



## Hollinghurst, Alan (b. 1954)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Alan Hollinghurst.  
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Alan Hollinghurst has been as warmly celebrated for his elegant prose style and subtle representations of moral ambiguities, as he has been criticized by gay and straight readers alike for his frank representations of casual gay sex. In recent years he has emerged as the most important gay novelist in Great Britain since E. M. Forster.

Hollinghurst extends the narrative tradition inaugurated by Christopher Isherwood and developed most significantly by Edmund White in which a character's gayness is simply a given in the novel, forcing the reader to adjust his or her expectations accordingly. Hollinghurst neither idealizes nor melodramatizes his characters' experiences, but dares to present the emotional complexities of everyday gay life in all of their mundanity.

Hollinghurst possesses a sharp eye for social excesses and for the individual's propensity for self-delusion. His satiric impulse is tempered by a lyrical gift that renders many passages poems in prose.

In Hollinghurst's novels, an exquisite aesthetic sensibility is conjoined with what Hollinghurst himself terms an acceptance of sex as "an essential thread running through everything . . . in a person's life." Were Marcel Proust or Ronald Firbank able to impose his style upon the subject matter of Jean Genet, the result would read like Hollinghurst's fiction.

### Biography

Hollinghurst was born on May 26, 1954, into an economically comfortable, politically conservative household in Stroud, Gloucestershire. His father, a bank manager, was forty-four years old when his only child was born, and would die shortly after Hollinghurst published his second novel. His mother, who appears to have been somewhat distant emotionally, has expressed difficulty with the frank sexual content of her son's novels.

From ages seven to seventeen, Hollinghurst lived in the all-male environment of boarding schools, which he acknowledges influenced the development of his sexual imagination. In particular, as a senior boy he was prefect or "librarian" for the school's swimming facility, an experience that vested him with an appreciation of the erotic nature of changing rooms and the sensual appeal of near-naked bodies gliding through water.

Hollinghurst studied literature at Magdalen College, Oxford, where in 1980 he completed an M.Phil. thesis on the strategies adopted by writers such as Ronald Firbank, E. M. Forster, and L. P. Hartley to express covertly their sexuality in an age that demanded concealment. In the late 1970s he taught on various one-year appointments at Oxford's Magdalen, Somerville, and Corpus Christi colleges.

In 1982, within a year of moving to London to teach at University College, he was invited to join the staff of the *Times Literary Supplement*, where initially he edited the art pages, subsequently worked as poetry editor, and finally, from 1985 to 1995, served as Deputy Editor.

Initially, Hollinghurst intended to devote himself to writing poetry while working at the *Times*, and his first publication was *Confidential Chats with Boys* (1982), a collection of poems. His skill as a poet also allowed him to translate from the French Jean Racine's seventeenth-century verse drama, *Bajazet* (1991).

Hollinghurst has confessed in interviews that initially he found it difficult to sustain interest in writing a novel, having begun at least four different ones before a grant allowed him the time to concentrate on what would become *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988). The novel appeared after Hollinghurst sent it to his former Oxford house mate (and subsequent Poet Laureate) Andrew Motion, who was then working at Chatto and Windus, an important London publishing house.

The novel, which depicts a young, self-involved gay man's life in London on the eve of the AIDS epidemic, enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success. (Edmund White, for example, praised it as "the best book on gay life yet written by an English author.") A publisher's advance for his next novel fortuitously arrived in the midst of a managerial shake-up at the *Times*, allowing Hollinghurst to purchase a semi-detached house on London's Hampstead Heath and leave the *Times* to concentrate full time on writing fiction.

Hollinghurst's second novel, *The Folding Star* (1994), treats the obsession that a thirty-three-year-old English tutor develops for his seventeen-year-old Belgian charge.

*The Spell* (1998), which follows the changing relationships among a group of friends and sometime lovers, deftly adapts to gay uses the simultaneously satiric and romantic conventions of the "weekend in the country" plot.

In addition to Hollinghurst's being named one of *Granta* magazine's best young British novelists in 1993, his novels have been awarded the Somerset Maugham Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, and a Lambda Literary Award.

In 1994, although touted by London book makers as the odds-on favorite to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize, *The Folding Star* lost, possibly because of its explicit gay content and provocative flirtation with pederasty.

Ten years later, however, Hollinghurst's fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty* (2004), upset the literary world, both for its devilishly satiric look at the excesses of the Margaret Thatcher era, and for its beating the book makers' favorite to win that year's Man Booker Prize. Hollinghurst's award, which carried a cash stipend of 50,000 pounds (\$90,000 US), was widely reported to be the first gay novel to be so honored.

### ***The Swimming-Pool Library***

The summer of 1983, narrator Will Beckwith notes at the opening of *The Swimming-Pool Library*, was to be "the last summer of its kind there was ever to be. I was riding high on sex and self-esteem--it was my time, my *belle époque*--but all the while with a faint flicker of calamity, like flames around a photograph, something seen out of the corner of the eye."

It proves "the last summer" in two ways. First, in late 1983 the earliest reported AIDS cases in the United Kingdom would convince British gay men that the epidemic was not limited to the United States, putting an abrupt end to the sexually self-indulgent lifestyle enjoyed by Will and celebrated within the novel. And, second, Will's self-esteem will be damaged when the arrest of his best friend by an undercover policeman, following upon Will's encounter with an elderly gay lord who had been similarly entrapped more than thirty years before, forces him to accept his complicity in a homophobic social system to which he has been

otherwise oblivious.

If Will is twenty-five years old in 1983, then he was born in 1958, in the wake of the Wolfenden Report, which was issued in 1957 and which in 1967 effected the decriminalization of homosexual activities in the United Kingdom. Having come of age in a comparatively more liberal period, Will presumes that he and his coevals are free to pursue the objects of their desire without fear of arrest or social censure, and pities men of earlier generations for the compromises that they were forced to make.

Invited by the eighty-three year old Lord Nantwich to examine the peer's private papers with an eye to writing his biography, however, Will is increasingly surprised to learn what rich opportunities for both emotional and sexual fulfillment were available in same-sex relationships in a supposedly more closeted time, and to recognize the extent to which the men of Will's purportedly more liberated generation are trapped in a pursuit of physical gratification that leaves them unable to connect with each other emotionally.

While reading Lord Nantwich's diaries, Will is further shocked to discover that his own grandfather orchestrated the campaign against "male vice" that led to Nantwich's imprisonment. Indeed, the family fortune that frees Will to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle in the 1980s is revealed to have been the fruits of his grandfather's government-directed homophobia in the 1950s.

*The Swimming-Pool Library* emerges as a powerful meditation upon the exploitative abuses of power in which even those who seem most innocent are implicated. The diaries of Lord Nantwich and of Will's best friend, James, function within the novel like a series of Chinese boxes: the further Will reads, the more uncertain grows his complacent view of the world. Ultimately, the reader's view of Will likewise undergoes serious revision: His narcissism grows less amiable the further one reads Will's own "diary"-- that is, the novel.

Thus, whereas Lord Nantwich begins the novel seeming to be little more than a ditzzy old queen who was so closeted as a young man that he went as a Foreign Service officer to the Sudan in order to indulge his tastes for black men (who he felt were more open than whites in their expression of physical affection), he is gradually revealed to be a complicated mixture of sexual self-interest and altruism that places him at the center of an unusual social network.

Conversely, Will--who initially thinks himself to be so much more liberated sexually--is shown to have very little real feeling for either of his current partners, a black teenager named Arthur, and a white, teenaged hotel worker named Phil, both of whom he treats with a sort of sexual *noblesse oblige*. The tables of sexual imperialism are turned when Will is roughly used by Abdul, the black chef at Lord Nantwich's men's club. Abdul is revealed to be the grown-up son of Tata, the teenaged servant with whom Nantwich fell in love while in Africa some sixty years earlier, thus closing one of the many circles of relationships that structure the novel.

The greatest grief in Nantwich's life proves not to have been the loss of reputation and social position that he suffered upon arrest and imprisonment, but the death of his beloved Tata--whom he had brought to London with him upon his return from Africa--at the hands of a group of racist thugs, the supposedly superior white race proving more savage than the blacks over whom it rules. Nor, however, can Will's race and social class protect him when he is set upon and viciously beaten by a group of homophobic skinheads, much as Lord Nantwich's sense of well-being was shattered by Will's grandfather through a sadistic, albeit entirely legal, persecution decades earlier.

Will's summer experiences teach him that not only is he not superior to others, but he is not even as desirable sexually as he has always presumed himself to be. Lord Nantwich forestalls Will's obtaining a

piece of evidence that would allow Will to save his friend James from a guilty court verdict, but only at the expense of exposing another, semi-closeted, gay man. And, after reading in James's diary of how unattractively shallow and self-involved his closest friend sees him as being, Will suffers the further shock of having his boyfriend, Phil, leave him for someone whom Will has dismissed sexually, but who proves far more emotionally available and generous to the boy. Physically, even Will's golden looks have been tarnished by the blows that he took to his face during his beating by the skinheads.

*The Swimming-Pool Library* questions the extent to which the expression of sexual desire is, by nature of its need to seize another person's body for one's own gratification, an imperialistic act. Likewise, it raises the larger issue of whether any happiness or good fortune can occur without the concurrent disappointment or tragedy of others.

Shrewdly, Hollinghurst does not judge any of his characters but reveals them all to be caught in a web of desire and self-delusion, motivated by feelings so mixed that it is impossible for a person to know clearly the reason for his or her actions.

### ***The Folding Star***

Hollinghurst's second novel, *The Folding Star*, deals with the enigma of love. Thirty-three-year-old Edward Manners, seeking to break out of an unsatisfying routine of working days and spending evenings with friends at the local gay pub, moves to an unspecified Belgian city to tutor seventeen-year-old Luc Altidore, the scion of a once-wealthy family, who has been expelled from a local prep school for a much gossiped about, but never detailed, scandal involving a group of sailors.

In addition, Edward offers private lessons to the sickly son of a local museum curator, who takes a liking to the modestly attractive Englishman and hires him to help prepare a catalog of the works of Edgard Orst, a symbolist painter who died under the Nazi occupation.

As Edward's obsession with Luc grows, the tutor regularly goes out of his way in order to pass by the boy's house on the chance of running into him, spies on him during a weekend holiday at a beach resort, steals photographs of him, lifts soiled underwear and socks from Luc's laundry hamper, and searches frantically for him in a blinding rainstorm after the boy, depressed over a failed love affair, runs away from home.

Hollinghurst's psychological drama of the pursuit of an elusive and enigmatic love object by a man who is himself no longer youthful has been compared to Swann's obsession with Odette in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, von Aschenbach's shadowing of the boy Tadzio in Mann's *Death in Venice*, and Humbert Humbert's obsession with the barely post-pubescent Lolita in Nabokov's novel of that title.

A more telling analogy, however, may be to the drama of unrequited passion played out in the works of Jean Racine, whose *Bajazet* Hollinghurst has translated. In Racine, as Roland Barthes points out, the erotic is a stage on which is enacted the conflict between one person who, seeking to captivate another, irrationally hates his or her suspected rivals. Thus, in Racine's *Andromache*, Orestes loves Hermione, who only has eyes for Pyrrhus, who is obsessed with Andromache, who is devoted to the memory of her dead husband, Hector. Each, in turn, hates a "rival" who, ironically, is either indifferent to his or her would-be lover, or has been rendered unavailable through death.

Similar pursuits drive the action of Hollinghurst's novel. Obsessed with Luc, Edward unintentionally inflicts pain upon Cherif, a charming and sexually obliging Algerian day laborer whom Edward meets in a gay bar and with whom he conducts a casual affair. In addition, Edward is surprised late in his stay by fifty-year-old Paul Echevin's tactful admission of an attraction to him, ironically reversing the situation of Edward's pursuit of the teenaged Luc and making Edward the uncomfortable object of an older man's attention.

Other chains of unrequited desire abound. Edward spends a good part of the novel trying to decipher the nature of Luc's relationships with two omnipresent school friends, Sibylle and Patrick. As Patrick later explains, Sibylle, who was once in love with Patrick, can now think only of Luc. Luc, however, is love with Patrick himself, who--while having experimented sexually with Luc years before and continuing to value Luc as a friend--declares himself uninterested sexually in other men. "I felt I'd have had to be Racine to keep abreast of this convulsive trio, their switches of allegiance that seemed compacted in retrospect into little more than a day," Edward laments.

The vanity of Patrick's exposition is exposed, however, when a bartender inadvertently reveals to Edward in the last pages of the novel that Luc--apparently unbeknownst to either of his friends--had grown obsessed in recent weeks with Matt, a charismatic but conscienceless amateur pornographer with whom Edward himself has been involved both sexually and commercially, and who had tired quickly of the boy. This chain of unrequited passions is further complicated by the fact that Sibylle herself is shyly worshipped by Marcel, the sickly son of Edward's own admirer, Orst curator Paul Echevin.

Where Hollinghurst departs from Proust, Racine, et al. is in his representation of erotic debasement. Von Aschenbach may render himself ridiculous by coloring his hair and applying rouge in order to make himself more attractive to the oblivious Tadzio, but he does not pilfer the boy's soiled linen, as Edward does.

And Hollinghurst dares to make an essential part of the novel Edward's explicit fantasies in which he seduces or sexually humiliates the handsome boy. Edward's fantasies of control are undercut when a bartender's casual comment reveals that Luc is not the innocent whose sentimental and sexual education Edward has hoped to conduct, but a hormonally overcharged, emotionally unstable teenager responsive to the allure of the louche Matt, and possibly even capable of offering himself to a group of sailors.

"You could have a great romance in here," Edward's friend Edie says upon visiting his apartment. By juxtaposing Edward's passion for Luc with Orst's for Jane Byron, the model whose beauty Orst rendered so enigmatically in painting after painting, Hollinghurst calls into question not simply whether a post-Stonewall gay man is capable of Orst's seemingly ennobling love, but the truth of the nineteenth-century ideal of the "grand passion" as well. Edward is delighted by fact that Luc's name is "cul" (which is French for "asshole") spelled backwards, indicating the site of Edward's desire. But the parallel story of Orst's obsession with Jane reveals a similar anal eroticism when Paul shares with Edward an uncatalogued cache of photographs that Orst had made of a Jane-look-alike defecating.

In the novel, thus, Hollinghurst suggests that like the unwary customers whose fantasies Matt cynically and dishonestly fulfills, all lovers will themselves into believing of the beloved what the lover's fantasies require be true. But however one ennobles one's feelings for another person, love is always founded upon what the Symbolist poets celebrate as "*la nostalgie de la boue*"--that is, a fond affection for what belongs in the gutter.

*The Folding Star*--with an epigraph by Symbolist poet Henri de Régnier, its subplot concerning a fictionalized Symbolist painter, and its celebration of the damp, autumnal atmosphere favored by the Symbolist poets--functions as an extended Symbolist poem in prose. (Indeed, Luc's alleged adventure with the sailors echoes the young Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud's supposed rape by a train car of soldiers.)

The love object is invariably a symbol, Hollinghurst reveals, not an actual person. Just as the teenaged Paul was dismayed to discover that his first lover was a fascist soldier who eventually betrayed to his superiors the whereabouts of Orst, so Orst was obsessed with a woman who either mysteriously drowned or faked her disappearance to escape his obsessive attention. One loves, not the reality of a person, but the mystery that he or she represents.

The novel concludes with Edward standing on a beach staring longingly at the face of Luc on a "Missing Person" poster, much as Orst himself had been left some eighty years before to study obsessively the sea into which his beloved had disappeared.

### ***The Spell***

Edward, Luc, and the painter Edgard Orst suffer under the erotic spells cast by the respective objects of their desire. Similarly, "the last two weeks have been extraordinary," Alex confides to a friend about his affair with the significantly younger Danny midway through Hollinghurst's third novel; "I feel as if I'm under a beautiful spell." The problem with spells, his friend Hugh rejoins, "is that you don't know at the time if they're good ones or bad ones. All black magicians learn how to sugar the pill."

Hollinghurst's *The Spell* departs from the use of a central intelligence that characterizes his other works, and follows instead the intersecting lives of four gay men, aged 22 to 47. The events in each chapter are seen from one or another character's point of view. As notable as this departure in narrative technique is, however, Hugh's rejoinder places *The Spell* squarely within the thematic concerns of Hollinghurst's other work: the impossibility of understanding fully the social and emotional contexts in which one is called upon to function; the ambivalent nature of rapture (whether one allows oneself to be carried away by music, drugs, sex, or romance); and the extent to which the secrets that lie in the heart of another person make him finally unknowable to his partner, rendering sexual attraction all the more mysterious or magical a process.

Appropriating a plot device that has been a staple of British fiction and drama, and that Hollinghurst's contemporaries Terrence McNally and Peter Cameron likewise adapt to gay purposes in *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) and *The Weekend* (1994), respectively, the novel's action unfolds around multiple weekends spent by a group of gay men one summer in the Dorset countryside.

On the first weekend, Alex--an attractive yet inhibited and dismayingly earnest thirty-six-year-old Whitehall functionary--has been invited to stay with his former partner, Justin, who is now living with Robin, the older, aggressive architect for whom Justin left Alex the year before. The other house guest that weekend is Danny, Robin's twenty-two-year-old son by an early marriage, with whom Alex begins an affair following their return to London.

Two weeks later, Danny and Alex return on midsummer's eve for the bash that Robin has allowed his son to throw to celebrate his twenty-third birthday. While Danny and Alex's relationship survives the storm surrounding its revelation, Robin and Justin's relationship risks foundering upon a lie that Justin tells concerning a former affair.

Two weeks following, Robin offers the cottage to Alex and Danny after he and Justin make a trial separation and Robin initially cannot bear to stay there alone. But on the final weekend in summer, Alex and Danny return to find Justin and Robin reconciled while their own relationship slips into decline. Tiring of the attentions of a more serious, older man, Danny breaks with Alex, repeating Justin's devastating abandonment of Alex a year earlier.

On his first visit to Dorset, touring a Victorian mausoleum that Robin (who specializes in architectural restoration) has been hired to rehabilitate, Alex marvels at how the high vaulted roof is able to stand without any interior support. "It's the whole thing of stresses and strains, isn't it?" he asks, providing the governing metaphor of the novel. It is impossible to anticipate how any of the four men in the novel will bear the pressures of life, except through the supporting "stresses and strains" of their shifting relationships that become apparent through the "tensions of [each] weekend."

The narrative of the four weekends is framed by a prologue recounting the day, twenty-two years earlier,

when Robin learned while on an architectural field study trip that he was to become a father; and by an epilogue, set fourteen months after Danny's break with Alex, when Alex makes a final visit to Robin and Justin's cottage, bringing with him the partner with whom he has recently become involved. The appearance of a shard of white china containing the inscription "sempe," which Robin found at a ruined structure in the American southwest and interprets to be a fragment of the Latin *semper* ("always"), links the various scenes and provides an ambiguous comment upon the strength--or futility--of hope.

The "spell" of "sex-magic" may indeed be "uncertain," as Danny observes; the "tingles in the air around a man, and when you touched him it flowed round you too," only to dissipate as quickly as it came on. But however each member of Hollinghurst's quartet grapples with evidence of impermanence and with a dashed hope of continuity, the men seem to be invisibly sustained by the stresses and strains inherent in a network of gay relationships.

### ***The Line of Beauty***

"Sex-magic" is not the only power that enraptures gay men. Drugs are also frequently used by characters in *The Spell*, which renders variously the Navajo use of peyote, Alex and Danny tripping on Ecstasy, Robin and Lars smoking hash, and a house full of partygoers snorting lines of cocaine. Sex and drugs continue to cast their "spell" in Hollinghurst's fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty*, but here they are rivaled by the intoxication offered conservatives by power and money in the years when Margaret Thatcher dominated the British political scene.

Upon graduation from Oxford, twenty-year-old Nick Guest moves into a spare room in the London town house of a former classmate, the sexually attractive but hopelessly straight Toby Fedden, while beginning doctoral research at University College, London, on the late style of novelist Henry James.

Rachel Fedden, Toby's mother, comes from a wealthy Jewish banking family who were elevated to the peerage during the Victorian period. Gerald Fedden, Toby's father, has just been elected to Parliament as part of Margaret Thatcher's 1983 landslide Conservative Party victory, and is busily positioning himself to be named to "The Lady's" cabinet.

Although the Feddens repeatedly insist that Nick is welcome in their home as a friend of their son, they treat him alternately as a member of the family and as an unpaid hanger-on to whom they can entrust the supervision of Toby's manic depressive sister, Catherine, with whom Nick quickly forms a close bond.

Catherine's confusion of the French word *délice* (delight) with *délit* (legal misdemeanor) focuses the novel's major theme of the pleasure of transgression. *The Line of Beauty* is, in large part, Nick's "coming out" story--from his initial sexual engagement with Leo, a black man a few years older than Nick, whose personal ad in a gay paper Nick answers; through his subsequent affair with Wani Ouradi, the son of a Lebanese immigrant who built a single grocery store into a multi-million dollar chain and hopes to be elevated to a peership on the basis of his generous contributions to the Conservative Party.

Nick first enjoys sex with Leo in the gated, private park on which the Feddens' house borders, the fear of discovery intensifying the excitement of the encounter. Likewise, his relationship with Wani is built, in part, upon the sometimes dangerous lengths to which they must go to obtain and consume illegal drugs.

Nick's new-found pleasure in illicit sex and drugs parallels the Thatcherite conservatives' own delight in breaking various laws. Gerald, who loves to pose as a dedicated family man, is eventually revealed to have been conducting an affair with his assistant, making use of his best friend Badger's "fuck pad." The resulting scandal is compounded by his involvement in a shady business deal with the homophobic Sir Maurice Tipper, who has built a fortune buying companies and ruthlessly stripping them of their assets.

But whereas the conservatives are not only forgiven their business transgressions but further rewarded for them at novel's end, the gay characters are left to fight to save their lives, and the lives of their friends, from the AIDS plague that is spreading rapidly. The closing section of the novel sees Nick reeling to learn of the death of Leo, his first lover; supporting Wani in what are clearly his last days; and scheduled to take his own HIV-test.

Describing Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, from which Nick has completed a film script that he hopes will be produced by one of Wani's companies, Nick acknowledges that "it's probably a very bleak book, even though it's essentially a comedy." The same may be said of Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*.

On the one hand, the novel is built on a series of social set pieces--Toby's coming-of-age birthday party attended by over one hundred guests, a dinner for various Members of Parliament and political pundits, the Feddens' silver wedding anniversary party, which is attended by Prime Minister Thatcher, a concert recital by an emigre musician at which few listen to the music, a weekend in the country with the socially maladroit Tippers--that brilliantly satirize the cold-hearted arrogance and aesthetic vulgarity of the wealthy and politically powerful as they plot to reduce "wasteful" social service programs while swilling champagne and plotting their next corporate take-over.

On the other, the novel traces Nick's loss of innocence as he comes gradually to understand that there is no place in the inner circles of power for a gay aesthete from the middle class, no matter how much he compromises himself in his sometimes desperate effort to fit in. As much a victim of his own self-delusions as of the cold hearted homophobia and class consciousness of the Feddens and their ilk, Nick is a Jamesian hero for the new millennium.

A film version, adapted by Andrew Davies and directed by Saul Dibb, was released in 2006.

## Conclusion

Hollinghurst acknowledges the deliberate mysteriousness of his titles. *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for example, makes no immediate sense to anyone who was not educated at a prep school where senior boys who wield authority over younger ones are known as "librarians." Yet the title serves as a metaphysical conceit, boldly yoking together spaces variously athletic and intellectual that are traditionally unrelated in order provocatively to suggest that a place of physical exercise and sexual cruising might function as the occasion for academic research or the general pursuit of knowledge.

Likewise, *The Folding Star* derives from a pastoral image in Milton's *Comus*, the appearance of the evening star signaling to the shepherd that it is time to lead his flock from the field safely home to the fold. The allusion ironically invests Edward Manners with the functions of Milton's Attendant Spirit, who is charged with guiding lost youth through the dark forest of experience, particularly sexual experience.

And *The Line of Beauty* subversively makes use of a technical term in eighteenth-century aesthetics and architectural design to describe the curving dip in a man's lower back before it flares out again in the fullness of the buttocks, thus highlighting the novel's pronounced anal eroticism. "Line" also suggests Nick and Wani's growing reliance upon cocaine to produce a feeling of euphoria during tedious social events, and as a stimulus during their sexual three-ways with the partners they bring home.

Hollinghurst's titles admit of multiple, rich, yet initially puzzling constructions whose full and oftentimes surprising significance emerges only as each novel's plot unfolds. In much the same way, the reader's knowledge of Hollinghurst's principal characters, and even a protagonist's knowledge of himself, invariably proves incomplete or misguided for the greater part of the novel. Hollinghurst's characters deepen as



enigmas as their contradictions emerge and ambiguities heighten--often, ironically, as they go about their daily routines, performing perfectly mundane tasks.

Readers may be unsettled by the lack of moral absolutes in Hollinghurst's works. Desire proves to be a motivating force that renders one alternately caring and selfish, mysterious and pedestrian. For example, is Matt a charismatic sexual adventurer besieged by a naively enamored Luc, or a cynical opportunist who went about seducing the boy after Edward foolishly enlisted Matt's help spying on Luc and his friends? Is he a farcically inept pornographer guilty only of attempting to make money the easiest way that he can, or is he somehow responsible for the death of a local hustler, whose body was found floating in a canal, and whom Edward recognizes by his tattoo as one of the faceless actors in one of Matt's cheap films? Hollinghurst leaves the reader to ponder the enigma of Matt, who is as often repellent as he is alluring.

Hollinghurst's novels prove him to be a poet of moral ambiguity, who can be as archly witty as Ronald Firbank and Vladimir Nabokov, and as psychologically astute as Henry James and Marcel Proust.

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