

Reading Group Guide – *The Expectations* by Alexander Tilney

1. Power—who has it, who doesn't, how they wield it—is important throughout *The Expectations*. How does the power of each character ebb and flow? How does each of them prosper or suffer as they hoard or lose power?
2. Have you played squash before? Or even heard of it? How does Ben's devotion to squash change his relationships to other people? How does his father's financial situation change his relationship to the game? There's a gap between how much Ben and his coach Manley Price care about the game and the fact that it's virtually unknown in the wider culture; how does that affect how we see them?
3. St. James, this isolated and often inescapable boarding school, becomes almost another character in the book. How would the story be different if this were a private day school? Or a public school? How do the concerns of the school's teachers and administration—Markson, Price, Phelps—affect the students? How does scandal, attempts to avoid scandal, and fundraising drive the school's behavior?
4. Alice works on a photo project and asks Ben to sit for a portrait. During the photo shoot she says, "I just thought that you seem pretty self-conscious a lot of the time, as though you aren't sure [camera snaps] how you come off to other people, and that difference between how you suspect you might come off [camera snaps] and how you actually come off is interesting." How does Alice contend with the scrutiny that she has to endure? How does she use photography to gain more control?
5. Incompletion and ruptures occur again and again. Ben chips a tooth. He breaks a leg. Instead of being a solid landscape, the St. James campus is traversed by water. How do these breaks and incompletions play into the characters' efforts to make their situations "complete" or "right"?
6. Toward the end of the book, Ahmed asks, "What are we all trying to be? My father is just as a man should be, and he never came here." How does Ahmed's experience of St. James compare to the image of the school that he arrived with? How does his self-image change, and how does his relationship with Ben change?
7. Late in the story, Ben suggests to his mother Helen that maybe he could come home and go to the local public high school. What does her response say about what it means



to her to have Ben attend this prestigious school? How does her upbringing play into this? Her marriage to Harry and what she expected her marriage to be?

8. Does *The Expectations* change the way you see events in the present day? The recent college admissions scandals? The nostalgia for a previous “great” era in American history? The ways that women, people of color, gay and trans people are accessing and/or being denied systems of power traditionally held by white men? Does it change the way you see America heading into the future?