

TLC Showcase

MICHAEL FORESTER

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Introduction to Vicious

It's strange now to think that the novel started life as a short story about Henry, whose little ebony talisman came to life. But then that was back in 2008. And when we decide to have children, which of us can predict how they will turn out? Perhaps all we can say about them with confidence is that they are unlikely to become the people we would have expected. They have their own road to travel, their own destiny to fulfil.

So do our novels.

Henry, the young man in the above story has a girlfriend, Laura. Laura (or 'Sister Serenity' as she insisted we all call her) seemed a little bland to me when I first met her; the kind of person you might spend a few minutes with at a book launch then smile politely and move on in hope of getting some time with the author. But just as I was about to leave her in pursuit of more stimulating conversation, she started telling me about the Eden ring and her invisible winged friend Gabe – and that led on to the matter of **SecondCome** and how she was pregnant with the returning Messiah. Well, how would you have reacted? Same as me I should think. Half of me wanted to edge away from this deluded individual ASAP, but the other half was mesmerised that anyone could believe such tosh. I ended up giving her a lot more page room than I ever intended.

That would have been fine, I guess. She would have given me a nice tidy novel about a religious nutcase that might have sold 10 copies with another 10 to family. Heck, if necessary I could threaten never to speak to either of my daughters again until they bought 5 each. Then maybe the dog would have bought a copy out of sympathy.

But that was before Tolly came stomping over the book jacket, grinding the heels of her Doc Martins into my nice clean margins. I like to think of myself as a patient person, indulgent of others even. But I do have to draw the line at a morbidly obese Punk Rocker with a purple Mohican haircut, who chain smokes Old Holborn roll ups while stuffing chocolate cake in her mouth; particularly when she spends her evenings swearing into the mirror at Nancy Spungon, forever taking Sid Vicious away from her. Antisocial Personality Disorder? No question. I could have given her as wide a berth as Laura.

But Sid Vicious... hmm... That's different. I've got a bit of a soft spot for 'ol Sid.

A few months ago Adam Johnson (*The Orphan Master's Son*, *Fortune Smiles*) said 'for a fiction writer, something that's half-seen is what stimulates the imagination.' And when I got to thinking about it, the question of who killed Nancy Spungon never did get legally resolved, because poor Sid was dead of an overdose before the case came to court. So err, could Tolly be telling me the truth when she insisted it was she who had plunged the blade of that knife into the poor girl, right up to the carved jaguar on the handle? It's the half-seen at work again. The 'not quite certain,' the 'I need closure,' poking away at me, getting my imagination up to work the night shift.

Even at that point I could probably have lived with all that uncertainty, turned over and gone back to sleep, so to speak. But then Tolly saw Henry and decided he was Sid's reincarnation and that Laura was Nancy Spungon's. And when she concluded she needed to get rid of Laura to reclaim Sid as her own, well I obviously wasn't going to get any more sleep that night, now was I?

So *Vicious* was born, being seven years in the gestation. And I must say, it got me to thinking. How certain can we really be about anything? Do we actually see the world as it is, the same way as the next guy sees it? Or, is it the case as Henry's psychiatrist Dr. Schmetterling says, "I do not think it is important what I see. What I think is important is what you see and why you see it."

I finished the novel and sent it to The Literary Consultancy for review, secretly believing on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays that I had an amazing best seller on my hands, and setting aside Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays for burning the manuscripts which I knew without doubt were worthless (I try not to work Sundays).

TLC sent it to Dr Stephen Carver to review (I've always been a sucker for PhD's, never having earned one myself). Steve responded in the most professional and academic of terms with a 27 page report that explored not only the writing and content of the book but its place within the literary and historical context. To me all the learned academic stuff sounded pretty much like 'Yesssss... if you pull it and push it and stroke it and kick it and run naked round the fire three times on the night of the full moon then maybe, just maybe...' I couldda kissed him. I think at that point he was glad we're not close neighbours.

Time for me to stop. I've got an interview booked with Gabe and I can hear wing beats...

Vicious, by Michael Forester

The Story so far:

Tolly is convinced Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols is in love with her and that her dear friend, Nancy Spungen is posing as his girlfriend only to help keep the crowds at bay until Tolly herself can come to him. She is certain they are communicating with her through stories placed in the newspapers. She has followed them to New York.

Wednesday October 11th 1978 4.00pm Eastern Standard Time

She wakes late. Something to do with this jet lag thing the woman in the seat next to her on the plane mentioned? The priority of the day is not ablutions, not food, not even fluids. Just one thing now dominates Tolly's waking mind and her sleeping mind: how to get to Sid.

How, Tolly? How will you find your beloved?

"Easy!" She replies with ignorant confidence. He'll have left a message for me in the newspaper."

But which newspaper, Tolly?

She considers a moment. "All of them!" she replies defiantly, with the unwavering certainty of youth that assures her all will now be well. She makes her way out of the hotel, past the sleazy, suggestive grin of the counter clerk, looks to the left and looks to the right.

Which way Tolly? Which way to Sid?

She hesitates a moment and then replies triumphantly, "Neither!" She has seen a street newspaper vendor. Darling Sid or Dear Nancy will have arranged a message for her in the newspaper right outside her hotel of course! She takes some coins from her bag and examines them carefully; hands what she does not know is a nickel to the boy with the newspapers, hoping it is enough. He stares at her hair for a moment, then decides she is pretty despite it and gives her a long suggestive look. Finally he

holds out a copy of the paper, just out of her reach. She snatches it from his hand and runs back into the hotel. Sitting on the bed she turns the pages excitedly... and... Yes! Here it is! Darling Sid and Dear Nancy have arranged a message. It's a story about an altercation at a Pistols' gig. Christ how she misses the gigs. The atmosphere... the music temporarily deafening her... the spitting... the "fuck yous" from crowd to stage and back again... and yes, the wonderful, unforgettable eye contact with her Darling Sid. But it's not long to wait now. Soon she will be driven to the gigs in a limo. Tolly skips the part of the article about the police... the arrests... misses the superior critical tone. She is looking for... looking for... *Yes! yes! yes!* Here it is. Sid and Nancy are staying right here in Manhattan. Good ol' Nancy! Still pretending to be Sid's lover to protect him from the fans. There is no gig tonight, so obviously they will be at the hotel. Tonight she, Tolly Jones, will go to the hotel to be reunited with her one true love, with her beloved Sid. And this time it will be forever.

Thursday 12th October 1978 10.45pm

So this is it. At long, long last, this is it. All the planning, all the preparation, all the support from Dear Nancy, all the effort by Darling Sid culminates at this one focal point in space and time. Tolly stands outside the hotel, a little nervous now that she is actually here. But she feels certain he will have meant her to come for midnight. She realises nervously that thought he is undoubtedly waiting for her, she does not know which room he is in. Darling Sid! In all the confusion he has forgotten a crucial detail. Her heart melts at the thought of how much he needs her to take care of the little details for him. No matter. Tolly will find a way to cross these last few yards to be with him. Be patient Sid, Be patient for your beloved Tolly! So she enters the hotel trying to look like someone who should be there and walks nervously up to the reception desk.

"Scuse me," she says, sounding terribly English. She senses intuitively that she must be polite in such an establishment, for official looking people stand behind highly polished chest-high desks wearing impeccable uniforms. "Which room is Sid Vicious staying in?"

The woman Tolly addresses has her auburn hair tied back into a bun as severe as the industrially chilled smile she gives Tolly. "I'm sorry," she says in a soft New

Jersey accent that Tolly thinks might be intended to be just a little patronising, "We don't release information concerning the hotel's guests under any circumstances." It takes years of professional training to be able to look this helpful yet remain so condescending at the same time. "Is there anything else I can do for you at this time?" Tolly rather thinks the severe looking woman probably doesn't really want to do anything whatsoever for Tolly, at this time or at any other time. Tolly thinks she probably wants her to turn around and disappear out through the revolving door as soon as humanly possible. So she withdraws to the sidewalk, nursing a small but painful emotional bruise. But Tolly will not be daunted! Oh no! This is meant to be! True love will reunite her with her beloved Sid. She makes her way to the side of the hotel, to the service entrance. She holds a vague intention of asking a maid or a bell hop or some other person she might feel intuitively more comfortable with where she might find Darling Sid.

But Heaven itself is supporting Tolly tonight! She has no need of asking. Mr. Vicious' presence in the hotel is the talk of the chattering staff. As she secretes herself in the shadows outside the service entrance a Bronx accent wafts through the door. A Queens accent replies. The room number is mentioned. She misses it. Tolly waits for the voices to fade and slips into the service entrance.

Checking the corridor quickly she hears voices approaching and slips through the first open door she can find – a broom cupboard as it turns out. There she waits in the darkness, afraid to come out until she is absolutely certain there is no one around.

Friday 13th October 1978 12.30 am

11.00pm glides on oil into midnight and 12.30 am, until Tolly finally finds the courage to leave her sanctuary. She makes her way to the service elevator. Her finger hovers over the buttons but she is still not certain of the room number or even the correct floor. She whispers a prayer to Sid to guide her now in her hour of need and presses a button at random. The door slides instantly and soundlessly closed. A wave of elation surges through her. Can she get any more fortunate? This is SO meant to be. The gods are SO with her! God is with her! FATE is with her, rushing like a raging river to take her to her love. The elevator vibrates; stops. Again the door slides silently

back. Tolly steps forward, stomach churning. Just a few more paces now. Where is the room? As it turns out, she can follow the voice. "Screw You!" reaches her ears. A woman's voice? Maybe... Nancy's voice? A welcome party? Yes! That's it!! They've mounted a surprise welcome party for her. Darling Sid and Dear Nancy and who knows who else, are waiting for her, just a few final steps down the corridor. She'll not spoil their fun. She'll play along, just as if she hasn't guessed. Tolly creeps quietly along the corridor, following the sound of the voice. "C'mon you Shit! Wake up! Don't you fuckin' pass out on me now." A smile passes over Tolly's face. Has her beloved fallen asleep from the exhaustion of waiting for her? No matter. He must have had so much worry on her behalf all this time. But now they can be together and she can kiss away his tears. She is standing now beside the door, which is slightly ajar. "Fuck you! Wake up!" But doesn't the voice sound angry? And is it really is Dear Nancy's voice? Whatever could be wrong? The sound of a slap. Tolly is confused. How does a slapping sound fit in with her welcome party? No matter. She takes a deep breath, pushes hard on the door and strides in, a huge anticipatory smile spread across her face.

Tolly looks around the room.

Tolly's smile petrifies.

Tolly sees no streamers. No funny hats. No welcome party.

Tolly sees two bodies on a bed.

A man, naked, supine.

A woman in bra and knickers pulled to one side astride him, trying to ride an erection that has collapsed with his consciousness.

Tolly does not see a Jonny Walker bottle on the carpet by the bed.

Tolly does not see syringes on the bedside cabinet or a hunting knife with a carved handle on the floor.

Tolly does not see the clothes strewn haplessly over a chair.

Tolly can see only Sid's face.

Until the woman hears her gasp and turns in her direction.

Then Tolly sees Nancy's face.

Friday 13th October 1978, 6.40 am

There are sounds each city makes as it awakens, that are characteristic of that city alone. Of all the cities in the world New York's awakening cries are the most easily distinguished. The superficial will hear the accents of the delivery men, the hiss of steam from the pavement grills, the horns of the early shift Yellow Cabs. But beneath that, for those that have ears to hear, there is a soul song of harmonies, an aria of passion and tears for the cold and the dying and the hungry and the loveless.

Of course, were I myself awakening after some hours spent curled up on the damp ground behind the trash cans in Greenwich Village, I might have as little concern for the city's soul song as Tolly has this morning. I might be more preoccupied firstly with the fact that I cannot straighten my stiff neck properly. Then I might be forced to consider how cold and wet I am. Then, I rather think I might begin to focus on the question of why I was here at all... and wasn't there something I was supposed to have done last night... and wasn't there somewhere I was supposed to have been? Then I would probably remember a severe smile and a head of auburn hair tied up in an elaborate bun and a revolving door and a broom cupboard and a service lift. And then I might very well remember – and did I really, really, see that sight? Or was I hallucinating? The sight of a trusted best friend attempting to steal from me the only thing I care about in all of this world by seducing my poor Darling, who sleeping, knew nothing of the awful act of betrayal that was being perpetrated upon him. Then I am sure that I would feel the anger rise within me again, resonating back to how it had risen within me in just the same way last night. Then I would wish, I would truly wish, I had done more than simply run from the room as... I... think... I remember doing. In fact, I would be so consumed with anger and the memory of anger that I would wish that last night I could have found a knife... a great... big... hunting knife with, maybe, a jaguar carved into its handle. 'Cos if I could have found a great big hunting knife like that I just know I'd have dragged that Yankee witch-bitch into the bathroom by her bleach-blond Yankee witch-bitch hair and I'd have stabbed her with that great big hunting knife and I'd have pushed it right down til the jaguar carved on the handle was clawing into that betraying lying Yankee witch-bitch's stomach and I'd have held onto it so tight that the Yankee witch-bitch couldn't get it out of

her betraying lying stomach no matter how hard she tried and I'd have looked into her eyes and seen how frightened she looked and I would have known how sorry she must have been for what she done to me and my Love and I'd have watched her Yankee witch-bitch blood slip out of her stomach and down the blade of the great big hunting knife and onto the carved jaguar and onto my hands 'cos then I would know that I'd paid that Yankee witch-bitch back just a little bit for what she done so'd she'd never do it to anyone no more no matter how long she lived. And then I'd let go of the great big hunting knife and watch the Yankee witch-bitch fall to the floor with her hands around the handle and I'd not care whether she was alive or dead or neither or both and I just know I'd never forgive her for what she done to me no matter how much she pleaded with me and my Darling for forgiveness an' we'd never be friends with her again no matter how much she wanted to come an' visit with us an' we wouldn't come to the phone or come to the door or return her calls ever again no matter how much she was crying an' no matter how sorry she said she was ever again.

And then all I would have wanted would have been to get the fuck out of there to just about anywhere to get away from the Yankee witch-bitch and the scent of betrayal that I could still smell hanging over that room no matter how far or how fast I ran and then I'd run and run and run and run - north, south, east or west, I wouldn't care, until I couldn't run anymore and then, I'd find an ally way without noticing I was somewhere called Greenwich Village 'cos all I'd care about would be to be anywhere but where the Yankee witch-bitch was squirming and groaning an' bleeding and dying all over the bathroom floor with the scent of betrayal still hanging over the room and my poor dear Darling Sid still lyin' in the bed in whatever kind of drunken drug-filled stupor the Yankee witch-bitch had tricked him into just to get him into bed and just to ride his poor sweet cock and just to take him away from me and just to... just to... just to...

And then I would look down. And I would wonder why there was blood on my hands.

About the Writer

Some are born with silver spoons in their mouths. I was born with a pen in my hand.

Of course, it was pinched immediately by my big brother who put it on a shelf too high for me to reach. I got my own back though. I nicked his abacus and hid behind the sofa with it. Thus my accountancy and entrepreneurial career was born, but always clouded by a nagging suspicion that my true calling had something to do with writing.



By the time I was 30 I was finally tall enough to reach the shelf, and I took down the pen. This induced a bout of split personality disorder in which I oscillated between pillaging the stock market and writing books teaching others how to make incalculably vast sums of money (one was called *Going for Growth* and the other, *How to Make More Profit*). Unfortunately they didn't make incalculably vast sums themselves...

The millennium year saw a complete volte-face in which I decided to devote my life to poetry, fiction and life writing. The first result was *If It Wasn't For That Dog*, about my first year with my beloved hearing dog, Matt. Sold on behalf of the charity Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, the book is still in print.

Short stories followed on subjects ranging from goblins and dryads to inter-racial love in a racist age, marital breakdown to bureaucracy. Not far behind came poetry from haiku to epic fantasy rhyming verse and New Age mind-body-spirit writings on subjects as diverse as self-worth and the nature of physical death.

In 2009 I won first prize at the Winchester Writer's Festival in the 'Writing can be Murder' category. I have been short or longlisted three times in the Fish Writing Contest.

Unfortunately my bank manager couldn't quite visualise the financial consequences of my impending literary breakthrough and I was forced, temporarily, to return to my old life of commercial piracy. It was due to the irritating distraction of needing to put food on the table, that though I started '*Vicious*' in 2008, it was to take six

years before the completed manuscript reached The Literary Consultancy in 2014. Its sequel, 'Daughter of Man.' Is completed to first draft stage and I am about to commence the third and final volume of the trilogy, 'If The Dead Be Not Raised.'

Now at the venerable age of 59 (deep respect, master, deep respect) I divide my time between Tenerife and the UK where I number dryads, angels and Liberal Democrat voters amongst my closest friends (though I acknowledge that most people believe the third of these categories to be mythical creatures of legend only). I am finally once again blessed with the opportunity of devoting the better part of my time to pursuing literary stardom. My children look on aghast as I squander their inheritance on such profligacies as A4 printing paper and laser toner cartridges.

They need have no concern. I plan to leave them the pen.

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