

*Call Me By Your Name* by André Aciman (Atlantic Books) R184

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To get classifications out of the way: *Call Me By Your Name* is the story of an intensely erotic romance between two men. And yet to call it a “gay novel” would be to limit the reach of what is in fact a profound meditation on memory and desire, or on the memory of desire.

Twenty years after the event, Elio, the narrator, now thirty-seven, recalls one idyllic summer: “I shut my eyes, ... and I’m back in Italy, so many years ago, walking down the tree-lined driveway, watching him step out of the cab, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere.”

The new arrival is Oliver, a twenty-four year old post-doctoral student in pre-Socratic philosophy, an assistant professor at Columbia, self-assured, good-looking, clever – though in the last respect at least equalled by Elio, the well-read, musically talented son of a well-to-do academic and his Italian wife. The setting is the Italian Riviera: Elio’s parents, who seem to have more money than even American academics can reasonably expect to earn, open their home each summer to a young academic about to complete a major research project.

Oliver is “this summer’s houseguest. Another bore.” Except that Elio is not bored for a second by Oliver; indeed, he speculates, “It may have started right there and then.” What starts there and then is a protracted game of cat-and-mouse, though it’s difficult to say who is the cat and who the mouse.

Aciman is very good at tracing the lineaments and subterfuges of desire, the way it both seeks to possess and strives to be free of its object. Seventeen-year-old Elio is precociously determined (“I was convinced that no one in the world wanted him as physically as I did”), and yet afraid alike of being rejected and of being taken into Oliver’s bed; Oliver, “okay with himself, the way he was okay with his body, with his looks, with his antic backhand, with his choice of books, music, films, friends,” is not entirely okay with his own attraction to the boy, and yet clearly wants him. By turns cordial and stand-offish, man and boy are intensely aware of each other’s movements. As Elio pursues or is pursued by Marzia, a girl his own age, Oliver follows his own interests. Both men have been functional heterosexuals until meeting each other, and neither seems to resent the other’s liaisons with the other sex: “Butchers and bakers don’t compete,” Elio opines in a questionable analogy, which is to be tested by later developments. Both men, it seems, have to overcome a degree of homosexual panic; arguably, indeed, they never altogether do overcome it. (It may be relevant that the author, the father of three sons, has reportedly never had a homosexual experience.) But *Call me By Your Name* is much more than a tale of sexual intrigue. It is a detailed and nuanced exploration of the nature of desire and, once the object of desire is attained, of the nature of intimacy. In particular, as the title of the novel signals, Aciman is intrigued by way extreme intimacy fuses the identity of the lovers, so that each feels indistinguishable from the other: “[H]e said ‘Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine,’ which I’d never done in my life before and which, as soon as I said my own name as if it were his, took me to a realm I never shared with anyone in my life before, or since.”

The scenes dramatising and celebrating this oneness “when two beings need, not just to be close together, but to become so totally ductile that each becomes the other,” are very explicit, without being prurient: it is of the essence of this intimacy that it should be total. But perhaps such intimacy can only be ephemeral, is dependent for its intensity on the consciousness of the partners that it cannot last. In the end, and most movingly, *Call Me By Your Name* is also a chronicle of loss, as time and circumstance, rather than melodramatic intrigue or betrayal, separate the lovers.

At one level, *Call Me By Your Name* is an upmarket *Brokeback Mountain* – one lover even preserves a shirt of the lost beloved -- and if it lacks the moving simplicity of Proulx’s cowboy lovers, it gains impact from the overcoming on the part of the two super-cool intellectuals of their own presumed superiority to mere passion, and from the price they pay for the sacrifice of their detachment.

Oliver, for all his breezy iconoclasm, settles down to the sexual comfort zone of wife-and-two-kids, and Elio is left, apparently, drifting from one lover to another, either in flight from or in search of the intimacy he had with Oliver. Perhaps oddly, it never seems to occur to the lovers that they might, if they really wanted to, spend their lives together. But that would have been another novel; this is a novel about “two young men who found much happiness for a few weeks and lived the remainder of their lives dipping cotton swabs into that bowl of happiness.” Or, as Elio imagines saying to Oliver, “We had found the stars, you and I. And this is given once only.” And that finding and that losing have nothing to do with sexual orientation.