

TLC Showcase

Piers Bearne



Introduction	2
Novel Extract: <i>The Bitter Trade of Calumny Spinks</i>	5
About the Writer	9

Introduction to *The Bitter Trade of Calumny Spinks*

Piers Bearne attended TLC's June Conference 'Writing in a Digital Age' and won the PEN Factor competition with a reading from the novel in this showcase. He writes about his experiences here.

I'd been thinking a lot about digital publishing when I heard about The Literary Conference. My wife bought me an iPad for Christmas – who needs one of those? I used to ask – ha! – and I found myself lingering over words, reading intelligent novels that my inner escapist might have dodged in print form, and just swingggggggingggggg the e-pages back and forth for the pure kinaesthetic pleasure of it. An idea was forming, but I didn't think I'd have to vocalise it in front of anyone. Least of all a heavyweight panel of agents and publishers. Or that I'd get the decimal point in the wrong place... But I'm running ahead of myself.



The conference looked rich, and very challenging for a new writer. Never one to dodge the risk of appearing foolish, I signed up. I hesitated about applying for the PEN Factor competition – the brief was to present a digital aspect of a writing project. I did want to get my novel out into the world, but the whole digital thing was a hostage to fortune. (The pale-faced, sweaty, superfluous hostage, that is: the guy who tries to do a deal with the hostage-takers; the one whose body is tossed out shortly after Plot Point 1...)

You've been shortlisted, came the email. TLC Director Rebecca Swift is a poet: unfortunately that means elegance and economy of prose, and there was no getting around it. I had to work out what the hell I meant by "Digital Hardback" in a week. Stopping only to ignore the instructions and send an extract from halfway through the book rather than the opening, I beavered away at my 5 minute pitch. I was very grateful to be married to a brilliant author (Rebecca Promitzer) at that point, not least because of her long training in the brutally honest world of screenwriting and script editing.

Fatally, I thought it best not to share the actual digital bit with her. Too late: it was now 48 hours to Trial by PEN.

It was an amazing two days. Audrey Niffenegger's keynote was a beautiful reminder of how and why to follow your nose, to wander across artforms and ignore the pigeonholing advice of the world. She was good cop: the industry panel on publishing models was absolutely terrifying. 80% of all books ever published have come out in the last two years - *Whack!* The best way to sell your book online is to give it away for free - *Pow!* (OK, I'm paraphrasing).

You try taking in six months' worth of ideas and meeting new people whilst trying not to actually cry from fear. I went home on the Friday night with a headache and thought about not coming back.

Then, miraculously, the conference on Saturday was lovely. Writers being supportive of each other; loads of easy-to-use ideas about digital publishing; great insights on design and typography. And then a fabulous rapid-fire PechaKucha session, like a jazz jam: people from all parts of the book world whizzing through pictures of books, places, ideas that had inspired them.

Bad cop returned: You're up next.

Before doing the pitch, you sit directly opposite the seven judges. If you point your knees at theirs, four feet away, is that weird? If you cross your legs, is that defensive?

It went in a blur. It was surprisingly easy, but moving, to read my book out loud for the first time.

Unfortunately, I left myself two and half minutes to dig a digital hardback sized hole for myself. One by one, the panellists said nice things about my writing and then very kindly pointed out the economics of producing a premium eBook with pictures before you've published a regular book or eBook. I blathered out a figure that was ten times too small, and which I'd made up the day before (that's the decimal point bit). But I think they forgave me.

Winning was lovely, of course – but it was the chance to read aloud that felt like the prize. And seeing the excellent Sally O-J, who'd performed numerous editorial lancements and cauterizations on *Calumny Spinks*, shedding a little tear.

The Bitter Trade of Calumny Spinks, by Piers Bearne

The Bitter Trade of Calumny Spinks is set in 1688, with England on the brink of the Glorious Revolution. Calumny is a redheaded, half-Huguenot outsider. He becomes a coffee racketeer in London to pay off a blackmailer and save his father's life - but his ambition and talent for mimicry pull him into a conspiracy against the King himself.

Extract One: Beginning

I am Calumny Spinks.

Between me and the satin blue sky hangs the hempen noose.

It has swung there in the faintest of breezes, waiting for me, all my life.

I was born to a raging Frenchy slugabed mother, sired by a sulking silk-weaver with a battered box of secrets under his floorboards. From her I got my flaming hair, so red that the scabfaced villagers of Salstead spoke of the devil's seed, spitting in the dust for salvation when I walked past. From my father came my sharp tongue, the quick wits to talk above my station, and the shoulders to take the blows that followed.

I was the lowest fellow in Salstead. I had not even been apprenticed by this sixteenth sweaty June of my life. I had to greet men by "Master This", and "Mister That", thumbing my forelock. To them I was but "Boy", a long-limbed red-haired Frenchy gawk, spinning and twisting silk like a halfwit.

The goodwives laughed behind their tippets when they passed me at the wayside, where my father Peter made me sit outside to work. "The silk must be spun in the fresh air, but woven in the dry dark," he said. If he had his will, I would rot in the village like Squire Salstead, whose bones hung in the rusty gibbet at the crossroads.

I should have been in London, not this Essex midden swirling with pigeon-chest men and their gossiping dry-venus wives. I was no fighter, could not read nor write; but

by Christ I had the smooth tongue to fool any man. And so I dreamed of becoming a merchant-gentleman by the power of my own wit, but London was forbidden me. Now it was but a fading memory, of dazzling lights, the broad river bristling with sails, of laughter and scented wealth.

We once had land-title in the city, so my father was known as Mister Peter Spinks then. But he weakly let merchants cheat him from his property and his title, and now he was only a Master, a mere craftsman.

My apprenticeship had been delayed so long that in two months I would lose the right to learn my craft and be called Master. And without a trade, I would never have the coin to buy my own land-title, to rise up and become Mister Calumny Spinks.

Extract Two: The Curette

During a rare day off between spying and racketeering, Cal's father arranges for his best friend Tyburn Tree Pettitt to have his scrofula lanced at the College Secular – a sort of paramilitary Royal Society. Cal is jealous of Ty's craftsmanship and education, which his father Peter has a habit of praising publicly.



The Surgeon-Principal took a sharpened steel rod from the silver tray. One of his students bathed Ty's neck. Water ran down onto the leather top, making a new stain, and I realised that the other patches were of dried blood. I wheezed in panic until spinning wheels of light hid the sight of Ty's face. Peter clasped my arm and squeezed it until I breathed more slowly.

"The curette," said the surgeon, holding the pointed end in the flames that crackled from the hanging brazier. "What is the principal purpose of this device?"

"*Aborior*," said the student, crossing himself.

"Such symbols are for the church, Grasset," the Provost scolded him. "Here, science must prevail."

"*Aborior* is correct," said the surgeon, holding the curette aloft to let it cool. "You, boy: It is when a man's lust makes a whore of a woman, and gets her with sickly child. Sometimes the baby must die so that the woman can live. And sometimes the parent desires that the baby should die."

Satan's cold breath clamped my belly. Peter had not wanted me, he had said it in Salstead. If my mother had not held firm, a knife would have taken me, unborn.

Ty cried out as the point of the curette burst open the smaller boil, and the surgeon twisted it in the wound to scrape away the yellow-pink mass inside. My friend shrieked again, kicking frantically at the hands that restrained him as the greater boil was lanced, and this time blood as well as lumpy pus came out, pouring onto the leather table top and dripping over its edge.

"Cauter," snapped the surgeon. Grasset took a rod topped with an eye-shaped lump of iron, thrust it into the hottest part of the brazier, then handed it carefully to his master, who laid it three times on Ty's bleeding wounds. At the first touch Ty gasped and fell silent, his clenched fists flopping open, and the smell of burning flesh leapt up at us like scattering pigeons. His eyes had rolled upwards into his narrow skull, the lock of black hair stuck down across his forehead with fearful sweat.

I turned away to puke, stumbling upstairs to the courtyard as foulness fell out of me. My father followed.

“Science is a marvel of God, but that fellow is an atheistical butcher who would as soon slice a man’s liver as care for his morals. If that is the medicine of this age, then I do not care for it.”

“But Ty is healed, is he not?” I asked, unquietly.

“God willing, he is. God willing.”

I see no God here, I thought. I see one man who prays and one man with a knife; and it is the cutting-man who has brought salvation to my friend.

About the Writer

Piers is a serial media entrepreneur. He studied at the University of York, where he met his future wife, the singer-songwriter and author Rebecca Promitzer. Piers was brought up in Luxembourg, a good place to cultivate the feeling that you don't quite belong.

