

Authors: André Aciman's Visceral Love for Italy

Natasha Lardera (March 17, 2016)



The Italian Cultural Institute had its second appointment as the series “American authors and their ties with Italy.” Foreign authors are invited to speak about their personal connection to Italy that is often poured into their work. The series was launched with the testimony of Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri, and it continued with Egypt born writer André Aciman. Aciman is currently distinguished professor at the Graduate Center of City University of New York teaching history of literary theory and Marcel Proust's work.

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André Aciman was born in Egypt in a French-speaking home where family members. He is the author of the memoir *Out of Egypt* (1995), and of two collections of essays, *False*.

Papers: *Essays on Exile and Memory* (2000) and *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere* (2011). He has co-authored and edited *The Proust Project* (2004) and *Letters of Transit*.

He is also the author of four novels, *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), *Eight White Nights* (2010), *Harvard Square* (2013), and of the forthcoming *Enigma Variations*. also spoke Italian, Greek, Ladino, and Arabic. He grew up in a family of Jews of Turkish and Italian descent that was thrown out of the country when he was only fifteen.

That's when they moved to Italy first and then to New York City. Aciman is currently distinguished professor at the [Graduate Center of City University of New York](#) [3] teaching history of literary theory and Marcel Proust's work. He previously taught creative writing at New York University and French literature at Princeton University.

The biographical [Out of Egypt](#) [4], won a Whiting Award and it has been described as a "richly colored memoir that chronicles the exploits of a flamboyant Jewish family, from its bold arrival in cosmopolitan Alexandria to its defeated exodus three generations later."

The novel *Call Me by Your Name* is, for now, the only one set in Italy and it narrates a boy's erotic coming-of-age at his family's home on the Italian Riviera and during a trip to Rome.

Rome is the Italian city that welcomed Aciman and his mother for five years after they were forced to leave Egypt because of anti-semitism. Through the years Aciman had studied Italian with a private tutor originally from Siena but despite his studies he was not totally fluent. He identified with being French even though his father had bought Italian citizenship and his family had Italian roots in Pisa and Livorno.

"We arrived in Naples as refugees," Aciman explained, "I immediately hated it and I didn't understand a single word. My mom was relying on me to translate what was being said but I couldn't. On top of that we were welcomed with remarks about being Jews. We left on that same day and we went to Rome.

I instantly hated it too and felt that I did not belong there. I attended an American school and my only contact with Italy and Italians was on the bus I used to take to and from school. After classes I'd get home, close the curtains because I didn't even want to see the outside, and started reading."

But little by little Aciman's resistance started to crumble: he discovered museums, the city's squares, music... and by the time this contamination was taking over, they moved to New York. "I immediately hated New York too," Aciman confessed, "but here's where I started falling for Italy, the Italy I was reading about in the books of the romantics like Keats, Shelley and Byron. And a visceral relationship that is mostly imaginary took over against my will."

Aciman travels to Italy twice a year and goes back to all the same places, dragging his family with him despite their complaints. "I am always disappointed by what I see but I just love it," he explained.

When asked by the Institute's director, [Giorgio Van Straten](#) [5], what he loves about Italy, Aciman answered "Not the food, as I have never been a foodie, or the wine. I love the silence in the afternoon in Rome and the Italian temperament. Italian people have a unique friendliness that nobody else has. And when I am there I immediately become more friendly, even my voice changes when I speak Italian.

When I am here, instead, I become more ironic. I also love the scenery, especially by the water. I used to take the train to go up to [Liguria](#) [6] and I would get lost in a dream world along the coast... I would see castles and mansions that I have not seen anywhere else, yet it reminds me of somewhere else. A place in my imagination or memory. It's a love like no other. I don't know why but



Id I did, I'd stop loving it.”

The appointments with “American authors and their ties with Italy” will continue: in April it will be David Leavitt’s turn and in May, [Rachel Kushner](#) [7]’s.

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[3] <http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Home>

[4] <http://www.amazon.com/Out-Egypt-Memoir-Andr%C3%A9-Aciman/dp/0312426550>

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