

## A Few Notes on the Book “Call Me by Your Name” by André Aciman

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### Abstract

In the article we deal with the interpretation and analysis of selected topics and motives in the narrative of André Aciman’s publication *Call Me by Your Name*. After a summary of the story, we take a closer look at the genesis of the two men’s relationships in the context of their Jewish faith. We also depict the transformation of their animal sexual relationship into a loving relationship associated with psychic harmony. The final passage of the article is devoted to the conclusion of the book, in which the message of the publication is anchored, which to a certain extent goes beyond the inclusion of Aciman’s work primarily in LGBT young adult literature.

**Keywords:** André Aciman, “Call Me by Your Name”, “Find Me”, homosexuality, young adult literature, self-awareness.

### 1. Introduction

In 2007, André Aciman’s book *Call me by your name* was published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (published in Czech translation in 2018). The sequel to the story is called *Find me* (in Czech in 2020).

In our contribution, we will pay attention to the literary depiction of the genesis of the relationship between two men, which is in the middle of the publication *Call me by your name*. We will contextualize the postulated ideas with the self-perception of homosexuals and bisexuals in contemporary society with possible points of contact in literary processing. Within the article we will also mention the presentation of Judaism in Aciman’s novel in relation to homosexuality.

- In the publication *Call me by your name* the relationship between Elio and Oliver is first portrayed as a purely physical relationship.
- Aciman does not portray a minority sexual orientation as a certain eccentricity, but as an affection equivalent to a heterosexual orientation.
- The publication *Call me by your name* is a symbolic representation of opposites, such as rationality (Oliver) versus emotionality (Elio).
- The publication also develops the Rome-Julian motive, which is most noticeable in the confrontation of the family background of Oliver and Elio.
- Judaism in Aciman’s story thus symbolizes an ostracized group as well as homosexuals.

We believe that although these works of Aciman are not primarily intended for children and young people (the cover of the Czech edition of *Find Me* even explicitly states: “The book is not suitable for young people and younger readers”), especially a certain symbolic self-knowledge in relation to their own sexuality – the main topic *Call Me by Your Name* – can be one of the possible guides for recipients to cope with their own difficult situation.

## 2. Briefly about the content

The publication *Call Me by Your Name* begins with the arrival of a postgraduate student Oliver at the rural residence of a professor who is to help Oliver with the revision of the manuscript. After various vicissitudes associated with professor’s son Elio in the area of admitting his minority sexual orientation, Aciman develops a story based on men’s relationship, which is linked to an effort not to let his surroundings know about him.

This fact is caused, on the one hand, by Elio’s very fear of having the feeling that he might feel something about a person of the same sex, and it is also caused by external circumstances: the story takes place in Italy in the first half of the 1980s. Only at the end of the publication, when he talks to Elio, is his father about the uniqueness of love and the effort of everyone to find a soul mate (be it a man or a woman).

## 3. Representation of homosexuality

In Andre Aciman’s publication, homosexuality is first portrayed as an animal relationship by its being, which is united by the desire to surrender its body to another. This thesis can be demonstrated, for example, by the motive of sharing one’s excrement, which symbolizes a bottomless effort to surrender entirely to another. At the end of the story, Elio and Oliver leave for a trip to Rome, where the animal desire for the other’s body is transformed into love in the true sense of the word. The desire to share one’s body with another is already linked to the spiritual dimension: we do not claim that love *sensu stricto* did not accompany their relationship at the beginning of their relationship. It is important to emphasize that the moment of desire to share one’s personality with another man is reflected in the name of book: Elio addresses Oliver by his name and Oliver Elio by his name. This situation is a metaphorical depiction of the absolute surrender of one’s self to another, both physically and especially mentally – but Aciman lags this line somewhat at the expense of depicting the sexual line between Elio and Oliver. The culmination of growing love with all its aspects is the farewell of Elio and Oliver at the train station in Rome, from where Oliver travels back to his country and Elio stays in Italy. At this point, Elio realizes his love for Oliver. Aciman proves this fact by a telephone conversation between him and his mother, when he asks her to come for him.

Aciman does not present minority sexual orientation as an eccentricity, as a distinguishing element from others, but as a basic part of the life of a homosexual individual, just as a substantial part of the life of heterosexual persons forms their intimate relationship. The affiliation of the publication to young adult literature confirms the theme of discovering oneself, its essence, the search for the meaning of life in connection with the discovery of its difference.

We believe that depictions of this line of adolescence may be close to intense readers with their undistorted depictions: Aciman avoids the euphemistic depiction of the development of a two-man relationship: recall, for example, that Elio and Oliver do not understand each other at all. The transformation of this relationship does not occur through the intervention of *deus ex machina*, but to some extent for rational reasons, when Elio seeks a kindred spirit who would help him acknowledge his own difference. Who else to choose at this point as the person to confide in, other than the person who, in a way, caused those “problems”? Aciman avoids the romantically

kitschy depiction of Elio's coming out even when he confesses to Oliver her feelings for him. It is not followed by the obligatorily expected kiss with the expression of reciprocal feelings from Oliver, but by Oliver's relatively strict rejection of Elio. Oliver initially denies himself to Elio: it gradually becomes clear that he is not motivated to take this step by unrequited feelings for the young man, but by a rational justification for the situation. Oliver, the more experienced of the two men, realizes that a hasty two-sided decline to the ultimate desire could leave Elio with a taste of remorse. That's why he gives Elio some time to settle everything and realize the importance of coming-out for himself. Elio uses this time to somehow verify his feelings with his friend; feelings about Oliver don't change.

In the story, Oliver symbolizes the already mentioned rational, which is associated with a greater degree of his life experience and perhaps with the ability to think about the possible consequences. At the end of the story, it turns out that Oliver has a relationship with a woman he is determined to marry. It can therefore be assumed that the reasonably justified initial rejection of Elio is also due to this fact, which implicitly implies that after his departure the relationship of his young men will not continue. To a large extent, Oliver's marriage is also caused in the book, mentioned several times by the negative attitude of his parents (especially his father) towards homosexuals.

In the story, Elio symbolizes a certain youthful recklessness, an emotional instinctive action, to which rational contemplation and consideration of possible consequences goes aside. His youthful recklessness is not delayed by his parents either: they are very progressive in the context of the time when the story takes place, and their son's happiness is above all.

The relationship between Elio and Oliver can be called Rome-Julian. On the one hand, a young man discovering himself, seeking his place in society, exploring the possibilities of his body and the like, moreover, supported in all these aspects by his parents. On the other hand, a man who has a largely lined, predestined life, not only of his own free will, but also of his parents' desires or implicit attitudes towards minorities. It is a bit of an exaggeration to say that Elio and Oliver (and their families) are united only by Judaism.

#### 4. Judaism motive

The motive of Judaism is mentioned in the publication relatively marginally. However, we believe that it has a relatively crucial place in the overall perception of the narrative. It is the Jewish faith that is the first and fundamental aspect that both young men realize that uniting them. Neither Elio nor Oliver had an orthodox Jewish education, almost the only Jewish custom followed by both families is the celebration of Hanukkah.

Judaism in the story symbolizes that difference. For centuries, Jews have been perceived as a group of people who differ from the majority society, which has been and is stigmatized and explicitly and implicitly persecuted in today's global society. If a Jew expresses his faith in public in some way, a large part of the population will turn to him, look back, point to him. Aren't these aspects common to Judaism practitioners and an open expression of affection for the same sex? Of course, this statement does not apply to society, but some covert anti-Semitism and covert homophobia remain part of global society, despite ostentatious political statements about equality of religions and the equality of sexual and other minorities.

Judaism in Aciman's story thus symbolizes an ostracized group as well as homosexuals. It is precisely the belonging of both men to Judaism in a way foreshadows their belonging to the sexual minority. After all, the awareness of his uniqueness at the level of faith is explicitly mentioned by Oliver when he asks a rhetorical question to imagine what it is like to grow up as a Jew in a small English village. Isn't this situation similar with young homosexuals or

members of other sexual minorities growing up in similar areas or in areas otherwise negatively determined by different minority groups?

The conclusion of the publication is very emotionally strong, when Oliver in a way confesses to Elio about the relationship with the woman he intends to marry. At that moment, Elio realizes the definitive end of at least potential hopes in the relationship with Oliver. The given scene again places the publication *Call Me by Your Name* in the field of young adult literature, because love disappointments in any form accompany the lives of all adolescents. This moment can also be a fusion of the subject in the sense of depicting homosexuality and other publications on various aspects of love disappointment or unrequited love in heterosexual relationships. The writer once again confirms that *Call Me by Your Name* is not primarily a story about homosexuals, but about finding oneself, whatever the sexual orientation of people. It also implicitly emphasizes that there is no difference between individuals with a majority and a minority of sexual orientation, they all experience similar problems, while those with a minor sexual orientation have a difficult opportunity to confide their problems to their surroundings (for example, a situation where Elio and Oliver story potential lovers, in a way entrust each other).

## 5. Conclusion

The story, authored by André Aciman, shows the strength of the relationship between two men determined by different social backgrounds, different life experiences or different approaches to life. Homosexuality is portrayed as a natural part of life that is accompanied by the same disappointments, desires and hopes as the majority sexual orientation. Elio and Oliver have a short love affair filled with animal sexuality, but also with bottomless love combined with a desire to absolutely surrender to the other (call me by your name). The loss of hope of continuing the relationship after Oliver informs Elio that he is engaged leads to the confirmation of the importance of supporting sexual minorities, especially from their immediate surroundings. The end of the relationship, which is indicated by Oliver's announcement that he will get married, is disrupted in the progress of the story of Oliver and Elio *Find me*, when the two men meet again and continue to socialize despite various obstacles in life and distance. It is the continuation of Elio and Oliver's relationship, which is being developed in the book *Find me*, that gives not only young people who have experienced disappointment in love hope that their disillusionment with not fulfilling their relationship is final, that everything can change.

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