

Until It Shimmers

Alec Scott

Ace of Swords (Jun 28, 2022)

(184pp)

978-1-77751-399-3

Until It Shimmers is an involving novel about finding one's place in the world.

Alec Scott's novel *Until It Shimmers* is about a man's search for his true self—and his sexual awakening.

Ned, the sheltered scion of a well-to-do Toronto family, can trace his roots to England and Oscar Wilde. He's book smart, with knowledge of classic authors from T.S. Eliot to Evelyn Waugh. But Ned has yet to learn life smarts.

Beginning with Ned's college graduation and following him through his adventures in London during the tumultuous mid-1980s, the novel focuses on numerous pivotal episodes, including a fraught, darkly comic moment in which Ned comes out to his parents. It also covers his initial, tentative forays into London's gay nightclub scene. Internally, Ned struggles to overcome his self-loathing, and religious, social, and family expectations that threaten to crush him. Taking his first fumbling steps toward maturity, he comes across an array of colorful people, including a bohemian great aunt who offers him support; bawdy writers and performance artists who form the backbone of London's cultural underground; a suave Italian, Luca, who becomes Ned's first lover; and a college buddy who serves as a symbol of what Ned could have been, if he had opted for a more conventional life.

Luxuriating in its high-class milieu, the novel embraces understated, measured storytelling, maintaining a deft balance between thoughtfulness and rambunctiousness. Ned's academic background also means that the novel is thick with literary allusions that both inspire and paralyze him—*Brideshead Revisited* is a major touchstone in his life, for example. As he learns to embrace his LGBTQ+ identity, the story opens up to accommodate fizzy references to eighties pop bands, vivid descriptions of manors and S & M clubs, and sexual encounters that are both raunchy and tender. The book's most gripping passages explore the darker elements of Ned's new life: an early traumatic episode finds him barely escaping a sexual assault, and later moments touch on guilt, an attempted suicide, and the specter of AIDS, which threatens to derail his relationship with Luca.

While Ned is the clear focus of *Until It Shimmers*, the book takes the time to color in many of the supporting characters with vibrant strokes. Particularly memorable is Ned's mother, Helena—a layered, sympathetic woman who takes center stage in one of the book's most devastating chapters, in which her relationship with her estranged father is explored.

Ned's story is sometimes sidetracked by chatty dinner parties and anecdotes about his family's eccentric relations and friends. But at its best, the book is a sober, affectionate story of self-discovery that builds to a bittersweet conclusion featuring reflections on loss alongside hope for the future. Contemplative in its approach and incisive in its characterizations, *Until It Shimmers* is an involving novel about finding one's place in the world.

HO LIN (April 8, 2022)

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