

Hollinghurst's Swimming Pool Library

The Swimming Pool Library

by Alan Hollinghurst

Random House Publishing

by Hugh Coyle

There's a saying in the publishing world that everyone in the business has an unfinished manuscript tucked away in the bottom drawer of the desk, and this may very well have been the case with Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library*. His affiliation with the literary world through his position on the editorial staff of the *Times Literary Supplement* might also explain the high praise and heavy publicity his book has been receiving.

To be fair, it should be said at the outset that Hollinghurst's novel is written with gem-cutter precision and a true feel for flair. The language is beautiful in the way that a well-solved math problem can be beautiful; it is technically correct with enough researched information to lend credence to the scheme of things. The problem is that beneath this glossy veneer of technique, the story itself is not much more than a glorified homoerotic fantasy, no matter how high its aspirations.

Told in the first person, *The Swimming Pool Library* concerns the exploits, sexual and (though rarely) otherwise, of one William Beckwith, a beautiful, popular, healthy, athletic, intelligent, and rich young man with plenty of time on his hands and plenty of men on his mind. Will is descendant of Britain's noble Beckwiths, and thus enjoys high social stature as well as unlimited funds. His favorite past-times include checking out the latest newcomers at the Corry Club, where he swims regularly, and making love to his latest conquests, wherever and however possible.

Lest the reader sense that such proceedings sound a trifle indulgent, Hollinghurst introduces the elements of an actual plot: Early on, our hero saves an elderly man who suffers a coronary in a public lavatory. The victim of the attack, Lord Charles Nantwich, is another regular at the Corry. After a series of rather dry encounters, Beckwith is engaged by Lord Nantwich to read through his old journals and ghost-write his memoirs. In this manner, Hollinghurst introduces an easy flip-flopping structure to his novel and switches between the exploits of the younger Charles Nantwich as he heads off to the depths of Africa and the more daring exploits of the young Will Beckwith as he explores the

darker side of modern-day London.

Though this may at first sound intriguing and exciting, it is not, and we read Nantwich's journals with the same sense of boredom that Will initially brings to them. To spice things up, there are other plot elements in the novel, but they are clearly subordinate. These subplots are hollow and disconnected. It's as though the author couldn't decide what was most important in his own book, and when he finally chose, he went back to the manuscript and beefed up what he imagined would be the more literary, more respectable plot line.

Will Beckwith himself is made to seem respectable, despite his selfish appetite for sex. Hollinghurst engineers the rescue of Lord Nantwich to win the readers

over to Will's side, and later in the book, Will leaves the set of a porn movie disgusted by what he has stumbled across. Such scenes are as subtle as cue cards in the book, instructing the reader in his or her judgements of the central characters. The problem is that the reader is often given contradictory messages. The ultimate manipulation occurs when Hollinghurst has Beckwith assaulted by a gang of skin-heads; it's either a blatant play for sympathy or an attempt to remind us that the real world does exist and can be a dangerous place sometimes. The scene is as out of place as a rape in *Alice in Wonderland*, but with little consequence: Will's perfect good looks are damaged only slightly and

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