war in Vietnam. The *Times* review called it "brilliant and challenging ... exhilarating ... a book that taunts and tantalizes you with your own hopes and desires ..." The book is erudite without pretensions, informal, yet rooted in the writings of great philosophers and, despite the heaviness of its subject, its style remains light and engaging.

Vizinczey moved to London where he was appointed lead reviewer for the *Times* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. His reviews were published later as *Truth and Lies in Literature*, a tour de force of literary criticism, still a delightful read for anyone tired of the usual bromides that pass for literary criticism nowadays.

I read his second novel, *An Innocent Millionaire*, in manuscript. Both Jack McClelland and I loved it, but it took many months of negotiations before it was published in Canada. Reviewers loved it, too. Graham Greene rated it "Bravo!" Anthony Burgess said he was "entertained and deeply moved" and remarked that Vizinczey could "teach the English how to write English."

His books have sold more than seven million copies worldwide, so far, and they are continuing to sell.



**N**ow, at 82, Vizinczey is ready to launch another novel. Once again, he will self-publish – not because he couldn't easily have found a publisher (the most common reason for self-publishing) but because he is convinced that most publishers are uninterested in originality; they merely mass-produce what they believe “the market” wants. As a result, they all publish the same sort of books, none with any sparks of individuality.

“Great literature,” he says, “is never created that way.” The sad consequence of focusing only on the demands of a notional book market is “the end of literature.” As he wrote in *Truth and Lies in Literature*, “Great writers are not those who tell us we shouldn't play with fire, but those who make our fingers burn.”

*If Only* is such a novel. It is about a young man who dreams about success, about becoming a great artist, and who makes terrible mistakes on his way to fulfilling his ambition. Vizinczey, like a magician, offers him the chance to go back and rewrite his life with the wisdom that hindsight has given him. He is older and sees things more clearly now. “Two things people want,” the author says, “to fulfill their ambitions, and to correct all their mistakes and fix their lives.... if only we could.”

Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson (who published *An Innocent Millionaire* in the UK while working for Hamish Hamilton) calls *If Only* “A Swiftian satire for the hedge fund age.... The mixture of harsh truths and escapist fantasy is unique and beguiling.”

I met Stephen in the London apartment he shares with his wife. He talked about his own disappointments and his successes, his debt to Canada for teaching him to write in English and for allowing him to live and learn while eking out a living at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC was then a magnet for post-Revolution Hungarians. In Italy, where he had first tried to settle after leaving Hungary, “you had to





IMAGE: ZOE CORMIER

**Stephen Vizinczey and his wife Gloria in their London home.**

be either a fascist or a communist” to succeed, he told me. Since he was neither, he feared for his life. “In Canada, I didn’t have to be afraid. I could leave ideology behind.”

Another useful lesson the CBC taught him: to treat truth and lies with the same amount of credulity. For example, if you were doing a show about Galileo (as he once did), you would have to leave the listener with no conclusion about whether the earth revolves around the sun or the other way around. Let the listeners decide for themselves. That’s the CBC way, and it offered Stephen an excellent lesson in the use of irony.

**W**HEN WE PARTED, he seemed a little sad – 82 is not an easy age – but said that he was ready for the battle to spread the word about the new novel. If only people who had read his earlier books knew about it, they would certainly want to read it. The challenge, as with *In Praise of Older Women*, is to get the word out.

Well, Stephen, this is my small contribution to let people know they can buy the book from [thehappyfew@btinternet.com](mailto:thehappyfew@btinternet.com), or order it from Amazon.

**ANNA PORTER** is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent books are *Buying a Better World: George Soros and Billionaire Philanthropy* and *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe’s Troubled Past and Uncertain Future*. She has also been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean’s* and the *Globe and Mail*. 

Stephen  
Vizinczey

*If Only*



The Happy Few