

The Night Language

David Rocklin

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Oscar Wilde called gay love “the love which dare not speak its name” when homosexual relationships were illegal, stigmatized, and taboo. *The Night Language*, by David Rocklin, revisits such a time, finding gay men closeted not only by culture, but by their fears of what they could lose by coming out.

Philip Layard, an apprentice to a doctor on the battlefield of present-day Ethiopia, becomes the guardian of Prince Alamayou of Abyssinia. Both men are black, and although they're very different, they are treated as equals by Victorian culture.

The Prince is taken from the war in Abyssinia to the court of Queen Victoria “so he could present himself as a grateful foreigner.” As Alamayou learns to speak English, it becomes apparent that he's not going to play the role that Parliament wants.

Philip is his faithful supporter, guardian, and lover. They find a common language that binds them together against political forces.

The Night Language is lovely and complex. It opens slowly, folding in historical details with ease. There's no doubt that the novel is written with a modern eye: the era's sharp racism is cinematic and soft, seen through a long lens.

Rocklin, who is white, spends plenty of time in the heads of his main characters—a problematic choice. Still, his writing sparkles.

The Night Language captures a magical, doomed relationship at the peak of the British Empire.

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