



BOOK OF THE YEAR
By Paul Smith

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BOOK OF THE YEAR

By

PAUL SMITH

CHARACTERS

Felix Porter – a writer Jeremy

Watson – a writer Stella de

Beauvoir – an agent Valerie

Porter – Felix's mother

Lionel Meredith)

Zuleika Simmons)

Steve Rudd)

- Members of an Am Dram Group

Genevieve Poesy)

Philip Wooze)

Voice – male or female

ACT ONE - Prologue

In the darkness we hear Albinoni – Concerto no.5 in D Minor Op9. No.2. This is followed by Bach – Goldberg Variations BWV 988 – Aria.

The lights come up on....

The home office of FELIX PORTER – a jumble of books, boxes, shelves with books, papers, souvenirs, papers over a desk and the carpet. Piles of books everywhere. The only places that are neat are several shelves of paperback books and a desk with a high-tech computer on.

A door off leads to a hallway, front door and kitchen. Another door leads off to a bedroom. This is an apartment in Central London.

FELIX is walking around the room in shorts and a dressing gown eating a bowl of breakfast cereal. He has a head set on and is speaking the lines for his latest novel into it.

FELIX

As he leaned into her, he could smell the fragrant jasmine of her Elizabeth Arden scent. It reminded him of his Mother and was shocked to feel a movement in his Calvins.

‘Lick me’ she uttered in a voice that was as dangerous as the purr of a panther. His tongue touched her neck. Spittle seeped out of the corner of his mouth and dribbled onto her rose-petal hued breast.

‘Oh God’ she moaned as his fingers arrived at her treasure chest.

Wetness was everywhere and the self-same Calvins were now moistening with some speed.

Unbeknown to FELIX – his partner JEREMY is standing in the doorway of the bedroom.

JEREMY

Utter filth.

FELIX

I have told you a million times not to listen to me while I work.

FELIX removes the head-set and turns off the music.

JEREMY

I can hardly ignore you shouting above the crunch of your Cheerios

FELIX

I have to be as clear as possible for this machine. And they are Crunchy Nut Cornflakes.

JEREMY Well maybe you should wait for me to go out or write when I sleep. You are very difficult to avoid. I much preferred you tapping away for more than your life's worth.

FELIX Well you must move with the times. I am way ahead of my competitors!

JEREMY They won't be competitors for long If you spew out too much of that rubbish.

FELIX It's not rubbish. It's romantic.

JEREMY I've read more romantic things scrawled on toilet walls.

FELIX Well, you'd know, you've spent so much time in them.

JEREMY Chuckle chuckle.

FELIX Anyway, this is not me, this is P.O. Worthington. Who is partial to a bit of leg over action. I have her best interests at heart. Remember, her audience profile is middle-aged women, housewives, into gardening and needlework, watch Paul O'Grady and Bake Off. Oh, and single heterosexual men in their mid-50s.

JEREMY Say no more. Coffee?

FELIX Please

JEREMY exits into the hallway on his way to the kitchen

FELIX And Stella is popping by today. She has something to tell me.

JEREMY ***(off)*** My heart is pumping.

FELIX Really? I thought it stopped years ago and you had become an android.

JEREMY ***(off)*** Fuck off.

FELIX Ah the most versatile of words in the English language. A word for all seasons. Fucking Summer, Fucking, Autumn, Fucking Winter and Fucking Spring.

You've put me off my thread now.

FELIX goes to the machine and it starts to read back the words to him.

MACHINE 'Luck me' she uttered in a voice that was as dangerous as the purr of a antler. His tongue titched her nick. Brittle seeped out of the corner of his mouth and dribbed on her nose pottle poeed best.

FELIX Bollocks, bollocks and extra fucking bollocks. What's the use of a machine that is meant to save me time when it just doubles the work load

JEREMY enters with two mugs of coffee

JEREMY Use it properly then. I think you'll find it suggests no extraneous background noises. Your dentures doing damage to corn flakes is pretty extraneous. And that dreary music....

FELIX We are well into the 21st Century, this kind of thing should be a doddle for scientists. Why are they so useless?

JEREMY Go back to two fingers. You've written them all like that up to now. Why change?

FELIX I just wanted a new gadget.

JEREMY You have too many and they only ever see the light of day once.

FELIX Can I help it if none of them work properly? I need a cigarette

JEREMY You don't smoke.

FELIX I know, but I still need a cigarette. This thing has got me all on edge.

JEREMY Deep breaths

FELIX I'd better get a shift on. Stella is likely to turn up at any moment. You know she loves early morning meetings.

FELIX moves into the bedroom and starts getting dressed. He speaks most of his next lines off stage but occasionally pokes his head around the door in a half-dressed state.

JEREMY What's all the excitement about.

FELIX You know I told you about that big new award – The Book of the Year – well she wanted to submit one of mine. She did an application and everything. So good of her. It's not what I pay her for.

JEREMY What do you pay her for?

FELIX She gets my work published. Admittedly, it's not exactly a goldmine, being a novelist, unless you're Wilbur Smith or Phillipa Gregory, but she does ok. Anyway, the prize they are offering is enormous.

JEREMY And you think you have a chance of winning?

FELIX And you don't?

JEREMY I am not one of the judges.

FELIX Who I believe are mainly soap stars and reality tv celebs.

JEREMY High-brow then.

FELIX I don't pretend to be. I write for the masses. And I am not ashamed of it.

JEREMY If only you sold masses.

FELIX Jealous. How many copies did your last book sell?

JEREMY 27

FELIX Roman watercourses and water-lifting devices published by the University of Western Alabama Press or some such absurd company.

JEREMY I write for a specialist market

FELIX The Roman water-lifting device market. Huge!

FELIX emerges from the bedroom fully dressed

JEREMY Keep your sarcasm for your agent. Which book of yours has she submitted?

FELIX Not sure, just one of those I have completed recently.

JEREMY One of those you have churned out recently.

FELIX Ha-ha

JEREMY The new Barbara Cartland without the floaty dresses, the predilection for all things pink and the requirement for lashings of make-up. Oh, I don't know though!

FELIX Such wit so early in the morning.

Doorbell rings

JEREMY ***(Going into the hall)*** You just prepare yourself for stardom!

FELIX tries to tidy a few things up, but fails miserably

JEREMY ***(off)*** Good morning Stella. Bright and early.

STELLA ***(off)*** Early? This is my third meet of the day! How are you Jez?

JEREMY ***(off)*** Jeremy

STELLA ***(off)*** Yes. Now where is my boy?

STELLA barges into the room. All beads, big coat and voluminous bag. JEREMY follows slowly behind.

STELLA Ah, Felix. My angel. How are you?

FELIX Good thanks Stella ***(They air kiss)***

STELLA Jez, be a dear. Coffee. White and sweet like Felix

JEREMY Oh God.

JEREMY exits to the kitchen

STELLA Now I haven't got a lot of time. I have lunch with Jude Law. You may be looking at his new agent!

FELIX Wow.

STELLA Yes, isn't he a poppet. These actors just seem to want to wine me and dine me at every given moment. But I am not complaining. I can hardly get enough of the bottomless Prosecco at Quaglino's – the stuff is virtually keeping my body going. Anyway, you don't want to hear about my evening with Ewan McGregor and Tom Hardy do you? The Odd Couple – sound fun? We shall see. Tommy has a Mad Max film to finish and then he may have a

window. Ewan of course is always gagging to get back on the stage and so I am bound to be able to entice him!

Now, you. Your manuscript. Or rather Z Sidecar's manuscript – that's the one. The one I submitted. What is it called again?

FELIX Diary of a Slasher

STELLA Sounds like a tale of incontinence. Anyway, that's the one I submitted for the big prize.

FELIX Wow.

STELLA In the Horror category. For The Book of the Year.

FELIX Thank you. I don't know much about it though.

JEREMY enters with a cafetiere of coffee

STELLA Little to know. It will be big. Huge prize money. 250k. Panel of judges read unpublished manuscripts of novels. No author names. They read them blind, as it were. Choose one from each of 5 categories and then choose overall winner. Author gets huge publicity and guaranteed sales etc.

JEREMY Sounds ridiculous

STELLA I had to get approval from your publisher of course but they jumped at it. They could do very well if you win.

JEREMY I bet they will.

FELIX You think it has a chance?

STELLA Of course. As much as anything else. That magazine always gives your horror books wonderful reviews doesn't it? What's it called again?

FELIX The Blade

STELLA Oh yes. They love you. Odd magazine. Never knew there was such a big audience for sliced human flesh. Anyway, we should hear back soon.

After pouring the coffee JEREMY hands STELLA a mug

STELLA Oh Jez. You are a real star.

JEREMY Not a problem. And it's Jeremy

STELLA Indeed

FELIX Diary of a Slasher.

JEREMY What of it?

FELIX That's what Stella submitted to the competition.

STELLA Z Sidecar

JEREMY Where do you get these names?

STELLA It's in the Horror Category.

JEREMY I hardly think the tale of a murderous British Prime Minister with a penchant for slicing people's faces off would be in the Romance section.

STELLA No, of course not. What wit.

FELIX Well, it's all very exciting, but then I don't think it has a hope in hell.

STELLA Who knows –I think it could get a lot of interest. A dystopian slant on the post coalition government. Cuts everywhere (*she laughs very loudly*).

JEREMY Very good.

STELLA Mmm this coffee Jez. Waitrose?

JEREMY Aldi

STELLA Yes I thought as much. Bit mucky. Anyway, darlings, I can't stay for long, but I thought I had better let you know a little bit more news.

FELIX I have a TV deal?

STELLA Don't be silly. I don't deal with that kind of thing. Quite honestly it's so much easier dealing with actors. They never expect the earth. So much more fun than authors. Never satisfied with anything. Always so grumpy. Present company excepted of course.

FELIX Thank you.

STELLA But you know I always like to pop in a little added extra every so often. Which is exactly what I was saying to Hiddy only the other day.

JEREMY Hiddy?

STELLA Hiddy. Tom. Tom Hiddlestone.

JEREMY Ah.

STELLA Absolute darling of course. I would marry him if I could.

FELIX Why can't you?

STELLA Well as far as I am concerned all actors are gay until they prove to me otherwise.

FELIX And how do they prove it to you.

STELLA There are ways!

JEREMY Didn't he have a fling with Taylor Swift?

STELLA Hardly a fling. Obviously a publicity stunt. Rock Hudson was married you know. And Olivier – three times!

FELIX He wasn't gay.

STELLA Wasn't he? You ask Danny Kaye!

JEREMY He's dead.

STELLA Exactly. Now look. I have been a teeny-weeny bit naughty. You see, knowing that you hadn't had a huge amount of luck recently, I thought I would up your chances of winning the big prize?

FELIX You haven't bribed the judges?

STELLA What with darling? My charm and body won't be enough to do that. No, I submitted four of your recent manuscripts.

FELIX What?

STELLA Well you do rather churn them out don't you? Anyway. It's ok. You don't have to do anything but sit and wait.

JEREMY You mean they have got to wade through more of your nonsense.

FELIX Oh how helpful and supportive can you possibly be?

STELLA It's fine darling. They will love them all. Apparently any author can only submit one novel

FELIX Right....so....

STELLA But you are not one author. You are five in one. P.O. Worthington, Z Sidecar, Geraldine Potts, Sebastian Rackenford and Lee Mobo. You see, that's why that rule doesn't apply to us.

JEREMY They won't fall for that.

STELLA Why? They don't see the author names. When they do, they will see five names. Five different publishers. None of whom know your alter egos.

JEREMY What about the blurbs on the book covers?

STELLA All so brief and say nothing. So, who's to know?

FELIX I never put out photos of myself.

JEREMY They will recognise your style.

FELIX Have you actually read any of my books? Because if you have you will see that all authors styles are quite distinct.

JEREMY Yes, I have read them... well some.... well bits of some.....

STELLA I just think you are bound to be ok with at least one. Remember this competition is one for the common people. The ones who can't face Dickens or Austen or Jeffrey Archer. The populist vote. The choice of the man on the street or the housewife tied to her kitchen. The once a year reader. Those who love true crime books and stories of childhood abuse. The devotees of the Richard and Judy Book Club...

FELIX Yes, ok we get your drift.

STELLA Here is a list of the books I sent in for you. As I say, the publishers are all thrilled to bits.

JEREMY Rubbing their hands with glee no doubt. *(aside)* Not unlike you!

STELLA We need to celebrate.

STELLA reaches into her bag and finds a crumpled-up piece of paper she hands to FELIX which he reads. She then removes an opened bottle of Prosecco with a cork in the top - and a wine glass and pours a glass and drinks. JEREMY and FELIX ignore it. This is very usual for her.

FELIX What do you think they will make of THE FIRST HUSBAND OF HENRY THE EIGHTH?

JEREMY As long as none of them are historians or passionate about our nation's story and their own integrity I am sure they will love it.

STELLA It's witty, it's edgy.

JEREMY It's tripe.

FELIX So where is your evidence to deny that Henry VIII wasn't a closet homosexual.

JEREMY And where is your evidence to suggest that he was.

FELIX I never suggested it was historically accurate.

JEREMY Then why write it?

FELIX I liked the idea, the title. It seemed it had to be written.

STELLA Now, just because you are an historian Jez, you really shouldn't tease my Felix. He does his best. And I for one think you have a chance. £250,000 is nothing to be sniffed at. Heavens you only get £50k for the Man Booker – so this is much more prestigious. And I think the ceremony is going to be hosted by Bradley Walsh.

JEREMY Whopppeeeee

FELIX He's funny

STELLA And a total darling. I think they had David Tennant lined up, but he was filming a soap powder commercial or something.

JEREMY Pity I might have come along if he was there.

FELIX You'll come along anyway if I get nominated.

JEREMY Of course I will.

FELIX So, you don't think there is any chance that they will find out we have defrauded them.

STELLA Oh it's not fraud. It's just playing with probabilities. Einstein or whatever.

JEREMY Relativity.

STELLA Exactly. Now look. I might have to dash or Jude will be twiddling his thumbs. Off to Highgate with me.

FELIX Well have a lovely time. I look forward to hearing from you.

JEREMY It can't be too soon.

STELLA's phone rings. She hands the glass and bottle to JEREMY as she hunts for the phone in her bag.

STELLA Oh hold this will you for a moment Jez. That's probably Mags. Smith. She is desperate to talk. Oh, no I am not sure who this is.

STELLA answers the phone

Stella de Beauvoir.

Yes, yes.

Oh, really? No, it's fine. He is with me now as it happens.

Yah. Yah. Oh Yah. Yah. Yah, Oh really? Yah Yah.

Bene.

TTFN

STELLA turns off phone and throws it back in the bag.

STELLA And who do you suppose that was?

JEREMY Not Maggie Smith I am guessing.

STELLA You are correct. It was only Bevan Christopher.

FELIX Bevan Christopher?

STELLA Exactly.

FELIX Should I know him?

STELLA Oh come on Felix. He is the managing editor at Pinprick Paperbacks. Seems like Sebastian Rackenford's desecration of Henry the Eighth has found favour. It's won the nomination for the Historical Fiction Section of the Book of the Year Competition.

JEREMY Jesus.

FELIX Really?

STELLA Yes, he said it was described as being witty and edgy.

FELIX Isn't that how you described it?

STELLA I rather think it was. Well how exciting is this!

FELIX It's fucking bonkers

STELLA You almost have both hands on the prize