

**The Folding Star
The Line of Beauty
By Alan Hollinghurst
Reading Group Guide**

The Folding Star

1. The Englishman Rodney Young is a great source of irritation to our protagonist Edward Manners, as is illustrated through several encounters at the bar, at the museum (p. 309) and at Alejo's clothing shop, where Alejo comments that "He's weird, he keeps trying things on but he never buys." (p. 275). For Edward, is Rodney a reflection of himself that he would rather not see? How does this speak to the larger theme of one's inner life vs. one's outer appearance throughout the novel?

2. Groupings of three appear in many instances in the novel; "The Three" of Patrick, Luc and Sybill, Orst's artistic triptych that Paul reassembles (p. 278), the illustrations for the story of the False Chaplain (p. 177) the childhood triad of Paul, Maurice and Lilli. Why does the author use this device? Considering in particular the group of Patrick, Luc and Sybill, is there any implication that groups of three are inherently unbalanced, and that they exist at the expense of at least one of their members?

3. Early in the novel, Edward reads from a museum pamphlet about the artist Edgard Orst's obsession with Jane Byron, and imagines his own burgeoning preoccupation with Luc Altidore: "...I imagined a life consecrated to the image of Luc, a shuttered house, the icon of his extraordinary face candlelit in each room – until I saw with a shiver that I had killed him off already, perhaps too high a price for either of us to pay." (p. 68) What does Edward mean by this statement? How does it apply to obsession as we come to understand it by the end of the novel?

In what senses do these obsessions take on lives of their own, becoming independent of their objects? Are all obsessions bound to follow a similar arc?

4. Of his first engagement with Dawn, Edward comments “Now that I had actually made love, more astonishingly now that I had been made love to, the fantasies were subtly undermined.” (p. 223) What relationship do Edward’s sexual encounters throughout the book bear on his various fantasies, particularly in regard to Luc? Is fantasy more potent, more tangible and ultimately more trustworthy than Edward’s real experiences?

5. Hollinghurst gives us an occasional glimpse of Edward’s behavior as it is seen through the eyes of others; through his friend Edie, his outburst about the music in the restaurant with Marcel, through the Spanish girls that hear him “late in the night, swearing and singing and banging doors or something.” (p. 166) How do these instances contribute to our picture of Edward and the tension that lies between his own subjective narrative and our more objective view of him?

6. Edward meets Rose on one of his first nights in the Casette bar (p. 6). Rose’s body is later found in a canal (p. 262) after which Edward sees him in one of Matt’s pornographic videos (p. 394). Can Rose’s story be taken as a harshly delineated moral of the story, meant to show the potential dangers facing those pushed to extremes by their own circumstances and the obsessions of others?

7. Whereas Museum Curator Paul Echevin has chosen to “protect” Orst, Edward believes that the more morally questionable and sexual aspects of Orst’s personal life ought to be brought to light in the artist’s catalog (p. 307). In your view, does this type of full disclosure always enhance our

understanding of an artist's work? Should Orst's, or any artist's work, stand for itself, independent of what could be construed as an unseemly personal context, and if so, what are the moral implications?

8. On page 157, the author introduces the idea of fetishism as a kind of alchemy. Considering that alchemy may be defined as a transformation, discuss Edward's own fetishism in regard to Luc, beginning with his showing Luc's photo to Rose (p. 8) to his dressing entirely in Luc's clothing (p. 348). Does Edward's "transformation" ultimately symbolize his desire to return to the innocence of youth?

9. "I looked away into the arched stillness under a bridge that the road rose and swung to cross. Almost a circle, arch and reflection crossed by the water's wintry line. I was working with nothing, I had nothing on Luc, nothing of him that mattered, nothing from him. It came over me with a certain desolate formal perfection and for the first time." (p. 287) Keeping in mind that half of the circle image is an illusion, How does the meaning of the reflected arch play out in the novel, particularly in regard to fantasy vs. reality and the past and present experience of various characters? Which part of the image is more powerful for Edward, the reality or the illusion? Can you find other instances of this type of mirrored disparity in the novel, for instance in the case of Jane Byron and her near twin, the prostitute that Orst discovers at the church?

10. After revealing the secret of Orst's unseemly obsession with the young prostitute that began after Jane Byron's mysterious death, Paul Echevin tells Edward "I've always been prepared to tell, if I could first find the right person. That's why I'm so glad you got the point." (P. 292). Why has Paul safeguarded Orst's secrets for so long, and why is Edward "the right person?" By protecting Orst, is Paul attempting to atone for his own illicit affair with the German soldier and

his alluded-to responsibility for Orst's death?

11. In the final pages of the book, Edward is disturbed by the appearance of his friend Gerald and the music band dressed in animal costumes; "He had two mouths: his real mouth and chin were left uncovered beneath the contraption, so that he could play, whereas the mouths of the bear and the monkey more troublingly coincided." (p. 418.) Discuss how masks, real or imagined, and the greater theme of betrayal play into the novel. Can you think of any characters in the book that who are mask-less, or who are actually innocent of betrayal?

Combo Questions

1. The words of Henry James appear in both *The Line of Beauty* and *The Folding Star*, and comparisons are often drawn between the two authors. In many of his novels, James explores the topic of alienation, often juxtaposing the cultural and aesthetic sensibilities of old Europe and the established society that it represents with the unique, "upstart" ethos of the United States at the turn of the century.. How has Hollinghurst capitalized on these themes in his own novels?

2. In *The Folding Star*, Dawn is the first real love and sexual partner for Edward Manners, a role echoed by Leo in *The Line of Beauty*. Both Leo and Dawn contract the AIDS virus on the cusp of it becoming a widely acknowledged public health crisis. Considering what these characters represent for Nick and Edward, does the author use Leo and Dawn to speak to a larger loss of innocence and freedom within the homosexual and heterosexual communities?

3. Both novels depict graphic and often coarse homosexual encounters, often in stark relief to the author's typically measured observations and imagery. What is your view of the treatment of

scenes such as Nick and Wani's coke-fueled encounter with Tristao, which takes place upstairs from the Fedden's anniversary party (p. 339). What does he achieve by making these scenes so visually explicit to the reader?

4. While both novels are viewed through their respective protagonists, each employ a different narrative perspective. Does the use of first person narrative in *The Folding Star* allow us to be more willingly drawn into Edward Manner's fantasy life? How does the author ensure that we also see Edward's actions as morally depraved? And why has Hollinghurst chosen to use third person narrative in *The Line of Beauty*? Does the technique help to foster our understanding of Nick as being emotionally disengaged from his own existence? Do we feel that we "know" one character better than the other?

5. "The service stairs were next to the main stairs, separated only by a wall, but what a difference there was between them...." (*Line of Beauty*, p. 231) "I scrambled up too, confused by a moment by my own reflection in the glass...as if a sixth sense revealed a face within my face, ghostly features caught in the very silvering of the mirror." (*The Folding Star*, p. 11). Reflections and stairways appear in several instances in both novels. What do these devices tell us about the "hidden" lives that Nick and Edward lead?

The Line of Beauty

1. In his life with the Feddens, Nick plays a variety of roles. What is the wider implication of his being available to "make up numbers" at the Fedden household? How does Nick's admission of his feeling about Gerald "long resisted, that there might be something rather awful about him," affect our view of Nick's continued presence in the Fedden household? Is Nick more serving of

his own social and aesthetic motives than he himself might lead us to believe?

2. Hollinghurst opens the novel with a quote from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. In Carroll's story, Alice's frequently encounters the often non-sensical world of political royalty. Why has Hollinghurst chosen this quote and what parallels might be drawn between Alice and Nick? What might the author be implying about class distinctions? Taking into account his final confrontation with Gerald (pp. 416-421) does Nick, like Alice with *Wonderland*, in some way outgrow the Fedden's world?

3. For both Nick and the Fedden family, the disgrace of Gerald's dubious financial dealings and his resignation as an MP are quickly superceded by the fallout following Nick and Catherine's visit to Badger's apartment. While Nick's affair with Wani Ouradi is used as a scapegoat for the family scandals, Gerald is offered a lucrative directorship, about which Penny comments on page 434-5: "That's the way the world works, Nick. Gerald can't lose. You've got to understand that." Discuss Nick's final conversations with Rachael (p. 405), Toby (p.409) and Gerald (p.417.) How is Nick effectively excommunicated from the Fedden family, and why is he considered expendable in this way? Why has Hollinghurst chosen "Guest" as Nick's last name? Do you sense that any of the Feddens regret their final actions toward Nick (are they themselves victims of their own circumstances)?

4. "The Lady" Margaret Thatcher is a potent political and sexual presence in novel, particularly in the Fedden household. How does the state of "mesmerized conjecture" into which this "other woman" throws Gerald (p. 194) affect Rachael? Do you think that Rachael knows about Gerald's physical affair with Penny before it becomes a public scandal? If so, why does she not only allow, but even possibly in some way endorse it?

5. After seeing one of Leo's favorite movies, Nick is reluctant to admit his dislike of the film, which paints a vulgar portrayal of a character driven in part by lust and cocaine; "As so often he had the feeling that an artistic disagreement, almost immaterial to the other person, was going to be the vehicle of something that mattered to him more than he could say." (p. 148). Is Nick's aesthetic sensibility a stand-in for deeper, unwelcomed emotions? Does this sensibility in some way protect Nick, "to whom life was a series of shocks, more or less well mastered." (p. 57) from feeling the truth?

6. Emotional, perceptive and vulnerable, Catherine Fedden plays a singular role in the novel. In what respects might she be seen as the moral, and emotional consciousness of the book? Does your perception of Catherine change after learning that it was she who divulged the secret about Nick and Wani's affair? Do you think that Catherine knew her admissions would result in Nick's banishment from the Fedden household, and if so, why would she knowingly seal Nick's fate in this manner?

7. Why is Nick trying so hard to fit into a world in which he doesn't think he belongs? What "qualities" do the Feddens possess that are beguiling to him? Discuss the symbol of the ogee, or "*The Line of Beauty*." How does Hollinghurst use the double curve, with its concave and convex sides, as a thematic device in the novel? What does the shape imply about the public and private lives of the characters?

8. At the Fedden's party the novel reaches a climax when Nick asks Margaret Thatcher to dance; "It was the simplest thing to do – Nick came forward and sat, half-kneeling, on the sofa's edge, like someone proposing in a play." (p. 335) Could this be seen as a point at which Nick's

trajectory begins to separate from the Feddens? In what way is this scene both a triumph and a potentially liability for Nick?

9. Arriving at the house in France, Nick finds Gerald and Rachael lying out by the pool. "...he saw everything that was wonderful about them, and something else, like one of Catherine's glittering intuitions, their unsuspecting readiness for pain." (p. 264). What is the meaning of Nick's observation? Can those who lead very public lives be held completely accountable for their own actions or are they in part victims of their own circumstances?

10. In the final pages of the novel it comes over Nick that his latest AIDS test will be positive and the realization triggers in him a sudden and urgent shift: "It was a sort of terror, made up of emotions from every stage of his short life, weaning, homesickness, envy and self-pity; but he felt that the self-pity belonged to a larger pity. It was a love of the world that was shockingly unconditional." (p. 438.) Why does this scene feel so tragic? Do you have a sense that Nick is suddenly regretful of his own life and his inability to feel any real connection to it?