

Who's Afraid of the Booker Prize?

a comedy satire by Peter Cowlam

(excerpt only – opening two scenes)

For further information email petercowlam@onetel.net

Synopsis

Marshall Zob, an award-winning novelist, is nevertheless on the point of desperation at not having won the Booker Prize. His latest novel, *Gimme the Cash*, has been nominated for that prize. His agent, Cornelius Snell, operates on the principle that securing the prize involves a great deal of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, though the kind of manoeuvres he adopts on his client's behalf are not always the most honourable. What is intended as his *coup de grâce*, and ultimate glory for Marshall Zob, seriously backfires, leaving him, his client and his agency hard put to salvage even a shred of public credibility.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Isabelle Lavante – Petite, attractive widow, early 40s, an inhabitant of West Hampstead (house, solid Victorian semi spread over three floors)

Michael Lavante – Isabelle’s 17-year-old son, sporty, academic, and already a cynic

Alistair Wye – Zob’s newly appointed assistant, single, 30s

A waiter or waitress, named Andreas or Andrea

Cornelius Snell – Zob’s literary agent, 40s to 60s

Marshall Zob – a novelist with ambitions to win the Man Booker Prize, mid-30s to late 40s

Merle – Snell’s attractive young assistant, 20s to 30s

Delilah Scuff – a famous TV cook, 30s to 60s

An electronics technician – mid-20s to 60s

Annie Cryles – performance poet, late 20s to mid-50s

A heckler – pre-planted in the audience prior to Act I Scene 7

A journalist

A photo-journalist

Time: the present

Setting: The action revolves around the offices of the Snell Literary Agency, situated in central London, and Isabelle Lavante's kitchen/diner in a suburban house in West Hampstead, with regular detours into a High Street bistro, and a single visit to a performance venue on London's South Bank. Although the specific settings switch between Snell's office, Isabelle's kitchen/diner, the bistro interior and the South Bank venue, a minimal use of permanently placed props and only slight re-arrangement of them will service all of these. A dining table and chairs UR represent the kitchen/diner, these furnishings being brought downstage to represent the bistro. Snell's office furniture is arranged UL, with a desk for Merle and a desk for Snell reasonably close to each other but with a definite sense of separateness. Merle's desk is nearer centre stage, and has with it two modest office chairs. A laptop computer and phone are positioned on the desk. Snell's desk, which is nearer the wings, has one rather grandiose chair for himself and one of modest proportions for visitors. On his desk is a desktop computer with a somewhat complex interface to his phone system linked to it.

ACT I Scene 1

ISABELLE's kitchen/diner. The table is laid for breakfast, though breakfast is now over – a tray, a teapot, mugs, a carton of milk, cereal packet, cereal bowl, cutlery etc. MICHAEL, arms resolutely folded, is seated at the table. ISABELLE, also seated, is looking slightly harassed. We hear WYE's car, a jalopy, pull up outside ISABELLE's house, in a blare of in-car music, Alban Berg's Opus 3. Engine cuts. Shortly after that, the music cuts.

ISABELLE: That's him all right – half an hour early! Hope to God he doesn't want breakfast...

MICHAEL: Huh!

ISABELLE: What do you mean, 'Huh!'?

MICHAEL: Do we really *need* a lodger?

ISABELLE: Now don't start that!

MICHAEL: Well do we?

ISABELLE: Yes.

MICHAEL: Why?

ISABELLE: Because every little helps, what with your father gone...

MICHAEL: Huh!

ISABELLE: Michael, now look. Do try to be a little less anti. You never know – you might just get on with him...

MICHAEL: I doubt it! Not if he works for Marshall Zob...

ISABELLE: Now you're only saying that because Marshall Zob happens to be on the A2 syllabus.

MICHAEL: I'm saying it, Mum, because his books are crap. You know this. Everyone knows it.

ISABELLE: There 'everyone' must be wrong, Michael. Isn't that new one of his up for the Booker? And don't use that language.

MICHAEL: Yes, Mum. It's called *Gimme the Cash*. Doesn't that just prove my point – Crap!

(The front doorbell chimes.)

MICHAEL: Well *I'm* not answering.

ISABELLE: Oh go on. Help him in with his things.

MICHAEL: Sorry! Already late for school!

(MICHAEL picks up his school bag.)

ISABELLE: Well at least say hello on your way out...

(MICHAEL bundles out UR. From offstage can be heard a truncated 'hello' and other murmurings as WYE, who has been waiting on the doorstep, tries to engage MICHAEL in conversation. ISABELLE sighs. Enter WYE UR, carrying a large backpack.)

ISABELLE: Ah, Alistair, how are you! Please don't take too much notice of Michael. He's at that age and he doesn't *mean* to be rude.

WYE: A charming boy, Mrs Lavante...

ISABELLE: *(Attempts to pour a mug of tea, but the teapot is empty)* I'm afraid breakfast is over – I expect though you're already on your way to work.

WYE: That's fine, Mrs Lavante –

ISABELLE: *(Putting all the breakfast things on a tray)* Do call me Isabelle.

WYE: Isabelle. To be honest I am running rather late. I completely misjudged the traffic. What's the best way up to the Hill from here?

ISABELLE: Well I won't go anywhere unless by car, though that probably won't suit you in rush hour.

WYE: Quite possibly.

ISABELLE: If I were you I would get the train.

WYE: Overland?

ISABELLE: From Iverson Road across to the Heath. That can't take more than a few minutes.

WYE: Yes, I think I'll try that. *(He heaves off backpack)* If I could just put this with my other things upstairs.

ISABELLE: You know the way.

WYE: Mrs Lav... Isabelle... thank you so much.

(Exit ISABELLE UR, bearing the tray of breakfast things, followed by WYE with bag in hand.)

ACT I Scene 2

A bistro. Enter a WAITER UR, who transfers to DC the table and two of the chairs that have served in ISABELLE's kitchen/diner. Exit WAITER DL. Re-enter WAITER DL, who now spreads the table with a cloth and lays two places. Enter SNELL and ZOB DL.

SNELL: Ah, Andreas, you've kept my favourite table...

WAITER: *(Pulls out chair for SNELL to sit) Si. (SNELL sits. ZOB attends to his own chair, and sits. Exit WAITER DL.)*

SNELL: Personally, Marty, I think you're right, perhaps there *is* more we can do – now that for example all the broadsheet publicity has got the ball rolling...

(Re-enter WAITER DL, with menu/wine list.)

SNELL: *(Takes list)* Ah, Andreas, that is just perfect!

WAITER: Si.

SNELL: Mr Zob and I will want to wet whistles, waging war on er this *(flourishes menu, then quickly scans wine list)*. The Shiraz Cabernet okay for you, Marty? Good. That's the Shiraz Cabernet, Andreas, and see if you can do something about this cutlery – looks a bit grubby.

WAITER: Si. *(He holds up knife to the light and nods his agreement, then removes all cutlery from the table. Exit WAITER DL.)*

ZOB: I'm so glad you see it my way, Cornelius. I mean it's so embarrassing! A novel by Marshall Zob still can't command the kind of advance reserved for *some* I could mention – and I am, Cornelius, *the best*. Tell me why it is that all the finest critical acclaim is lavished on these others – impostors.

SNELL: Agreed, Marty. You are and always have been my star author – no one else on the books comes close.

(Re-enter WAITER DL, with a bottle of wine and a corkscrew.)

SNELL: Ah, perfect, Andreas, perfect!

(WAITER opens bottle.)

SNELL: Don't bother with all that bouquet business – just pour. On second thoughts perhaps you'd better just give me a taster...

(WAITER pours small amount into SNELL's glass.)

SNELL: *(Tastes wine)* Um, I'm not so sure about that, Andreas. Perhaps we'd better try

the Merlot.

WAITER: Si.

(Exit WAITER DL with both the wine bottle and SNELL's glass.)

SNELL: Tut-tut. Do try to cheer up. We have after all got you on the Booker longlist. The shortlist is bound to be a formality, and you know what that means. No, Marty, no – I'll *tell* you what it means. It means, Marty, more exposure on all those tacky late-night Britart shows. You might even get that what's-his-name Tom Boring on your side.

ZOB: Palling. But –

SNELL: But what?

ZOB: Well obviously I need friends on the committee.

SNELL: Yes of course that's absolutely it, though failing that the next best thing.

ZOB: Which is?

SNELL: To get the committee on your side, you need the pressure of public opinion. It's like politics. I'll wager by this time next week *Gimme the Cash* will find itself up there among the favourites. In fact I might have a flutter on that myself!

ZOB: Well thanks for the vote of confidence.

SNELL: And there's one other bit of good news too.

ZOB: Go on.

SNELL: I've been in touch with one of my good friends at the BBC, and how's this for a coup! I've got you lined up for *Desert Island Discs*.

ZOB: *Desert Island Discs*. I see. When?

SNELL: First things first, Marty. What the production team would like to see is a list of eight records.

ZOB: I wouldn't have said that was an onerous task exactly.

SNELL: Ah, but there's a science to it, Marty. Trick is to appeal to the widest possible number. And don't ever forget the show is principally a vehicle for you to talk about yourself – so it's of critical importance to present a very human side.

ZOB: That makes it sound as if you think a human side is what I lack.

SNELL: Don't get me wrong, Marty. The whole thing's highly political – like everything really. Here's an example. When you talk about family life as you were growing up, what

you have to try to do is make it bland and universal. It goes down well if you reflect on parental influence say as wholesome. Schooling should be irksome. School friends on the other hand are best if pranksome, though harmlessly so. Holidays should not have been exotic – if they were, don't talk about them. It's also crucial to claim all ignorance of your father as an establishment academic. The masses, which mean mostly life's losers, are always so touchy on nepotism.

ZOB: A catalogue of lies, in other words.

SNELL: You get the idea, though I wouldn't put it as strongly as that.

ZOB: I'll need to rehearse.

SNELL: Fine. Let's do that now. I'm the presenter. (*In the softened tones of a Desert Island Discs presenter:*) What about student life, Marty?

ZOB: What about it?

SNELL: It's role-play. Come on. How do you answer?

ZOB: I don't exactly know.

SNELL: You tone down the élitist nature of Oxford as an ancient institution. You point up the camaraderie with working-class contemporaries. The abiding image is a receptive young man taking his first tentative steps across the threshold of twentieth-century literature, as opposed to Oxford classics.

ZOB: Well that's more or less true – though I don't know about the camaraderie and the working-class stuff. Not my line at all, that...

SNELL: (*Again, in the softened tones of a Desert Island Discs presenter:*) Professional life.

ZOB: What about it?

SNELL: You're not taking this seriously, Marty. It's role-play.

ZOB: Oh, sorry.

SNELL: You can make much here of those initial years of failure, commercially speaking – in particular *Aristotle's Atom*, which wasn't just remaindered, it was pulped as I recall.

ZOB: Thanks for reminding me, Cornelius.

SNELL: Don't take it so personally. What we're trying to get at here is society's usual tendency to value its gifted people belatedly.

ZOB: Yes, I see.

SNELL: Current activities.

ZOB: What about them?

SNELL: That's exactly it, what about them? This is your chance to assert on air that what you're enjoying now is a short break after those immense labours over *Gimme the Cash*, which it's bound to be remarked has been entered for the Man Booker Prize.

ZOB: That reminds me – how well do you know the committee?

SNELL: Never mind that now. The next question is almost certain to be about what plans you've got for the immediate future. This is your opportunity to mention the next book title.

ZOB: I haven't got a next book title.

SNELL: Think of one. Beyond that there's the long term – because don't forget there's the Nobel committee. What they would like to hear is news of an ambitious undertaking, a broad sweep say across the whole Christian era – *you* can make it up better than I can – a tapestry of social history embossed with futuristic speculation. That sort of thing.

ZOB: Oh, that sort of thing.

SNELL: You've got to think carefully about how you're going to summarise all this. There's always a conclusion those eight chosen discs seem to add up to. It's usually to do with what each piece of music has meant at a particular stage of life. We have to be careful here, given that all eight selections must in totality have that same broad appeal your comments are tailored to.

ZOB: But aren't we forgetting something, Cornelius?

SNELL: I don't think so.

ZOB: The discs. Can't say I'm that fond of music, to be honest, so how on earth do I choose them?

SNELL: Oh, that's easy. The formula's well understood. From the Sixties the Beatles, with a chance to sentimentalise on both the dead ones.

ZOB: But I always much preferred the Rolling Stones.

SNELL: Best keep that to yourself, Marty. And regarding the pyrotechnics of youth in general, I'd advise avoid at all costs the grotesquery of Mahler. Keep it simple, effective. These are the best candidates: the *1812 Overture*, Beethoven's *Fifth*, Brahms' *Piano Concerto Number One*. Slight hints here at the avant-garde could be along the lines of, for example, *The Rite of Spring* – but nothing that is now controversial. We don't want a

Boulez creeping in.

ZOB: No. We couldn't have that, Cornelius.

SNELL: Solace. Everyone needs it when things go wrong. So, early professional life could be accompanied by: that Albinoni *Adagio*, or the Pachelbel *Canon*, even a *Brandenburg*. Or what about some jazz?

ZOB: The only name I know is Oscar Peterson.

SNELL: Oscar Peterson indeed. Then you need an all-time favourite. Everybody has one. That piece we never tire of listening to. There are some obvious choices. The Elgar *Cello Concerto*, perhaps with du Pré (who in herself elicits sighs). Or that Rodrigo guitar piece, which is still very popular. Or some good old Haydn rum-te-tum.

ZOB: Can you honestly see me listening to Haydn rum-te-tum?

SNELL: Well, perhaps not – but what about opera? That has a surprisingly large following, even among those without much money. And it's such an easy choice. Domingo or Pavarotti, with a Verdi or Puccini highlight. Something that really grabs.

ZOB: I don't think that's quite me either, Cornelius.

SNELL: And as a man of modern letters, you'll be expected to show keen contemporary awareness. I can't see any drawback in acknowledging the minimalists – but *don't* however choose any rhythmic drumming, or handclaps, or syncopated vocals!

ZOB: Perish the thought.

SNELL: There must also be certain personal horizons. By this is meant a composer you say you know little of now but would like to explore. That doesn't mean someone obscure. It's something you've never quite got round to. You could try Wagner.

ZOB: Wagner.

SNELL: And of course no intellectual can overlook Mozart (a bit like Shakespeare). I understand *The Magic Flute* is highly thought of.

ZOB: *Magic Flute*, right. Anything else, Cornelius?

SNELL: I think that about covers it. (*Absorbed in menu*) You know, Marty, the peppered steak here's exceptionally good.

ZOB: I do know. It's what you ordered over my last book, when that was up for the Whitbread.

SNELL: Well that's settled then. By the way how's that new assistant of yours, that

what's-his-name?

ZOB: Wye.

SNELL: Just a polite enquiry...

ZOB: No. His name. Wye. Alistair Wye. He's a communications buff, microchips.

SNELL: Well, why don't you have him pop across to the office, let the Snell Agency give him the once over.

(Re-enter WAITER DL with a fresh bottle.)

SNELL: Ah, Andreas, yes! Signore Zob is ready for a peppered steak, I think... You are ready to order, Marty?

ZOB: Actually I'm not.

SNELL: What's the matter, lost your appetite! That's nerves that is.

ZOB: Well if it's all the same to you, nerves or no nerves, I've got my media image to consider. *(He rises)* Too many peppered steaks not so good for the waistline.

(ZOB begins to walk offstage DL.)

SNELL: *(Rises)* Marty!

ZOB: I've got work to do, Cornelius.

(Exit ZOB DL.)

SNELL: *(Following his client)* But come on, Marty, there's loads to discuss... Marty!

(Exit SNELL DL. WAITER remains standing, looking bemused. He walks DL peering after them, sees no sign of their return, and himself returns to the table shaking his head. Finally he moves the table and chairs back where he found them. Exit WAITER UR.)

Excerpt ends