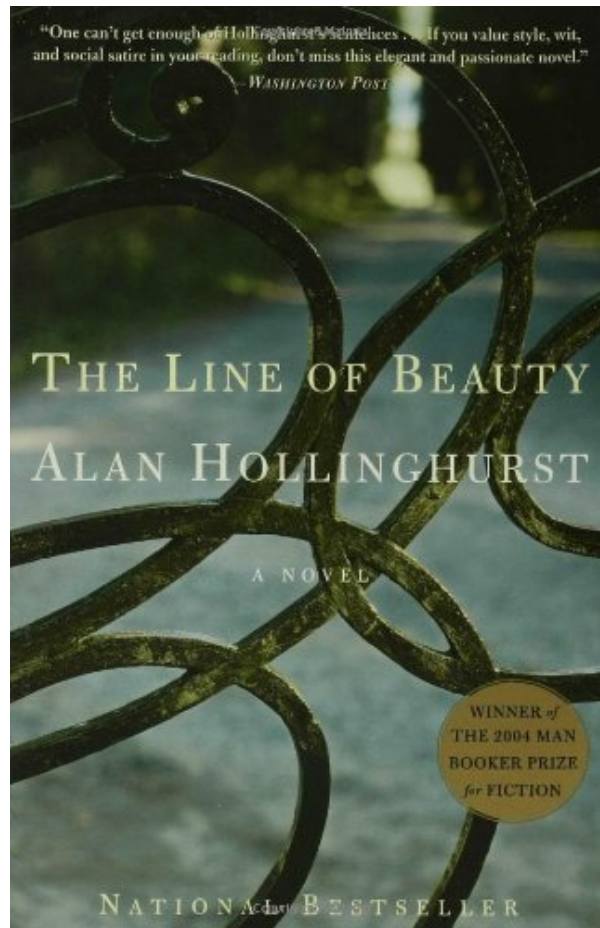
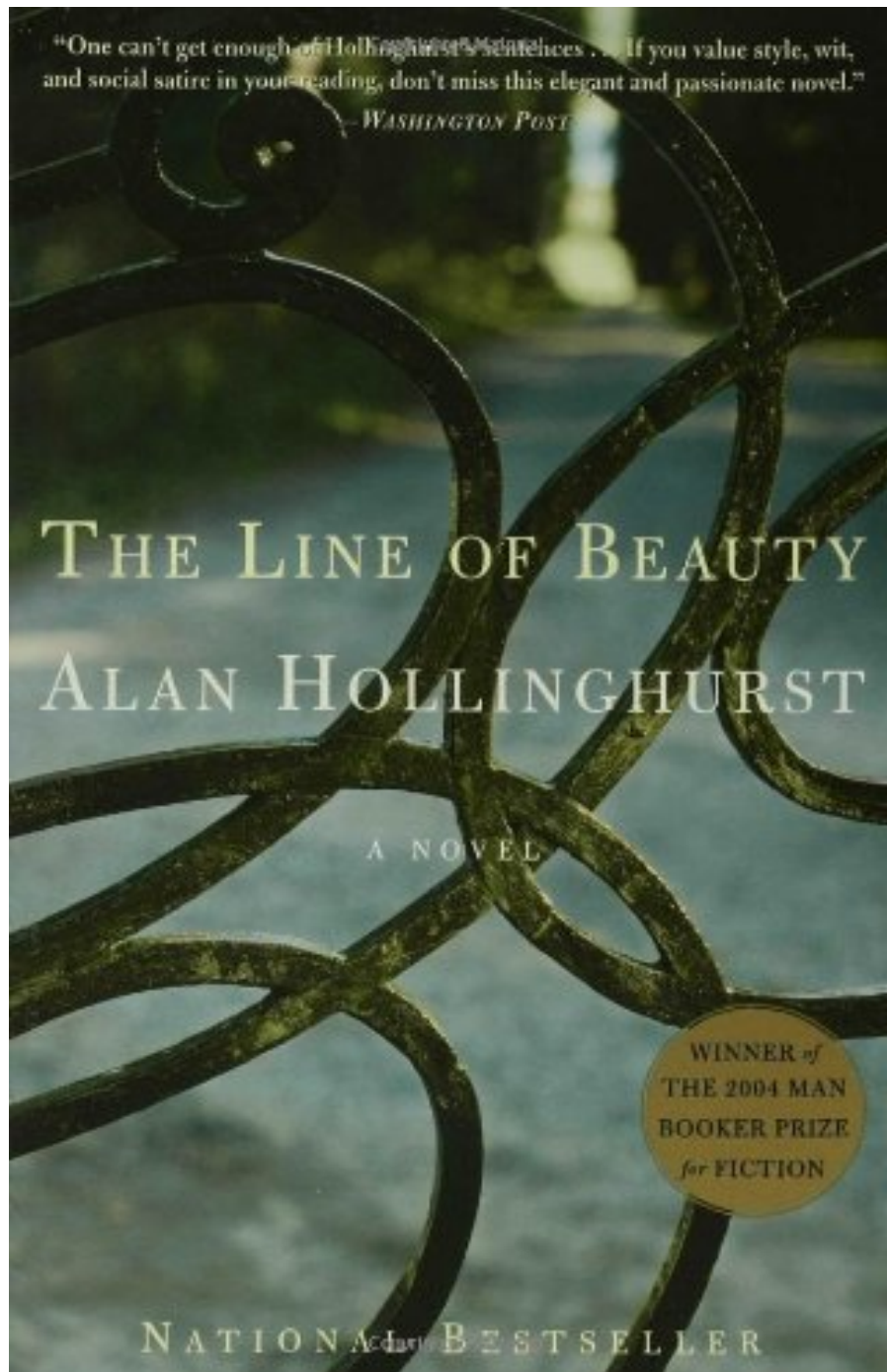


THE LINE OF BEAUTY: A NOVEL BY ALAN HOLLINGHURST



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Interview with Alan Hollinghurst

Alan Hollinghurst's extraordinarily rich novel *The Line of Beauty*. has garnered a new level of acclaim for the author after winning the 2004 Man Booker Prize. Hollinghurst speaks about his work in our interview.

From Publishers Weekly

Among its other wonders, this almost perfectly written novel, recently longlisted for the Man Booker, delineates what's arguably the most coruscating portrait of a plutocracy since Goya painted the Spanish Bourbons. To shade in the nuances of class, Hollingsworth uses plot the way it was meant to be used—not as a line of utility, but as a thematically connected sequence of events that creates its own mini-value system and symbols. The book is divided into three sections, dated 1983, 1986 and 1987. The protagonist, Nick Guest, is a James scholar in the making and a tripper in the fast gay culture of the time. The first section shows Nick moving into the Notting Hill mansion of Gerald Fedden, one of Thatcher's Tory MPs, at the request of the minister's son, Toby, Nick's all-too-straight Oxford crush. Nick becomes Toby's sister Catherine's confidante, securing his place in the house, and loses his virginity spectacularly to Leo, a black council worker. The next section jumps the reader ahead to a more sophisticated Nick. Leo has dropped out of the picture; cocaine, three-ways and another Oxford alum, the sinisterly alluring, wealthy Lebanese Wani Ouradi, have taken his place. Nick is dimly aware of running too many risks with Wani, and becomes accidentally aware that Gerald is running a few, too. Disaster comes in 1987, with a media scandal that engulfs Gerald and then entangles Nick. While Hollinghurst's story has the true feel of Jamesian drama, it is the authorial intelligence illuminating otherwise trivial pieces of story business so as to make them seem alive and mysteriously significant that gives the most pleasure. This is Nick coming home for the first and only time with the closeted Leo: "there were two front doors set side by side in the shallow recess of the porch. Leo applied himself to the right hand one, and it was one of those locks that require tender probings

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"One can't get enough of Hollinghurst's sentences...If you value style, wit, and social satire in your reading, don't miss this elegant and passionate novel."-Washington Post

Winner of 2004's Man Booker Prize for fiction and one of the most talked about books of the year, *The Line of Beauty* is a sweeping novel about class, sex, and money that brings Thatcher's London alive. Nick Guest has moved in with the Feddens, a family whose patriarch is a conservative member of parliament. An innocent in matters of politics and money, Nick becomes caught up in the Feddens' world of parties and excess, as well as in his own private pursuit of beauty. Framed by the two general elections that returned Margaret Thatcher to power, *The Line of Beauty* unfurls through four extraordinary years of change and tragedy.

A New York Times Bestseller (Extended) • A LA Times Bestseller List • A Book Sense National Bestseller • A Northern California Bestseller • A Sunday Times Bestseller List • A New York Times Notable Book of the Year

And chosen as one of the best books of 2004 by: Entertainment Weekly • The Washington Post • The San Francisco Chronicle • The Seattle Times Newsday • Salon.com • The Boston Globe • The New York Sun • The Miami Herald • The Dallas Morning News • San Jose Mercury News • Publishers Weekly

"A magnificent comedy of manners. Hollinghurst's alertness to the tiniest social and tonal shifts never slackens, and positively luxuriates in a number of unimprovably droll set pieces...[an] outstanding novel."-New York Times Book Review

"Hollinghurst has placed his gay protagonist within a larger social context, and the result is his most tender and powerful novel to date, a sprawling and haunting elegy to the 1980s. A"-Entertainment Weekly

"Mr. Hollinghurst's great gift as a novelist is for social satire as sharp and tra

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people are beautiful because we love them, not the reverse

By pjf

SPOILER ALERT

Middle-class but upwardly hopeful Nick Guest comes to Tory MP Gerald Fedden's house first as a vacation houseminder, and ostensible watcher of the unstable daughter Catherine (Cat). Nick is in pursuit of beauty of a certain type. Beauty is in many things, but Nick is enthralled by beauty as manifested in privileged lives and its beautiful things.

Invited to stay after the vacation as a useful dogsbody, he gets to be the hanger on of wealth, and dabbler in their society. Always obsequious, he becomes a foil for family head and MP Gerald's boasting, a constant reassurance and dutiful quasi-son to the mother Rachel (he's much more sympathetic to her than to his own mother, who he is vaguely ashamed of) and a companion and minder to the manic-depressive Cat.

Nick's biggest problem, as a character, is that he is such a sycophantic bluenose. With his labor friends, he reviles Thatcher, and comments negatively on Gerald. To Gerald and his friends and relations, he acts the supportive, respectful Tory. This chameleon-like character makes him hard to respect.

Supposedly working on getting an advance degree on Henry James at UCL in London, he seems more in pursuit of love. But after dabbling in a relationship with middle class clerk - who it is foreshadowed will dump him because he has no money -- he becomes a kept boy for a rich Lebanese millionaire, and former Oxford classmate Wani Ouradi. Nick's finances are tied to his tentative relationship with Ouradi; his living and personal situation tied to his relationship with the Feddens. While other rich companions from his graduate class are starting lives, making names and fortunes, middle-class Nick's can't leave the mein of his college companions but can't afford it himself, (he was a scholarship student at Oxford) so remains stuck in sycophantic roles to stay in that social set.

Nick was enthralled with Henry James, but the real line of beauty is more enthralling than its fictional dissection. Instead Nick helps start up Wani's magazine/film company OGEE (named after the line of beauty arch). But Wani is something of a dilettante, more interested in cocaine, porn and sex. Nick's job is something of a pose. Wani goes through a lot of cocaine, a lot of rent boys, a lot of sex with Nick. He gives Nick a salary and car, while they do tacit work on the magazine and a film script. But Wani openly reviles Nick as just another one of the many paid sluts who takes his money. Nick basically is a respectable looking, safe, but hidden sexual companion, no more acknowledged than the anonymous rent boys.

Nick constantly professes love to his lovers and adopted family. But none take Him seriously as if sensing his shallowness. Indeed, often the sentence after Nick professes love to someone, he wonders at himself for doing so. Whatever these relationships are, they aren't love. His first "lover", it is hinted at, trades Nick up for someone with more funds, before Nick snags Wani, wanting to love him for his physical beauty, even knowing Wani's faults. There's convenience, and a bit of regard, but no real tie.

Similarly, Nick tells Catherine that he loves her family, but he's there for a job as well as a minder to Catherine, a general dogsbody, and an impressionable and appreciative mirror reflecting their wealth. Because Nick loves the Fedden's privileged life, he gives it more brilliance, a reflective glow. Therein lies his real usefulness. Oxford educated and a quasi Don, he offers a tacit legitimacy in his otherwise middle class admiration that someone else wouldn't be able to offer (even perhaps get in the door). Gerald shows off to him, and uses him as a verification of their own wealth and privilege. Nick's basically just a different kind of slut for the Feddens.

Meant to be a sort of touchstone, Catherine reviles pretense, babbles of speaking truths. She's angry that Nick doesn't leave Wani because their relationship must be kept hidden. When he tells her he stays with Wani

because he finds him so physically beautiful -- she tells him that people shouldn't be loved because they are beautiful. That people are beautiful because we love them.

Nick only usefulness requires being a convenient reflective foil for beauty, but that means keeping ugliness hidden -- Gerald's indiscretions, Wani destructive lifestyle, etc. When Catherine, in a manic phase, blurts out some of these truths to the press, Nick's only usefulness then is as a sort of scapegoat. Wani, now dying of AIDS, pays Nick off in his will, but never speaks of love. And Nick discovers there was never any love in these relationships, nor any beauty. But has he learned his shallow quest was in vain?

The story ends in ambiguity. Both Nick's lovers succumb to AIDS. We don't know if Nick is HIV positive. In the film, the impression is left that he has been lucky in that, even as he still searches, clueless, for beauty. In the book, which goes a bit more darkly into Nick's insincerities and obsequiousness, Nick believes he will become positive as well. Both end with Nick, and the rest of the characters not having learned much. Adversity hasn't made them better. Rather their own flaws have brought them all down. So it is hardly a positive story. Even Catherine, who reveals others truths and secrets, does it from a manic sense of mischievousness, and not from any sense of moral certainty. (One telling scene is of her sitting in her Uncle's French manoir telling a multi-millionaire, who didn't contribute more than fifty pence to a church restoration that he has too much money. When he asks her (and she has a significant inheritance) what she gave, she claims she had no money on her.)

Some reviewers, and I think the author, make a thing of that Nick's troubles may have to do with homophobia. I didn't see that. The gap between Nick and the Feddens, even between Nick as a potential "mate" for Wani was more financial and cultural than gender oriented. Nick was a hanger on, a sycophant, a leech, because he thirsted after what he saw as a beautiful lifestyle. Gerald was brought down by a financial scandal, then by a petty affair with his secretary. When the news of Nick's sexuality came out in the papers, it wasn't as if everyone in Gerald's circle didn't know Nick was gay. Nick never made a secret of it, except to Wani's father. Gerald flies in a fury at Nick because he thinks that Nick told his daughter about Gerald's affair with his secretary, that Nick had secret knowledge of. And that Cat blabbed to the papers. Without that, Gerald might have survived the financial scandal. But Cat discerned that herself.

In his rage Gerald includes a lot of slurs against gays, as well as against middle class opportunists, etc, when he reviles Nick. Certainly Nick's being gay was a central part of his life, but I don't think it was all that central to the plot's denouement. To me, that had to do more with character, not gender orientation. Nick's problems were because he didn't build a life of his own, but instead based his life on being a hanger on for others, attracted by a lifestyle he had no legitimate ownership of. His father was a buyer and seller of antiques, a caretaker of ancient clocks in mansions. Nick didn't want to come to the mansions merely as a winder of clocks, or to even buy and sell the clocks. He wanted to live in the mansions.

In the end, he might have learned that beautiful things don't necessarily make for beautiful people. And even with beautiful people, that beauty is only skin deep. But that too is left ambiguous. These characters end the book no better, in most cases much worse, and with no more insight, than when they entered. It's a hard book to like, for that reason. But the characters are so clearly drawn, (even if they are rather shallow, unworthy characters) that you want something more to have happened. I think the author has a dislike for the period and these characters, and doesn't believe anything good should come out of it. One of the most striking scenes is when the housekeeper tells Nick she always suspected he was no good. Nick is stunned, but as reader we have to be in tacit agreement, having seen the false part Nick has often played in all his relationships. Still, the lack of any positive resolution means that the characters stay in your head because you wish it ended otherwise.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A half-liberated gay comes to grief in the Thatcher Era

By Donald G. Marshall

Hollinghurst has a justified reputation as a stylish chronicler of gay life in London before gay liberation carried the day. This novel is set in the Thatcher era and the Tory conservatism of that period provides a constant backdrop. The central character is a bit off-putting. A young gay graduate student working on Henry James, he lives in the home of his college friend, whose father is wealthy and a prominent MP. As the middle class son of an antiques dealer, he's in a good position to appreciate the beautiful London house and its furnishings and paintings. In the family's eyes, he is there largely to look after the daughter, who is manic-depressive and occasionally goes off the rails. He goes on a family visit to the country estate of the wife's father and spends some time in their French vacation home as well. But mostly, he looks for sexual partners and shares drugs with them and the daughter. His first partner is a black young man from a poor family, and they have somewhat torrid sex in the private garden attached to the London mansion where he lives. Abruptly, we shift to his second lover, the son of a fabulously wealthy Lebanese family who was a college mate at Oxford. The son, named Wani, starts an art magazine, with the protagonist helping. Wani is completely closeted, but in the end he contracts AIDS and dies. The protagonist hears that his first boyfriend has also died of AIDS. Meanwhile, the MP's affair with his secretary becomes public, and the tabloids create a scandal, including reports of the protagonist's sexual escapades in the French vacation home. The result is that he is expelled in disgrace from the London home in scenes whose ugly homophobia brings to the surface the contempt in which he's been held all along. He has been eagerly sucking up to them all along, fantasizing that he's part of a world that completely excludes him, and the lesson seems to be that the vicious arrogance and contempt of the rich should never be doubted. The book meanders quite a lot, and for most of it I wondered where it was going. Hollinghurst's style is undoubtedly smart and brilliant, but it's also a bit mannered, and he falls back on a few mannerisms, attribute a complexity and paradoxicality of feelings to remarks and gestures that give no evidence of carrying so much. He's obviously trying to work in the Jamesian mode, but seems to lack the intensity James achieves in his characters' interactions. The end is intense enough, but rather melodramatic. The protagonist has written an essay on "The Line of Beauty," the S curve of the ogee (the name of the magazine which publishes one issue and will then collapse with the death of Wani, its funder). But it's hard for me to see this as more than an aside or add-on. I can see how Hollinghurst's witty intelligence and lively writing, along with the notion that the novel somehow tells us something about the Thatcher era as gays were beginning to claim public space just as AIDS was breaking out, bagged it the Man Booker Prize. But I found myself a big skeptic about the project, especially given that the protagonist is a rather annoying wannabe who drifts through the story with his face pressed against the plate glass that separates him from the rich and powerful. It keeps occurring to me that he should have known better and expected the humiliation that eventually befalls him.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

A classic. Should be on every must read list!

By just thinking

Reading this was, for me, like a long vacation in a gorgeous and sacred place. A perfect book with beautifully crafted sentences, descriptions of place that carry the weight of story, and then also masterful scene and character development. It's a book that anyone interested in writing (or reading like a writer) should read to learn about a beautiful line, the clear and expansive point of view of a close narrator. Let it wash over you.

And readers of all kinds should read this. Don't be put off by the novel of manners feel of it, because this is subversive, and in its subversion is its emotional depth. High school students should be reading this book for its deep reach into the world of hidden lives, the random judgments we feel entitled to make.

Important and wonderful book.

Highly recommend.

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