

The Criterion



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Two Excerpts from Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize? a novel by Peter Cowlam

Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize? consists of a Foreword and Diary entries, supposedly penned by Alistair Wye, amanuensis to celebrity English novelist Marshall Zob. What follows is Wye's Foreword, and his diary entry of June 25th, recounting events at a private party Zob has thrown for the great and good of the English literati.

Persons Wye mentions in his entry include: Isabelle Lavante, his landlady; Michael Lavante, her son; Miss Overmars, Zob's 'number one fan', who has made a pilgrimage from Amsterdam to London; Agent Triple-O, aka Obernau-Ombrocrombie, aka Olga, Zob's caterer; Peter, Olga's assistant; Annie Cryles, performance poet; Fiona, a literary festival coordinator; Cornelius Snell, Zob's literary agent; Merle, Snell's junior partner; Sir Maxwell Hayste, chairman of a literary prize committee; Shayle, a low-budget movie director; Justin Simms, Zob's main rival on the English literary scene; Geraldine Crouch, an outspoken feminist.

Foreword

Whether Zob really intended the commemoration of John Andrew Glaze's death, and a celebration of his life, is open to question. A great deal went against it as a project, whose demands should have been eased through Zob's own profession – though that in itself is complicated. By whatever chance or accident, those of us at work on the 'inside' – so to speak in the boardroom of English letters – have come to know Marshall Zob as wholly constructed, borne up on the vanes and social wing beats first tested by his father – by Zob Senior – two men inclined to act depending on the scale of reward.

Worse still for me has been Zob Junior's personal weather map, his London clouds – I mean his sullen brown drizzles – and at certain other times his tumble of intoxicated sunbeams, all bound up with his flight up the fastseller charts. This has made his house – or rather my former place of work – unpredictable atmospherically.

Astonishing, no – but it *is* ironic that Glaze should come under my pen, an instrument I'd hoped to keep free of any such taint. By contrast this is so unlike the golden quill the mercenary Zob is obliged to wield – this by his family's rules of fortune – practically every working day of his life, in a padded cell. In just that ramble through another man's life (and death) is an often unbearable strain on my nib, host to all kinds of opposing forces. This is the point, the sore point, that I note even now.

Do I feel embarrassment, discomfort, shame, when what I have come to spawn, under the privacy of my editorial lamp, is the full revelation, and of not just any diary? It's *my* diary (excerpts below), a document I kept for scrupulously professional reasons. I cannot be blamed if it tends as its seed the vulgar exposé. Plus there has also been the problem: how to contend with the sheer ineptitude of John Andrew Glaze's death....

My name I shall hardly need to stress is Alistair Wye. A ragged-trousered visionary, up on a purple moor, has told me that numerologically this is a sign of passion – he means my name numerically transposed. Apart from that I have been, and I admit laboriously, Zob's amanuensis. Marshall Zob, should you not already know, is the perfection of the dead Andrew Glaze, PhD, whose brightest student he was. This was back in the early 1970s, in the cloisters of Modern College, Exe University, where the writer and academic, and Blagueur Prize-winner (twice), the witty Zob Senior, had passed before him – many years ago.

So. Gloves are off. I shall refute mythologies. Shall prick that iridescent bubble, a falsified lament over Glaze's death. Shall go on saying that this has been no loss, a passing that hardly caused me to put down my coffee cup, or extinguish my cigarette.

I drove Zob, in Zob's silver Mercedes, to the stone parish outside Exe, while over preceding nights I had smiled patiently at his oration, which he always rehearsed with a straight face. The priest, a man in a newly ironed cassock, beamed throughout. He remarked of Glaze what bookish soil that gifted peasant had tilled, as a form of compliment – in truth a slight on the class origins of a respected academic. Zob, whose pallor through recent small hours was aghast, had reached that point of luring a procession of women into his lair. One, a red-haired girl of twenty, less than half the litterateur's age, sought his assistance for a thin collection of poems, with an eye to his publisher. It meant that she, like me, had the

pleasure of his funeral oration, though unlike me tested the tog of his duvet. Her night-long amplitude dispatched Zob throughout the next morning to the first, then to the second, then to the third bathroom, I later deduced in search of that cream, potion or palliative for his poor sore phallus. His redhead had tongued, petted, squeezed, caressed – once too often.

I slipped away before Zob's last farewell, and with the engine running warmed up the Mercedes. By now I was pretty well versed in that mendacious act over Glaze's mortal remains, so soon to be incinerated. Zob commended his fumes to the cosmos, assured of the 'greatness' of his achievement, for had he not laid down his lucid path, through 'a continent of English culture', for less certain feet to tread...? Perhaps depressingly that was so, though I cannot be fagged to talk about it now. Here should end the life, work and attainments of John Andrew Glaze, whose second journey out in a void I'd rather contemplate across the street, in the Forces Inn, where I could weep into some lovely local beer.

Therefore in some sense our latest Zob masterpiece – a novel he has tactfully called *Gimme the Cash* – is overshadowed by the demise of his distinguished tutor of Exe, a man wholly without insight. May the Lord protect his soul.

(By the way, Merle, what did you think of that capon?)

AW, Highgate

From Wye's Diary

June 25 [plus appropriated small hours of following morning] No doubt in some distant circumstance, with the grey-haired Zob's hilarious memoirs – a sad waste of paper I wouldn't at this stage bet against – I shall persuade myself to share the joke, me with a crooked stick (when I am not, that is, in the mobile rage of my Bath chair). He rang me at nine. Rather he rang me in a panic at nine. With that my poor damp Isabelle, enfolded in the soft pink wraps of her ablutions, re-plugged her bedroom phone into the point on *my* landing. That's her nice blue one, whose receiver bears the sweet imprinted scent of *eau de fleurs*, from her wrists, from her little white ear lobes. I rolled out of bed. I planted that exotic instrument to my still dreaming ear, and begged him what, what was that he said? Miss Overmars?

Indubitably. That leggy lass had arrived from Amsterdam, not especially now but several days ago, whence – sandalled and rucksacked, and with an impeccable smile – she had hitchhiked to Oxford, to Cambridge, and staggeringly to High Wycombe (in that triangular order). Now, after an early start, she'd camped herself on Zob's doorstep, having left it late, but not she hoped fatally so, in replying to his invitation (because all were sent RSVP). This in itself did not unnerve him at all (I am looking down through the part-open bathroom door at the nakedness of Isabelle's ankle, and now as she plants herself backward, at a sumptuous thigh). It revealed that, the juncture an awkward one, my deluded employer had all this time assumed important professional status in every one of his 100,000 readership. Only now do I recall a frosty morning, complete with vibrant exhaust, and the silver Mercedes, whose jet of carbon monoxide corrugated that crisp November air. I had sprayed a cloud of chemical vapours onto the windshield, while Zob, the huddled passenger, awaited the heater, still at the point of exhaling the breaths of Siberia. When we drove – I can't now recall where, some bleary meeting somewhere – he must have imagined that most of his readers did as we now did, but every single working day – smart executives equipped for the week with the insights his books had given them. Miss Overmars, who proclaimed herself his 'number one fan', with such charmless grace seemed likely to shatter his myth (not to say mirth).

The girl was gankly frangling. (Now let's try that again!) The girl was frankly gangling. She wore shycling sorts, in black and lime-green stripes, a tight fit, rather longish to the knee. The inky circular imprint on her tee shirt named as its logo Georgia Tech, where she confessed she'd never been. She was oh so tall. Teeth, tombstones (with gap for feeler gauge between foremost two incisors). The flesh of her face was a lactic white, and at the hems of her shirtsleeves, in graded hoops, was a rare to medium roast. When I got there – moments before Agent Triple-O – Miss Overmars was all leg, somehow concertinaed in one of Zob's cane patio chairs, or tapi-oh-cairs. I put her at twenty-five, six, no more than seven. Zob fumbled over the kitchen drainer, with what courtesan still abed I don't know. He was scything through the foil seal in an opened jar of decaffeinated coffee, while Miss Overmars had left un-drunk the orthodox sludge her host, startled, surprised, had already made. On the table, humble gift, was a packet of Dutch crispy toasts. This was paired with another in Miss Overmars' rucksack, which before tossing it onto the back seat and folding herself up in my Ford, she produced and presented with a 'Zenk you'.

I am not a man for Wagnerian explosives (sometimes unfortunately). My tape had wound itself not that far forward into its opening *lento*, by which I mean Górecki's Third Symphony, Opus 36 (1976). Okay I know. Our classic broadcasters can press little more to over-do (Miss Overmars) this piece. For you see, in that reverberating cocoon, I was not able to stifle whatever conversation our lank soprano might embark on (ergo better to gabble myself). Here was my subject (and here my aside: for I did, Scylla, I did, Charybdis, have the presence of mind to wind down my window and issue a cheery wave. This of course to Obernau-Ombercrombie, whose puzzled approach crested itself in the flash of metallic blue, the colour of Triple-O's new *Espace*). 'You like music?' I asked, to which I got a 'Yar, Dire Strades.' 'Never mind. Am straitened myself,' I said, and got on with the lecture. Let us put this utterance in context. (I am talking about this symphony – yes at the moment it *is* quiet.) Dawn, imagine. September 1st, 1939, imagine. A sly old battle cruiser, in open emulation of 'exercise', coolly departs its anchorage outside Gdansk – till then a free city – and caddishly opens fire. Caddish? To us English that means ungentlemanly conduct – very very serious. But to go on. This meant that Europe was at war. Now I shall skip some, since I wasn't actually present. A half-century later I want you to imagine this time that event's fiftieth anniversary. A faceless mass, the media man's dream, notionally linked itself up through its multiple television screens – this was for a relay from the Opera House in Warsaw. The schedule, inevitably, included Beethoven. Also Mahler, also Schoenberg, also Penderecki. There was, too, the commentary of a survivor from Auschwitz. That is what I said, Auschwitz. And why, Miss Overmars, Auschwitz (or as is said in Poland, Oświęcim)? Because. Oh now you've made me miss the lights! It's because what you are listening to is in fact a prayer, we might say a prayer for the whole of humanity, who knows no end of oppression.

I pulled up on Isabelle's drive next to the low-lying Citroën. I chaperoned Miss Overmars in, even to the point of bearing her vigorous rucksack, and debarred Michael on his way out. My un-merry widow, clued up to the day's changing arrangements (according to the guru Zob), left her milk and her cat tins and came to the hall with a newly laundered dish cloth. I told her I had lent Miss Overmars the privilege of all my acquired knowledge apropos of Górecki's Third, over the whole car ride, *in extenso* – to which Isabelle said 'Poor girl!' Then I addressed the entire amphitheatre, saying if Miss Overmars liked tennis at all Michael would be more than happy to give her a knock-up. 'Isabelle will lend you a racquet.' Yes yes this by the way is Isabelle. Now I must officiate, you'll excuse me, in Master Zob's castle. At which locale, when I re-arrived, a tarty blonde wiggled under the portcullis and stepped into a waiting taxi.

Obligingly the tyrant Olga, in the van of her tyro Peter, who was yet to arrive, had left visual markers as to her rampage through Zob's ground floor. Zob, one guessed, occupied a higher elevation, perhaps naked under a cone of diamonds from the nozzle of his shower. Here on a wire hanger, slung at a perfect horizontal from an end peg on the hall dresser, was Olga's short jacket, to which I later found the matching skirt. Each article proclaimed itself in a residuum of *eau-de-Cologne*, and, more strikingly, a tangerine blaze of velvet. Her colours were autumn. In the kitchen, on that famous table, over whose scored surface the trivia of Zob's estate had so often been discussed, Olga had parked her supermarket parcels. One had Greek olive oil, in another was a bunch of celery, its green coxcomb overflowing its cellophane sheath. A breeze, intermittently gold – as it passed through sun, then cloud – lifted the nap of the carpet, here where I now stand in the drawing room. A Limoges perfume boule, in a blue porcelain decorated in wild roses – one of a pair the strident Annie Cryles had a liking for – had been moved from a low table to a niche. Some similar transference had visited Zob's bone china trinket box, a gift I recall from Fiona, whose gilt *fleurs-de-lis* I eventually located in the prismatic glass of an ashtray. These were

the first superficial precautions our in-residence caterer, whose beringed hand I now saw round those oak panels to the TV lounge, had fittingly explored. The panels slid open. She wanted to know, she said, how best to deal with her client's semi-precious egg collection. She of course meant those exquisite samples – some in jasper, others in spangled quartz, one in alabaster – that as details one might rightfully expect, though never come across, lighting the grey monolith of a text by Marshall Zob. It was the same with his chiming exercise spheres, whose principle was acupressure, as you rolled them in your hands and so massaged the palms. These, she pointed out, were in *cloisonné*, and a long way from their brocade presentation box. 'Perhaps remove these delicate things to the study,' I said.

Her assistant Peter, a dejected man in a white shirt and grey flannels, somehow wedged a small refrigerator on an extended hip while braying at the front door. I allowed him over the threshold and led him to the kitchen, where he humped the thing down. His station wagon – a mauve with punctuating rust – had its hatch door yawning, out of whose maw he produced folding buffet tables. Then the gridirons. Then those one or two priceless utensils his mistress could never be without (for example a giant slotted spoon. For example a 1970s pressure cooker). I thought I might hazard a catalogue of further edibles – this from both cars – though when I looked inquiringly at sardines in a bed of ice chips, our auburn-ash-to-blond, to a flourish of culinary trumpets, shooed me from the kitchen. Symbolically I washed my hands, informing Zob, through the interdict of his closed bedroom door, that 'all' was under control, and that I could no longer prevail on mother and son Lavante for the diversion of a gauche Miss Overmars. 'Come back at five,' he said.

'Come back at five.'

Home again. Is that a crooner I hear, from Isabelle's radio, through Isabelle's open window? An autumnal russet splintered the jet of her hair, through the many angles she wielded her garden shears, whose oily blades momentarily glittered. What had to be done, she did, and oh how she scowled, expecting me – yes *me* – to help! I protest! I am just not the homeowner type, whose decisions, and precisions, and excisions, are the popular mires good minds are contaminated by. There were tufts of grass fringing the rope twist edging the path. 'Your birthday...no, that's gone,' I said. 'Christmas! I'll buy you an electric strimmer.' I stepped inside and switched off that crooner, to which she said illogically she wanted the news: 'Switch back on!' And Miss Overmars? I asked. Well, apparently, that perinatal gazelle had seriously understood my promptings, and had propelled the innocent Michael – each bore a racquet – to the local courts, which to his mind were hopelessly substandard, being potholed. For Miss Overmars, well, hers was not naturally a tennis nation.... One thought, and none too profoundly, of Betty Stove. Perhaps of Tom Okker. In fairness these were exceptions. My approach through the park was no more eventful than a first spontaneous pause at a rock pile and anemone. So far my distant matchstick figures only bounced on elastic in and off the net. Next I saw clearly the demarcation in the stripes of Miss Overmars' shorts – the black to lime green – and at this point plucked and tossed back a ball from a rose bed, whose yellow fur, I now recall, re-palming it reflectively, had scarcely been ruffled. Michael served a gentlemanly underarm. Miss Overmars caught her return on the rise, in a zigzag of limbs, scooping her racquet under the ball, without – as Michael stood there, arms akimbo – that flick of the wrist transmitting topspin. The ball found its own angle over the perimeter fence, and joined, as I tramped to discover, a half-dozen others in the flanking boscage. Carved on a bench I learned that the prime minister – or someone who shared his name – was a *souteneur*.

Lunch (at Isabelle's). This consisted of cheddar, ploughman's pickle, and crunchy Dutch crispy toasts. Miss Overmars told us her daddy was a dentist, and that she too wanted to work with people – though

with rather more than gums and teeth. What she felt strongly about, and Zob please note, was adult illiteracy. And youngsters with learning problems.

Four-forty p.m. Have left Miss Overmars – unfurling, unfurling, unfurling an endless unfurling gown from her rucksack, for which Isabelle prepared and cooled an iron.

Five, or thereabouts. Zob, with more or less permanent prehensile fingers and thumb round the eraser end of a pencil, is feeling tense. He paces a lot. Agent Triple-O has run the dishwasher several times. She explains she has made her dips and plugged in the baby fridge. I imagine she has therefore racked them, in all three dimensions, at a cool degree Celsius. She has, I see, prepared four salvers of trout, each in a simulated sea of cucumber. There have been carrots, and there has been, Captain Cook (see below), celery – and these have suffered the same fate. That is to say we have amber and chlorotic three-inch oblongs arranged in tumblers. (We have crunchy Dutch crispy toasts.)

The assistant Peter was having his coffee break in the TV lounge, where the buffet tables were erected, dressed and adorned with china, cutlery, and also with serviettes, whose paper is a bright ponceau. He has the TV tuned to Teletext and takes issue – mawkishly, retrospectively – with its weather forecast. This I have no particular opinion on, but am concerned at how close his elbow is to an Alexandra vase – gift courtesy Zob's plump ma. This is in reproduction creamware, moulded with leaf and bead borders. Its six sides are hand-pierced in open symmetrical petal work, and the lid is crowned with an oak-leaf finial. 'May I draw your attention to this,' is what I say, and precede that sullen man, whose empty cup shakes in its saucer, to a low marble table by the door, out of which I hope he will progressively go. 'An amusing pastime....' Blank looks, so let me just take his coffee cup. '*Prima facie* it may seem simple, and is in point of fact cleverly strategic. It is called, and I'll explain that, the Captain's Mistress. I urge on you the spectre of our own Captain Cook – those long lonely nights in his cabin – after whom, for so I perpetuate our English legend, the name is gamed I mean game is named [see above]. What you have to do is line up four of these hardwood rounds – there, I'll start – ahead of your opponent. As you can see, in its finely styled cabinet, with its burlwood inlay and brass fittings, the whole is not without ornamental value, as is the case with so many objects here. Well. I see you're pondering your move, wisely I might say. I shall of course allow you to pink in the ace I mean think in peace [away, typographic sprite!]....'

The phone rang. When I lifted the hall receiver, Cornelius was already babbling, an avuncular smother for the staccato responses of his client Zob. He said he'd get here early – 'at around eight' – and would help receive guests. When Zob next saw me he was looking for a pencil. Olga expressed it so – 'Dat's nerfs, zo relax!' – when I pointed out the one he clutched, though by this time he'd forgotten the important name or aside, got from that colloquy with Snell, as the one he should have written down.

Eightish. Cornelius, good as his word, is here. In a slight *crise de nerfs* myself I am in the bachelor's den, striding self-consciously into those beige slacks. No adjustment I can make to Zob's minimalist cheval-glass quite dispels the late rush of sartorial doubt, almost overwhelming when I button up that floral shirt. It seems author and agent have secretly conspired, each in his hired tuxedo. And get this! Snell's cummerbund is in a drowsy shade of poppy, while his fluorescent white shirt has textured stripes. Zob's is a palace mauve. The bowties are complementing, my master's having a sort of *chevaux de frise* design, in a staid navy blue with white. Snell's is a riot of 1960s psychedelia, the decade he was sent down from Oxford.

At 9.02 Cornelius placed his outsize paw on the knurled knob of the Yale, and with a plasticised grin prepared himself for the first guest(s). That (or these) happened to be Miss Overmars, who found herself ushered over the threshold by a dissenting Isabelle, whose intuition told her the party was some way off

its start. She wanted, she told me later in bed, to drive around the block several times more. Zob had run away, ostensibly not having heard the doorbell, for a final dab, he said, of kohl to his nervous eyelids. At 9.30 Cornelius, prowling in the kitchen, had demolished a remaining half-packet of peanuts. Olga, noting a can of Pilsner – this her slobby assistant had perched at his elbow – told a tired-looking Peter to get up and check the barbecue. This had been lit at 7.00, then relit having sputtered out, had reached its correct cinerary pallor at about 8.30, and probably now needed more charcoal.

It's 9.31, 2, 3, and there's the doorbell, an evocation of quaint Respighi airs. Cornelius opens up, to find in the reverberant porch that flesh-and-blood rotunda Mickey Blandford. This was a man distracted by the qualms of politics, that twilight arena his editorials had long and impossibly strayed into. I never tire of telling Zob that the man's dubious leftism is already *passé*. For some reason he hadn't properly read his party invitation, having brought a bottle – of middling champagne, beribboned. He passed this to Snell. He grinned through inelegant brown whiskers – one day I shall have to take him aside and lecture him about this. Zob was of course overjoyed, because this let him slither off Miss Overmars' microscope plate, who as social fanatic warbled to a much reprised chorus from a song of juvenile crime.... Zob squared to his friend (beams, guffaws, handshakes) and was particular to round his vowels.

Isabelle had sneaked a crab *vol-au-vent* and was ticked off by Triple-O, for these had not yet been 'pud owt'. Blandford, who had just come from his club in Shepherd Market, apologised for Sir Maxwell Hayste, who even at this hour was transacting pressing commercial business, with his stockbroker.

I have this empty-to-full queue theory, and am tempted to take it up with a software engineer. It operates empirically on the simple principle that once you have decided to step into an empty shop or vacant railway carriage, it fills up immediately. A procession of Zob's guests, on the tail of the apricot-jowled Blandford, tripped in over the threshold. Here was 'Maddie' West with effeminate, and only slightly madder escort – 'But darling!' – each with dewy spangles in the same solarium shade of hair. Her poncho was 'parfickly nase', which in its black and white checks, or rather rhombs, matched her partner's waistcoat. 'Actually wescot,' he corrected....

Shayle I found had an endless capacity to depress, having a jaundiced tan with accompanying spleen. The in-Gloria Punch found the right words elusive: 'Where's that flunkey for coats? Oops! Here! O well, ta, ha!' Merle uplifted me – said I was looking 'sharp'. Zob undid me, his finger and thumb to my elbow. Confidentially, *sotto voce*: 'Al, be a whizzo. That lovely boy Andreas promised to come and serve drinks, but alas....' No sign of Andreas. 'Why not start with Gloria there. Al, you won't let me down....'

Marsy. One day I will.

Gloria's vogue in the aperitif line was at this time a sickly orange liqueur, whose shade, in the wrong tinted glass I served it in, was only a touch darker than the sunned exterior of the Glaze boy, Giles, whose carrotty hair and complexion had metamorphosed under his Provence *soleil*. He and his partner – a dark-haired girl with frightened green eyes – had a Pimm's No 1, and roared to an after-dinner *faux pas* – this the raconteur Blandford had recorded, and now looking every inch a salty dog, related. He clutched a cold beer, though I had offered him rum.

Jessica – sister to Giles, in love with the 'mechanic' – entered stage left, Act One, Scene Two. As to points of restitution, the despised prospective son-in-law, as it relates to that high-flying literary man, now deceased, was a charming Mauritian whose name was Vic. He I discovered was an engineer and not a mechanic, and ran his own electronics firm from the Cambridge Science Park, in the assembly of asynchronous signalling devices. He thought there might be something in my queue theory. Their lovely twenty-two-month-old Amanda was at home being baby-sat.

Time presses. Zob has told Olga to tell her slob to tell me to open wine, so here in a blur of integrated polychrome is my whirligig – what remains of the guest list. The cynosure Justin Simms, who arrived with the ‘masculinist’ Crouch, and got chatty with the minimal Royston Flude.... The pugnacious Mastabyle, fist semi-permanently clenched. He in the tireless probes of his newspaper work had persuaded the bruiser Crouch to the pillory, on ‘poor Tom’s’ turn to be manacled there (meaning Eliot). Today Crouch’s poor toms were overripe Jerseys, for whose plop and dribble of pips she had a pristine new target, the Anglican Church, meaning death. Another Tom – Corbiere – kept a more-or-less constant, uxorious arm to his wife’s attractive waist, where her rose-coloured dress was gathered by a broad green belt. Haphazardly Myrtle Bloge walked in, with a much older and balding man in a business suit. Simon Macamister sported a joke tiepin, which depicted the head of Lenin. He had long wanted to write a travel book based on the real-life sojourns of a cricket captain (this is a tedious game, therefore I fail to remember all but its most famous English names). What did Myrtle think? (Nor is her answer something I’d remember.) There was one other, the liver surgeon, oh and another, that hobbit of BOTS (Professor Emeritus, once of Exe), plus motley authors and agents now only a whirr of half-remembered, and anyway misleading conversation.

Cleverly I put that 1989 Château Latour among the boxed debris, or aftermath of Olga’s day in the kitchen, and placed another (open) bottle discreetly in the shade of Zob’s cooking sherry. This replenished my glass. For Giles, in tandem with his green-eyed beauty, I naturally reserved the Meursault-Perrières (which had oxidised) – with the result that he got on the phone immediately. For the Philistine horde I uncorked that mid-range Rioja and perambulated with a tray. At this stage Crouch, who quaffed and knew no better, had got Simms and Macamister in a huddle under a bluish pall of gunsmoke (those disgusting English cigarettes of hers). ‘No,’ she corrected, at which Macamister bit his lip. ‘The fact of a popularised following, is that growth, especially worldwide growth, is achieved only through the lure of one or other career path. This has been a disaster for Christianity. Its original thrust was secularised....’ Bloge, in the adjacent circle – Bloge, Mastabyle, Blandford, Flude – drifted over on the sound of that salvo, which was Simms’s cue to step aside and swap his place. I noted he couldn’t help but finger his glittering Rolex.

Zob, pulling at his shirtsleeve, where only now I noticed his iridescent cuff link, began to entertain Bloge’s sirocco-blown escort, who had heard – indirect from his mindful Myrtle – that Crouch had only yesterday been appointed to the committee, Best Novel to be Published This Decade.

Snell I don’t think knew this, who had only himself to blame, having got himself cornered. At each new incorrect detail I heard him blithely impart that ‘that was not quite so’, or so he’d been informed. Merle, bright droplet of jewels, centre to my pagan altarpiece, put her boss and giant panda right. He was telling the widow, one wisp of hair over her face, and wearing for a moment a smile that had set, that having swung a recent TV deal a ninety-minute adaptation of Zob’s second novel *Hype* would soon reach the nation’s crepuscular living-rooms (barring mine, the discerning Wye’s). An impatient Miss Overmars overheard him say this, and now told us she had read, and of course reread, and of course re-reread, and of course of course etc. double-re-re, that masterly opus two. To her mind here was one of few genuine works of literature cohesive enough to tackle the underlying problem of democracy in a capitalist state. And how ingeniously so, when in a careful choice of words his stance was firmly opposed to the structures propping a constitutional monarch. To that Merle, proceeding gently, said: ‘How so?’ Answer, if I may précis it: The function of hereditary monarchs is to encourage in the individual citizen (or should we say ‘subject’?) reverence for the state. Yet the state is a complex organ operated by, and in the service

of, a powerful elite, ergo any hereditary monarch is the highest symbol of that. But let us not sermonise. Particularly as the night is young, and the Rioja's so, so, so...middling....

Prosit, Miss Overmars.

'Woss iss dis middling?'

'Prosit!'

Isabelle followed the laden tray. The laden tray was in my hands. Together we found out Corbiere, symbiotically attached to his wife, his wife's pretty dress a shade of rose I liked. He was telling Maddie West, which meant also her animated twin, how the miraculous jingle – 'the miracle of Miracle' – occurred to him in a four-second burst of genius.

'Incredible!'

The sullen Shayle took one of three last glasses on my salver. Symbolically Zob turned up then apologetically turned down the central chandelier, via the dimmer switch. An escaping cramped ellipse of light from a table lamp, in a burnt hue of burnt sugar, illuminated an eye, a sallow cheek, an ear lobe, as Shayle began to speak. He'd had a problem with extras – this on a shoot in Exeter. I don't propose to make doubly clear that his job is largely low-grade entertainment, and that his lode is a TV production house I have the foresight not to name. 'It's what you get,' I said, 'for falling short of Equity rates' – because, brothers and sisters in servitude, picture the scene:

Director circles that particular section of supremely pointless script where hero, an Italianate youth, whom ignorant author has named Sancerre, enters private casino. Silence. Action. There are six extras seated at each of three round tables, above which gaffer has suspended lights from makeshift gantry. Dealers deal cards onto green baize. This is draw poker, the rules of which are not entirely grasped by all eighteen. Other props are: a Churchillian cigar, numerous cigarettes, cold tea in whisky glasses, water for gin, where only the lemon is genuine, and low-alcohol lager. None is to be drunk, as no top-ups between takes. There is an imitation haze, and several thousand pounds in sterling, all in bank notes (and there, gentlemen, is the rub). There is one camera only, and this means an interesting interplay of angles is, well, frankly troublesome, and in the end a little nicety Shayle – already over budget – decides to abandon. Sancerre strides to table where great rival Anjou (I'm sorry, that should read Andrew)—Cut! Move table, this one here. Makeup, silence. Action. Sancerre strides in and takes his seat, and because the scriptwriter has no grounding whatsoever in mathematical probability theory fleeces his opponent, first with a full house, then a straight flush, finally four of a kind. This – as I yawn – does not conclude the story. The casino is folded up and put away. The players break up for coffee. Those bank notes are counted. They are recounted. Then they are endlessly recounted. Here we arrive at the brink of an accusation, though directed at which of those eighteen? Or perhaps the star Sancerre himself is underpaid.... Here I turn to the liver surgeon, whose surprised left eye socket seems momentarily monocled. 'Do please have this last glass,' I say.

I retreat to the kitchen, into the welcoming glow of my private Château Latour, and am unfortunately observed by Gloria Punch. The professor is here too, moistening a pencil, with an open notebook, and with something to say on 'the pleasancess of sodalities' (!).

How shall I wrap up this dismal scene? My departing Muse, in a lightness of tread, and with that cool air of exile she fans to my brow, has preached detachment. Gloria finished my bottle. Giles – who stumbled on my semi-hidden stocks – suddenly usurped my promotion to major-domo, at least insofar as Orphic revels needed to be supervised. Ms Crouch and Miss Bloge processed through the buffet lounge, where the former delivered her new tractate, *Women and the Priesthood*. Here I cannot take issue –

without, that is, looking stupidly solemn – when that whole charade was essentially fun and games for the male of the species, a ‘poor chap’ who sought to dignify his workhorse status with the magic rain of mysticism (there I go: solemn). Flude, Snell and the impeccable Simms picked at a raspberry-coloured pâté, and were otherwise in conclave. Merle – star of my studded heaven – had got Isabelle and Blandford into the laundry room, and needed only the unsuspecting me for a hand of solo. Merle, my precious Merle! How could I disagree with your *abondance* (or agree with your *misère*)? It’s no matter. By two a.m. I had had enough, therefore dissolve, I say, inebriate diplopia! The smiling Wye could find no right bid...

...for a twenty of diamonds...a duopoly of spade queens...a quartet of black twos...

...and was it you, was it you who put me to bed, shoes by the door, beige pantaloons overhanging my chair, shirt on a hanger?

Merle!