

The re-release of Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women*

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Published on 15 Mar 2010

This month a new edition of Stephen Vizinczey's erotic novel *In Praise Of Older Women* was published as a Penguin Modern Classic.

This is good news – not only is one of the great novels of the second half of the 20th century available again in this country, but the spotlight will fall once more on the man I regard as the greatest living writer.

One of the many remarkable things about Vizinczey is that he writes English so well, with persistent clarity, precision and grace. He did not learn the language till he was in his mid-twenties. As a radical student playwright in Budapest in 1956, he took a leading part in the failed uprising against the Soviets. As the insurgents – with justice, decency, patriotism and honour on their side, but no backing from the west – were ferociously put down by the Soviet military, Vizinczey had to flee for his life. He ended up in Canada, destitute and with fewer than 50 words of English, a writer without a language, as he put it. He struggled, and came close to suicide.

But he sustained. Painstakingly he taught himself English and he began to write scripts for the National Film Board of Canada. He self-published *In Praise Of Older Women* almost a decade later. Like Nabokov and Conrad before him, he came to English late and then deployed it with a mastery that most native speakers could only dream of.

In Praise was condemned by some as pornography. In spite or perhaps because of that it was a phenomenal seller. There is nothing pornographic about it. It is a beautiful and tender book, the semi-autobiographical tale of the amorous adventures of a young man who learns much, not only in matters of sex, from older women. It is a primer for men on the threshold of adulthood and a paean of elegant praise for older women. Unlike many male writers who write about women, there is no fear or hatred. *In Praise* is warm and wise.

He followed up with *An Innocent Millionaire* 20 years later. This superbly structured novel is different in tone: funnier, but also bleaker, less optimistic, and angrier with the rottenness of the world. Some sneered at it as upmarket Harold Robbins while intelligent critics, such as Graham Greene and Brigid Brophy, were almost ecstatic in their admiration.



This newspaper sent me down to London to interview Vizinczey when Corgi brought out the paperback edition in 1984, with an initial print run of almost one million copies. His publisher warned me that he could be difficult and challenging. I was already engrossed in his writing, but I was nervous when I arrived at his large apartment on the western fringes of Kensington. I needn't have worried. He received me like an old friend and the conversation that ensued – five or six hours of it – was the most heady I've ever experienced. I realised that for the first time in my life, I was in the presence of a genuine genius.

Vizinczey reminisced about the 1956 uprising. "Before our failed attempt at revolution, I did not know there is more to value than life, and that is freedom. But, if I hadn't lived under Communism, I'd be a Communist today."

As his Scots-Canadian wife Gloria fussed around him, he talked about sex ("today girls are too compliant for their own good"), about ideology ("where people go to avoid learning from experience"); and about politics ("public affairs are mismanaged because public decisions are made for private reasons"). And he talked about literature. He amazed and annoyed me by forbidding me – he can be very didactic – to read any of the 19th-century classics by the likes of Scott, Dickens, Eliot and so on. These writers, he said, wrote prose that was bloated and hypocritical. Instead I should read Balzac, Stendhal and Kleist, his trio of heroes.

He was boastful – "modesty is an excuse for sloppiness and self-indulgence" – but his boasting was not bombastic; it was the talk of an ambitious and highly serious artist. He lacerated "idle hacks" and "cultural phoney's"; above all, he told me to despise what was fashionable and modish. This was not so much an interview as a provocative and constantly rewarding seminar.

Vizinczey has visited Scotland only rarely, but he is making a brief visit here later this month. He believes he has an authentic affinity with our country: "It's about the same size as Hungary, and both countries are always being bossed around by bigger ones."

In Praise Of Older Women is published by Penguin, priced £9.99.