

Lines of Beauty Lines of Battle

By Jack Lamport

This year the Man Booker Prize went to a wealthy white, Oxford-educated English male, writing about a wealthy white, Oxford-educated English male. What, we wonder, could have made Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker winner, *Line of Beauty*, "worthy of public interest? As The Express exclaimed, "BOOKER WON BY GAY SEX".

Line of Beauty, "is Alan Hollinghurst's fourth novel, and charts the gay lives and loves of Nick Guest and his beguiling Tory friends through the heart of Thatcher's 1980s Britain – the time of their youthful flowering, if only it wasn't for AIDS. Hollinghurst writes, as usual, in prose of astonishing and sometimes devastating clarity.

Last month, as a dedicated follower, I went through the mildly traumatic experience of watching him propelled to the superstar, multi-million selling status of 'Booker Winner'. During that episode, something hit me. In an attempt by the more responsible media to prevent the novel from being written off as another "gay book", its gay theme was quietly being ironed away.

I met Hollinghurst for the first time, a week before he won the Booker, at a signing in New York. The prospect of meeting him made me fret, but to stay at home when my hero was in town would have been unjustifiable. When he finished signing my copy, I

asked which other gay writing he might recommend. He was a little impatient, and in a wry aristocratic camp replied, "Edmund White, obviously," before elaborating, "I confess this is not something that interests me that much these days." He made a stab at an apologetic smile.

No, I was not annoyed with him. My question was merely a nervous slip. I hadn't thought it through. I understood Hollinghurst's view; to call literature 'gay' was reductive. Yes, I had read the hip sexuality gurus and the queer theorists who deconstructed 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' and proclaimed it politically injurious to talk of a 'gay sensibility'.

I had nodded happily as I learned from my queer forefathers that to talk of 'gayness' was trite and reductive, that the word could only be used as a 'tactic', not as an identity. In my eagerness to understand my gayness, I had voraciously digested the information that the very concept of gayness was false"

I started using the scare quotes. "Oops, I mean my 'gayness,' haw haw." I learned that the point was to be queer, to practice sex that 'disrupted', not mere 'same sex activity'. I was theoretically precocious, street-wise, and I could handle it.

So I thought. Faced with Hollinghurst,

