

Excerpts from interviews with Michelle L  glise  
21 November 2015- 17 April 2016

**How did you meet Boris? What were your first impressions of him?**

Well, at first I was attracted to his brother. His brother was tall, he had blond hair, did theater. But he was a liar, like all theater actors. He wasn't very sincere. Boris was very handsome. He didn't speak a lot. I was very shy, so it was difficult to meet him and get to know him.

One day I had a meeting with Alan at the Arc de Triomphe. And that's when I saw Boris. We began to exchange letters through his brother, Alan. We exchanged thoughts and ideas, and he taught me about jazz.

**What was life like when you and Boris were growing up?**

Boris's family was very, very rich. They lived in the building that is now the Picasso Museum in the Marais. He was used to being wealthy. But they left to live in Ville d'Avray in a house that was smaller. That really made an impression on Boris—to go from having to not having cars and servers, things like that. And after that he always wanted to earn a lot of money—to be able to breathe again. It wasn't necessarily to have money, but so that he could do what he wanted to do.

[Boris] was really inhibited by his illnesses. When he was twelve years old, he caught rheumatic fever, and that wasn't treated very well. The Vians loved their children a lot, but they didn't want a doctor to treat them. He knew then that he was destined to have a very short life.

**The Vian family was known for throwing surprise parties, and surprise parties appear in several of his novels. Can you tell me about the surprise parties that they threw?**

[The idea of the surprise party] started in the 1920s with the flappers. They had a habit of throwing parties [...] and their parties were truly a surprise because at midnight they would knock on the door of their neighbor who was fast asleep. And the neighbor, who was in his pajamas, would open the door, and they would yell "Surprise! Surprise!"

In order to invite people, and since we lived right between Versailles and Paris, we went to the Saint Lazare train station and we had a meeting in front of the monument there. And we said [to everyone], "There is a surprise party at the Vian's house next Saturday!" When Duke [Ellington] came, I told him the same thing. I said, "You can invite anyone you want."

One group would invite four friends to come to the party, and those four people would invite four more people, etc. It was always friends of friends. It became like the crowded cabin scene from the Marx Brothers' film [*A Night at the Opera*]. That's what the surprise party was. It was really fun for us.

**Boris's most well-known work is *L'écume des jours*. What was his inspiration for the novel and what do you think people should know about the book?**

Everything is personal in the book. He practically wrote his autobiography, but you have to find it. There was always an element of reminiscing about childhood in his work. In the beginning of his career, there was always a nostalgia for childhood.

He also liked to play with words. You can find a million examples of this in the book. There is always a trap in the middle of a sentence, and, when you can understand it, it's very funny. When [the novel] first came out, no one understood [his sense of humor]. It wasn't until later that he had great success. The generations changed and *L'écume des jours* became the bestseller. But when it came out, it was a total flop. It earned him very little money.

***L'écume des jours* features many references to jazz. How did Boris become interested in jazz?**

At the age of sixteen he began to play the trumpet. He began to study jazz and all of those wonderful records at that time. Lots of Armstrong, obviously. He was very popular at that time. And Ellington, too. There was a lot of samba and rumba [like] “La Cucaracha.”

He wasn't a bad player, but because he was sick with the heart condition, he couldn't play for very long. He became tired very quickly. He didn't play the trumpet in the style of black [artists]. He played in the style of white [artists]. [His style] was a little closer to Bix Beiderbecke.

Later, his club [Hot Club of Paris] helped with Ellington's Paris visit. It was he and Charles Delaunay. Charles Delaunay was the director of the Hot Club of Paris, and Boris had been a member of this club since he was sixteen years old.

**Why did Boris play the trumpet in the style of a white jazz musician and not in the black style?**

Well, he tried to play like the black musicians, but he couldn't play in the black style because of his heart. So he played in the style of Bix Beiderbecke instead.

**In *L'écume des jours*, Vian creates a character based on your friend, Jean-Paul Sartre. What do you think of the Jean-Sol Partre character?**

I think it's perfect. When he was writing the book, he showed it to Simone de Beauvoir. She laughed like a crazy woman. And when she came to the passage with Sartre, she said “Ah that's exactly Sartre. He's exactly like that.” And then [Sartre] read it, and he found it great. He invited us to his house and he allowed Boris to write all the articles about America—American music, American cinema, American directors—for *Les Temps Modernes*.

**Can you tell me about *Les Temps Modernes* and the literary groups that met in Saint-Germain-des-Près?**

Well, you see, Sartre directed *Les Temps Modernes*. All of the people involved with *Les Temps Modernes* [...] we [Boris and I] thought the same...we thought just like them. We were against the war. And that's the time when Saint-Germain-des-Près began. That is to say, there came to be a corner reserved for art, a place for modern writers. It was a corner where all the editors were. You had Grasset on the Rue de Saints-Pères, and all the editors were there, all around Saint-Germain-des-Près. This was where Balzac worked during Napoleon's time. During Balzac's time it was already a place to write, but it was for the rich usually.

There were two cafes: Le Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots. That's where the whole world met. A little bit like at Harry's Bar. When we went to Venice, we would go to a Harry's Bar. In Florence, we went to a Harry's Bar in Florence. So these were meetings with people from all over the world. In Saint-Germain, [there was] the Church of Saint Germain and the two cafes [Le Café de Flore and Les Deux Magots] that were around it [...] there were a few others as well [...] began to develop all the literature after the war and all the jazz music. The French didn't know about jazz [before then].

**What was your life like during the occupation? Is there evidence of occupied France in *L'écume des jours*??**

During the occupation it was difficult. There were no trains, there were no cars, there was no gas, there was no wine. There was nothing. Because there was no milk, no paper, etc., the black market thrived. [That's how we got a hold of] Armstrong's records and other really good American records.

*L'écume des jours* is a reflection of that time. For example in the novel, in the beginning, there is a part when Chick tells Colin that he trades his aunt for a big of Belgian coffee. That is a reference to the black market during the occupation.

**Did you and Boris ever interact with Americans? What was your impression of them?**

We liked the Americans a lot. We knew them very well because of Saint-Germain and the [jazz] music. We loved American musicians, and we loved American writers—Caldwell, Faulkner, Hemingway—all of those during the 1940s. We wore jeans [like Americans]. We wore checkered shirts like lumberjacks—those big shirts. We loved it all. We wore lots of American things, like tennis shoes.

But Americans were also racist at times. Boris, was playing [trumpet] in a jazz orchestra on the Champs Élysées during the period of the liberation, and one day he was leaving [the venue] with a black guy when a car pulled up with six Americans in it. When [the Americans] got out of the car they saw the black man they shouted "You nigger lover. You are playing music with a black guy." And Boris said, "Yes, and he plays very well."

**Boris wrote as a black man under the pseudonym Vernon Sullivan and subsequently created a scandal in the literary world. Could you tell me a bit about that?**

Well, that was a joke. It was Boris's editor who said to Boris "Write me a piece of noir fiction." He wanted a detective story with a police, a blonde girl, etc. It was to be in the style of Raymond Chandler, for example. We didn't write [noir fiction] in France. It was the Americans who wrote noir fiction, but the French loved them. So his editor, Jean D'Hauin, said "Write me a bestseller. You're smart enough. Write me a bestseller so we can make some money." And Boris wrote a bestseller. [He was able to write a bestseller] because he had translated Chandler and all the others who wrote in the American noir style. Boris took a style that was in fashion and wrote a book.

I thought up the name of the author—Vernon Sullivan—I thought that sounded very nice [...] a bit like a Southern name. I wanted to add "Lee" [as a middle name]—Vernon Lee Sullivan but that was a little much. So Vernon Sullivan [was to be the author of] the *roman noir*.

Boris took all of the themes from noir fiction. The idea of vengeance was the main theme he drew on—the idea that if someone kills another person, it's has to be for vengeance. For the cowboy, it's vengeance for the Indian who captured his wife or child, [while] another person might kill to seek vengeance for his brother's death or for the death of his best friend. There was always the idea of vengeance [in this kind of writing]. Without the idea of vengeance, [the violence is] too gratuitous, and it's not religious anymore. The theme of "it ain't right" doesn't exist in France because we aren't very religious. So [the ideas of] vengeance and of God—no—not for us. This book had to be American.

**Was his goal to cause a stir or to create a scandal?**

No. He always wanted to create something beautiful, something just, something good.

**What were Boris's final years like?**

Well, after we divorced he stopped writing books. He started writing songs. He was occupied by music. From the beginning, he knew his life would be short so he felt he had to do everything. In the last years it was very tiring.

**How did your relationship with Boris change your life?**

Well it changed everything. When you're a young girl in your parents' house going to school every day, then suddenly you fall in love with someone, it changes everything. I would have gone on to be an English teacher or a French teacher, but I got married. We entered into an egalitarian relationship, Boris and I. We were already feminists. At the beginning, we were the couple in *L'écume des jours*. But when he wanted to be with other women, I said no. Then, after our relationship ended, I was with Sartre.

**Did knowing Boris change your life for the better?**

For the better, absolutely. Because I could do what I wanted to do with another person who wanted the same thing that I wanted. We were like this [holds up crossed fingers], me and Boris.