

The Line of Beauty Study Guide

The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst

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Plot Summary

The early 1980s were a time of great change socially and politically. People were carefree and enjoyed excessive lifestyles. Casual sex and recreational drug use were prevalent. The wealthy class hosted extravagant parties with no expenses spared.

The political climate was also changing, with the election of Margaret Thatcher and her new regime. The early 1980s were a time of great indulgence and the mid-1980s were the peak of this lifestyle. As the 1980s came to a close, the discovery of AIDS closed the door on sexual freedom and self-indulgence. Nick Guest, The Feddens' and politics as a whole experience this rise and fall, and their lives parallel this curve during the 1980s.

Nick Guest, aged twenty, is a recent graduate of Oxford. After graduating, Nick moves into Kensington Park Gardens, the home of Oxford classmate Toby Feddens. Toby lives with his father Gerald, his mother Rachel and his manic-depressive sister Catherine in Notting Hill, a wealthy area of London. The year is 1983, a politically charged yet socially innocent time in London. It is a time of opulence and indulgence, before AIDS. The Conservative Tories have just elected Margaret Thatcher into office. Gerald Feddens is a newly elected conservative Member of Parliament for Barwick, where Nick was raised. It is during this time that Nick Guest is coming of age.

Nick is a homosexual who has only been open about his sexuality since his final year at Oxford. Nick has never had a sexual relationship, except in his mind. Nick fantasizes about Toby but would never act upon his longings. Nick has his first real sexual encounter with Leo, whom he meets through a personal ad. Catherine encourages this blind date, but Nick must postpone the initial meeting because Catherine has a mental "episode" and Nick must stay with her. Catherine is very unstable and unpredictable, and Nick knows that Gerald and Rachel depend on him to look after her. Nick never tells Gerald and Rachel about this particular instance of Catherine cutting herself, and this act of loyalty towards Catherine will come back to haunt him.

Nick is no longer with Leo as the story leaps to 1986, and he is now a sexually experienced, confident young man. Nick finally accepts his homosexuality, but he realizes that a large part of society still does not. Nick indulges in cocaine and casual sex. He is very impressed by the lavish lifestyle that he leads by being a member of the Feddens' extended family. Nick attends grand parties among wealthy business people and politicians. He is intelligent enough to handle himself, but he never really belongs. It is at Toby's twenty-first birthday celebration that Nick runs into an old Oxford classmate named Antoine "Wani" Ouradi.

Wani is a close friend of Toby's, whom Nick has fantasized about since college. Although Wani is engaged to Martine, he begins an affair with Nick. Nick is in love with Wani, but Wani insists that the relationship be kept a secret from everyone. Nick respects his wishes until Catherine finds incriminating evidence while on holiday in France, at which time Nick confides in her.



Gerald Feddens is named in a financial misdealing with Maurice Tipper, and the news hits the media. This is during the new election, and the Tories are expecting another landslide, although they narrowly win. Catherine is a loose cannon, and she simultaneously reveals Nick's affair with Wani and her own father's affair with his secretary. Gerald and Rachel blame Nick for not controlling Catherine, and Toby is devastated that his friend has been keeping his relationship with Wani a secret from him. Nick has become the scapegoat.

In the end of the novel, Nick is moving out of the Feddens house. He has taken a test for AIDS, a disease that has already claimed Leo and Wani. Nick is already aware of his fate.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The early 1980s were a time of great change socially and politically. People were carefree and enjoyed excessive lifestyles. Casual sex and recreational drug use were prevalent. The wealthy class hosted extravagant parties with no expenses spared.

The political climate was also changing, with the election of Margaret Thatcher and her new regime. The early 1980s were a time of great indulgence and the mid-1980s were the peak of this lifestyle. As the 1980s came to a close, the discovery of AIDS closed the door on sexual freedom and self-indulgence. Nick Guest, The Feddens' and politics as a whole experience this rise and fall, and their lives parallel this curve during the 1980s.

Nick Guest is walking by a bookstore that is showcasing a brand new book about the recent elections. It is 1983, and there is a new Tory Prime Minister. Nick is pleased to recognize the familiar face of Gerald Feddens in the book. Gerald is a new conservative Member of Parliament representing Barwick, Nick's hometown. Gerald is also Nick's new landlord.

Nick Guest is a twenty-year-old recent Oxford graduate. He is a friend of Toby Feddens, an Oxford classmate. He has moved into Kensington Park Gardens in Notting Hill, a wealthy London suburb. Nick lives here with Gerald and Rachel Feddens, Toby's parents, and Catherine, Toby's manic-depressive sister. Nick is sexually inexperienced and has a blind date with Leo, whom he met through a personal ad. As Nick prepares for his date, Catherine has a breakdown, tries cutting herself and cannot be left alone. Nick calls and cancels with Leo, and he walks through the gardens with Catherine.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Nick is alone at Kensington Park Gardens while the Feddens are on holiday at their home in France. Nick enjoys looking around the Feddens' home while they are gone and pictures himself as lord of the manor. He gets great pleasure from the opulent furnishings and explores every room.

During Catherine's mental episode, Nick brings her to the drawing room to play some music. When Catherine settles, Nick goes with her to his favorite place, the communal gardens, and they take in the neighborhood sounds.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The Gerald and Rachel Feddens return from France, and Gerald distributes gifts. He gives Nick a bottle of "Je Promets" cologne. Nick plans to discuss Catherine's mental episode with Gerald and Rachel, but in waiting for the right time, he decides to keep it between him and Catherine.

Nick goes on his date with Leo, which is his first date with a man. He meets Leo at a bar, where Nick drinks alcohol while Leo only has Coke. Later, Nick loses his virginity in the gardens of the Feddens' estate. After their romp, they meet Geoffrey Titchfield, the neighbor Nick heard when helping Catherine after her breakdown.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Nick is attentive to the Feddens, unlike their own children. He enjoys and respects Gerald and admires Rachel. Nick notices that all of the Feddens' family members have nicknames, but he does not. This is another reminder that he is not one of them.

Nick reflects on the first time that he met Elena, the housekeeper. He mistakenly thought she was Rachel. Toby brings up the news of Hector Maltby, a junior foreign minister who was forced to resign after being caught in a compromising position in his Jaguar with a rent boy. Rachel believes the news, and Gerald tries to make light of it.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Nick, Rachel, Gerald and Catherine head to Hawkeswood, the home of Lord Kessler, who is Rachel's wealthy brother, for Toby's twenty-first birthday. Various ministers and dignitaries are invited, among other wealthy people. Lord Kessler welcomes them and gives Nick the grand tour, including the extensive library.

Nick runs into former classmates Paul "Polly" Tompkins and Antoine "Wani" Ouradi. Nick has always fantasized about Wani. Nick learns that Wani is engaged and meets his fiancée Martine. Nick also has his eye on an attractive waiter named Tristao, whom he plans a rendezvous with, but the meeting never happens. Gerald makes a witty speech for Toby, which he follows with his own. Nick drinks too much and ends up in Toby's bedroom with Toby and other friends drinking and smoking pot.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The government theme continues with many Members of Parliament and the Home Secretary in attendance at Toby's birthday party. Nick must wear his great uncle Archie's dinner jacket, which he douses with "Je Promets" to disguise the smell of old age. He wears the jacket to fit in with the wealthy guests.

Lord Kessler questions Nick about his Oxford education and his plans for the future. Nick admits that he graduated with honors from Oxford, and Toby did not. Nick discloses that his thesis is on style, like that of Henry James. Lord Kessler shows Nick a photo album with a picture of Henry James at Hawkeswood many years ago.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Nick and Gerald engage in a lively exchange about Richard Strauss and other symphonic material being critiqued on the radio. Leo stops by to see Nick, and together they walk to see Pete, Leo's ex-boyfriend, at his antique shop. It is obvious that Pete is ill, but no reason is disclosed. The three make small talk, while Nick absorbs every word between Pete and Leo to determine their current relationship. While lusting after Leo the entire time, Nick realizes that the relationship between Nick and Pete is platonic. Leo and Nick run into Toby and Sophie on the street at a market. Leo is very impressed to meet Sophie and has actually seen one of her films.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Nick finds the meeting with Pete and Leo painful. His relationship with Leo is his first, and he is jealous. It is ironic that Pete has his own antique shop, as did Nick's father. Pete jokes to Nick that since he is dating Leo, he had better have his checkbook. Nick is well educated and intelligent, and while he has great knowledge of the finer things in life, he is really no better off financially than Leo.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Gerald enters from a tennis match with Badger Brogan. They banter about who actually won, with Gerald twisting rules to prove himself the victor. The Feddens are having a dinner party, and Nick is the thirteenth guest when Catherine bows out. Toby and Sophie attend, and there are two Members of Parliament, Barry Groom and John Timms, with their wives. During dinner they discuss politics, while Nick charmingly makes small talk and observes the room. Elena, the housekeeper, serves venison that Gerald hunted at Hawkeswood. Leo phones during the evening, and Rachel tells Nick that Leo is welcome anytime. Brentford, the min-cab driver with whom Catherine has been social, brings an upset Catherine home. Everyone goes to the door as Barry starts yelling at Brentford. Nick yells at Barry to "shut up," which Catherine seconds. Nick immediately apologizes to Barry, who only responds with a sly grin.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Nick pays Rachel his rent money before dinner. It is always uncomfortable for him because it reinforces to him that he is not a member of the family. This feeling of not belonging is also reinforced when Catherine backs out of the dinner party, leaving Nick the unlucky thirteenth guest. Nick is embarrassed when Leo phones and cannot gauge Gerald's reaction, although Rachel politely tells Nick to take the call in the study. Catherine is going to a party with Russell, and Nick fantasizes about attending a beer and smoke-filled party with Leo. In the next moment, Nick learns that Toby is invited to a party in a castle, and he is jealous that he is not.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Nick meets Leo after work, and Nick is impressed at seeing Leo in a business suit. They go to Leo's home, where he lives with his mother and sister. Leo warns Nick that his family is very religious. Mrs. Charles, Rosemary, Nick and Leo eat dinner, and Mrs. Charles questions Nick about his education, teases him about being so young and makes him promise to meet the Prime Minister. After dinner, Nick and Leo go to see *Scarface*, but they cannot sit together because the movie is so crowded. The Feddens are out on constituency business in Barwick, so Nick invites Leo to Kensington Park Gardens, where they end up in Nick's bed.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Nick notices that the Charles family eats dinner promptly at 5:45 every night. Nick realizes that this is a class distinction, as the Feddens eat dinner at least three hours later. Leo accepts a whisky at the Feddens' home, although he does not drink. Nick shows Leo around the Feddens' home and is pleasantly surprised when Leo sits down to the piano and plays rather well.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Nick brings Wani to a men-only bathhouse, where men are laying around a pond and jetty naked. There is an old wooden raft in the middle of the pond where men socialize. They meet a man named Rick, who Wani wants to invite home for a threesome. Nick follows Rick to the toilet and asks him over, but he has Rick tell Wani that he has a girlfriend.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Nick is disappointed that it is early in the season for the bathhouse because he wants Wani to have fun. Nick recalls the Oxford days when he lusted after Wani, and some of the snobbier students would make fun of Wani for being a Lebanese grocer's son. Nick is jealous that Wani wants to invite Ricky over, but he does it because he loves Wani. Nick is cutting lines of cocaine on the glass table, and he looks down and sees a picture of Wani and Martine in a magazine.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Wani has a house on Abington Road, which houses the *Ogee* office. Wani has staffed the office with Howard and Simon, described as good friends, and Melanie. Nick thought of the name *Ogee* for their new magazine as he lay in Wani's canopy bed after sex. Wani gives Nick a check for five thousand pounds because he says that he is tired of paying for him all of the time, but he tells Nick not to tell anyone. Nick meets a banker friend named Sam Zeman for lunch to discuss investing the money, which Sam does.

Nick has lunch with Wani at Lowndes Square, the home of Wani's parents, Bertrand and Monique Ouradi. He arrives quite hung over, and Bertrand greets him as Antoine's "aesthete." Martine is also there. Nick and Wani sneak upstairs to do cocaine.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Nick likes Wani's flat on Abington Road and the wealth that it displays. Nick pictures himself belonging in this world, but Wani does not care about art or design, the aesthetics. Nick and his Oxford classmate, Sam Zeman, discuss orchestral music and Richard Strauss. Nick has a lively conversation with Howard and Simon and quotes Henry James for entertainment. He tells them about the encounter with Ricky but replaces Wani with "a Frenchman." Howard and Simon ask Nick to describe Ricky's penis, and he first ponders how Henry James would have described it.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Wani gives Nick three hundred and fifty pounds to buy cocaine from Ronnie, Wani's dealer. Nick then returns to Kensington Park Gardens to change for a piano recital that the Feddens are hosting for Nina Glaserova. Family, friends and colleagues attend, including the Ouradis, Polly Tompkins and Lady Partridge. It is revealed here that Sophie Tipper, Toby's former fiancée, married an actor named James Stallard. Nick has a conversation with Bertrand, as Wani watches from across the room. Nick and Wani go upstairs to Nick's bedroom to do cocaine, and they hear Catherine and Jasper come upstairs and have sex in Catherine's room. This encourages Nick and Wani to do the same.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Nina's piano recital is a political gathering. At Gerald's signal, Nick must politely tell Nina to stop playing the piano, as she has already played three encores. Bertrand greets Nick as the "aesthete," and as they are chatting, Nick notices through the window that Bertrand's Rolls Royce Silver Cloud is maroon. This is significant to Nick because he recalls that one of Catherine's neuroses is a horror of the color maroon.

Nick and Wani go upstairs to Nick's room to do cocaine, and Wani selects *Henry James and the Question of Romance* to cut the lines with his gold credit card. Later Nick sees Polly outside, and when Polly asks Nick what he and Wani talk about, Nick replies "Henry James."



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Nick wakes up at his parents' home in Barwick. He attends the local Barwick Fete celebration held in Abbott's Field, a local park. Gerald is the guest speaker. Gerald and Nick spend the day with Don and Dot, Nick's parents. Gerald displays his competitive side when he joins in welly-whanging, which requires throwing a Wellington boot as far as possible. Gerald plays until he wins a pig.

Nick and Gerald later have cocktails at the Guests' home, and his constantly empty glass preoccupies Gerald. Gerald tells the Guests that the Ouradis had an older son who was killed by a lorry in Beirut. Later, when Nick drops Gerald off to make his speech at the Barwick Fete, he realizes that Gerald has left his speech in the car. Nick follows him to give it to Gerald and sees Penny with her hand in Gerald's back pocket.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Nick senses the appropriateness of the service stairs and the main stairs being separated not only by a wall, but also a world. He is not fond of the home he grew up in, but he realizes that the attraction of Hawkeswood is the finery inside. Nick hears that Wani's older brother, whose existence was unknown to Nick, was killed with his nanny in Beirut. Nick realizes that although he and Wani are intimate sexually, they are not close.

Don Guest, being an antiques dealer, discusses French furniture and art that Gerald has at home in London, of which Gerald is clueless. Nick sees Penny with her hand in Gerald's pocket and realizes that they are having an affair. He is devastated because he thought of Gerald and Rachel as his parents.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Toby, Wani and Nick meet the Feddens at their vacation home in France. Maurice and Sally Tipper and Lady Partridge arrive later. Catherine brings her boyfriend, Jasper. Maurice Tipper is interested in Wani because of Wani's interest in business, but he is not impressed with Nick. Toby and Nick bond in the pool while the others are playing boules. During dinner, the Feddens receive a phone call that Pat Grayson, Catherine's godfather, has died. Pat is a gay actor who is an old friend of Rachel's.

Nick hears Gerald yelling at Catherine, and she later tells Nick that Gerald is mad because he found a used condom in the pool house. Catherine and Nick are discussing this when Catherine realizes that she and Jasper did not use a condom, so Nick tells her about his affair with Wani. Maurice and Sally Tipper leave the Feddens' home on a sour note.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Wani is trying to impress the Feddens and the Tippers with his business sense. He is pretentious and cares what people think about him. The Tippers arrive in France with expensive luggage, and Maurice comes armed to do business.

Catherine announces to the dinner table that Pat Grayson is a homosexual who died from AIDS. This news disturbs the Tippers, who are very rigid in their conservatism, and sets a negative tone for the rest of their stay. Nick confides in Catherine, as he always has, without realizing that this will come back to haunt him. Rachel and Lady Partridge seem unaffected by all of the chaos around them.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Gerald and Rachel are celebrating their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a large party. Lionel Kessler comes and gives them a Gauguin. The Prime Minister is on the guest list. Penny and Gerald are together working on Gerald's diary. Nick stops by the Gents station, which is a known spot for homosexual dalliances, and leaves disgusted with himself. Catherine and Nick chat, and then Nick kneels before the Prime Minister and asks her to dance. Later, Nick recognizes Tristao, the waiter, who is again working a party. Later, Nick, Wani and Tristao meet in the bathroom to do cocaine, and Wani performs sex on Tristao.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The green front door of the Feddens' home is an issue before the party because the door is green instead of Tory blue. Geoffrey Titchfield, Gerald's neighbor, has already painted his door blue, so since the Prime Minister is attending the anniversary party, Gerald paints their front door. The Prime Minister arrives without noticing the color. The Prime Minister has told Gerald that she will not dance, but she dances with Nick.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Catherine and Nick are discussing the election, and Gerald is confident that he will again win Barwick. Nick dictates letters in the *Ogee* office and fancies himself a version of Henry James in his older years.

Rosemary Charles stops by to visit Nick in his office with her friend, Gemma, to tell Nick that Leo has passed away. Nick states that he knows that Pete died. It is revealed that Leo dumped Nick a few years prior because he knew that he was ill with AIDS. Rosemary and Gemma discuss Mrs. Charles's inability to accept that Leo was gay and her belief that he acquired AIDS from a toilet seat.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Catherine and Nick vote together, which shows the outsiders that they are. Rosemary and Gemma disclose to Nick that they themselves are gay. When they leave, Nick sits down and tries to write a letter to Mrs. Charles, and he struggles between impressing her with his words and sounding insincere. He wants to impress her, and he recalls the words of Henry James regarding the death of Poe. He envisions himself in six months time writing a similar letter to the Ouradis.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Nick is at Kensington Park Gardens with Catherine awaiting election results. He is silently grieving. Polly Tompkins wins the election as a conservative Member of Parliament for Pershore. Although Polly is a homosexual, it is announced that he has gotten married. Catherine wanted her father to lose, but Gerald won, although not by much. Nick looks out to the gardens and reflects on his first time with Leo.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The media is talking about a Tory landslide, and although the Tories win, it is not a landslide like 1983. Nick recalls going to a pub a few months prior, seeing Leo from behind and realizing that he is ill. Nick goes down to the Gents and picks up a stranger.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Nick meets Brad Craft and Treat Rush, two Americans, for a business lunch. Wani enters the restaurant with a cane and joins them. Everyone is shocked by Wani's appearance. Brad and Treat met Wani when he was engaged to Martine, and they are confused by his illness. Nick is trying to sell the Americans his screenplay to make a film, but Brad and Treat want to add love scenes and change Nick's writing. During their discussion, Wani becomes ill and excuses himself. Nick drives Wani home, and on the way Wani tells him that Gerald may be in legal trouble for doing some "clever accounting" in a business deal with Maurice Tipper. Wani assures Nick that Maurice has covered his own tracks. Nick and Wani discuss Martine, and Nick learns that she has been paid all of these years. Nick kisses Monique as he helps Wani to her, and he is aware that this is their final goodbye.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Brad Craft and Treat Rush, described as social hungry, are in town for Nat Hammer's wedding. Nat Hammer is a former friend of Nick who previously hosted the party at the castle that Nick was not invited to attend.

Wani's presence in the restaurant is unwelcome because of his illness. He was once in demand because of his wealth and good looks. They discuss Black Monday and the drop in the stock exchange, which Wani blames on America. Wani's health seems to parallel the rise and fall of the economy. On the ride home, Wani tells Nick that he is leaving the office building to him in his will. Nick again gets something of value from someone else. When Nick learns of the legal troubles facing Gerald, his first concern is for Rachel.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Nick walks to Kensington Park Gardens and is confronted by photographers. He realizes that the scandal that Wani mentioned has hit the news media. Elena greets Nick and sends him upstairs to Rachel and Lionel, who are seated in the drawing room. Lionel asks Nick to go and get a copy of the local paper and to not speak to anyone. Rachel asks Nick to find Catherine. Catherine comes home and chats with Rachel, Lionel and Nick. They have dinner together, and then Catherine announces that she wants to go out and asks Nick to drive. Catherine does not reveal the destination, but she directs him to Badger's house. Penny passes Nick and Catherine at Brogan's front door. Nick and Catherine enter Brogan's house and see a disheveled Gerald.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Nick is called upon to help the Feddens and to be responsible for Catherine. Lionel asks if Catherine is taking her medication, and he and Rachel depend on Nick to control her. Catherine is ranting about politics and Gerald, and when she says she is leaving, Rachel looks at Nick. He knows that she means for Nick to stay with Catherine. Catherine tells Gerald that she thought he had given up his affair, and Nick realizes that Gerald and Penny's affair is the one secret that he and Catherine did not share with each other.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Photographers have staked out all four entrances to the Feddens' home. News of Gerald's affair has hit the newspapers. Catherine told her old boyfriend Russell about her father's affair, and Russell told a friend of his who works at the *Mirror*. Pictures of Nick are in the tabloids, and Nick recognizes that Catherine's old boyfriend, Russell, took the pictures. Rachel sends Nick to find Catherine, who is staying at Russell's. Gerald tells Nick that he never understood Catherine, and they argue. Gerald asks Nick to move out of their home.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Nick fantasizes about comforting Rachel. She makes remarks to Nick that blames him for not watching Catherine. Rachel reveals to Nick that she knows about Catherine's episode in 1983 and is upset that he never told her. Geoffrey Titchfield is upset that the gardens are in peril because of the photographers. Nick apologizes to Gerald about Catherine's latest episode. Gerald never tells Nick what exactly he did wrong, but Nick realizes that he is Gerald's scapegoat.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Gerald and Rachel are preparing to attend a wedding in Yorkshire. Gerald is on the telephone to ensure that his presence will not be an embarrassment at the wedding. Gerald gets a new directorship position. Wani is watching a porn video before leaving for the wedding. He is very ill and fragile. Nick is in the *Ogee* office, where the first issue of the magazine is delivered. He later goes to Kensington Park Gardens to pack up his belongings. While he is there, he runs into Penny, who professes her love for Gerald. Nick is privately awaiting the results of his third AIDS test.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The Feddens are attending a wedding, as is Wani. This is another wealthy affair to which Nick is not invited. Penny reveals to Nick that Gerald took Rachel away from Norman, Penny's father. This is another example of Gerald's competitive nature. Nick receives the first issue of *Ogee*, and he loves its beauty. He notices the advertisement for "Je Promets" cologne. Nick does not tell Wani of his AIDS test, and he realizes that he knows the results before he even receives them. Nick, with his car full packed full of his belongings, locks the door to Kensington Park Gardens, drops the keys through the letter slot and reluctantly drops the key to the gardens in last.



Characters

Nick Guest

Nick Guest, the main character, is an attractive young man with curly blond hair. Nick was born in middle class Barwick to Don and Dot Guest. He recently graduated from Oxford with a degree in English. He is planning to attend graduate school with his thesis on the style of Henry James. Nick is very intelligent and well spoken. Nick is coming to terms with his sexuality and striving to find his place in society.

The story begins when Nick is twenty years old. He moves in with the Feddens, a very wealthy and political family, and immediately is taken in by their extravagant lifestyle. He enjoys the parties and vacations of the wealthy. He also participates in the abundance of alcohol and cocaine. Nick fits in well within this elite circle, but he never really is accepted as a member.

Catherine Feddens

Catherine Feddens is the mentally unstable daughter of Gerald and Rachel and the sister of Toby. She is manic-depressive, and she is supposed to take medication to stay in control but often does not. She experiences extreme highs and lows, and when not medicated, she has vocal outbursts. Catherine is described as "different" looking from her physically attractive family. She is rebellious, especially against her father and his politics.

Catherine goes through a string of boyfriends and picks up strangers in between. She smokes cigarettes and marijuana and drinks alcohol. She is rather an embarrassment to her parents, who do not seem to accept the severity of her condition. Gerald and Rachel depend on Nick to keep an eye on Catherine. Nick is one of the few people that Catherine trusts.

Tobias "Toby" Feddens

Toby Feddens is Nick's classmate from Oxford. Toby is athletic and good-looking. Nick has always lusted after Toby, but Toby is oblivious. Toby received his degree from Oxford in politics, philosophy and economics. He is an aspiring, though not very successful, journalist. Toby is at one time the fancy of wealthy Sophie Tipper, but she later marries someone else. He is a close friend to Nick and feels betrayed that Nick does not confide in him about his affair with Wani.



Gerald Feddens

Gerald is Toby's politician father. He is a conservative Member of Parliament. Gerald is in his early fifties, tanned, toned and energetic. He is very social and loves a cocktail, but he is not particularly cultured. Gerald is highly regarded and often questioned by outsiders about the Prime Minister. Gerald does not have the extreme wealth and refinement that his wife Rachel was born with, but he was still raised upper class. Gerald is extremely competitive in all arenas.

Rachel Feddens

Rachel is Gerald's wife and the mother of Toby and Catherine. Rachel was born into a wealthy banking family. She is an attractive woman with dark hair and bold gray streaks. Rachel is the perfect hostess and wife. She is very refined and sophisticated. She is very maternal to Nick, and he admires her. Rachel seems rather detached from reality where her daughter, Catherine, is concerned. She is fiercely loyal to her family.

Antoine "Wani" Ouradi

Wani is a former Oxford classmate of Nick's and a friend of Toby Feddens. Wani was born in Beirut. It is later revealed that he had a brother who died when he was young. He is small in stature and extremely good-looking. Wani has dark curly hair, long eyelashes and a chiseled nose. He is very wealthy, being heir to a grocery fortune. He is rather private and is excessive with sex and drugs.

Wani is engaged to a French girl named Martine, and his family tried to encourage the marriage. A few years after college, Wani begins an affair with Nick. It is later revealed that his fiancée is being paid by the Ouradis to stay engaged to Wani. Wani's self-indulgence is ultimately his downfall.

Leo Charles

Leo and Nick meet through a personal ad placed by Leo. Leo is Nick's first sexual partner and his first love. Leo is black, small built and attractive. He is also egotistical. He rides his bicycle everywhere. Leo is from a very religious home. He lives with his mother and sister, whom he has not told that he is gay. Leo is very promiscuous, which catches up with him, and he succumbs to AIDS.

Lady Partridge

Lady Partridge is Gerald's mother. She is a dignified woman. She is always around, but she is an observer rather than a participant.



Lord Lionel Kessler

Lord Kessler is the wealthy brother of Rachel. He is around sixty years old, short, stout and bald. He is a banker, and admittedly no one knows exactly what he does to make so much money. Lord Kessler is a bachelor, and no one knows if he is gay. He lives in Hawkeswood, an estate outside of London.

Derek "Badger" Brogan

Badger is a close friend of Gerald Feddens and said to be a godfather to Catherine. Badger is very protective of the Feddens family. He does not like Nick.

Rosemary Charles

Rosemary is Leo's sister. She works as a doctor's receptionist. Readers later learn that she is also a homosexual.

Mrs. Charles

Mrs. Charles, Leo's mother, is extremely religious. She does not know that Leo is gay.

Penny Kent

Penny is Gerald's devoted assistant. She is in love with Gerald.

Russell

Russell is Catherine's photographer boyfriend.



Objects/Places

Kensington Park Gardens

The Feddens' residence is a large, white home in Notting Hill, a wealthy section of London. The home has a three-locked green front door, which is an issue later when Gerald paints it Tory blue in preparation of the Prime Minister's arrival. The house is filled with fine French furniture, porcelain and works of art. There are several floors with grand stairs throughout. The first flight of stairs is made of stone, while the rest are made of oak. Nick later ponders the irony that not only a wall, but also a world, separates the main staircase and the service staircase.

Kensington Park Gardens is surrounded by communal gardens where residents must have a key to enter. The key is a symbol of belonging in this exclusive neighborhood. There are some cottage homes in the neighborhood, which are not as grand. Nick's bedroom is up in the roof, in the children's area. The fact that his bedroom is located at the farthest end of the home also symbolizes that although Nick lives in the Feddens' home, he is not a central member of the family.

Hawkeswood

Hawkeswood is the home of Rachel's brother, Lord Lionel Kessler. Hawkeswood is in Birminghamshire in the country. The home is the color of French mustard and has slate roofs. Hawkeswood has a two story central hall with an ellipse of two naked females on the ceiling. It is filled with Victorian pictures, tapestries and furniture. Hawkeswood is also home to famous works of art, such as a Cezanne. It is described as being so full of everything that it makes Kensington Park Gardens look bare. There is also an extensive library with exquisite books locked in gilded cages.

Willesden

Willesden is the working class area that is home to Leo, Rosemary and Mrs. Charles. They live in a tiny flat with a large dining table, a leather-like sofa and a gas fire. The fireplace has a ledge surrounding it, which will be the final resting place for Leo. The home is filled with religious memorabilia.

Bathhouse

The bathhouse is a men-only pond where homosexuals swim and lay around nude. There is a large wooden raft and a jetty where men lounge and mingle. There is an old wooden gate that leads to a concrete yard where the men socialize.



Barwick

Barwick is the middle class town where Nick was raised. The home in which Nick was raised has pink walls and metal frames. It is a small, non-remarkable home. Nick does not feel at home here and never felt that he belonged in this middle-class area. Barwick itself is Gerald Feddens' home constituency, and the host to the annual Barwick Fete. The annual fete is a community gathering that invites Gerald to be the guest speaker. It is here that Gerald demonstrates his fierce competitive nature during a boot-tossing contest.

France

France is the location of the Feddens' vacation home. There is a grand chateau on the property, but the Feddens' estate is a smaller but nicer sixteenth century home. Wani appears to prefer the larger chateau. The Feddens' manor is made of purple-black brick with steep slate roofs. Nick is given the smallest, darkest room across from Wani. Nick does not mind because it makes him feel like family. Toby's room is down the hall. The pool to the estate is down stairs that lead to another terrace. On this terrace by the pool is a pool house, which itself is a cottage.

Ogee Office

The *Ogee* office is Wani's building on Abington Road. The ground floor houses the office and the two top floors house Wani's flat. The office is high tech and serves as a symbol of hope and purpose for Nick, since the *Ogee* magazine is his first professional endeavor. *Ogee* affords Nick the opportunity to use his aesthetic knowledge in a productive manner, rather than just for entertainment at elite parties. Nick finds the interior to be pretentious, which is exactly Wani's style. Ironically, when Nick tells Martine, Wani's fiancée, the name of the magazine, she misunderstands him and thinks he is saying "Orgy."

Pete's Antique Shop

Leo stops by the Feddens' house to see Nick. Leo invites Nick to go visit an old friend, Pete. Pete, who is Leo's ex-boyfriend, owns an antique store. Nick is familiar with the furniture and tapestries, because ironically, Nick's father is an antiques dealer. Nick and Leo both gravitate towards an antique canopy bed, where they momentarily lounge.

Pubs

Nick plans to meet his first official date, Leo, at a local pub. Nick and Leo plan to meet at the Chepstow Castle, which Nick chooses because it has a small, dark back bar which offers some privacy. There is also a more visible bar up front, but most people stand outside during the summer. As Nick approaches the pub, he sees Leo waiting for



him on the street, where they have their drinks. A few years later, Nick enters the Shaftsbury pub, a local watering hole, looking for a one-night stand. As Nick makes his way to the small back bar, he recognizes Leo from behind. He notices that Leo is very thin, which foreshadows Leo's ultimate demise. Readers later learn that Leo dies from AIDS.

The Feddens' Front Door

The Feddens' front door is the first thing that impresses Nick when he moves into the Feddens' home. The door is green with three locks and symbolizes for Nick an entrance to the world in which Nick wants to belong. Gerald likes the green door, but he notices that the neighbors paint their door Tory blue. The Prime Minister is expected at the Feddens' home for their anniversary party, and as a gesture of solidarity, Gerald has his front door painted Tory blue. The changing of the door foreshadows the changes that are coming to the Feddens' family on the other side of the door. Nick's life with the Feddens begins with him admiring the "three-locked green front door." His final interaction with the Feddens is actually with the door. Before dropping his keys through the letter slot, "Nick pulled the blue front door shut, double-locked the Yale locks and the Chubb lock, and stood fiddling the keys off his ring."

Lowndes Square

Lowndes Square is the residence of Bertrand and Monique Ouradi, Wani's parents. The home is filled with reproduction furniture and large mirrors, and it has a large pink and gold drawing room. The Ouradis are very wealthy and like to display that wealth through art and furnishings. Nick is at Lowndes Square for lunch and notices that citrus fruit is held in high regard at the Ouradis' home. There is a tall pillar of oranges and lemons on a side table, and the sliced fruit is served in an elaborate display on the platter. Bertrand explains that Lebanon, their homeland, is a wonderful place to grow citrus fruit. It is ironic that such a war-ravaged land can produce such nice fruit. The Ouradis moved to Lowndes Square after a bomb destroyed their home in Lebanon.

Mira Mart

Mira Mart is the convenience store chain that Bertrand Ouradi established upon fleeing Lebanon. The business began as a small chain, and Bertrand later added Mira Food Halls, which are larger and cater to the rich. Bertrand's businesses follow the theme of indulgence. Mini Mart was the first income producer for the Ouradis, and as they became wealthier, they upgraded their stores. Although Bertrand views the elite with distaste, he has designed the Mira Food Halls to supply the wealthy and erected them in posh areas. He personal spending and indulgence increases with the rising success of his stores.

Themes

The Line of Beauty

An ogee is a double curve that is shaped like an elongated "S." This double curve is Hogarth's line of beauty. The ogee is a symbol throughout the book in a variety of forms. Nick notices the "curlicue" of the path at Hawkeswood and finds another curve at Hawkeswood, on the handsome waiter, Tristao. Nick is attracted to Tristao and focuses on the curve of his trouser front. Nick chooses the name *Ogee* for his magazine with Wani. He thinks of the name while in Wani's bed. He sees the ogee curve in the mirrors, pelmets and mainly in the canopy of the bed. Nick explains to Bertrand and Monique Ouradi that the ogee actually originated in the Middle East, but the Ouradis are not interested. The ogee, the line of beauty, symbolizes Nick's focus on aesthetics.

The line of beauty is present throughout the novel, from the curve of the staircases to the piano. Nick sees the S-shapes in the black and gilt floor at Kensington Park Gardens. The line of beauty, for Nick, is also seen on the human body where the back curves to meet the buttocks. Nick fantasizes about this area on Leo. One day, Nick receives a call from Leo, and they discuss the possibility of Leo coming over to the Feddens' house. Nick ponders their romance, "Days like these had their design, their upward and downward curves: it would be unshapely to change the plan." Nick finally writes an article about the line of beauty for the sole issue of *Ogee Magazine*.

The curves of the line of beauty also symbolize the rise and fall of fortunes, reflecting the curve of the story. The beginning of the book is the bottom of the curve. It is the early 1980s, and as the story peaks towards the mid-1980s, Nick, the Feddens and the political climate are all positive and happily thriving. Life is good, and it is the height of indulgence and opulence. As the end of the 1980s nears, the curve is going down, and the end of an era is palpable. Leo and Wani are victims of AIDS, and Gerald's political career is crumbling. Although the Prime Minister is re-elected, it is not the landslide that was predicted or that started the book.

Outsider Looking In

Nick is highly intelligent and well educated, but he lacks the family and breeding required to belong in the upper class. Nick is living in the fashionable Notting Hill section of London, but he is merely a lodger with a room in the roof. Upon meeting Nick, Leo says, "And I thought I'd got myself a nice little rich boy."

Nick wants to be perceived as one of the elite. He rides with the Feddens, in their Range Rover, to Hawkeswood during the time of the Notting Hill Carnival. Notting Hill residents board up their homes at this time for fear of riots. Nick pretentiously waves to policemen and secretly fears seeing Leo in the crowd. "Nick, sitting in the back seat with Elena, felt foolish and conceited at once. He dreaded seeing Leo, on his bike, and



dreaded being seen by Leo." When they arrive at Hawkeswood, Nick surveys Lord Kessler's home and recognizes that the painting over the fireplace is a Cezanne. "It gave him a hilarious sense of his own displacement." Later, Gerald Feddens is surrounded by a group of his friends and waves Nick over. The narrator explains, "but there were too many people for introductions, a large loose circle who turned momentarily to inspect him and turned back as if they'd failed to see anything at all."

Badger, Gerald Feddens' best friend, is confused by Nick's presence within the Feddens household. Nick attends grand parties with famous people and politicians, but people question him about where he fits in. Nick tries to look and dress as if he is one of the wealthy people that he mingles with, but he never completely succeeds. Bertrand Ouradi refers to Nick as the "aesthete." He enjoys the trappings of wealth, but none of it belongs to him. Nick does not belong with his own family because he has moved on from his humble, middle-class upbringing. He is an Oxford graduate, which itself is very prestigious, but he does not have the wealth or lineage of his elite college classmates. Nick is highly intelligent and well liked, but in the end, the family sticks together, and Nick is the one that must leave.

Henry James

Henry James (1843-1916) was an American writer who wrote about American versus European culture. Henry James is Nick's hero, and references to Henry James are rampant throughout the book. Nick explores the Feddens' home and pretends that he is the owner, taking great pleasure in the opulent furnishings. At this point, the narrator states, "Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt he could 'stand a great deal of guilt.'"

Nick is such a Henry James enthusiast that he is planning to attend graduate school to study the style of Henry James. He shares this information with Lord Kessler, who is genuinely interested. Lord Kessler retrieves his old family albums, which are kept under lock and key. He shows Nick pictures of Henry James at Hawkeswood, where Henry was once a houseguest. Nick is noticeably impressed. When with his friends, Nick quotes Henry James in general conversation. Nick does this as a source of entertainment for friends and acquaintances in social settings. He often considers what Henry James would do in certain situations, before taking action himself.

Henry James is a constant influence in Nick's life. The theme of Henry James follows the arc that is common throughout the book. The early eighties represent a time of promise, and the mid-eighties are the peak of life and prosperity for Nick, the Feddens and politics. The end of the eighties mirrors the end of the carefree decade and the downward turn for Nick and the Feddens. As the book opens, Henry James is a positive reference for Nick. In the middle, Nick uses his knowledge of Henry James to socialize and display his intelligence at parties with the Feddens' wealthy friends and constituents. By the end of the 1980s, Henry James' face, on a book cover, is now a surface upon which Nick and Wani cut cocaine.



Homosexuality

Nick is a closeted homosexual until his third year of college. He never discussed his sexuality with his parents, and he does not discuss it even after he comes out. Leo brings Nick to meet Pete, Leo's ex-boyfriend. Nick is new at being openly gay, and the narrator says, "He was still faintly shocked, among other emotions of interest and excitement, at the idea of a male couple."

When Nick moves in with the Feddens, they accept Nick. However, the Feddens do not really understand Nick's homosexuality, and it does not agree with their conservative politics. The Feddens chose a homosexual, Pat Grayson, to be Catherine's godfather. Pat Grayson is a famous actor who Nick thinks of as a "silly old queen." Catherine loves her Godfather Pat, but Nick sees Pat as "an unwelcome future," which foreshadows Nick's own life. Nick is later remorseful for "snubbing Pat Grayson, and pretending to be part of this hetero mob." Pat Grayson's death is announced while the Feddens are vacationing in France with the Tippers. The Tippers are clearly disgusted and appalled that Catherine has a homosexual godfather.

Nick has friends from college who are gay. One acquaintance is Polly Thompkins, an old friend of Toby's. Nick is fixated on Polly, because although Polly is tall and fat with acne scars, he has an impressive list of sexual conquests. This leaves Nick jealous and dumbfounded. Nick runs into many of his college friends at Toby's twenty-first birthday party, including Polly. "He saw the great heterosexual express pulling out from the platform precisely on time, and all his friends were on it in the first class carriage..." Nick sees Wani at the party, whom he has fantasized about many times. Nick also sees Martine, Wani's fiancée, and describes her expression: "It must be the face of a steady happiness, a calm possession, that he couldn't imagine, or even exactly hope for." By the end of the 1980s, Polly Thompkins wins the conservative seat for Pershore, but only after getting married the previous month.

Indulgence

The 1980s are a time of indulgence and excess. The Feddens have a large home in London's prestigious Notting Hill section. The home is furnished with exquisite French furniture and art from the Old Masters. Rachel takes all of the finery for granted because she was raised in a wealthy family. Gerald is unfamiliar with art and finery, but he owns it because that is what wealthy people do. Rachel's brother, Lord Kessler, also lives in a very posh home. His personal library is filled with leather bound books and first editions, all under lock and key. Nick notices that Rachel and Lord Kessler discuss his Cezanne as if it is ordinary, and he is impressed. Lord Kessler gives Rachel and Gerald a Gauguin for their anniversary, and they decide to hang it their bedroom for lack of a better place. Gerald Feddens himself overindulges in alcohol, often drinking before lunch. He also indulges himself by having an extramarital affair with Penny, his assistant.



In 1983, casual sex and drug use was rampant. Nick and Wani use cocaine regularly. Wani is extreme with everything in his life. He does too much cocaine, watches too much porn and has frequent casual sex. Wani and his family live an opulent lifestyle. Nick likes Wani's Abington Road house, with all of its opulence, and the narrator relates that Nick thinks of it "as he did the Feddens' house, as a fantasy of prosperity that he could share..." They drive expensive cars, and their homes have gold fixtures. The Ouradis, who started their chain of convenient stores when they were poor, think that they have earned the right to have the best of everything. Maurice Tipper and his wife Sally are excessively wealthy. Sally Tipper has no breeding or class, but she always has the most expensive things because "that's what rich people do."

Leo also has an abundance of casual, unprotected sex. Nick tries to use protection and thinks that he is practicing safe sex. However, he is with Wani and Leo, who are careless, and he has had questionable experiences himself. By 1986, AIDS has become prevalent, especially in homosexuals. The indulgent lifestyle of Wani, Leo and Nick foreshadows their future. This disease is ultimately the death sentence for Wani, Leo and, readers are led to believe, Nick.



Style

Point of View

A third party narrates the story, but it is told from the perspective of Nick Guest, the central character. The narrator is the voice of Nick's thoughts and feelings, and the reader experiences the action from Nick's point of view. The narrator is the voice of the author, and the reader gets the sense that the narrator thinks Nick is a decent but misguided fellow. The narrator tells the story through Nick's eyes without being sympathetic.

This story is fiction, and because it is set in the upper class world, the characters are more superficial and less three-dimensional than the average character would be. Nick is trying to fit into the elite class, but since he was raised in the middle class, his actions often seem uncomfortable or unnatural.

Setting

The novel opens at Kensington Park Gardens in affluent Notting Hill, a London suburb. Nick has moved into the home as a guest of Toby Feddens, his classmate from Oxford. The home is owned by Gerald and Rachel Feddens. Nick is alone in the house while the Feddens are on holiday in France, and he imagines that all of the grandeur is his. The gardens surrounding the family home are a place of refuge for Nick. It is also where he has his first sexual experience. The gardens are communal, but they are only for residents who have a key. The key to the gardens is a symbol of wealth in this community. The Feddens' neighbors, the Titchfields, are in the background of activity at various times throughout the novel. The Titchfields live in a small home, or cottage, in the neighborhood. George Titchfield is in the gardens after Nick and Leo have their first sexual encounter, and he approaches them. Nick assures him that he has a key and tells George that he lives in the Feddens' home, which satisfies Mr. Titchfield.

The action in the novel moves among the wealth and opulence of parties and celebrations, from London to the English countryside, with a brief excursion to the Feddens' vacation home in France. The pool in France is a setting of lust for Nick, who spends a day with Toby admiring his beauty but knowing he can never make a move on his heterosexual friend. The pool is also the setting for sexual encounters, which foreshadow things to come. Catherine has sex with her boyfriend in the pool house, and Nick and Wani have sex there as well. Gerald finds a used condom, and when Catherine realizes that she did not use one, she confronts Nick, who tells her of his secret affair with Wani.

The setting briefly shifts to middle class arenas during Nick's visits to his home in Barwick and also the home of his lover, Leo, in Willesden. Ironically, the setting moves



briefly to the antique store of Leo's ex-boyfriend, which is familiar to Nick, who grew up with his antiques-dealer father.

Language and Meaning

The language of the story is colorful and descriptive. The novel is British, but the parallels to American culture are usually simple to define. The author uses extensive detail throughout the work, especially describing the surroundings. There are sexual events that are graphic and many descriptions of cocaine, but the language and references are easy for the general reader to understand.

The author often describes things in such extreme detail that the story seems to be secondary to the furnishings and the surroundings, emphasizing again the main character's aesthetic point of view and importance of wealth in the story. The reader gets a very vivid picture of the setting, but often substance is lacking. The setting is three-dimensional, but some characters are not.

Music is used as a background to the language, with Gerald's love of Richard Strauss playing a prominent role. Often during one of Catherine's episodes, she will try to play a record but will drop the needles in an arbitrary place. The music is also described in excruciating detail in this prose-heavy novel.

Structure

The story is told in eighteen chapters that are separated into three time frames, reflecting the movement of the story. There is a three-year leap between the first and second sections, but the lapse in time is filled throughout the following chapters, so that the reader is not left wondering what was missed. The first section, taking place in 1983, catches the characters at the beginning of an upswing into wealth and indulgence. The second section, which takes place in 1986, describes the height of their fortunes. The final section, in 1987, shows the characters' fall from fortune and their often heavy tolls for their excesses.



Quotes

"When Gerald had won Barwick, which was Nick's home constituency, the arrangement was jovially hailed as having the logic of poetry, or fate." Chapter 1, p. 4

"Of course, there was nothing wrong in being charming to the housekeeper, and Elena's view on Guardi was probably just as interesting as Rachel's and more so than Gerald's, but still the moment which seemed to remember for its charm Nick recalled as a tiny faux pas." Chapter 2, p. 22

"He confessed but entirely imaginary seductions took on - partly through the special effort required to invent them and repeat them consistently - the quality of real memories." Chapter 2, p. 24

"He wasn't quite ready to accept the fact that if he was going to have a lover it wouldn't be Toby or any other drunk straight boy hopping the fence, it would be a gay lover - that compromised thing that he would then become." Chapter 2, p. 24

"He observed Lord Kessler's snuffle and murmur at the name of Maurice Tipper, the incalculable ironies of different kinds of rich people about each other." Chapter 3, p. 46

"Sometimes the memory of books he pretended to have read became almost as vivid as that of books he had read and half-forgotten, by some firm process of auto-suggestion."

Chapter 3, p. 48

"He felt he might look like a person with no friends, and that the waiter might know that he didn't really belong to this looking-glass world." Chapter 3, p. 55

"He felt the loss of him as though he had really stood a chance with him, he'd gone so far with him in his mind, as he lay alone in bed. He saw the great heterosexual express pulling out from the platform precisely on time, and all his friends were on it..." Chapter 3, p. 59

"After all it was marvelous to be staying in a house like this, a friend of the family, not the son of the man who wound the clocks." Chapter 3, p. 65

"'I think you said you had someone in,' said Lady Partridge. Again looking at Nick. It was as if she had scented his fantasy of belonging, of secret fraternity with her beautiful grandson, and set to eradicate it with a quick territorial instinct." Chapter 3, p. 70

"As so often, he felt he had the wrong kind of irony, the wrong knowledge, for gay life." Chapter 4, p. 94

"Days like these had their design, their upward and downward curves: it would be unshapely to change the plan." Chapter 4, p. 110



"Nick pictured Leo, as he had left him today, walking his bike away, and the love-chord sounded, warily no - he didn't want the others to hear it." Chapter 5, p. 126

"In the rich air of Kensington Park Gardens he seemed to live in the constant diffused presence of Toby, among people who were living allusions to him and thus a torment as well as a kind of consolation." Chapter 6, p. 135

"He chopped and drew out the fine white fuses of pleasure and watched Ricky tug at the buckle of his lover's belt." Chapter 7, p. 173

"The ogee curve was pure expression, decorative not structural; a structure could be made from it, but it supported nothing more than a boss or the cross that topped an onion dome." Chapter 8, p. 176

"The double curve was Hogarth's 'line of beauty,' the snakelike flicker of an instinct, of two compulsions held in one unfolding movement." Chapter 8, p. 176

"There's a marvellous bit in his play The High Bid when the man says to a butler in the country house, 'I mean, to whom do you beautifully belong?'" Chapter 8, p. 183

"He had never been in Nick's room before, and it was clear that it held no magic for him of the kind Nick had felt in Wani's room at Lowndes Square." Chapter 9, p. 222

"His first thought was that his smug reckonings of intimacy with Wani looked very foolish. It was the family mystery, hardly glimpsed, far stronger and darker than their little sexual conspiracy." Chapter 10, p. 246

"When they turned in, unbelievably early, the high summer twilight still beautiful outside, Nick called out, 'Sleep well!' and closed his door with a bewildering sense of loss, as though Gerald and Rachel were really his parents, and not the undeviating old pair in their twin beds in the next room." Chapter 10, p. 253

"And then Gerald saw the PM, his idol, who had said before that she wouldn't dance, but who now, a couple of whiskies on, was getting down rather sexily with Nick." Chapter 12, p. 336

"Wani was down on his knees, trying clumsily to do justice to the thing he always wanted. His pants were undone, but his own little penis, depressed by the blitz or blizzard of coke, was puckered up, almost in hiding. He was lost beyond humiliation - it was what you paid for." Chapter 12, p. 339

"He gazed round the room, feeling for the precedence, the protocol of their relative afflictions." Chapter 14, p. 359

"I mean, we've always been very kind to you, actually, I think, haven't we? Made you a part of our life - in the widest sense. You've made the acquaintance of many remarkable people through being a friend of ours. Going up indeed to the very highest levels." Chapter 17, p. 419



"He saw how his beltless jeans stood away from his waist to give a glimpse of blue underwear, and had a moment's sharp unexpected recall of Leo, the double curve of his lower back and muscular bottom." Chapter 14, p. 368

"Do you honestly imagine that your affairs can be talked about in the same terms as mine? I mean - I ask you again, who are you? What the fuck are you doing here?" Chapter 17, p. 420

"Nick was glad that he wasn't going to Nat's wedding, and yet his absence, to anyone who noticed, might seem like an admission of guilt, or unworthiness. He saw a clear sequence, like a loop of film, of his friends not noticing his absence, jumping up from gilt chairs to join in the swirl of a ball." Chapter 18, p. 426

"The one he was most reluctant about was the sleek bronze Yale for the communal gardens; it has a look of secrets to it. He could probably keep it, no one would remember; it would be nice to be still in fact, if not by rights, a keyholder." Chapter 18, p. 437



Topics for Discussion

How does the political climate of the 1980s parallel with the lives of Nick, Wani and the Feddens?

The music of Richard Strauss is a prominent reference throughout the novel. What significance does Richard Strauss, and music in general, have in this book?

Why do you think Nick is satisfied being an "aesthete"?

Rachel and Lady Partridge are women who do not have strong opinions. How could they have changed the downfall of Gerald?

Why does Nick so easily forgive Catherine?

How does homosexuality shape Nick's life? Is homosexuality positive or negative for him?

What influence do Don and Dot Guest have on Nick's life?

A certain level of competition is healthy. Discuss the role competition plays in the lives of the Feddens. At what point does competition become unhealthy?

Nick and Gerald parallel the rise and fall "curve" of the 1980s. Discuss other characters or events that follow this theme.

How could Toby have been a stronger character?

How have society and society's ideals changed since the 1980s?