



Library podcast

André Aciman and Dave Wheeler discuss 'Find Me'

[00:00:05] [piano music] Welcome to the Seattle Public Library's podcasts of author readings and library events, library podcasts are brought to you by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation. To learn more about our programs and podcasts, visit our web site at www.spl.org. To learn how you can help the Library Foundation support the Seattle Public Library, go to foundation.spl.org.

[00:00:36] [piano music] We are going to get started in just a second. I wanted to say hello, I'm Stesha Brandon. I'm the literature and humanities program manager here at the Seattle Public Library. And as we're getting started, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. We honor their elders past and present, and we thank them for the stewardship of this land that is associated with the book. And Karen, do you want to talk a little bit about that or..? So welcome to Central Library. And thank you for joining us for tonight's program with Andre Aciman and Dave Wheeler, presented in partnership with Elliott Bay Book Company. We're grateful to the Connie and Gary Kunis Foundation, Seattle City of Literature and The Seattle Times for their generous support of library programs. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the Seattle Public Library Foundation for their support of library programs and events. Private gifts to the foundation from thousands of donors help the library provide free programs and services that touch the lives of everyone in our community. So thank you to library donors here tonight. Thank you.

[applause]

[00:01:40] Yeah, let's give around of applause. I think there are a few in the audience.

[00:01:44] So now I'm delighted to welcome Karen Maeda Allman from Elliott Bay Book Company, who's going to introduce us to tonight's program.

[applause]

[00:01:56] So good evening. Thank you for coming out tonight. So it was about a year and a half ago, we hosted Andre Aciman at Elliot Bay, and it was, I think, his second visit, this time to read from and discuss his 2007 beloved classic novel, Call Me by Your Name. Very interesting and very unusual to have a book tour so long after.. after a book's release. But as you know, this was, of course, related to the 2017 release of the film based on Call Me by Your Name, which went on to win an Oscar and a

BAFTA for James Ivory's best adapted screen play, and also received nominations for Best Motion Picture of the Year, and Best Actor. But we know this book, of course, as a beloved book as well as a film. So but.. but the film did open the door for us, for many more readers and admirers of the novel and of the author's other books and also desire for a sequel as.. as so many of us wanted to spend time within the world that is created, which he has in Find Me, but it's some years on. And Find Me, this new novel, was on over 35 most anticipated lists, and it's well on its way to the bestseller list, if it isn't there already.

[00:03:20] We're so glad that you've joined us tonight to participate in the tour that will launch this book into the world, into the hands of many admirers. nylon.com said this book is.. "stubbornly unsentimental, but nevertheless beautiful. Find Me at Heart is a meditation on how love bends and warps over time, but never quite disappears". And I thought that was a really beautiful tribute to the book. Andre Aciman is the author of of several books, many books, Eight White Knights. Call Me by Your Name, as I said, Out of Egypt, which is a memoir, False Papers, Alibis, Harvard Square and Enigma Variations. And we have most of those copies of most of those books on our Elliott Bay table tonight, as well as Find Me. He teaches Comp Lit at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and he lives in Manhattan with his wife. He appears in conversation tonight with Dave Wheeler, who is the associate editor for the book Industry news source, Shelf Awareness, here in Seattle. His first collection of poetry, Contingency Plans, was published by T.S. Poetry Press, and he's written essays for Catapult, The Stranger, INTO, and The Morning News, and elsewhere.

[00:04:38] So this evening, the format is a conversation between Andre Aciman and Dave Wheeler and then followed by [...] questions from the audience. And then after that, a book signing and a chance to meet with the author, as Stesha said. And we will continue to sell copies of the book through the end of the program. So with that, thank you so much for joining us. And please join me in welcoming Andre Aciman and Dave Wheeler.

[applause]

[00:05:16] [inaudible] I'll take the far one, is this okay with you?

[00:05:21] Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us. Are you comfortable Andre?.

[00:05:24] I'm comfortable, very comfortable. This is too comfortable. I also want to thank, you know, Elliot Bay for hosting me and inviting me and also for the library for making this available. Without either of them, I wouldn't be here. And you might have better things to do. But I'm very happy to be here.

[00:05:46] As am I. It's it's a real honor to be here talking with you again. We had a conversation, like Karen said, about a year and a half ago, about Call Me by Your Name and Find Me is such a rich new book for these characters and so many of them or that so many of us have fallen in love with. I was certainly delighted by it when I first read it, and I hope others will be, too. As I got to reading it, though, like nylon, I got to thinking about how Call Me by Your Name is something of a traditional

coming of age story where desire is awakened to no Elio, whereas Find Me is explores a different kind of coming of age, one that awakens to time's effect on desire. Is that something that you were thinking about as you were drafting?

[00:06:34] I don't know that I was thinking, but I was I was writing as I was as it was happening. And I never have a plot in mind, but I just went and did this. And as I was writing, I realized that I was enjoying myself, which you don't enjoy yourself as you're writing, but you enjoy the idea of writing and which are two different things.

[00:06:58] But actually, I wasn't thinking of them as old or aged or aging. They're just different characters, totally different with the same names. They've.. they've sort of grown up a bit, but I didn't want to begin to tabulate what are the differences between what they were at 17 and what he's now at 32.

[00:07:20] Yeah, and I think that comes across. There's a very natural progression into their lives in this book. Was it with the passage of time since you wrote Call Me by Your Name and with the popularity of the film , was it difficult to balance what you might have wanted to focus on compared to what you thought your audience might be expecting or wanting out of this book?

[00:07:51] What the audience wanted became very clear as soon as the book came out, the first book, they wanted a sequel or they wanted.. they asked me questions, well, what happens to them? And, oh, can you write the book from Oliver's perspective? The same story, just Oliver's perspective. And I said, I have no idea what his perspective is. Don't ask me because I don't know. And so there was a lot of that going on. There was also I used to get a lot of mail. That was fan mail and fan fiction, let's say more, more. [laughter] And I...

[00:08:25] Juicy stuff I'm sure.

[00:08:26] What?

[00:08:27] Juicy stuff I'm sure.

[00:08:28] Lots, oh, my God. You should see the fruits!

[00:08:32] I mean, people were letting their libido go on me and I'm saying, please, you know, but I couldn't even read this stuff any longer because I was afraid that if ever one day I would write a sequel or something approaching a sequel, they would always say, "Oh, but you copied my idea. That was my desire." I said, I cannot read any longer what you said you think.

[00:08:51] But it is very difficult to say. I didn't keep in. I cannot write if I think somebody is looking over my shoulder and I cannot write thinking that this is what the readership wants or this is going to make them happy. I, you can't do that.

[00:09:09] I'm not that kind of a writer, so. Oh, sorry, I was not holding the mic the right way. I can hear myself now. So everything I said before doesn't count. Okay. No, but was very difficult to to even listen. I didn't want to listen. I couldn't listen. I was waiting for really for myself, though I hoped the book would get published. But I was going from somewhere inside my head and I would just ignore anything that came my way. Among them, my wife would say to me, you know, enough with the classical music and people don't want to hear this. They think you're showing off. And I said, you know, I need to have classical music in it. Sorry. So I do what I want to do. And then I leave the readership to do what they they what they like or.. it's not something I'm indifferent to. I hope they like it. But at the same time, I cannot be sort of tailor... I cannot tailor make something to suit the public. It's just not possible.

[00:10:09] How did.. how did seeing actors portray these characters influence the way you wrote it? Because I'm sure that's that's impossible to erase from your, from what your seeing.

[00:10:18] No, I can't. I can't. In fact, you know, I always say to people, people say, you have such a visual.. mind. I don't, I don't see anything. So I didn't even know what Elio looked like as I was writing Call Me by Your Name. Was he blonde? Was he dark skinned? Was he hairy? Not hairy. I had no idea. And I couldn't decide. And I didn't even know what Oliver looked like. But once I saw the film, everything was he erased.

[00:10:48] I see Timothy in the role of Elio. When I read reread the book, I see Timothy and I see Armie as Oliver. There's no way I can ignore that. But once I started writing Find Me, I went back to seeing them very fuzzily. They're older. They, I can't, I don't even know what they look like. So, but when I look into the past now, whatever I had any idea I've had of what Oliver looked like has been erased, totally erased and superimposed by the image of Armie Hammer.

[00:11:22] So now he owns the character.

[laughter]

[00:11:26] So when there are action figures of this, it'll look like Armie Hammer. So one thing that I was really taken by starting reading Find Me is that you begin with Elio's father, Samuel, who didn't have a name in the first book and the [inaudible] film named him for you.

[00:11:49] Yes.

[00:11:50] How did you choose him as your entry point into these..?

[00:11:53] Well, it's there's a long history to this. After I wrote Eight White Knights, which I had interrupted writing in order to Call Me by Your Name when I went, I finished Eight White Knights. I said, I'm going to go back to Call Me by Your Name and I'm going to continue writing about Elio. And I started many, many times to write about Elio at the age of twenty two, twenty three in college, out of college, as a big sort of budding musician and so on. And it was boring. Because it was, as I make

fun of it, it's like Son of Call Me by Your Name or Call Me by.. it's like Rocky 2 and 3 and 4. I just didn't want to do that. And so I just gave up. And eventually what happened about three, four years ago almost, in no, 2016 is three years ago I was riding a train from Bordighera to to Genova, actually. And I, I sat next to a woman who was very interesting and smart and funny. And she had a dog. And I we started talking about her dog, and she said, could you hold the leash? I'm going to go to the bathroom. Fine [inaudible] So, of course, I've never held a leash in my life, but, because I don't have a dog. But anyway, I did it just to be nice. She got off two stations afterward. She told me her father was very sick, he was probably dying. It was his birthday. So, and I, as soon as she left, I started writing about her. I had no idea what I wanted to do. That's exactly how I started Call Me by Your Name . I was writing about a house. In this case, I was writing about a woman on the train. And I had this image of Chekhov staring at me saying, Oh, the lady with a lap dog on the train. Famous story by Chekhov. I said, Oh, no. Okay okay. But about, you know, four or five pages later, I said, this is not just an anonymous character.

[00:13:46] It is Elio's father. I like, I said now we're gonna discover who he really is because you had no idea who he was. He just gave a wonderful speech. And so I decided to start with him. I had no idea where I was going with this because.. but I did know one thing, that Elio was going to show up at the very end as a.. almost like a minor character. And I loved that idea because that would allow me to start with him as a major character in the next chapter.

[00:14:18] I think that was a very brilliant reentry point, because I think so many of us fell in love with the father in the movie, and in the book, as he gives this speech. And there's.. there's so much mystery to what he's.. what wisdom he imparts to Elio.

[00:14:37] And so giving you the opportunity and giving us the opportunity to see more into his background felt very redeeming and gratifying to me.

[00:14:48] I think he's a fascinating character. But, you know, not everybody will. That's.. that's a given, you know?

[00:14:55] Sure. In the film, he's played by Michael Stuhlbarg. And he reads the audiobook for Find Me.

[00:15:02] Yes. He does, he does.

[00:15:03] Can you tell us anything about how that came to be?

[00:15:05] Oh, I mean, Call Me by Your Name, for those of you who know, is read on Audible by Armie Hammer. And he enjoyed the experience.

[00:15:14] And so we went to Michael Stuhlbarg, who is also a professional actor. And he says "I'd love to do it". And he did it in no time, and said he enjoyed it tremendously. And I'm very happy

because I love his voice and I love his his sort of way, the way he speaks and the way he reads. It's deliberate. It's slow. It's not something.. it's not a slog. But he's he's slow, and I love that.

[00:15:42] Yeah, I've.. I haven't listened to it myself, but the.. the reactions I've been seeing on the internet have been fantastic.

[00:15:49] Yeah, yeah

[00:15:50] This seems like a good time to talk about maybe the other promotional things you've done around this, including the perfume. How.. how did this come to be?

[00:15:59] I. They said, you know, there's a famous writer in France who became very famous after the war. Extremely famous, and then he died. And everybody said, oh, he became famous because they sold his book as if it was a soap, but it was.. it did very well. Now we're selling this book as.. with the perfume. And it was.. we.. I said, what? The perfume? Why and how come? And so they said, well, what kind of scent would you like? And so I gave them some ideas. They said, well, we need to do this as well. I said, well, let's see. We did we did three trials. And I don't think we ever totally, totally agreed on what was.. they wanted something that would suggest Rome. The smell of summer, sand, masonry. And I wanted a lot of Bergamot. So, but we.. we finally sort of did something that is.. that allows us both to feel that we have created something that we both like.

[00:16:55] Had you created a scent before?

[00:16:57] Never! What do I know about scents? You know, I may.. I collect them, but I don't know anything of how to make them? No, no idea.

[00:17:08] Find Me, to me as a reader, I felt like you were.. you were enjoying yourself writing this book. There were there were so many meta-narrative sort of jokes to it, jokes isn't really the right word, but it seems like you.. you were having a fun conversation with readers along the way.

[00:17:30] For instance, you.. you take the suggestion of a parallel life that comes up at the end of Call Me by Your Name and.. and expand and beautifully illustrated it in Find Me, including a doctoral dissertation that .. that the characters discuss. Was it.. was it a sense of wanting to explain this philosophy formally that led you to write this dissertation topic, or were you just sort of having fun with.. with what readers might remember from Call Me by Your Name?

[00:17:59] I wanted to [discuss].. I wanted to talk about time. That's really what I wanted to do. And it's very hard to speak about time without being sort of didactic. And that's the last thing you want in a novel is to find and also is being didactic and selling you ideas. So I didn't want to do that. So it was I was resisting that. But I was very interested in the idea that the father of the woman whom Elio's father meets is called Miranda. And her father is dying, like the woman I met on the train.

[00:18:31] And.. and he's.. he edits dissertations as.. because he was a retired professor and one of the dissertations.. this is an interesting story because it came up today. One of the subjects of the dissertation is about a wartime pilot who goes to fight in Germany and disappears and they never recover his body.

[00:18:52] So his girlfriend marries a man who basically looks very much like him. And they have three daughters. And eventually the man dies.

[00:19:03] The wife dies. The daughters are sort of.. forget.. they don't even know about the the ex-boyfriend of the mother. And eventually they discover a body in Germany. And they do a DNA test and they they don't have any.. there are no relatives left. So there's a very distant cousin. And finally, so that they.. the distant cousin, they identify the gene and the DNA of the.. the man who died and they brought him back to South Dakota, where he belonged. And there was an article written about this. And today, somebody in working in the U.S. government wrote to me saying, "By any chance, is this a pilot who died in Italy"? I said, "No, he died in Germany". Well we got into a long conversation. Anyway. But this is about the fact that you die, and you disappear. And it's as if you never existed. Nobody knows your name, nobody. You are.. no relatives, everybody's dead that you could have grown up with. And suddenly you.. something resurfaces, layers and years and tiers later. And I'm interested in that subject. And so I found four examples of the same thing happening. And I just narrated them because it's part of the subject. But it's also about the father saying to..

[00:20:25] ..his daughter and to the man was going to become her her husband at some point, who is Elio's father, because they're divorced, that basically time does not work the way we wanted to. Time is against us, or at least time doesn't care about us. And so we are not really made for time, but time is something that we struggle with all our lives. And I think that's true, because when you think about time, what do you really think when you think about time?

[00:20:56] You think about death. Because that's really the nickname for time. Or time is the nickname for death. It makes it comfortable. But every time you think of time, you're thinking of time passing by. And basically, the more time passes, the closer you get to the end. And we all know this, but we don't want to think about it. And it's these kinds of thoughts that sort of troubled me when I was writing the book. And I wanted to address them in a way that was not.. sort of cacophonous, or sort of heavy duty. I wanted to be light and humorous, if you can. And that's what I did. So.. in order to conceal the fact that I really wanted to discuss that.

[00:21:35] I think you did give it a lot of levity because immediately following the father.. or the.. Miranda's father's discussion of this dissertation, he follows up saying, "I think the young man is having trouble pulling this together." Was that a certain self-effacing humor that you were struggling to write this yourself?

[00:21:54] Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, absolutely. He's.. this is.. I don't think he's ever gonna finish this dissertation, which is something I live with because I'm a professor and a lot of my students are graduate students writing dissertations. That's.. sometimes I suspect.. you're never going to finish this

at this rate. So, yes, it's a subject.. it's kind of shoptalk, but I didn't want it to sound like that. And I hope it doesn't.

[00:22:18] It doesn't. It doesn't. It was just it was something that made me laugh, and I was.. Another thing you mentioned earlier, classical music. And what.. what role does classical music play in your.. your writing process? Was it was your wife getting tired of hearing the classical music? Or reading your classically music?

[00:22:35] No, no, no. No, no, because I listened to it usually on my own when nobody's at home, because I.. I don't want to bother anybody, but.. And by the way, I don't play any an instrument. I don't even know how to read music. But I listen to classical music a lot. But I can't listen while I'm writing. But what.. what I wanted with classical music, I didn't mean to have a soundtrack to the book, but the presence of classical music of Beethoven, Bach and Mozart is over.. overwhelming in this novel because I think that classical music for those of you who like classical music and live with it, it is a way of saying.. when I mentioned classical music, I'm trying to address something that is sort of above the ordinary kind of music we listen to. It's about our ordinary. It's beyond ordinary, time bound, very earth.. sublunary sort of things where, when you talk about classical music, you're talking about that which is extratemporal, sort of goes beyond time. And it's a way of invoking it constantly, because as you probably know, my characters are not really you and me. They're more like sort of people hovering over earth and their feet are not grounded. And that's why I don't give you details of where in the cities is this taking place. I don't know and I don't care. But it's because I don't care about so many things that people say "what? You know, how can you not mention this or that? Why don't you address all these issues that are so sort of time bound"? I say, "Because that's not what I'm writing." I'm.. I'm interested in something that's slightly sort of off the planet, as it were. And that's what the role that classical music has for me. It's another order of.. it's another way of sort of creating a chronology of things that is not exactly.. sort of.. focused on the watch that you wear.

[00:24:34] And I think it lends you a vocabulary for.. for this book. Each section is sort of marked by a different musical notation. And in the middle of it, another one of those sort of meta-narrative winks you give to the reader is Elio discussing what.. what a cadenza is. And as I was reading and I was like, oh, this is.. this structure is exactly the book that he's writing for the sort of coda that you've written at the end of Call Me by Your Name. You're improvising within some of those years.

[00:25:05] Yes, yes. I mean.. I mean I don't want to make this very.. it's not an intellectual book, okay? Don't get scared, because that's not what I wanted to do. I hate people who have ideas in their books. I don't have ideas. But I like the fact that a cadenza is a piece of music that is improvised during a concerto. In other words, the orchestra stops and the pianist or the violinist or whatever instrument it is, sort of riffs on a theme that was introduced during the concert. But that becomes his because he's adding things to it, his own, whatever he feels like doing. It's a riff. And I think for those of you who like jazz, that's what a lot of jazz is. It's just riffing on a few notes and the discovery cadenza that is written by a man who died in the camps during the Holocaust, and the cadenza itself contains a piece of Mozart, which allows Elio to say "What kind of stupid cadenza is this? I've heard it", you know, and then he realizes it has some Beethoven in it, but that's weird.

[00:26:08] And then you realize that there's a Jewish prayer in sort of in.. inserted in the cadenza. And so obviously that becomes a kind of code between the person who wrote the cadenza and the person to whom it was given and who has never played it and kept it under wraps, as it were. And finally gives it to his son as a present before dying. And so I always like the idea that there's.. everything that I touch on has many, many layers. In other words, not just the superficial layer, but it's the under one. And then there's another.. a nether one. And a third and a fourth. And it goes back to.. those of you read Call Me by Your Name, it's the same thing that you have in the San Clemente Syndrome. You have a top church and then you have another church right under it, which was older. And then under that church, is a Mithraic Pagan Temple. And side along that Mithraic Temple, there's another temple, even older. And I love that because this is what I think our identities are from childhood on. We're the same person, but we have many, many different personas in us. And therefore, every time I mention anything, there's like an excavation going on. And I think this is what I.. In a way, it's what Freud does as well. It's constantly excavating. Going under, under, under with never an answer.

[00:27:32] Did you sort of re-excavate your manuscript for Call Me by Your Name before or as you were working through this?

[00:27:39] No, no. That was done. We put it aside. We finished Call Me by Your Name. In fact, I didn't even reread Call Me by Your Name in order to write Find Me. And somebody found a mistake, a very glaring mistake. I said "Oh, God, this is embarrassing. But it's okay. Fine." Because the father.. the father cannot have an affair with someone and be dead at the same time. But I love the fact. It's like finding out that you.. you know, you have a penny that belongs to that has an error in it, you know? Oh, I love it, okay?. It's like an old stamp that is misprinted and has become very valuable. I love the fact that there are mistakes in my work, and that the editor didn't catch it. Nobody caught it. Fine. Okay.

[00:28:22] You know, sort of conflicting apocryphal narratives about these people that exist out.. not touching the floor.

[00:28:29] Oh, yes. Ther are, of course there are. Yeah, there's plenty of these. And.. and people tell me things and I say, you know what? You're more right than I am. Why not? I mean.. and I told Luca, the director of the film, that the ending of the movie, for those of you who saw it, is amazing. And I said that ending is better than the ending to the book. He says, "No, you don't mean that". I said, "Yes, I do." So we went back and forth. Okay. But people come up and.. with all kinds of explanations that, you know, you're right. I can't undo it, but it's fine.

[00:29:02] Find Me, has this rumit.. ruminative sense to it? Elio and Samuel share these vigils with one another. Was that something you wanted to read for us?

[00:29:14] Yes, I wanted to read something, but I need a book.

[00:29:20] That's okay..

[00:29:24] And I've.. well, let me introduce the idea. There is a moment where. Thank you so much. There's a moment in which Elio's father, who goes to Rome periodically to give lectures, but now he's in Rome because his son lives in Rome, and they're very close, and what the father does.. let's call him Sammy after the movie.. what he does is he likes to go back to places that were dear to him. And then he has this thing that he does with his son. They go and visit places where they thought something happened to either of them, which I do with my own son. When we go to Paris, for example, I show him where my father lived, where my grandmother lived and so on. And we share that. And every time we are in Paris together, which happens not too often, but often enough, we do this vigil. It's called.. I call them vigils, because for those of you who know, there is in Spain or Italy or Portugal, whenever you walk into an old part of town, there's always the little shrine to the virgin. And there's always a candle or a lamp that's lit. And people pass by they offer a prayer or something, and then they go about their business. So the father does that. And since it's written in the first person..

[microphone adjusting]

[00:30:38] So, it's the father speaking. And the father has gone and done a vigil with Miranda the day before, and shown her the place where he was, himself, a student once upon a time.

[00:30:51] [Author reading from the book] "When we reached Via della Pace, I thought Elio was about to take us to one of his favorite churches in the area. Instead, no sooner had we sighted the church, that he made a right turn and took us to Via Santamaria dell'Anima," (for those of you who know the area. It's a beautiful area.) "Then after a few steps, and just as I'd done with Miranda the day before, he stopped at a corner where a very old lamp was built into a wall. I never told you this, Dad, but I was drunk out of my mind one night and I had just vomited by the statue of the Pasquino and couldn't have been more dazed in my life. Yet here, as I leaned against this very wall, I knew, drunk as I was, that this with Oliver holding me, was my life. That everything that had come beforehand with others was not even a rough sketch, or the shadow of a draft of what was happening to me. And now, 10 years later, when I look at this wall under this old street lamp, I am back with him. And I swear to you, nothing has changed in 30, 40, 50 years. I will feel no differently. I have met many women and more men in my life. But what is watermarked on this very wall overshadows everyone I've known. When I come to be here, I can be alone or with people, with you, for instance. But I am always with him. If I stood for an hour staring at this wall, I'd be with him for an hour. If I spoke to this wall, it would speak back."

[00:32:36] So this is exactly the spirit, I think, of the book. It is.. how do you travel back in time to something that meant so much to you? And it's not going to kill you. You're not going to be sorrowful forever. But something is implanted in you and you can never forget it. And you go on a vigil to seek it out again. The way we all do when we go back to something that was very meaningful and that we know we will never have again or think we will never have again. And just like to revisit it and not that you accomplish anything when you revisit something. But the hope of revisiting is enough to give you some sort of satisfaction. So that is, I think, the spirit of the book.

[00:33:21] It is. And I also like that you.. you illustrate how those vigils can change over time. Miranda asks if she can join them on their vigils.[Yes] And I believe it's Elio who says, well, you're going to be part of like.. you'll become an element of the vigil from this point forward. And you understand that. And so I think it adds to that.. those layers on top of layers that are that are big.

[00:33:46] Yeah. She's she's gonna be now part of the family. And it's clear and what I love about that scene is that it is the exact converse of what happened in Call Me by Your Name. In Call Me by Your Name, the father is giving the son advice and telling him, be who you are. It's okay with me. And in this case, the son watches the father totally enamored with this woman and says, basically, I've never seen you in love, dad. And I hope you don't mess it up. There's a touch of that in his.. in his look at his father. And it's wonderful because now the roles are sort of reversed.

[00:34:25] You mentioned taking your own kids on vigils. [Yes] And I wondered if you managed to do any as you were writing this book. Vigils.. maybe for Call Me by Your Name or going back to Italy. Paris from New York.

[00:34:42] I've tried to. I've tried to walk. There's a street that I wrote about in Call Me by Your Name, when the two go from their hotel to the bookstore. And.. and I've walked on that street. I mean, when I wrote the novel, I knew the street, but I had never thought about it. And when I went to visit the street, I was expecting. Mm hmm. I'm walking down the street that I've written about and a very important moment in the lives of my characters. And I felt nothing.

[00:35:14] Well, I'm sure it's changed so much over time, too, that it's maybe..

[00:35:17] No, it's just that, you know, you try to say, I'm entering the zone that I created. It's a very powerful place. Nothing happens. You know, it's it's so disappointing because you go expecting something. And.. but that's also part.. because then it has to come to you by ricochet, or sort of obliquely. You don't expect.. for example, there was a song that I rediscovered while I was writing Call Me by Your Name. And I said, you know, I used to like that song years ago and now I'm listening to it again and again. And it was this summer in which I wrote Call Me by Your Name. And when I hear the song, it takes me back to the time when I was writing Call Me by Your Name. So this song, which was an inadvertent sort of accomplice in the whole thing, but not really significant, means something to me. Whereas the street where Elio and Oliver walk means nothing.

[00:36:12] Which song was it?

[00:36:13] What? Oh, it's a song by an Italian singer that is not that great anyway. But it moves me because it takes me right back to the summer when I was writing Call Me by Your Name.

[00:36:28] Wonderful. There are so many.. so many meals shared and bottles of wine opened in this book. It seems like every other page there opening a new bottle of wine. Is that also life that's.. that's hovering just a couple of feet off of the ground or is or is this something that..

[00:36:51] No, it's that.. actually there's there's another explanation. Yes, I do like wine, okay? And I love having people drink wine, and I like having.. they also drink single malts, which I happen to love. So that's okay, too. But what.. there's a lot of sitting at a table in my books, and that's because I love nothing more than having two characters facing each other without moving or doing anything that distracts them. Having a meal is the only way, or having coffee is the only thing you can do. But basically talking and examining each other or feeling each other out. I love that there's nothing else I like in fiction than the fact that you have two characters sitting together talking. But I like the idea of feeling each other out.. in other words, trying to understand, is there something going on here? Is there a possibility or is there absolutely nothing? And that takes me back, for those of you who've seen the film, it's an old film by now called My Night at Maude's, where there's a man and a woman, and they're not having sex. And it's called like when you.. the French have invented a new vice. They're not having sex, but they're sitting on a bed. She's under the sheets naked. And he's there, dressed in a suit and very gently telling her he's not going to sleep with her. But they're having a 20 minute conversation about almost everything that happened in their lives. And it's, of course, it's better than sex because they're talking and essentially feeling the situation. And I love that. That's that's really what I love best. I don't care about anything else.

[00:38:30] Of course, they have sex in my books.

[00:38:30] Lots of it. And it's great sex. It seems like probably time to transition to audience Q&A. So I believe Stesha's gonna be coming around with microphones as people maybe want to raise their hand. And I will do my best to call on you.

[00:38:53] Ok. You talk about time. Are you afraid of death?

[00:39:00] Am I afraid of death? I'm terrified. I tell you what. Because death is also a very embarrassing thing. In other words, you're basically become dysfunctional.. you don't die right away. It's nice to die right away. Better yet, in your sleep. But having people take care of you while you're busy dying is a humiliating. But I'll tell you something else about death. I think it is the grossest mistake of creation. It is not part of life. Anybody tells you that is lying, okay? It isn't. It is a mistake in life, to have death. We should be living forever, not getting old forever. Just living forever. Because that makes sense to me. If you get tired of living, then. There has to be a solution. But I don't like dying. Yes, I am terrified of death. I mean, I accept it because I have no choice. And so as in Elio's.. in Miranda's farther case. He says, you know, one life is not enough. And there are so many things that when you die, you don't accomplish and you feel the regrets sort of mounting in you. I'll never finish this. In my case, I'll never learn German well enough. Okay? I love is not going to happen. Okay? And I hate this. So in her father's case, he says, I dont want you just to remember me when I'm dead. That does nothing for me. I want you to live out my life. The things I was not able to do. You do them. And that's basically the way in which we can hope to defeat this thing called death.

[00:40:45] I don't know that I've answered your question. I can't answer that question.

[00:40:49] Ok. I had two questions. If you don't mind, firstly, who are some of your favorite contemporary authors? And then secondly, why did you choose to make Oliver, and I guess the father archaeologists like was there any real reason for that?

[00:41:05] They're not archaeologists. That's the movie. [Oh, really? Okay.] Yes. They're philologists. In other words, both. One is a classical star scholar, which is Armie. But the father's really a philologist. He studies language and also ancient languages, particularly Greek. And so the easiest thing to do in a film is to.. as opposed to having a philologist, who studies words? Really? This is boring and if.. have statues come out from it! So they made him into an archaeologist. But the idea of the archaeology I love because Freud was, himself, very interested in archaeology. And he uses archaeology as a model for thinking about the human psyche. And he uses the city of Rome as a sort of metaphor for how the psyche works. There are many, many levels in Rome as far as he's concerned. So archeology's not in accident. So I hope that.. that answers the question.

[00:42:04] We have a question up here.

[00:42:08] So in the first book.. [Andre: Where are you? Where are you? Oh, there, there.. Okay, I see. I see you. Yes] Hi. In the first book, the San Clemente Syndrome, when he was describing that he drew inspiration from Bangkok. When he was in Thailand. [Yes.] Was that from personal experience or from something else?

[00:42:08] You're trying to say.. you're trying to find out if I've lived that particular incident? [I guess. Yeah.] Is that what you're trying find out? [Yes.]

[00:42:38] This is the kind of question I don't like to answer, but I'll answer it. No, it came to me totally by sheer accident because I was once sitting in a cafe and I see this very beautiful person and I can't decide whether it's a man or a woman. And so I felt, let's look, we keep looking. You know, he's or she is writing postcards and I'm sitting there having coffee. And and I wrote about this. And so I said, no, no, it has to be a woman. No, it's not a woman. It's a man. Actually, it's a man who looks like a woman who looks like a man. This is where my mind goes. In other words, I don't like something that's black or white. I like something that looks white, but is really a reflection of a black thing. But then turns out to be actually white itself with.. in other words, you go back and forth. And everything I've written in my life is fundamentally ambivalent in that way, where you don't know not only what gender the person is, but you don't know anything. And the best example I can give you of that isn't there's an essay I wrote about a friend of mine who lives in Paris, and she says, Are you coming to Paris for Christmas? And I said, no, I don't want to go to Paris, because when I'm in Paris, I'm constantly thinking of having Christmas in New York. So she says, well, why don't you come to Paris and forget New York? I can't do that. I don't want to go to Paris. And she said, well, why don't you do me a favor?

[00:44:08] You know, stay in New York and think of going to Paris. Longing to be in New York. Okay? And maybe that's gonna solve the problem for you. And so it's this kind of go back.. this.. this traffic between A and B constantly sort of.. going back to one to.. sort of.. reflected one on the other. And

that's really how I write. I love things that are not one thing. And that goes with everything I do, I'm not of one nationality. I'm not of one religion. I'm not of anything.

[00:44:46] Hi. I wrote down my question because otherwise I wouldn't be able to say it as eloquently as I would like, but it's no strange fact that your prose, some of your strongest piece of writing elements. And I wanted to ask you to expand on something you mentioned earlier in your program. You spoke a bit about your process and the obvious impact your writing has had on the writers who read your work, especially those who are younger writers. So that being said, there are some dissertations that assert Emily Bronte's Jane Eyre may be an early example of fan fiction from Emma by Jane Austen. And because of fan fiction, we have works like Cassandra Claire's Mortal Instruments series and to the dismay of some 50 Shades of Grey. So do you personally value fan fiction as a legitimate process for aspiring young authors? And if not, what would you suggest for those looking to hone their craft?

[00:45:49] It's a good question. The answer I will give you is an answer that I've drawn from many of the most famous writers who have ever written. And they did something like fan fiction, but they called it pastiches. In other words, and I tell all my students to do that and and I've even had one of my sons do that as well as a fun exercise.. is, write a paragraph in the style of so-and-so, imitate so-and-so, wear the shoes of so-and-so, and see where it takes you. In other.. because you're changing your voice and adopting the voice of another author, it might liberate you from what you believe is your voice. So it's not exactly fan fiction, but it's the idea of imitating the great writers. There's nothing more.. better. I think nothing better than imitating a famous writer. Joyce does it in one of the chapters of Ulysses where he imitates everyone, you know, from Mallory and Chaucer down to PR writing and of course imitates brilliantly. Proust did it just for the whole book, imitating the styles of many famous writers, because it's part of the exercise of becoming.. of finding out who you really are. And if you think of it Dante himself, every Canto is written in a different voice, with a different sort of.. the rhyme is the same. It's the same terza rima, but it is a different character that comes out in every single Canto. So I love that. In other words, experiment. If what you want to do is fan fiction, then if you're going to write fan fiction about Oliver and Elio, then imitate my style.

[00:47:42] How is that, fair enough? Use me as.. as a kind of, you know, what do you want it? Sort of as a way of testing yourself and say, okay, I don't want to write this way. One of the reasons why I've stopped teaching creative writing, which I've done for four or five years in my life, is that I don't want to teach it, because I can only teach you to write the way I do. It's not that I don't respect the way you write. It's just, I don't know how else to teach. If you don't write long sentences, I don't want to read you. Well..

[laughter]

[00:48:16] I mean, I can respect short sentences. And there are certain writers who are very good with short sentences. But I'm not going to teach you anything. Because you're not.. that's not what I know how to teach.

[00:48:30] Hi. Thank you for coming. [Where are you? I.. I.. Okay, okay, I see you, okay.]

[00:48:35] I wanted to ask you a question on long the lines of transportation. What did you do, before writing Call Me by Your Name, to transport yourself into the point of view of a 17 year old?

[00:48:52] I don't understand. Explain to me the question.

[00:48:55] So one of the things I love about this book is how authentically it sounds like the speaker is 17, and is experiencing these feelings for the first time. And you talked about a song being able to transport you to the mindset of writing this book and where you were when you were writing it. So can you tell us a little bit about your process being able to write as if you were 17 again and experiencing these things for the first time?

[00:49:24] Well, a correction. I don't think that Elio is writing as a 17 year old. He's probably much older, looking back at that fateful summer. But I was in my early 50s when I wrote that book, so I had to basically go back or not go back. I had to just imagine what it is to be in love with a man at the age of 17, and in describing everything that goes on through his mind as if it were happening to me at the age of 53 or 4. But that's what's called imagination. You just have to use the word transport. I transplant myself into this other person whom I've invented and begin to feel what he feels in order to chronicle what he's feeling. But otherwise I.. I.. there's no there's no process. It's just.. sit down and imagine being someone else.

[00:50:29] Thank you.

[00:50:32] Any other questions? Oh, hi.

[00:50:36] Could you speak about how you settled on the name for this book, Find Me? [How.. I'm sorry?] Oh. How did you pick the name of this book?

[00:50:45] The title? [Yes.] Because I always like to take a line or a few words from the book I'm writing, in order to capture something about the book. And I have no idea what the title is going to be when I'm writing a book. None. And it comes much, much later, after a series of choices. And one of them was, I like the idea of seeking someone. In other words, I don't have the strength to do it, 'find me'. Come to me. Ask me to join you. That is really what the invocation I was trying to use in the title itself. Find Me. It's not.. I'm passive, I can't help myself. It's.. please, come to join me. It's what you say to somebody, well, why don't you come and find us this summer when you.. when you're free?

[00:51:40] And the translation into other languages is.. it is a.. is very difficult because in Italian it comes up to something that means.. it doesn't mean exactly seek me out. It means pick me up, more than anything. So, that's not quite right. So.. but I like the title Find Me. It speaks to me.

[00:52:02] Yes. Oh, yes, I can see you..

[00:52:05] You've.. you've spoken and written a lot about place being your kind of easiest entry into writing. And obviously it's very strong in this novel as well, but I was curious returning to characters that you'd written about and sort of that oblique process of rediscovering them. Is that a similar process for you or was still place sort of your primary starting point?

[00:52:25] No, actually, if you think about it, I'm not good at describing places. I like to give you the sense of a place. I used to write for travel magazines, and I always used to say I don't see anything, I don't.. I don't see it, but I can feel the place. And, usually, that can be more accurate when you feel the spirit of a place, than it is in describing the place. So that's why I'm.. I'm either an excellent travel writer or the worst.. because, you know, I.. because you know, I don't.. notice in my books. I don't name.. I don't even name the towns in my book because I'm not interested in the names of the towns. I'm not even interested in the names of the characters. I have to give.. You have to give it a name! It's.. it's like.. but it's like what my.. one of my editors at Condé Nast Traveler used to say, "We want a piece on Italy." And I said, "Well, I write about Tuscany." She says "That's great. And what do you want to write about Tuscany?" I said, "I want to write about visiting Machiavelli's house," and she says "Fine. That's great. When do you think you're going to go?" I said "Maybe sometime in late June." "Great." Of course, we're in the middle of February. March. I already wrote the piece. I said "I've never been to Machiavelli's house." And she said to me, "Andre, this is not good. You have to go there."

[00:53:54] "You have to go there"! I said, "But it's a good essay"! She says "Yes, it's very good. And we're probably going to publish it as is. But I need to know that you're going to go." So.. it's just.. I don't know. I don't see things. I was once in Bethlehem doing a piece on Bethlehem, and we're walking around Bethlehem trying to capture the spirit of the play. I'm not capturing anything.

[00:54:17] And I'm walking with a photographer says, "Did you see this guy? He's only wearing one shoe. This other guy is barefoot, but he's got a cell phone." "Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course." And I'm jotting all this down, like details. I don't see anything. And it goes back to this kind of irreverence I have vis-a-vis hard facts. I'm not a reporter. I'll never be a reporter. I don't want to give you reporting of facts. I want to give you the feeling of what is going on. So when Elio's father is sitting vis-a-vis Miranda and they're having coffee, and something is going on between them and it's clear that something is going on, I want to capture that. I don't tell you where that coffee place is. I don't tell you what kind of day it is. You don't know anything. And it's not material. And that's where I come from. I'm sorry. So, yes. Place is very important because I named Paris, but I don't describe Paris, and I can't even decide in the story about the cadenza, whether it's on the left bank or on the right bank. I'm waiting for a movie director to tell me it's done.

[laughter]

[00:55:26] Yeah. Hello, right here. So I have more of a prompt than a question, [Sorry?] but I would love it to.. prompt rather than a question.. [Okay.]

[00:55:33] But I would love to hear you talk about your use of gender and sexuality in the narrative. Like, you say you don't know what your characters look like. You don't necessarily care about their name. Is gender and sexuality also something that's ambiguous and just kind of happens with the narrative? Or do you use it intentionally?

[00:55:49] Intentionally? Well, it's very hard to have somebody unintentionally male. Correct? I mean, you know, I started the book, *Call Me by Your Name*, thinking I was writing about a boy and a girl, and then I said, everybody's done that summer. Boy, girl, 17 and 17. What's going to happen? The obvious. So I just.. I said, I'm going to make him.. boy, boy. And that sort of released other issues that are very interesting, because it released also the fact that you have.. Elio is a very.. he's not very confident of himself. He is insecure. He's hesitant. He's reluctant to do anything that.. sort of takes him out of his routine. And therefore, in a way, he was.. it made more sense to have him battling this thing that he has to cross. He's to cross from one gender, the female, the default.. the default female gender to the male that he's attracted to. So he has to do some work and some analysis of himself. But that's the only place where I did. Otherwise, they were having a relationship, and I'm okay with that. So I don't know if I'm answering your question.

[00:57:03] No, you are. [Okay.] Definitely. Thank you so much.

[00:57:07] So, I know that there's a lot of really great scenes in both in *Find Me* and with *Call Me by Your Name*, but one thing I'm genuinely curious about is, what would you say between both those books was the most compelling scene for you to write, like that brought you probably like the most joy or kind of made you think a bit more.. about how you put a little bit more of a thought process into making them. And other scene for both those books where it was really difficult for you to write, be it that it had a lot of thought that you had to put into it, or that it was like very emotionally compelling or draining to do them.

[00:57:47] The most compelling scene is one that comes from my own life, and.. because I seldom sort of go to my life. But I did go there because I wanted to. And it's a scene that I read. It's the wall. There's a wall somewhere in the world where if I go to that wall, I'm with the person that I was, many, many years ago. And she's there and I'm there and we're kissing. And I'll never forget that. And it arrested me. But that is the most meaningful scene.

[00:58:18] But what I've done with it is totally different. In *Call Me by Your Name* I had them kissing against the wall. And meanwhile, I invented there were two old men walking by and say, "Look at those two. In Mussolini's time, that would never happened." Okay. So am I.. I elaborate on everything that comes from my life. But there's very little that comes from real life. The one scene that was the most difficult to write is again in *Call Me by Your Name*. And it's the scene in which Elio tells Oliver, basically, that he's attracted to him, and doesn't say anything. He doesn't say a thing to give himself away. It's the fact that Oliver understands, that gives a thing away. In other words, Oliver was there all along but wasn't going to say anything until Elio said: "You know what things." "What things are you talking about?" "You know what things." That was very hard because I had to make sure that Elio

revealed himself and yet left enough room to backtrack and have loopholes in case he needed to retract whatever he said.

[00:59:27] Hi, I'm over here. [There you are] Well, first off, I love the book. It was fun to read. So thank you. [I'm sorry.] The book was great and it was fun to read. So thank you. But the.. one of the things that I noticed when I was reading it was the relationships had this element of insecurity or kind of a power dynamic or the characters are upfront about their insecurity. And I saw that in Call Me by Your Name as well. So I was just curious, what was your inspiration behind that, or your reasoning for making that an element and dynamic? in, I.. I believe, all the relationships in the book.

[01:00:01] You mean the insecurity?

[01:00:03] Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

[01:00:05] Is.. raise your hand, is there anybody in this room not insecure?

[01:00:12] Well, that's.. that's who we are, and I can go further. I can see that not all of us are convinced we are really fantastic people. We may not even like each.. ourselves, but insecurity is built-in and put it this way, shyness is part of who we are.

[01:00:29] I'm the shyest pers.. here I am, public speak, doing a public speaking routine. And you think I'm not shy at all? I'm the most shy. Blush in a second. And so.

[01:00:39] But there's the other aspect that we haven't discussed, is the question of shame. Shame is such a powerful force in our lives. When you.. we're ashamed of something and we've done something shameful. We'll never forget it. It still hurts us decades later, it's impossible. Things I've done as a child that I'm ashamed of, still hurt me today. But you'll say I need to go to therapy. Fine. But no, what I.. what I'm trying to say is that insecurity not.. see, my characters never do what they do in movies where you have men, woman or man men and they look at each other intensely and they finally kiss. No, my characters need to speak about it. And that's difficult.

[01:01:25] Yeah. That's that's what I had noticed, that it was not just insecurity displayed once, but it was continuously throughout the relationship, [Yes] checking in, making sure. Are you still interested? Is this still gonna go on? [unintelligible]

[01:01:35] Well, yes. I mean, you.. we.. we do this all the time. You still like me after what I've said? You know, that sort of thing. And what Miranda does, which I love, is she tells him, I'm going to tell you the most shameful thing I've ever done in my life. And I'm telling it to you because you're the only person I'll ever say it to. But I'm saying it because I don't want to have secrets. And I am ashamed of what I did. And if we have a relationship, which we're going to have anyway, she says, because she's a tough woman, she says if we have a relationship and I haven't told you, I will never tell you. So I want to tell you this beforehand. So insecurity, we're all.. we're all there.

[01:02:18] So we have time for one more question, which is going to be this person here in the middle.

[01:02:23] In the real middle, right?

[01:02:25] In the real middle. Right there. [Okay.] And.. but before we do, I just want to remind you that folks that are getting their books signed will want to go out the door and line up against this wall. But on the other side of the wall in our children's department, and we will have the book signing taking place in the lobby. And then for those of you who aren't able to stay. We wish you well. So let's pass the mic to this final question.

[01:02:53] Hello. [Hey.]

[01:02:54] I wanted to ask a little bit, and I guess this is a little bit more related to Call Me by Your Name, but I know a lot of North American critics and commentators have made note of this sort of age discrepancy between the two. And I'm curious, sort of your thoughts on critical reaction between, say, North America and Europe, whether there were differences there and sort of how you thought about that, whether that was something you considered during the writing of the book?

[01:03:34] While I was writing the book. No, it actually didn't really cross my mind. That's the irony of this. There are different reactions in Europe and in America and in North America. And South America is much more forgiving. You know, that's an issue. And I totally respect the fact that, you know, a 17 year old boy was a 24 year old man presents a problem. I'm totally aware of that.

[01:04:00] But at the same time, it was also a consensual relationship. Let's not forget that. And there was a loving and consensual relationship. And finally, to answer your question directly, that's the book I wrote. It's a piece of fiction. And that's how I saw it. I wouldn't redo it any other way today. And I think that.. I don't remember what it is in the movie, but I wouldn't change that at all.

[01:04:32] Any final thoughts from either you, Mr. Aciman, or Dave, to close us out?

[01:04:39] No, it's wonderful to be here. It really is.

[applause]

[01:04:44] Thank you.

[piano music]

[01:04:50] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.

[piano music]