

A few pages into Alan Hollinghurst's novel, something remarkable happens. The gay hero, Nick Guest, is on his way to a blind date but is waylaid by his landlady's daughter, a highly strung neurotic with a history of self-harm. Smartly assuming control of the situation, Nick relieves her of the contents of the cutlery drawer, and chivalrously holds her hand until she calms down. This touching scene is unlikely to have occurred in one of Hollinghurst's previous books: first because there were few women in them; and second because nothing would be allowed to get in the way of a passage of graphic gay sex.

If Hollinghurst's debut novel, *Swimming Pool Library* was the party novel, *The Line of Beauty* deals with the inevitable hangover. Aids was never even alluded to in the earlier novel; here it ominously clouds the narrative. And those readers who admire Hollinghurst's style but weary of his sex drive (even the *Gay Times* condemned the erotic passages of his previous book as "selfish" and "dull") will be pleased to discover it is a work of social nuance rather than sexual urgency. And for once, the wider political context is embraced rather than ignored - not only is Mrs Thatcher a pervasive influence throughout, she even puts in a personal appearance.

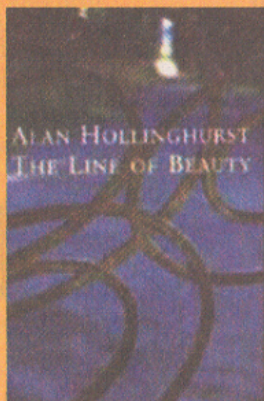
Although the book takes time to explore Hollinghurst's principal obsessions with Eros and aesthetics, its main theme is the climate of giddy success among well-to-do Tories between the electoral victories of 1983 and 1987. "The 80s are going on for ever," declares one character blithely, while a typically self-serving civil servant sums up the mood in Whitehall: "The economy's in ruins, no one's got a job, and we just don't care, it's bliss."

The Line of Beauty is a novel of eventful gatherings rather than propulsive action, and in these situations Hollinghurst proves to be one of the sharpest observers of privileged social groupings since Anthony Powell. Perhaps it is in homage to *A Dance to the Music of Time* that he calls his ambient narrator Nick, while the surname Guest alludes to his ambiguous status as a tolerated interloper - an Oxford friend of the Feddens' son, who rents a room in the family's Notting Hill home.

Despite the fact that the Feddens host private recitals in the drawing room and keep a *Guardian* above the mantelpiece, they are fundamentally philistines, for whom art is a means of social advancement. Nick, meanwhile,

Between the lines

ALFRED HICKLING



The Line of Beauty
Alan Hollinghurst

is an unattached aesthete searching for an outlet for his sensibility. At first he makes half-hearted progress on a thesis about Henry James, but later he floats into the orbit, and bedroom, of Wani Our-adi, a glamorous Lebanese heir to a supermarket fortune, with whom he formulates vague plans to found a production company.

With characteristic pretension, Nick takes the company name, Ogee, from the sinuous double curve cited by Hogarth as the "line of beauty", though Nick's favoured example of the form in nature is the point at which a man's lower back cleaves to his bottom. Not surprisingly, the venture fails to inspire much confidence in his parents, for whom "being sort-of the art adviser on a non-existent magazine was as obscure and unsatisfactory as being gay". Nor does it impress the principal underwriter, Wani's father, a spectacularly vulgar Lebanese grocer who tellingly mishears the word as "orgy".

The Ogee organisation is in fact no more than a rich boy's distraction - part production company, part publishing house, but really no more than a nebulous excuse for its directors to Hoover up vast quantities of cocaine. If Hollinghurst's previous novel, *The Spell* (1998), was the slightly embarrassing story of a last-ditch, middle-aged dalliance with ecstasy, *The Line of Beauty* is a sour celebration of the drug that kept the economy booming: "Nick loved the etiquette of the thing, the chopping with a credit card, the passing of the rolled note, the procedure courteous and dry, 'all done with money', as Wani said."

Unfortunately, the illicit glamour of these scenes wears off as quickly as the drug itself, to the point where the incessant snorting takes over from the sex as the most mechanically repetitive element of Hollinghurst's writing. And when he chances to write about drugs and sex together, the outcome is dire: "Tristao bent to snort his line, and Wani felt his cock and Nick felt his arse" is as impoverished a sentence as you will find in any novel, literary or otherwise.

But *The Line of Beauty* is a long book, and even if you skip the sex and the snorting there's plenty left to enjoy. For the first time, there is a clear sense that Hollinghurst has extended his powers to create a universe rather than a clique; and though it adopts a highly privileged perspective, the novel has sufficient breadth to evoke the full social spectrum of 1980s Britain - gay and straight, rich and poor. Ogee ogee ogee, oi oi oi.

This review was first published in The Guardian.