



# The Understudy: A Novel

By David Nicholls

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## The Understudy: A Novel By David Nicholls

Recently divorced actor Stephen C. McQueen (no relation, unfortunately) seems to have a knack for bad luck. But a failed marriage, a stalled career, a judgmental ex-wife, a distant daughter, a horrid little studio apartment in the far reaches of the London suburbs—all these pathetic elements seem to pale in the chiseled face of his newest tormentor: the Twelfth Sexiest Man in the World, Josh Harper.

Josh is the star of *Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know*, a biographical play about Lord Byron—and Stephen is his understudy. Not only is Josh fantastically, infuriatingly good-looking, internationally renowned, and remarkably talented, he's also frustratingly healthy. No matter how many all-night booze-and-coke benders Josh goes on, he always shows up at the stage door for his call like clockwork. Stephen doubts he'll ever get his chance to slip on the puffy shirt and tight breeches of Byron and tread the boards in the role that would certainly be the break he's always waited for.

And just when Stephen's sure he couldn't resent Josh more, he meets Josh's witty, restless American wife, Nora . . . and discovers he likes her a little too much. Another man might curse his luck at finding that his potential dream woman is a rival's wife, but at this point, Stephen would expect nothing else. Caught between his stirring feelings for Nora, the demands of an insistent and secretive Josh, and his lifelong desire for a real career in show business, Stephen must make a terrible decision: Will it be the girl or the fame?

A hapless, bumbling bloke in love, an arrogant megastar with a potpourri of addictions, a sexy married woman out of her element in the fast lane—David Nicholls brings them all together in this knockout romantic comedy.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* Nicholls's wry romantic comedy about down-on-his-luck actor Stephen McQueen receives a royal audio treatment, complete with mood-setting music and Layton's seamless narration. With chameleon-like grace, Layton slips easily among the characters, from Stephen's genial, unremarkable British accent to the slippery suave tones of Josh Harper, whom Stephen understudies, and the flat American accent of Josh's smart, self-deprecating wife, Nora. Both narrator and music succeed in conveying Stephen's desperation at being 32, with a small number of bit parts to his credit and only one broken leg away from stepping into Josh's shoes as leading man. Convinced that all he needs is that single opportunity to turn his fortune around, Stephen makes a pact with Josh to help him deceive his wife about his extramarital liaisons, an agreement that slowly dissolves under the weight of Stephen's growing affection for Nora. An understated success, this audiobook is full of quiet but powerful realizations about life, love and the stark difference between reality and movie reality. There are moments where listeners will recognize the genius of this audio's orchestration, such as when Nicholls describes the enthusiasm of Stephen's daughter ebbing away like a wind-up toy running out of steam, and strains of a wind-up music box can be heard in the background.

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From [Booklist](#)

*\*Starred Review\** The follow-up to Nicholls' hilarious debut novel, *A Question of Attraction* (2003), is a smart, funny, bighearted romantic comedy. Struggling British actor Stephen McQueen is fast approaching his midthirties with nary a smidgen of the success of his namesake, a leading factor in the breakup of his marriage. His most lucrative gig required him to dress up as a squirrel. Now he is the understudy for the "twelfth sexiest man alive," action-film star Josh Harper, who is trying to shore up his acting cachet by doing a stint as Lord Byron in a West End play. Despite his stunning good looks and enviable success, Josh has trouble holding up his end in a conversation that does not revolve around teeth whitening; his wife, Nora, however, is a completely different story: warm, witty, and self-deprecating. Nicholls expertly mines his rich premise for all it's worth, hilariously riffing on fame, vanity, and the actor's lot. What raises his material far above standard-issue light comedy, though, is the way Nichols always seeds his polished banter with deeper emotional issues. The sometimes tender, sometimes painful scenes between Stephen and his seven-year-old daughter, especially, are achingly authentic. *Joanne Wilkinson*

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Review

'I adored "The Understudy". It's a fantastic comedy ... delightfully written and makes you realise that even though some people are always cast as second best, that doesn't mean they're never winners.' -- New Woman 20050401 'A comic genius' -- Maria Beaumont on David Nicholls 20050401 'Brilliant... we would recommend it to anyone' -- Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan on STARTER FOR T 20050401 'I laughed a lot' -- Jeremy Paxman on STARTER FOR TEN 20050401 'Moving, wickedly observed, warm, uplifting and above all blindingly funny, Starter for Ten hits the spot time after time. Read this book' -- Jack on STARTER FOR TEN 20050401 'A zippy comedy with laugh-out-loud lines, grounded on a solid plot and first-rate dialogue...irresistible' -- Daily Mail 20050408

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From reader reviews:

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**Nona Smith:**

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