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## Stories that won't go away



"I think Freud was a great mind, and certainly he altered the way we think forever, but he stretched the evidence to fit his theories." Psychoanalyst and novelist Sally Vickers.  
Photograph: Oh Studios

MARY LELAND

Brought up in a committedly atheist household, novelist Salley Vickers found herself tempted by the forbidden fruit of religious themes, writes **Mary Leland** .

WHEN SALLEY VICKERS arrives to speak at Kinsale Arts Week she will be revisiting countryside she remembers from family holidays touring Ireland in her father's half-timbered van.

Her trade unionist father, Jon, as he drove around Cork and Connemara, told stories of Ireland's struggles to become a Republic and recited the poetry of Yeats. It was from that source that Salley's name was chosen, as her father loved the verses of *Down by the Salley Gardens* and her mother loved the Benjamin Britten setting to which they are sung.

Although she doesn't want to talk about her personal life, it is perhaps allowable to note that both van and Ireland coincide, even if obliquely, in her third novel, *Mr Golightly's Holiday* (2003). The van is the model for the vehicle which brings the weary and slightly disheartened Mr Golightly to a small English village. The story itself emerged from a kind of bolt-hole when, during what Vickers has described as a period of turmoil, she lived in a Dartmoor cottage, afraid that she might never write again. I hope to be forgiven for suspecting that this lonely heartbreak was a consequence of the failure of her four-year marriage to Irish writer Frank Delaney, but, in our conversation last week, we don't go there. Especially as *Mr Golightly's Holiday* is a happy book, an exploration of the way in which extraordinary events, or people, can be disguised as ordinary, or even of the permeable quality of the tissue separating life and afterlife.

What was ordinary for Salley Vickers as she grew up in Stoke-on-Trent with her parents and her brother was a household in which everything was tolerated, except religion. As her parents were committed atheists, forbidden fruit for Salley was the old and new testaments. "Because these were never forced on me they kept a charm which is often lost on people whose noses are rubbed in Bible stories," she says, remembering also that there is a strong history of socialism in both western Christianity and in Judaism. Much of her writing hints at the power of myth or parable or precept; her references are subtle, but lie like a seam of relevance beneath the smooth surface of her prose.

"Religious stories can be myths too," she says. "A myth, after all, is a story which won't go away, and I think these old stories are there to remind us of the existence of other values, of other ways of seeing things."

She notes too that while she has remained a socialist all her life, her father, who died early last month, had asked that his funeral service be conducted according to *The Book of Common Prayer*.

Accommodations can be made, and despite a perhaps inherited ethical seriousness, Salley Vickers is happier with the idea of herself as a metaphysical writer rather than a religious one (although she does believe that human beings are "inescapably" religious). But her creative openness to the needful gifts of grace and her readiness to indicate other presences slowed down the early critical responses to her work. For example, reviewers simply didn't know quite what to make of her first novel, *Miss Garnet's Angel*, given a 1,000-copy print run in 2000.

Here was a Christian story linked to Jewish scripture and decoding the interweaving influences of ancient literature on modern life. Even more awkward was its author's sense of life's prodigality, a core of subdued but glowing joy resisted by reviewers but not by readers or booksellers. By the time the paperback edition appeared, other writers had responded to the enchantment, recognising a daring author who, as John de Falbe was to say later, can make delicate and difficult notions vivid.

Strengthening year by year as a writer of complex and compelling ideas, she is probably still best known - and best loved - as the author of *Miss Garnet's Angel*.

Both Venice and the Apocrypha were certainly in her bloodstream, the city itself familiar after years of acquaintance, beginning with the obligatory teenage visit during which she got lost, ending up in the Campo dell'Angelo Raffaele (as so many others, including this writer, have done as a result of her book). This is also where Julia Garnet discovers the painted story of *Tobias and the Angel*, a discovery which expands into a pageant of characters, from exiles in Nineveh to a Prosecco-loving Monsignore, from art restorers and historians to Venetian citizenry and thus into a welcome for the variable nature of love.

VICKERS STUDIED English literature at Cambridge and, although hoping to train as a child psychoanalyst, she supported herself and her two sons from her first marriage by working as a university lecturer specialising in Shakespeare - "It was all I could do."

Gradually, she realised that there wasn't much wrong with children that wasn't being caused by adults. When the time was right, she qualified as a Jungian analyst.

"But when you teach literature you really have to know it," she says. "And literature is the most marvellous introduction to psychology."

It's that bloodstream thing again, that confidence in the story told in *The Other Side of You* (2006), a title taken from TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* and hinting at other presences through the interaction of a psychiatrist and his patient.

Revelation and redemption are high in Vickers's thematic list. Her characters go on journeys, either internal or external, and their luggage includes a perceptible or latent grounding in Christian experience, even where this might have been abandoned.

The voyage evokes the small epiphanies which illuminate the experience of life and which also express Vickers's own belief that a writer has a responsibility to give credit to the light, a duty not to overlook the potential for happiness.

The encounters sometimes include unexpected observations of great paintings: in *The Other Side of You* it is Caravaggio's version of the meeting at Emmaus, just as Miss Garnet is startled

by a painting in the Accademia showing St Paul on the road to Damascus, and just as the tired, downcast gaze of St Anne in Leonardo's painting ( *The Virgin and Child with St Anne* ) in the Louvre signals a shift in consciousness for the grieving and confused widow in *Instances of the Number 3* (2001).

But life, says Vickers, also holds the possibility of misfortune's alternative, good fortune: "There isn't just one way, there are at least three roads, and a lot in my books is about waiting things out, learning to bear conflict and ambiguity because things change, and very often a third way becomes apparent."

Her most recent work (although a new book, *Sweet and Comfortable Words* , is due from Picador in September) is an examination of this very possibility through a kind of gentle confrontation with the dying Sigmund Freud.

In *Where Three Roads Meet* , published in the Canongate Myths series in 2007 the originator of the Oedipus complex has a visitor who suggests a different interpretation of the story of Oedipus the king.

"I think Freud was a great mind, and certainly he altered the way we think forever, but he stretched the evidence to fit his theories," Vickers says. "When I came to study the Oedipus complex, having already taught the play by Sophocles, I felt that this wasn't the way the myth seemed to me at all. Freud leaves out what seemed to me one of the most important aspects of Oedipus, the fact that his parents crippled and tried to kill him as an infant. When the book came out some critics didn't like my saying that this is a myth about how parents can want to destroy their children. But there's a terrifying amount of evidence, isn't there, that often there can be ambivalent feelings in parents which can be expressed destructively?"

Despite this dark reminder, *Where Three Roads Meet* is an optimistic dialogue which Vickers is now transposing as a radio play for the BBC. Her intuitive sympathy for Freud leavens her ability to turn myth into history, a history carried only by voices.

She admits to being one of those writers who claim that the characters, rather than the author, dictate the story.

"You may not believe it, but I don't think we're making it up. Except," she adds as an afterthought, "that we make everything up."

• Salley Vickers reads at the Friary Space, Kinsale, Co Cork, Sun, July 20 as part of Kinsale Arts Week, July 12-20 [www.kinsaleartsweek.com](http://www.kinsaleartsweek.com)

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