

*Find Me* by André Aciman (Faber)

“Does true love ever die?” the back cover enquires, and replies ringingly: “One of the great contemporary romances continues.”

We can take that for a no, then, and expect Elio and Oliver, the multi-talented young gods from the 2007 novel *Call Me By your Name*, to get it on together again, after their heart-rending separation in the earlier novel (and of course in the ultra-gorgeous 2017 movie).

Somewhat unexpectedly, then, at the start of this novel we find ourselves sharing a train compartment in Italy, not with one or both of the lads, but with a middle-aged man and a young woman. The man, who is the narrator of this section, is Samuel, Elio’s wordy father, whom we only tolerated in the previous novel because he was so understanding about his graduate student, Oliver, banging his son, Elio, on the premises – that is, the family’s photogenic holiday retreat on the Italian coast. Actually, that romance worked as a novel, because Aciman conveyed the hesitations and presumptions of first love touchingly and convincingly. We believed in the young Elio and Oliver as we never believe in Samuel and Miranda (the young woman on the train), or in the older Elio and his new, much older lover, Michel, or in the now married-with-two-children Oliver.

The problem, I think, is that Aciman aims to expand Samuel’s famous closing peroration in *Call Me By Your Name* into a book-length Compendium of Profound Thoughts. The characters prose endlessly and platitudinously about Life and Fate and Time, while smiling obsessively (after the first five pages I stopped counting the number of times they smile) and telling each other how wonderful they are. (“You could just be the dearest person I’ve ever known,” Michel tells Elio, and much more in this vein.)

Father and son share the ability to fall in love totally, hopelessly, eternally with someone within five minutes of meeting them, and having the other person fall in love with them equally totally, hopelessly, etc. They also have a common penchant for age difference, Samuel being twice Miranda’s age, and Michel twice Elio’s.

Samuel (whom Miranda addresses as *Sami*, though it’s not clear how her pronunciation differentiates this from ordinary old *Sammy*) and Miranda, upon descending from the train, go shopping, burdened with his jacket, her leather jacket (“Prada, most likely”), his duffel bag, her backpack, a box containing a birthday cake (which, magically, started its journey in Florence as profiteroles) and her dog on a lead, and proceed to add to this a whole fish, some scallops, a bunch of spinach, a bunch of gladioli, two bottles of wine and four persimmons. Sweaty as this burden must render them, they end up bathing in each other’s bodily fluids within hours of their meeting (“No shower, no brushing of teeth, no mouthwash, no deodorant, no anything”, Miranda insists).

By contrast, the more hygienic Michel, upon the consummation of his whirlwind meeting with Elio, orders the young man to, “Shut your eyes and trust me. [...] I want to make you happy”, then soaps and shampoos him with chamomile: “he palmed my face gently with soap and then asked if he could shampoo my hair, to which I said of course he could”. Of course. Happiness is chamomile shampoo.

There is, apart from all the talk, a tremendous amount of touching of each other in both relationships, usually tagged with “I liked it that...” or “I loved it that ...” – an obsessive repetitiousness, like the manic smiling, that probably owes more to bad editing than to a desire to reassure the reader that the characters are enjoying themselves. But then, the talk is generally so gloomily portentous that the author may feel the need to lighten things up.

This being Aciman territory, that is, an American snob’s Europe, the settings are gorgeous and expensive. Sami and Miranda cavort in cosy little restaurants in Rome, Elio and Michel frequent a little Parisian bistro of Michel’s choosing: “The place was indeed small, just as he had said, but it also looked very exclusive. I should have known. His navy Forestière jacket, the large, flowing printed scarf, and the Corthay shoes were dead giveaways.” Of course, Elio’s brandname-savvy is equally a dead giveaway. (According to Google, Corthay shoes cost anything from R20 000 to R32000.)

In the bistro the new lovers share another epiphany: “Then I did something that came to me totally impulsively. ‘Order for me,’ I said. I loved the idea, and it seemed he loved it too.” Perhaps a foody version of call me by your name? At least this time we are spared a peach-penetration.

The third section of the novel is narrated by Oliver, now living temporarily in New York with his wife. He lusts after two guests at a party, one male, one female, but he knows, and we know, that they are really stand-ins for Elio; after all, as the cover asks, “Does true love ever die?”

I won’t spoil such suspense as this novel offers by divulging the ending. I could mention, though, that it was apparently an after-thought, added after proof copies had been circulated to reviewers. In fact, the whole novel, with its editing lapses, its glib profundity and its shallow characterisation, speaks of haste. It was published on 29<sup>th</sup> October. No doubt author and publisher wanted to catch the Christmas market.