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Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?

Peter Cowlam interviewed by Vishwanath Bite

VB Mr Cowlam—

PC Do call me Peter....

VB Peter. I wanted to talk to you about your new novel, *Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?* I was struck by its time and place.

PC Yes. I have set it in the relatively safe remoteness of early 1990s literary London.

VB It's a satire – intense and unremitting.

PC Yes, and that's dangerous territory. I have no wish to bite the hand that feeds me.

VB Can you give an idea of what the book is about? Let's start with its central characters.

PC There are three. The first is Marshall Zob, whose father, of eastern European origin, has previously changed his family name from Zoblinski, or Zobilinsk, or something like that.

VB 'Zob' so much easier for natural English-speakers.

PC Exactly. Zob – Zob Junior, that is – is a literary celebrity, whose social ascent has taken him to London's literary heights, through a network of media and literary contacts. Although it's the force of advertising hype that has turned his mediocre works of fiction into bestsellers, Zob can delude himself that his success really is down to his genius.

VB And this being the early '90s, the communications revolution hasn't really got underway. This brings us to our second character....

PC It does. Zob has bought himself what was then, in the '90s, state-of-the-art computer equipment, for the room where he writes, but he doesn't know how to use it. He hires an assistant.

VB There's an extensive vetting process.

PC There is, but even then he makes a huge error of judgement in the man he hires.

VB That man is Alistair Wye.

PC Correct. Wye's background is computer science. He is employed, at the time Zob calls him for interview, by a theatrical properties firm, operating from an office in Mortimer Street in London's West End.

VB An odd combination – the theatre, computers....

PC On the face of it. His job is to manage a computerised stock-and-order system, a database of props and costumes, of where they are at any given moment. But he's bored. He sees Zob's job advertisement by chance, and as a joke sends his CV.

VB He gets the job.

PC Astonishingly, yes.

VB One of the first things Zob asks him to do introduces our third character.

PC The hapless Andrew Glaze, one-time Professor of English Literature at Exe University, who is already dead as the novel begins.

VB So we have two central characters, plus corpse.

PC You could say that. Zob was Glaze's student in the 1970s. In fact Zob was his star student, which is not to mention he was also the son of Zob Senior, himself a professor at Exe.

VB Ah, the sweet smell of nepotism.

PC Glaze's personal life hasn't gone well. Prior to the novel's opening action, his marriage has collapsed and his wife Samantha has fled to New York. After the divorce, she intends to marry one of New York's wealthiest bankers.

VB All of which is chronicled in a series of letters, postcards etc. languishing in Zob's archive.

PC Unfortunately Zob has been careless about filing these letters, and has them dotted about in no particular order in his extensive archive. Furthermore his replies to his friend Glaze have all been made on an ancient IBM-compatible using word-processor software he never quite understood.

VB All these replies do still exist, and are somewhere on his computer disc system?

PC Yes, though that ancient IBM-compatible now refuses to boot up. Cue Alistair Wye.

VB So why does Zob want to retrieve that correspondence?

PC As an important academic, and a dead one, don't forget, Glaze's life and work is about to be commemorated publicly. Zob sees commercial opportunities in annotating that correspondence and publishing it as a book.

VB And Wye does manage to restore that creaking PC....

PC That's not all he does. He starts a diary of his own – a witty and ruthless exposé of life in proximity to a literary superstar, a diary destined to become the novel *Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?*

VB Ah, so what you've in fact written is Wye's diary.

PC Correct. Peppered with the Zob-Glaze correspondence.

VB Which is hilarious, by the way. What does that correspondence reveal?

PC It shows us Glaze's pathetic attempts to get Samantha back, by following her across the Atlantic. He takes a sabbatical, ill conceived as a lecture tour. From a chance remark in one of his opening lectures it seems he's about to publish a startlingly new theory of literature. It rests on a semi-philosophical notion of time. For Glaze this is problematic, since philosophy is not a subject he's studied.

VB The lecture tour is a failure.

PC And not even an heroic failure. That and his moribund marriage drive him over the edge. All of this is catalogued by Glaze himself in those letters and postcards sent to Zob.

VB Meanwhile we've Zob's other preoccupation, or obsession almost.

PC Actually *three* obsessions. One is the fabulous procession of women Zob lures into his lair. Two is his political infighting in the brutish world of publishing and writerly success. Three is his bad weakness for public accolades, and his attempts to bribe his way into winning the Best Novel to be Published This Decade award, a typically English parochial thing, but important internationally (apparently).

VB [Suppressed chuckle.]

PC Here Zob eventually comes unstuck, since a new and even more mediocre novelist, Justin Simms, appears on the scene just as it seems certain Zob will win his coveted prize. Simms's friends are as powerful as Zob's, and at the last moment Simms is poised to snatch the prize from under his nose.

VB Your book is fast-paced and brimming with vitality, and – if I might say so – is a merciless poke at the English establishment.

PC Yes – that's one of my favourite pastimes. But the book is not without optimism. From the wreckage of Zob's career, an unscathed Alistair Wye, the amused diarist of his downfall, salvages an upbeat and cheery conclusion to everything he's witnessed.

VB And his message is?

PC Well, to paraphrase Wye himself – that a renascent literature may one day flourish, and shan't be undermined by the clumsy hobnails our many Marshall Zobs tramp in our world of printed pages in.

VB Peter, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts on *Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?* Signed copies are available, I hear.

PC For a limited time. More details at the publisher website, http://www.centrehousepress.co.uk/centre_house_booker_prize.html

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