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CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the *CARC Podcast*, the *Career and Academic Resource Center* here at the Harvard Extension School. I'm Chris Davis, the associate director and the host for the *CARC Podcast*. And today, it is my great honor and pleasure to have with me André Aciman.

André Aciman is distinguished professor of Comparative Literature at the CUNY Graduate Center and director of the graduate center's The Writers' Institute, and director of the Center for the Humanities at CUNY. He's the author of five novels, including *Call Me by Your Name*, winner of the Lambda Literary Award, several collections of essays, and the memoir *Out of Egypt*, which received the Whiting Award for nonfiction. He's a widely published essayist and literary scholar. And I'm very pleased to have him here today. Hello, André.

**ANDRÉ
ACIMAN:** Thank you. Thank you very much. And hello to you, Chris

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to start out by asking you about the new collection of essays *Homo Irrealis*. I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly, which is going to be published next month. I think this is the first collection of essays that you've published since the 2011 *Alibis*, which was a wonderful collection. I want to ask you, what do you enjoy about the essay form? You recently said an essay embraces chaos but ultimately tames it. I'm curious to know more.

**ANDRÉ
ACIMAN:** How does one tame an essay? Well, put it this way. The best essays I've written were written for basically on order. Let's say, why don't you write about something that interests you for us. And I would scratch my brains out. And I would start an essay and I had no idea where it was going. And sometimes I wanted to give up. But there's a kind of tenacity in me-- not that I'm sort of that ambitious-- but it's just that if I find myself that I'm teased or there's something about the subject that I like but I don't know what precisely it is. And so I continue to write within that sort of circling around it, sort of prowling around it, until I find a point of entry.

And then I realize, oh, that's what this is about. Of course, I'm interested. I'm more interested now. Now how do I resolve this? And so it becomes an internal journey, which is partly examining who I am, what I want, what I think has been affecting me personally. How can I conceal that from the reader so that the reader has space to get into the subject and feel as if I'm talking about him and not about myself.

And then there's also the writing aspect of it, you know. How do I make sure that the writing is such that the sentences are going to be long enough for the reader to find a way to borrow the cadence of my work, and therefore think once again that this is really a music that he's creating not me. And I don't think of the reader that much. But I'm writing to myself as if I am a reader that I haven't met yet.

CHRIS DAVIS: That's very interesting. And it ties into something which you said, which I think is quite true. An essayist presumes that the more he discloses his own idiosyncrasies and his own idiosyncratic way of seeing things, the more he mirrors the reader's own.

ANDRÉ

Yes. I believe that very, very much. In fact, some of the boldest things I've said in my writing, and some of it is quite bold, though it doesn't appear that way because it is sort of couched as it were. But if it's bold, and if I have the guts to basically tell you something about myself that maybe I shouldn't, it's basically because I know that 99% of humanity has experienced the exact same thing. I'm not alone.

And I think that that's what readers like about my writing is that you feel that, oh I thought I was weird. He's just as weird as I am. They say about me. OK. And I think that we're all, of us very, very weird. But we've learned how to hide it, how to conceal it, how to couch it in various ways. And it's nice when somebody tells you, you're not weird. You're normal. That's being normal.

And so I find that a lot of readers write back to me and still do sometimes 15 years later telling me, you've told me who I was. Not that that was my purpose, but that the intimacy, that the kind of writing I do generates that kind of response.

CHRIS DAVIS:

Now that picks up on something that I actually wanted to ask you more about. You've just earlier mentioned that when you're writing, you don't necessarily think of the reader. But the readers of your work bring their own meanings sometimes to your work. And I think you've said that about, for example, *Call Me by Your Name*. You have been and still are approached by people who responded to it in ways that surprise you. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ANDRÉ

ACIMAN:

Well, I mean, it's a love affair between two men. And a lot of people sort of respond to that. Now I can understand when somebody writes to me and says, you know, I'm 78 years old. I wish I had a father who had spoken to me that way. That I understand. There are people who tell me, you know what, you've written the story of my first love with another man. Blah, blah, blah. And they open up to me.

What I'm finding surprising is when girls who are in high school, some of them even in middle school, write to me and tell me, you've described exactly what I've gone through. Now there's no way I could have imagined that. And certainly, that wasn't my purpose. I thought my readership would be sort of people in their late 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s, and certainly 60s, but not that young.

And so I find that parents come with their children, the children want me to sign their books. I signed them. And then I turned to the parents I said, are you sure this is OK for your children? And says, I've read the book. I loved it. And yes, they should read it. Or they have read it and they loved it. In other words, the kind of response I've gotten has been bewildering. And, of course, it's lovely to know that you have all these readers. And you hope that you've said something that is intimate enough for them to feel that you've touched them.

CHRIS DAVIS:

That's interesting to hear. I can also easily visualize that particular story speaking to a wider audience. And--

ANDRÉ

ACIMAN:

It does. It speaks to people -- I mean, you have no idea. I mean, there are ladies in their 70s and 80s who adore the book. So it just goes back to confirm a theory that I have, which is a book does not necessarily have to mirror the reader in the sense that if it's a book about an adolescent, therefore an adolescent has to read it. If it's a book about a murderer, then only a murderer can understand it.

I think that your identity is far more profound than the identity that you carry with you every day-- your age, your work, your ethnicity, your nationality. These are surface identity. Internal identity has no age. And that's what I'm finding. And it's a wonderful feeling to know that if I had to examine myself, I am no different from who I was when I was seven years old. I'm just wiser, better read, et cetera. But the emotional compact that I have is the same.

CHRIS DAVIS: I wonder if part of why you revisited that particular story and wrote about the characters later in their lives was partly in response to the public response that you have received and continue to receive.

**ANDRÉ
ACIMAN:** No. I was more that I -- it would be nice if I could write in order that way. People do send me what is called fan fiction all the time. And I just don't read it any longer because I don't want to be sort of owe anything to anyone who will say, wait a minute, you just stole my story.

So I wrote the stories the way they came to me because I really wanted to revisit Elio and Oliver. And I certainly wanted to understand what kind of man would give that speech to his son. And I wanted to examine who he was, what was his life like, what could a man in sort of late in life find attractive in a woman in that case, find attractive in a woman. And what can a woman do to a man who's already sort of almost twice her age, to find satisfaction in that relationship herself.

And for me, it was very interesting to see two younger people falling in love with older men in the sense that you would suspect that an older person has something to give to a younger person, that a younger person cannot find among his or her peer group. And, of course, a younger person has things to give an older person, that an older person probably would love to have and can no longer find in his own peer group.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to switch a little bit. In a recent introduction that you wrote for *The Best American Essays of 2020*, which you edited. You wrote, I believe of Machiavelli, he doesn't write an outline first to then spill his words on paper. He writes because he cannot write an outline. Thinking comes with writing not before. Now I promise you I was going to ask you something about your writing process. Do these words apply to you in how you approach your work?

**ANDRÉ
ACIMAN:** Yes. And I think that everybody will tell you that. You may have an idea. In fact, let me just backtrack. People who write already knowing what they're going to write are fundamentally superficial. I mean, unless you're writing a memo or a quick article that you're going to write because you've just discovered something. But if you're writing an essay where you're probing into yourself, the essay itself is almost like a travelogue. You don't know where you're going. You shouldn't know where you're going because if you knew where you were going, then you're just doing spadework, if you see my meaning.

You're just basically-- you know exactly what the direction is and you're going to go there. And you'll find a way to get there. But when you have no idea, then you can't think -- you cannot say I'm going to think this through before I write it. That's not possible because the writing process is itself a better way of thinking. It might misdirect you. It might tempt you in other places, as it does in the case of Montaigne, for example.

But the best thinking I've done is always on paper. It's never an idea that I have. I need to probe that idea. I need to examine it. And as I like to say, to excavate that idea. And there are things to find underground that you never suspected were going to be there. So I wasn't writing about Machiavelli only.

CHRIS DAVIS: I suspected as much, which is why that passage spoke to me. I'm also curious. I mentioned that you were a distinguished professor of Comparative Literature. You have taught for many years. And in the interview that you gave that I watched recently, I was very intrigued. You were asked, how you would teach writing, your writing, and other writers work. And you said that you would certainly not focus on the themes of a writer or the purported themes very much. It would be about the style, the form of the writing. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Yes. I always introduce my courses. And usually, they're graduate courses. And these are people who have just finished undergraduate work. So they're fresh from that particular mill. And they have been used to writing character studies, theme studies. Of course, nowadays they use the literary work as a way of studying colonialism, sociology, sexology, gender studies, feminism, all those things that I consider-- they could be extremely relevant, but they are fundamentally external to the work.

The work itself is made up of sentences and words. And I think that ultimately, if you want to really understand an author, if you want to walk in that author's shoes as it were, or feel the author's pulse, you have to basically get very, very close to them. You have to hear how these authors speak, how they write. You want to basically capture the tonality of their voice. And that can only be done, as I think, not by looking at the theme or the character studies, or worse yet the symbols, which I've always hated, as a way of teaching literature. You want to look at the style.

You want to look at how does this person put together this story. What is it about the way they write that captures a particular flavor of reality? And that is what I consider an interpretation of literature is. It is your interpreting the style. You're trying to look at the sentence and say, this sentence was short then it was followed by a longer sentence, and then it was followed by two short clipped sentences, and the rest of the paragraph is one whole sentence. How does that work?

The author knew what he was doing or she was doing. And therefore, you have to examine again how they wrote. When I think of Flaubert or when I think of Jane Austen, you're thinking of really fantastic stylists who don't always proclaim their style. Think of E.M. Forster, who doesn't basically tell you I'm a stylist. But he's got a style. Definitely, he has a style. And he has a way of capturing reality. And that's what I try to teach.

But if you have a student who wants to examine what makes Nabokov such a great writer, which I don't think he is, but I'm just going according to what some of my students think. You want them to look at how does he write. What is it that makes this particular writer a great writer? It's not going to be the issues that they describe. It's not going to be the Russian Revolution. These are all I consider ancillary subjects.

CHRIS DAVIS: I want to ask you a little bit about your work as a memoirist. Your first published full length book was *Out of Egypt*, where you talked about your early years living in Egypt, speaking French and Italian, and being expelled from Egypt as the Jewish population was in the mid-1960s. And in a published excerpt of the introduction of your forthcoming collection of essays, you're also talking about those years.

And you speak about exile nostalgia, the idea of certain places being a fantasy of our own desires. I think one of the things you said you described Egypt as a place from which I liked to imagine being already elsewhere. Can you talk a little bit about what if your thoughts on exile or your approach to writing about your early years, your formative years, has changed or evolved since you wrote *Out of Egypt*?

ANDRÉ

ACIMAN:

Well the one thing that has been sort of "resolved" quote unquote once I wrote *Out of Egypt* is that I felt that I had found a place, a book, where I could talk about my memories of particularly people of a certain way of life, flavors, and smells, the feel of summer on a hot day. All those things were very meaningful to me because they keep sort of springing up every time I'm walking in New York or in Rome or in Paris. And I find oh my God, this feels like Alexandria. This feels like that.

So that these sort of scattered and very desultory impressions almost needed a home. And I put them in a home, which was a book. And I hope that that would at least placate them and ask them to leave me alone now. Of course, that never happens. But it was wonderful to have finally anchored them somewhere to find order in what was basically a whole chaos of impressions for many, many years. So that was the determining factor for writing *Out of Egypt*.

Have I changed? Is that what you're asking? Have I changed as a writer vis-a-vis nostalgia vis-a-vis exile? No. You never change because you don't belong anywhere. I mean, the irony is and I think I said that in that forward, you know, Egypt was my home. I was meant to live the rest of my life as I was supposed to in Egypt, in Alexandria. And it was my home. But it was never my homeland. And that became increasingly obvious as I was growing up, that I was a foreigner. I was like everybody else. I spoke like everybody else. I was one of them. But really, I wasn't.

Among other things, I was European because I wasn't an Egyptian, although I was born in Egypt. And I was also -- eventually, it became very clear to me that I was not Muslim. I was Jewish. And that a Jew was essentially perceived as an enemy of the country. And so I was basically an enemy of the homeland that should have been my homeland but was just my home. And I knew that I was going to be expelled at some point. And so you have this feeling of never belonging.

In fact, it feels very artificial for me to say, I now belong in New York City, in the United States, in the Western Hemisphere. That does not make any sense to me. Ironically, I don't have a home. I don't really belong anywhere. Because I certainly don't belong to Egypt. I would love to think that I belong to Italy, but I can't stand Italy after a month. And France, after a few days I have enough and I want to leave. And New York is my place, the place where I live. Is it my home? I don't think so .

CHRIS DAVIS:

I wanted to ask you, speaking of this, the concept of *Irrealis*, which you do refer to in the introduction, it's the title of the collection. I found it quite fascinating. I don't want to butcher it. So I'm going to ask you to talk about it a little bit because I found it incredible.

ANDRÉ

ACIMAN:

Well it has to do with how do I explain myself to someone who says, you know I belong in New York City. I was born here. I'm probably going to die here. I love what I do. This is my life. This is my family. These are my values. And I live as that person normally would say, by the way, I live in the present. I'm a person who lives in the here and now. And I'm saying to myself, gee, I don't belong to the New York City. And this has to deal with space, which is rather easy to determine. I don't belong in this space, but it's the place where I have a house where I live. And you can even say it's become my home in a figurative manner.

But when it comes to time, that kind of displacement becomes very problematic. Because you're not really, really in the present. Because quite a bit of you is thinking I wish I were elsewhere or this reminds me of such and such. And it draws me back to my past of about 40 years ago. This smell of food is yes it's happening in my kitchen or it's a neighbor's kitchen let's say that seeps through under the door. And you say to yourself, that smell I know it. Where does it belong?

I'm not being Proustian. But I'm just trying to give you a sense of how we tend to skid from the present to the future, to the past. And as I like to think, we always skid into a time. And let's say you're having a wonderful time, which I've had in my life, and you sometimes say to yourself, I know that in a week from now or in a year from now I look back at this moment and think God I was lucky to be with these people having this wonderful meal. And part of the experience of the meal is suddenly sort of co-opted by this future moment when you will be looking back. In other words, you're distracting yourself from this being in the present because you're slipping from the present into your future that is already invoking a past that hasn't even occurred yet because it's in the present.

And you can do the same thing with the past. So it's what I call this, the might have been that never really happened but might happen though we hope it doesn't, but we also suspect it might. And we cannot decide. So it's a combination. This is what the eerie I was moved is really. It's either the subjunctive, which we don't use in English any longer much. It's the conditional, which we still use. It's the imperfect tense. It's all these various ways of not being in the present.

And so what I've done in the book was-- and I'm just going to give you this and say no more-- it's basically to see how does it work if I'm reading say a poem by Leopardi, or by Cavafy, or if I'm listening to a piece of music by Beethoven, or if I'm watching a film by Eric Rohmer, or if I'm thinking about Freud and what his experience of Rome was. So I picked up various individuals whom I'm intentionally and knowingly misreading in order to excavate something about myself.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for that. And you've certainly whetted my appetite for the collection. I can't wait to read it. I want to ask you something else too since we're talking about writing about your own life, your own experiences. You've compared writing a memoir and writing a novel and said for you it's very much the same. And a lot of that is down to the chronology of a memoir and how you're in some ways manipulating it or moving things around. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Sure. I think that the beauty of writing a memoir is that the plot is already given to you. Now if I were Dickens, I wouldn't care because Dickens was very, very good with plot. He kept coming up with new plots all the time. I'm terrible with plots so that you will see that I can spend five pages in a scene between two human beings who are hardly speaking to each other but just intimating various messages and misreading and sort of intercepting signals constantly.

That's what I like. So that's why I'm sort of considered a psychological writer. Plot does not come naturally to me. So writing a memoir was very easy for me because the story was given to me. I knew I was going to leave Egypt at the age of 14. I knew that my grandparents were some wonderful people and terrible people. I knew that my father cheated on my mother. I knew all those things. And these things were part of the story. They were given to me.

In fiction, it's different. Because in fiction, you have to make up things. And I don't really like making things up. I don't even like giving a character a fictitious name. It bugs me. So sometimes I don't even give the name right away because I'm not good at that sort of thing. And I don't like to lie either. So many of my characters are just fantasizing what they want to see happen to them. And that allows me to bridge the what might be. Again, what might be, what could happen, what I wish might happen, which if you think about *Call Me by Your Name* is exactly what the voice of the young character is, Elio. He's constantly dreaming up what he wants until he finally gets it. And that's the fiction that I know how to write.

And the memoir is very much a kind of a departure, as much as I can depart from the factoids that are given to me so that I can begin to interpret them, which is what I prefer to do. And I find that this hazy sort of space between the fiction of what has not happened and of the memoir, which tells the story that has in fact happened but is beginning to drift somewhere else, and is beginning to really borrow what I call the conventions of fiction, the voice of fiction.

It's why I think that each form or each genre, if you want, sort of seeps into the other. The memoir wants to sound as if it's almost novelistic. And the novel wants to sound as if it's being told from personal experience, which just to open a parenthesis is exactly what many readers tell me. They always accuse me of having made up the real memories because they say how could you have been alive to quote this person when you weren't even born there. And the opposite is, how could know so much about what happens between two men unless it was from personal history.

And that's exactly -- it's because the two voices are really fused. And I love the fusion of the two. I don't know if I've answered your question.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, you certainly do. That's extremely thought provoking and articulated better than I think any other writer possibly could, and very true of your work. And now I was just thinking of also how the public has responded to *Call Me by Your Name*. As you said, a lot of people have invested very personal experiences or thoughts into that work, which is a piece of fiction. But there's a certain cross-pollination, as you said.

ANDRÉ Yes, exactly. Yeah. Good word. Yeah.

ACIMAN:

CHRIS DAVIS: I wanted to ask you, I couldn't resist. Because you had mentioned that you had taught a continuing education course or two at Harvard in the 1970s, could you talk a little bit more about that? What were the courses? What was the experience like? I'm very curious.

ANDRÉ Well I was teaching in the evening school. I think it-- was it called the evening school? It was continuing
ACIMAN: education. But I was-- basically, the reason why was that I could no longer teach during the day, I think my allotment of courses for my scholarship or fellowship were sort of exhausted. And meanwhile, I had found a full time job. But I wanted to continue teaching.

And I did the same thing in New York City. When I came to New York, I found a full time job. But I still worked. I still continue to teach in the evening because I loved it. And I never wanted to stop. And I did that in the evening school for about two or three years. I can't remember. But it was wonderful because those were the same classrooms where I had taught other undergraduates. And now I was teaching people who were much older and had careers, and had full time jobs, some of them, and wanted to learn what I was teaching.

What I taught however, was just either French or Italian. That's what I was doing, the language. I used to teach literature for undergraduates. But at that point, the evening school needed somebody to teach the languages, and eventually I did that. Eventually, I had to stop doing that because my full time job was getting in the way and was not allowing me to leave early enough in the evening to teach.

But it was very rewarding. It was lovely. The students were, of course, far more open than undergrads. And they would constantly invite me to dinners out, with gatherings of other students. It was lovely.

CHRIS DAVIS: That must have been the Extension School. And yes, to this day, foreign language courses are some of the most long running and dynamic so I can certainly say that. Oh, that's interesting.

Well on that note, André, I wanted to say thank you so much for joining me today. I know many of our students will appreciate this but certainly our graduate in creative writing and literature students, many of who are, as you describe, working adults or those transitioning to creative or writing career at different stages in their lives and their careers. And I'm sure they'll be very fascinated to hear your words.

**ANDRÉ
ACIMAN:** Well I hope so. And it was really enjoyable. Thank you for these wonderful questions because they're thought provoking for me as well. Thank you so much Thank you, Chris. OK.

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You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the *Career and Academic Research Center* here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.

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