

The Line of Beauty

Director: Saul Dibb. Producer: Kate Lewis. Teleplay: Andrew Davies (from the novel by Alan Hollinghurst). Cinematography: David Odd. Editor: Tania Reddin. Music: Martin Phipps. © 2006 BBC Television. U.S. distribution: BBC Warner (DVD).

“They’ve really taken you in, haven’t they?” Mrs. Guest (Jessica Turner) asks her son Nick (Dan Stevens). She refers to the Feddens, a wealthy London family with whom Nick has taken up residence in 1983 at the start of *The Line of Beauty*, as something between lodger, house guest, and family friend. “Yes, I suppose they have,” Nick replies. The play on words catches the crux with excruciating elegance. Is Nick the dupe of this family and culture? What does he want from them? The father, Gerald (Tim McInnerny), is a Tory junior minister, so Nick’s entrée to their house is in a way his implication in the politics of the day; the mother, Rachel (Alice Krige), is possessed of independent wealth and to Nick seems to be an exemplar of gracious living; and he has an unspoken, unrequited crush on the son of the house, Toby (Oliver Coleman), sturdy and straight, his friend from student days in Oxford. His key relationship—even more in the serial than the book—is with Catherine (Hayley Atwell), the clever, manic, and in every way *unconservative* daughter, the person who makes sure the story ends in tabloid revelation and political scandal. Alan Hollinghurst’s novel and now its three-part BBC TV adaptation don’t exactly look back in anger, but they return to the 1980s in a disillusioned and at times disgusted spirit. It was the worst of times, even if it seemed to Nick to be the best of times—that seems to be the position, despite the side of costume drama that encourages fondly nostalgic recall.

The adaptation is within its means remarkably faithful, extremely resourceful, tactful in compressing the 500-page book into three TV hours, and consis-

tently lively, as you would expect from the screenwriter Andrew Davies, who has become the regular first choice for literary adaptations on British television. This project is in a way closer to his home territory than, say, the armfuls of nineteenth-century novels on his extensive CV, most recently *Bleak House* (2005), most famously *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). The image of Colin Firth as a freshly bathed Mr. Darcy in wet dress shirt became—partly with the help of Bridget Jones—a kind of icon of heritage sexiness, and the clincher that Davies could make costume drama eye-catchingly raunchy. He added an upbeat queer credential with his 2002 adaptation of Sarah Waters’s Victorian-period lesbian romp *Tipping the Velvet* (maybe *too* upbeat to suit Hollinghurst’s often doleful sense of sexual compulsion). Moreover, Davies’s own best work as an original screenwriter was probably *House of Cards* (1990), a pungent satire on ambition and betrayal in the higher echelons of the 1980s Tory world—a world which also supplies much of the setting of *The Line of Beauty*. The main previous credit of the director, Saul Dibb, is *Bullet Boy* (2004), a story of teenage gangs set in east London, and it is a sign of his versatility as a director that he brings a sharp observation and sense of nuance to such different milieus.

The book is partly a seduction by place, like *Brideshead Revisited* or *Howards End*, the romantically conceived home of a certain ideal of affluent culture. Each of the three TV episodes starts and ends in this place. The Feddens’ house in its tree-lined West London square is an even more luxurious picture of London wealth than *Notting Hill* (1999), though less fantastical than that film, since the Feddens are actually meant to be very rich, whereas the characters in *Notting Hill* were gifted with real estate well beyond their means in the interests of elegant local color. It is greeted with a “Wow” by Nick in the serial’s first word (compare the more measured launch of the novel: “Peter Crowther’s



A seduction by place



Elena (left), Nick and Catherine

book on the election was already in the shops"). The viewer, however, is not required to join with Nick in being wowed. The direction attends more to his response than to sumptuous framings of the house and furniture: we are not in a Merchant–Ivory setting here, indeed the danger is probably the opposite one that we can't enough share Nick's delight in the choice architectures to feel for his sense of them.

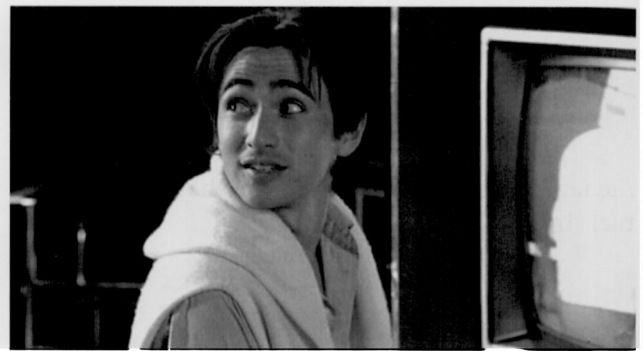
The house has its keeper, Elena (Carmen de Sautoy). Characterized in the book by a "look of unhappy subjection that no one but Nick ever noticed" (122),¹ she is instead in the TV version steely and aristocratic from the start, with a threatening hint that she is the Mrs. Danvers in this beguiling Manderley. Naive Nick at first mistakes her for Mrs. Fedden and bumbles ingratiatingly about the excellence of the Guardi in the drawing room. In *Hollingshurst* he persists "in face of the woman's smiling deference and heavily accented murmurings" (23), but there is none of this courtesy in the serial: she lets him run embarrassingly on. When in a later scene he thanks her at dinner, she gives him a subtle look suggesting that actually he's not high-class enough to be thanking her. Like her, but in the end more dispensably, he is effectively part of the senior household staff.

The mistaken identity incident returns at the end of the last episode, with Elena recalling it and delivering a kind of *coup de grâce*; she saw from the first, she said, that Nick was "*sciocco* . . . no good." In the serial this scene has been moved backwards, so that it comes *after* the climactic showdown in the book, in which a furious Gerald turns violently on Nick and orders him out of the house (Gerald's financial and sexual dodgy dealings have at this point come out in the papers). He looks really shocked by her summary rebuff, the last of his rejections chez Fedden. Her jump from his social faux pas to the larger condemnation is wildly unfair, yet it cruelly picks up in its grain of truth, and in the way

it makes sense to Elena, on Nick's insecurity and his compromised life. Elena here becomes the ultimate guardian of the house, decisively closing ranks against the scapegoat intruder: her verdict is as it were ratified by a shot in the very last scene, in which we see Nick's departure from the point of view of Gerald and Rachel, standing at their upstairs window, the married couple reclaiming their domestic space, recuperating.

But there's a possibility that he's well out of it, and this maybe is why the serial endows Elena with that touch of the Gothic (a darkly dressed figure filmed in shadowing corridors). We might feel that the shock of the ending is a blessing in disguise, traumatic but necessary if Nick is to escape into a wider and less sleazy world. The end of the TV series keeps a well-judged silence about his expulsion into the London panorama of the final shot. It may be a new life, but he might be too damaged to live it, and there are dark symbolic hints that he has contracted HIV. The absence of a flashback structure (in book or film) keeps the possibilities open about the future ushered in by this loss. The last, visually distinctive shot is an aerial view of London's westbound roadways towards nightfall, not exactly a landscape either of loss or of hope, except that it gathers Nick into a rather somber sketch of solidarity with other lives in the metropolis. The book ends quite differently, with Nick holding on through all his losses to his sense of "beauty" (its final word).

Three out of *Hollingshurst's* four novels end with fairly horrible comeuppances for their protagonists, worse than they deserve, the reader tends to feel, but also somehow grimly condign. *The Line of Beauty* (2004) resembles *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) in dealing a spectacularly punitive shock to its main character, who is wealthier, brasher, and more of a hedonist in the earlier book, but similarly possessed of a snooty cultural style and a sexual taste for black men (which runs up against English racism as well as English homo-



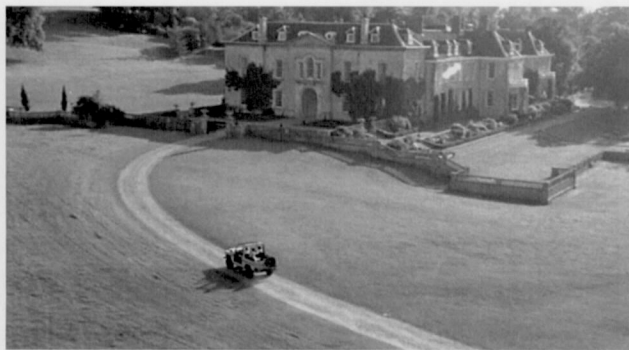
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Nick's lovers: Leo (left) and Wani

phobia). The endings shock the heroes and maybe the readers too into a realization that in the 1980s there was a war going on in the politics of homosexuality, with the governing classes as the villains. But the idea that the 1980s were rife with greed, selfishness, and bigotry is in 2007 a familiar and comfortable piece of cultural memory, so that the indictments of *The Line of Beauty* may not have quite the charge they need dramatically (although American viewers, armed with different preconceptions, may find them more powerful). The currency of English wealthy idylls—and of the English Establishment more generally—is more tarnished than it was in the days of the TV *Brideshead* of 1981. When we see big houses now, we want to know where the money came from; when we see affairs of state, the first impulse is to look for evidence of spin.

It is a problem in the serial and perhaps the book that we don't enough discern why Nick is so captivated by the Feddens' world, no matter how fine the homes and gardens. Why is he so drawn to them? This remains rather mysterious. He's not a gold-digger, it seems, and not much moved by ambition. The TV series relies a lot here on the subtlety and intelligence of Dan Stevens's performance as Nick, but the story on screen has him as a mainly passive figure, observing and reacting. In the

book he is (in Henry James's term) the central consciousness, and his wit and liveliness are the medium of the whole story: if his motivations remain obscure, still we have much more to go on. In particular, his love of art and culture is a warmer thing in the book, whereas on screen it tends to dwindle into snobbery and connoisseurship. Perhaps in response to this obscurity about the appeal the Feddens exert over him, Andrew Davies has made the family more likeable. Rachel, especially, played by Alice Krige, becomes much more warmly attached to Nick (she is also I think implausibly younger than John Standing, who plays her on-screen brother, Lord Kessler). In the serial she no longer pronounces judgment "in one of her sudden hard formulations" on the Tory minister who was caught cottaging: "it's was vulgar and unsafe" (25), she says, a conclusively dismissing phrase which resonates through the book, and gets a darker twist in the HIV context of safe and unsafe sexual practices. Davies wants the family to be more attractively fleshed out and writes in, for instance, a good lively kitchen scene in which we are first introduced to them and they to Nick. He emphasizes, a little blatantly at times, the surrogate family idea: "I suppose I sort of fell in love with the whole family," Nick tells Catherine in a scene added for



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Far-flung locations: the Feddens' *manoir* (left) and Leo's family home in Stoke Newington

the adaptation. Still, it stops well short of showing them as ideal compensating family. Any decent therapist would want to know more about why Catherine cuts her arms, for instance. The adaptation gives Nick a cogent extra line in the row with Gerald, where he accuses the family of “leaving Catherine in the hands of a virtual stranger.”

The main thing that’s only latent in the story is the clash between Nick’s social tastes and his sexual ones. Like Will in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, he is especially drawn to black men, and ones much less educated than himself. His sexual desires are structured across class and background in ways that are likely to lead to large sociopolitical conflicts. *The Line of Beauty* minimizes these. Of Nick’s two lovers, the first, Leo (Don Gilet), ends his affair with Nick at the end of the first section of the book (and episode of the serial), and is only very briefly tested socially by meetings with Nick’s Tory milieu; and the second, Wani (Alex Wyndham), whose wealthy business-class family comes from Lebanon, is part of an international Oxonian upper class. In terms of its racial dynamics, *The Line of Beauty* is set in the same period as *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), in which there was a real danger and a liberating comic frisson to the unlikely brew of Thatcherite business and a mixed-race gay love affair. But it was written and has now been filmed in the time of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (book 2000, TV serial 2002), in which the multiculturalism of contemporary London is much more of a political given and a comical opportunity. The scene where Nick visits Leo’s family stands somewhere between the two: the mother (Floella Benjamin) is strict and evangelical, grimly so for Leo and his lesbian sister (Nikki Amuka-Bird), but comes across on screen as comical and old-fashioned. It’s a sign of changed times that a West Indian character can be seen with this irony, as the bearer of repressive bygone codes, even in an uncompromisingly anti-racist story.

Although it has been hailed as a chronicle of the 1980s, *The Line of Beauty* seldom goes far from its coterie setting (any more than its TV and book precursor *Brideshead Revisited* did, except in its prologue): the scene with Leo’s mother in far-flung Stoke Newington is an exception. Compare the panorama of urban energies and social change in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Spell* (1999) and it is apparent that Hollinghurst is working on a different canvas here (a wider one in terms of gender, but narrower in class). In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for instance, the male fragrance of choice was Trouble for Men, combining sexy allure (“You’re trouble”) with a promise of real troubles ahead (disease and persecution); here in *The*

Line of Beauty it’s Je Promets, looking to issues of trust in more intimate contexts. The real subject is the tension between two kinds of conservative culture, high and low, which joined forces, up to a point, in the 1980s: a traditional one, landed, affluent, Oxbridge-educated, and

a newer, Thatcherite one, less tactful and humane, more impatient and violent for change. The latter gets less space in the story—the world we see isn’t much shaken up. The two characters who most represent life outside traditional conservatism are Jasper (Joseph Morgan), an estate agent, and Russell (Justin Salinger), a photographer for *The Face*. Both are at different points boyfriends of Catherine’s boyfriends, and they are among the flimsiest characters in the story, neither of them rising much above their status as signs of the times. Andrew Davies has added a scene in which Nick visits Catherine in Russell’s council flat in Brixton, rather heavy-handedly shown as terra incognita to Nick, and the flat is melodramatically sordid and festooned with arty erotica. Though the scene is clumsy, it does recognize how little the story gets out and about into the streets of London, how little of the color and trashiness and crazy mixture of a changing London it represents.

Instead we are in a world familiar from a previous history of screen costume drama including versions of Forster, Woolf, and Wharton, fantasies of an opulent past, often organized round a conflict between love and conformity. The titles at the beginning, in flowing cursive script, tell us that the setting is as much Georgian as Thatcherite. So too does the elegiac theme music, which even at times accompanies the sex scenes and adds its notes of foreboding hindsight. (The scenes of gay sex are filmed in a lively and positive spirit which may still be radical in mainstream TV drama: mostly they are al fresco, and they seem to be more comfortable, hygienic and reciprocally satisfying than you might think likely, but then screen sex has never been a realist mode.) Gerald is a squirearchical Tory, in the eighteenth-century manner, with plenty of energy and effrontery. His brother-in-law Lord Kessler is a descendant of the new Jewish aristocracy of Victorian England as depicted in the novels of Trollope (“he’s very good on money,” Lord Kessler tells Nick, in a deliciously

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subtle scene on both page and screen). These period dramas (none more so than the Merchant–Ivory ones) tend to buy into a Whig version of history: the audience can easily see through the stuffy past with its strict codes, crying out for the kind of liberating reform that the attractive young leads are striving for. The past is another country; they did things stupidly there because they were all repressed.

Is *The Line of Beauty* queer or gay? It comes from the time when “queer” was coming into being as a combative and dissident idea of sexual politics. But among its TV precedents *Queer as Folk* (1999) was much queerer, and among literary ones so was Hollinghurst’s first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, also set in 1983. In *The Line of Beauty* Nick aspires to find a place for accepted gayness in the conservative world he’s so drawn to. He wants to find a place on the boat, not to rock it. The story shocks him out of this hope, most violently through the full-on homophobia he meets in the governing caste, who turn on him not for his failures of candor and courage which the book Jamesianly ponders, but for the mere and scandalous fact of his being gay. The Feddens’ homophobia comes out under pressure and two of the crucial powerbrokers in the book are the most murderously anti-gay, the asset-stripping Sir Maurice Tipper (Kenneth Cranham), “a cold-blooded thug” (447), and the Tory MP Barry Groom (Christopher Fairbank)—like the Tory Home Secretary Norman Tebbit he is known as “a bit of a Rottweiler,” the talismanic dog of the decade. Nobody sympathizes with Nick because his two lovers both get AIDS: instead he is thought contaminated, and in an ominous scene at the end Nick expects that his own HIV test will this time prove positive.

The early moments of the AIDS panic, with press and government colluding in homophobic hatred, come over strongly on screen and page, especially in the restaurant scene where waiters and diners convey their

wish that the stricken Wani should just disappear. “Silence = Death” was an activist watchword of the 1980s, but Nick is given to silences and is no kind of activist, for all that he has a political awareness and an essential decency. The advent of AIDS, like the outbreaks of racism, cuts through the moral ambivalences of the story, and turns it unequivocally angry and political.

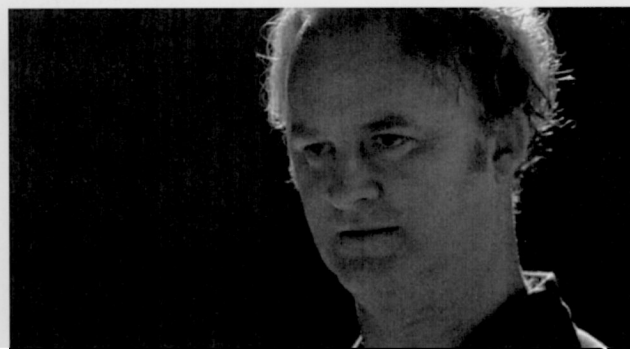
The really queer figure in the story is the heterosexual Catherine, who like Nick has a drug habit and unsuitable boyfriends. But unlike Nick she is scandalously outspoken, and (in ways the serial underlines) she really hates and assaults the conservative culture prevailing around her. But she’s mentally disturbed, her childlike clarity also a deficiency of balance. Drama tends to like figures who blow the gaff, and her candor is a delight amid the secrets and half-secrets of the Feddens’ family life and political contacts; but she is also a self-harming manic depressive, and her full-on attack on her father comes when she is unbalanced by lithium, so that the story gives you a really oppositional politics only in the context of mental illness.

Alan Hollinghurst wrote in *The Guardian* (13 May 2006), “The film of *The Line of Beauty* has a very good-looking cast, more so than the book, but no one will object to that,” which just about stops short of objecting but murmurs a bit. “I have a feeling for, say, Nick’s size (about 5ft 6),” he went on, “and I know that he has curly blond hair and blue eyes, but I’ve no idea what his nose or his hands are like.” The book is explicit about Nick’s not being tall and at times makes that fact expressive of his social disadvantage. Stevens is six foot tall and has wavy dark hair and classical good looks which the many trailers on British TV made the most of: but thereby he became the embodiment of beauty, not the moth drawn to its flame. Although Dan Stevens is exceptionally good, I can’t get past the feeling that he’s miscast, mainly because his looks so much suggest the glam-



Nick dancing with Mrs. Thatcher, and Gerald in his constituency

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Implication and menace

orous center of attention and not the aspirant courtier on the dispensable edge of things. He seems also culturally to be securely part of the Fedden world, every inch the mannerly public schoolboy, for all that the serial adds a line about his going to the local comprehensive school.

When I first saw the serial, I admired it in many ways but found it disappointing. The adaptation problem is that you sometimes think it has been done very well, but what in the end was the point? Its very fidelity to the book made it seem like an optional market-driven extra (like another new Andrew Davies adaptation, of *Brideshead Revisited*, recently announced for 2008). But of course readers of the book, and especially keen fans, are only a small part of the target audience. Seeing it a second time, I was more impressed by its nuance, throughout, and by the intensity in the final episode. The casting is excellent (with the important proviso about Nick), the acting unusually subtle and rich. The best scenes of the book translate into excellent set pieces on TV, notably the party where a coke-fueled Nick dances with Mrs. Thatcher. Where I had thought, for instance, that there would be no screen equivalent to the telling moment when Nick, looking back at a photo of himself dancing with Mrs. Thatcher, sees “a look of caution he hadn’t been aware of at the time” (407) in fact there is, through the shooting of the dance sequence to indicate his point of view and to suggest hers as not quite the same. As in John Mortimer’s screenplay of *Brideshead Revisited* and Ismail Merchant’s of *A Room with a View* (1985), Andrew Davies has had the astuteness and confidence to follow Hollinghurst’s brilliant dialogue very closely. He has whittled it down, but seldom adds to it—one notable exception being a virtuoso short scene in which Gerald enlists Nick’s collusion in covering up the affair he is having with his secretary:

GERALD: Appreciate your tact.

NICK: Well, Rachel . . .

GERALD: Well, absolutely. Good man.

Only nine words, but a wealth of implication.

As a fervent admirer of the book and only a lukewarm one of the TV series, I suppose I have to end with my reservations. A major problem is that in spite of the high quality of the cast there are very few characters here you really want to spend time with—in contrast, say, with *Brideshead Revisited*. This matters much more on screen than on the page because of the obvious and crucial difference in the medium: the characters are here the object of our attention instead of Hollinghurst’s prose, in which every sentence is a nuanced pleasure. Nick is the central consciousness of the book, and the central figure in the drama; but in the rather passive figure we see on screen there is no equivalent to the nervous energy and lively witty discriminations of the prose which is his literary medium.

NOTE

1. Parenthetical references are to Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004)

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ABSTRACT The BBC TV adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst’s Booker Prize-winning 2004 novel of Aids and Thatcherism was undertaken by Andrew Davies, best known for his version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Directed by Saul Dibb, *The Line of Beauty*’s depiction of 1980s London is appropriate to both to its source and costume-drama conventions.

KEYWORDS Alan Hollinghurst, Andrew Davies, adaptation, gay literature, Aids