

The Line of Beauty

Alan Hollinghurst

Picador, £7.99

Lines of cocaine; lines of curvature where men's backs meet buttocks; lines of prose that, though not so beautiful in cadence as repute suggests, roll the reader comfortably up in old swathes of novelistic textures – these Booker-winning lines from 2004 are all redelivered with the recent BBC adaptation and this tie-in. While certain of Hollinghurst's themes are modern (AIDS, conspicuous consumption), we are on traditional character ground with young naïf, Nick Guest, a gay Oxford graduate besotted with straight friend, Toby Fedden, at whose family home in Notting Hill he is lodging. Thatcher's mid-80s Britain struts and trumpets around them, especially in the form of Toby's Tory MP father, Gerald. Nick's experiential lessons, acquired amid a privileged milieu enlivened out of seemingly innate shallowness by Hollinghurst's satire, progress towards a powerful ending of ambivalent aubade-like mood. This is how to write a discursive novel about period and politics: somewhat obliquely, from the inside out, avoiding the easy moralising of distance and retrospective judgment.

John Kenny