



PEN WORLD VOICES: CONVERSATIONS IN THE LIBRARY

BERNHARD SCHLINK & ANDRÉ ACIMAN

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South Court Auditorium

New York Public Library

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**MICHAEL ROBERTS:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. I'm Michael Roberts, I'm executive director of PEN American Center, and we really appreciate your coming out today for this home stretch of our five-day extravaganza of international literature, where we've had 170 writers from 51 countries in 82 events, speaking more than three dozen languages. And it's wonderful to see once again that New York's given a lie to the notion that Americans have no interest in translated literature. We have another manifestation of that now with this wonderful almost full house.

If you've come to previous sessions, you know the significance of the empty chair and of PEN's campaign to persuade the Chinese government to release more than three dozen writers and journalists now in prison in the People's Republic of China before the

Olympic Games in Beijing, which start about three months from now. As strange as it may seem, dictatorial regimes really are susceptible to shaming, and they do usually care about their international reputations. And PEN has really existed for 86 years to effectuate the proposition that you really can make a difference, and these techniques of advocacy and protest really do work. So at this event, we particularly remember Zhu Yufu, an Internet writer, founder and editor of the China Democracy Party's magazine, who was arrested on April 18, 2007 and sentenced to two years in prison on July 10, 2007, after pushing a policeman during his arrest. In February 2008, the Hangzhou Intermediate People's Court ordered a retrial and Zhu is currently being held in Zhejiang No. 6 prison in Haining City, Zhejiang Province. He'd been previously imprisoned and was released in 2006 after serving seven years for his dissident activity. So please join PEN's efforts to win the release of Zhu Yufu and all the writers and journalists currently in prison in China. Sign the petitions that are outside on the table – about 3,500 signers' petitions were delivered to the Chinese mission at the United Nations earlier this week, and they did not come to the door, but we think that they are getting the message – and sign up and support all of PEN's programs.

Bernhard Schlink was born in Germany in 1944 and later studied law. His distinguished career in that field includes service as a judge at the Constitutional Court of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and he's also taught law and the philosophy of law at the Humboldt University at Berlin, and more recently, at the Cardozo Law School here in New York. His 1995 international bestseller *Der Vorleser*, or *The Reader*, won a number of international prizes, and has been translated into 39 languages. It became the first

German book to reach the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. There have also been four prize-winning crime novels, *The Gordian Knot*, *Self's Fraud*, *Self's Punishment*, and *Self's Slaughter*. His newest book *Die Heimkehr*, was published last year with the English title *Homecoming*.

And André Aciman was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and he's lived in Italy and France and studied at Harvard. He's the author of *Out of Egypt*, a memoir, and also *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory*, and he is the co-author and editor of *The Proust Project* and *Letters of Transit*. His most recent work is the novel *Call Me By Your Name*, which Colm Tóibín described as “fiction at its most supremely interesting. Every clause and sub-clause shimmers with the densely observed and carefully rendered invention which seems oddly and delightfully precise and convincing.” Aciman is the chair of the program in comparative literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. Welcome, please, Bernhard Schlink and André Aciman.

**(applause)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Hello.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It's nice to be here together with André. We have been at the New York Public Library in the year 2000-2001...

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Correct.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** As fellows at the Center upstairs.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Every day. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Every day.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Lunch every day.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** In our little cubicles.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's right.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And I knew that on the other end of the hall, there was André, in his cubicle. And he wrote a book. I didn't know what book. It's this book, *Call Me By Your Name*, and I was sitting in my cubicle and writing my book, and it's *Homecoming*. We didn't talk about our books.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** No, we were very reticent. I think we were the most reticent. We made a lot of jokes, but when it came to our work we were sort of private, shy, correct?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Yeah.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, and we're still very shy and now we're about to talk about ourselves in public. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, we'll have to manage somehow. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Let me say just a few words about André's recent work that I have read over the last weeks, and loved very much. It's the story of a young boy, a very gifted young boy: a musicologist at the age of 16. A very sensitive boy, who falls in love with an American guest in his family's house, and it's a love story with such a wonderful, slow pace.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** **(laughs)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It's a love story that still takes time, weeks, to really develop and unfold. And in our days, where love is so often consumed so fast and so easily, it is so wonderful to read how these obstacles build and how there are borders and limitations and misunderstandings, and revelations, and then they are taken back, and finally they really—

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** They do it.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** They do it. **(laughter)** No, it's a wonderful love story. And a hundred years ago it would have been a love story between a boy and a girl.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. Or maybe a grown-up man and a younger girl who's just becoming a debutante, sort of. And it would be very polite and full of hesitation and fear.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And now the hesitation and fear is in this love relationship. It's a wonderful book. You should read it.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** **(laughs)** And anyway, there was Bernhard Schlink as we were both writing away in our respective cubicles. You were traveling a lot, I remember, but he was always there. And you couldn't quite believe that the man sitting at that cubicle is actually this man, who wrote that book, called *The Reader*, which most of us has read, and we didn't just read it, you just took a day off from your life and just threw yourself into it because you couldn't put it down, it was so wonderful. And there he was, every day, back in the flesh, and I was always mesmerized. And then I got in the mail, because the New York Public Library is so efficient, they sent me his book because we were going to have this conversation. And there it is, and the title of course instantly scared me. Because we all have our little domains, and exile unfortunately is mine **(laughter)**, and it's a standing joke with my friends. And there is this book called *Homecoming*, which I said, can there really be a homecoming? So I began reading it with this sense of,

okay, this person is actually going to arrive home. And I said, but I, this is totally foreign to me, and as I was reading it, I realized that the whole book is about sort of missing home. And *not* arriving home and finding the wrong homes, or putting off arriving home. And the whole idea of homecoming was such a—laced with misgivings and errors that sometimes you might say that your whole life is a homecoming, but that you realize it at the very, very end.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And maybe not even then.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's right.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And I read in *Out of Egypt*—you obviously loved *The Odyssey*, and you describe this conversation you had with your Italian teacher. Did he really come home, did Ulysses really come home, or obviously there is even a reading, maybe it's a reading of your Italian teacher—I wasn't aware of it—that he stayed with Calypso and became immortal.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's right, and—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And so didn't even come back to Ithaca.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, you'd have to be stupid to give up immortality—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And Calypso.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** For what? For Ithaca and the swine and the swinard? **(laughter)**  
You gotta be crazy. Take immortality. That was my version. But then I saw something so similar to that whole idea of Ulysses being not just tempted by Calypso but you know, realizing that this is another possibility of making a meaningful life. Sort of basically staying—if you want—in limbo, but in limbo could also be a meaningful life, and when you think about it, I don't want to cast aspersions on anybody, but if your life is not in limbo maybe you're not alive.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, the other reading is that he came home—

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** —back to Ithaca, but he didn't stay. And obviously Homer, he didn't stay.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** He doesn't stay.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** He had to take on and walk until I think he reached a place where people don't know sea salt.



**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Is that it, or was it somebody with the winnowing thing is going to tell him, is this, he didn't know this was a sail, and he thought it was some kind of cloth with which you thresh—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Okay, he reaches his place—

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** See, we have two odysseys right there!

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** —he has to reach the place where people don't know what sea salt is. And then he can finally rest, and what resting means, we don't know either. Does it mean he can then go back to Penelope, now to stay? Or will he die there, but restful, in exile?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** (laughs) I don't know, but maybe the idea is that Ithaca is really the place of exile. It could be. I mean, we toy with these ideas and we don't like answers. Neither of us likes to give answers to anything, because we like the moment of perplexity. Because I think in both our cases, we think once we don't have an answer, once we are sort of baffled by the kind of questions we ask, and which brings me to one question I've been to ask you—I mean, you are, we're speaking in English, but you are German and I just wanted to know what it's like to have the kind of life trajectory that you've had. Maybe they would want to know. How is it being Bernhard Schlink?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK: (laughs)** Well, in a way I have two lives, a life as a lawyer and a life as a writer. And also I have a life in Germany and I have a life here in the United States. And I think it's a wonderful thing to have these two lives, to be here and there, to deal with law and also to write. There are moments of pain, so every time I arrive here for the first weeks I think, oh, my English is getting better and better, and I feel more and more at home. And then I reach a point where I realize I can't really play with this language. I'll never be able to play with this language in the way that I'm able to play with German. And then jokes hardly ever work, and then I teach my students and try to be ironic, and I have to explain to them **(laughter)** that I meant to be ironic because they don't get it. So after awhile it becomes painful. So I have to go through these painful weeks until finally I make my peace with, okay, I have to explain my students that was meant to be a joke.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Now, how long have you been in the States?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Right now, I haven't arrived such a long time ago, so I'm still on the upward road.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Okay, okay.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** So what is it to be André, in exile?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I don't know that André's in exile.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** He's not in exile?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I don't know, it's very hard to say. I mean, those of you who know me you know that I hate every single place that I go to. **(laughter)** I just don't like anything. No place feels really like home, but then I remember very distinctly hating my home. **(laughter)** So that sort of creates a problem, so you have to invent places that will make do. I think that's really the way that it happens. You sort of make peace with whatever life gives you. And you say, okay this is probably going to be my home, I better learn how to love it. But it's very hard, because—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, the books that we write, in a way, are home.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, I think so. I think that home is really, I mean that's why I called one of my books *False Papers*, because false papers means that you have false identity. And yet, I think that the truest identity that a writer has, ultimately, is the one that he semi-invents for himself on paper. Because all the rest is so totally unsatisfying.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And in a way it's a perfect blend of reality and imagination, of things we experience and things we don't experience, but maybe want to experience or are afraid to experience and finally once we experience them in writing, we aren't afraid of them anymore, as much as before. So it's a world that we create, I think, where we are maybe as much as home as possible.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I think so. And do you find that some people have asked you, “Bernhard Schlink, how much of Bernhard is in this book?”

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Oh, of course. Again and again. Are you *Der Vorleser*, and how much—what’s the percentage of you in *Der Vorleser*, thirty, forty, seventy? Yes, of course. You must know the same question.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And I duck the question now because I hate answering it.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Oh, I never answer it.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh, you duck it too? Okay. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, I, you see, in Germany, *The Reader* is read in schools.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Okay.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And so I get student mail almost on a daily basis. And it goes from, I have to give a presentation of your book, could you please give me a synopsis?  
**(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** **(laughs)** I don’t have time to read it!

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** To the question, Okay, is it all autobiographical? And then I came to write them, every book one writes is autobiographical and no book is one to one. What more can one say?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Nothing, I mean silence is the best answer. But in my case, when I wrote a memoir, they wanted to know how much of it was made up. **(laughter)** It was clearly made up, of course, because half the conversations occurred in 1905. But then when I wrote a novel, of course, people wanted to know how much was true. And you try to tell people, one is a memoir, one is fiction, there are certain transpositions. And people don't understand, they always want to know how much of it, what percentage of it is true. And it leaves us very sort of denuded, because every answer you give is going to be true, false, or false and true, and you can never quite give anybody—you cannot even give *yourself* a satisfactory answer, because one of the things that happens when you write is that as soon as you've written about something that actually did happen to you, you have erased what has happened to you, and now you have the paper version of it. And you will never remember what it was before.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** That's right. What I also sometimes write back is, what difference does it make? And being asked back, they never answer. They don't know what difference it makes. And, in fact, what difference does it make?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I think—I think people are more—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It satisfies curiosity, but the book doesn't become better or worse or more or less interesting, or more true, or more false.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yeah, I agree, I totally agree. We have some—we had a discussion together and tried to find common grounds we have, and one of the common grounds we found is that the character of the father, which plays a very dominant role in both our latest books. And maybe you want to talk a bit about the father. Or you want me to talk about your father? **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Talk about mine; I'll talk about yours.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** **(laughs)** The father that you have is really amazing because I think your—the father of Peter in the book is also a metaphor, I think, a metaphor for the ultimate changeling. The guy who was a confident person nearly all the time, and basically has a—every chapter moves on and you discover a new aspect of this father, because the character is in search of his father. Who was his father? And how did he die slash disappear slash escape. Went away. What other personality did he take on during the war? And so you have this more or less orphan who discovers at the end that you know, he is maybe not—I don't want to give away the novel. But it's this idea of this character who existed during the Nazi era and who essentially, I think, wedded himself to the Nazi cause, but then when the Communists came became a Communist and then moved on, sort of in other parts of the world which I will not name. But it was interesting

to see that this—the problem of this chameleon is very, very present in your books. And I think in many of your books the idea of this person who you think was X, suddenly becomes Y, suddenly becomes Z, and so on. And one has the sense that the writing itself is in pursuit of some kind of inner core, which it already assumes it will not find. Is that correct, more or less?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** That's correct, more or less. **(laughter)** And I think...the problem with this father is also he changes his roles in a rather playful way.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** So he's not doctrine-y or whatever he is, he just plays with the elements of whatever is there. And even though he thinks he can plan with these different realities and ideologies, and stays on top, in fact he can't fully stay on top. You can't play with anything without getting involved one way or the other.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, you do get, you get burned by your—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It's his illusion that he can play and even though he treats reality in this playful way, he's drawn into it and he's bound by it and his identity finally becomes determined.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes. But given the chance he would play a new role in a second.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** In a second.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** If history mandates it, yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And he might even play it well, but still it wouldn't be some outer role that he could just...

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Put off again.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, I think we all know this, right? I mean, we find ourselves going into situations—not all of you, because you look like a very decent crowd **(laughter)**—but there are people who, you know, once you've decided to go into a situation, with sort of a, somewhat of a lie in your heart, you find yourself that once you've accepted the lie you're going to live for those few minutes, that it's not so hard to do. And that you become, say okay, this is the person I am, these are the things I'm going to say, such and such a character could not possibly say all these other things, and you just find yourself suddenly, to your bewilderment, being trapped in a totally different personality. And, but I also think this is something I do all the time in my writing, especially, not in my real life but in my writing, I do think that people are—I mean, to say that you have two sides to you is an understatement. We have at least four, and five,



or six, I mean we are legion, **(laughter)** as Satan said to Jesus, you know. The idea is that there are so many of us, and they're all so confused and confusing and we can't ever reconcile them.

But I also think, and I think this is what makes our life histories so similar, is that there is an Old World quality to the idea of the character who was forced to play many tricks, take on many professions, take on many careers, many identities, sometimes simultaneous marriages. How many of you have read *The Orientalist*, a beautiful—I see a hand up, okay—it's that sort of character, and then you have today's people, I think, the more Westernized of us, who basically are mono-trajectory, you have one career, one set of ideas, one person you're going to vote for. Everything is unitary, so you develop this sense that people should have a very limited and at the same time a core identity. Which I think nobody in my family, certainly among my great-uncles and great-aunts, ever thought for a second that they had a core identity. They had no such thing. They'd be anybody you wanted them to be, and they could take on any religion, which they did! **(laughter)** So, I mean, that's my family, not yours. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** The father who we meet in *Call Me By Your Name*, he has gone through many stages in his life and places in his life, and all kinds of things. And it seems what makes, enables him to go through all this is an enormous tolerance and generosity. So it's not so much a playfulness, he doesn't seem to particularly enjoy to now to have to play this role and this context, and now that role in that context, but he somehow seems to manage to distance himself from it by just being enormously tolerant

of whatever happens, and enormously generous with his family in, okay, whatever happens, I give them what there is to give.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I certainly think that's the father that I—that I mean, I portrayed in the book. It's a very difficult kind of character because we all like to think of ourselves as tolerant human beings without prejudices, but I do think an intellectual person—and this is the father, he's a university professor, he's very famous, people seek him out. And in a sense he's a real intellectual. In other words, he will not take on an idea in order to be enlightened. He takes on doubt as his fundamental position. But I also like the fact that he is a very tolerant father, vis-à-vis the son. And in this respect, I mean he certainly is very much like my father, who was not and is not an enlightened human being, but he did have the notion that, you know, whatever you do, make sure you enjoy it. If you enjoy it, if you find pleasure—or the French word in *bonheur*, if you find *bonheur* in whatever you do, you're on the right track. Who cares what other people do, and certainly if it's with your body, it's always fine. **(laughter)** I mean, with the idea that it was somebody else's body as well. **(laughter)** But as you can see, both options are in my book, and they're both quite gratifying and accepted.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Yeah, and identity, how would he describe his identity, if he had to describe his identity? He's an intellectual, he's a man of the mind, so that's probably what constitutes the core of his identity.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And with that, he can probably live in all kinds of contexts and it doesn't matter what they are. They are more comfortable or less comfortable, more satisfying or less satisfying, but he doesn't mind taking on different roles and playing different situations. The core is his—

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, his mind is—the open-mindedness, the desire to test out new things and find fault with the ones that you thought were sacrosanct. He's open to everything, which I think is what we should all aim for, if we were only capable of half of it. But it does make sense. I mean, that's the kind of world that I want to live in. Where everybody's not just saying they're open-minded but are actually open-minded, and willing to suspend judgment in whatever form it comes. Difficult.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** One character, one person I had in mind when I wrote *Homecoming*, wrote the father of *Homecoming*, was the German with the names of Schneider and Schwerte, he had two names. He was a German scholar in the Third Reich and worked with some SS research institute, was married, had two kids, and then after '45 he took on a new name, wrote a second dissertation under a new name, remarried his wife under his new name, adopted his two children, and began a completely new life. And became very successful, he became professor and university president, and only after his retirement it became public. And he said, well, I did exactly what was expected from a good German. I changed. **(laughter)**

After '45, he had been expected to change, and he did, how can one more change that? And he never understood that he—they took away his pension, they took away the medal that he got from the German state, and he thought, well, identity means take on a new identity in this new world, in this new democratic Germany. And obviously we don't—we allow for change, but the change must not go that far. The change has to be communicated as something. A process of repentance. So people want to see that change. It's not enough that you change.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I guess not. I mean how—we watch a lot of those television evangelists, when they're caught visiting prostitutes and they come on the television screen and they're always makeup and their makeup is all over their faces. And this is I suppose the mortification that we expect from them, that they have to be visible. And I have to say, just to bring it home, in my case, my ancestors—and my family too—as soon as it became a bad idea to be Jewish, they changed the way the German did.

Automatically they took on different names and they took on a different religion, and they thought this was enough. So obviously there's a degree of the change that one wants to see—in the characters in your book, is that it has to go deeper. But I don't know that we know what that deeper is.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, I think what the public expects is not so much that it goes deeper, but as your example also shows, that it is performed in public.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Ah.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** One must—one has to be able to see how this person changes. Then change becomes acceptable.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** So the—

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** So we have all these rituals with the evangelists, or the ritual that had been expected from the Schneider/Schwerte, would have been that at least in the '60s he would have finally had to confess that, oh, in fact, I'm so-and-so, and I regret so much what I did, and how can I make it good, and—

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But let me ask you a question—is it possible for anyone in Germany, I mean, do people get rewarded for sort of confronting their past in public? Or is it that one is always punished for that? I mean, is there a case of somebody who said, by the way, I want everybody to know that...

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, take Günter Grass. He was punished not for finally revealing this, or that we finally learned that he had wanted to join the SS, he was punished for having been so judgmental of others who had not confessed years ago that they had been involved.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Right, right.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And, I think that was what people couldn't take. But just to confess that okay, I then had wanted to join the SS and I've never made it public but now finally I'm an old man, I want to make it public. That, I think, people would have accepted.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** They would have accepted from him.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Yeah, they would have accepted easily.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Then he made a bad calculation.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** No, I think the mistake was that he had been so judgmental of others before. But let me come back to *Homecoming*. In *Call Me By Your Name*, at one point you talk about love as coming home. Is love, is loving, coming home?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I think love has many definitions but perhaps the most—the one that I believe in the most as I get older is the idea of trust. That in order to trust you need to love, and in order to love you need to trust. Completely. And the willingness to trust, which means also to become very vulnerable, to other people, is a wonderful feeling, which doesn't come often. But when you are able to trust someone else, you're not just saying if I turn my back you're not going to stab me, but you are saying you are my base, you are my better self, you are the person that I turn to when I feel lost in the world because with you I do not feel lost. And it actually means in the end, I think, this ability

to love is the ability to find a home in someone else. Absent that feeling, I think we are—and since we don't, I don't, have a god—absent this trust in someone else and this need to trust, one is lost, totally lost. And forget limbo, we are sort of dislodged forever. So I think that love in that respect is a homecoming. And to find a person, a group of people, that you can love, is pitching your life to theirs. And I think that's a wonderful feeling.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** M-hm.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It needs work.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Okay, it needs work, but you just widened it, it can be one person, it can a group, a net, of people.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It could be family.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It can be family, yeah.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But in the book that I wrote, the idea of homecoming was this young man who feels that life has been really wonderful to him, very generous parents, wonderful growing up, and he suddenly feels that outside of this other person, he's totally lost. And so he realizes that this other person is necessary for him—both physically, intellectually, and emotionally—necessary for him to be in the world. And so the grown up author gives him the language: you are my homecoming, without you I don't have a

homecoming. But then you have the same feeling in your character, who is a person who goes through many, many, many modulations in his life, and plays himself this kind of mini-odyssey in a larger odyssey of his father. And himself, thinks that he has found a woman, and she's not the right woman, then he finds another woman, one has a son that he begins to love, and wants to take care of but basically this sense that he is very dislodged.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Yeah, and he can—as much as he can come home with Barbara, this woman, that he comes back to at the end. He only can come home after he has found out more about who he himself is. And it's not just that he didn't know who his father was, and whether he was still alive or whatever, his mother also kept this secret, so it was never an authentic relationship with his mother either. And only once he had clarified this and found about this and found his identity, he was able to come home to her.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And basically, I think, accept her as—not as a mother, but as someone that he needed to...there's a reckoning going on. A sort of coming to terms with this woman, who is a difficult woman.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** But also to understand that she accepts him.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes.



**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** He was in all these, who am I, and what does one want from me, and what does my mother want from me, and what can I want from...he didn't know what he could want, and what he could give and what he was allowed to take. And only once he found out more about that, he could accept that she accepted him.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But it was a difficult rel—very fraught, and yet, it's the kind of mother who says, funny you should ask. And she gives him a piece of information knowing that in a few years he's going to come back and say, by the way, what happened? Oh, funny you should ask. Here's the information. But she never volunteers more than he asks, which is an endless frustration. But—do you want to read a passage from your book?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Okay. **(laughter)** The one we talked about?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** The one we talked about. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Okay. It's from the chapters where the protagonist, this young boy and later man who looks for his father, has his former girlfriend's son staying with him. So over a couple weeks he has to take care of this kid.

“Every day I looked forward to telling him his bedtime story. After the first homecoming story, he kept wanting to hear more. The story of the man who, when his wife fails to recognize him, puts her to the test by courting her and rejoices when she rejects him out

of fidelity to himself. Or the one in which the man confirms his wife's devotion by telling her about her husband's supposed family happiness abroad, and watching her sad but ungrudging, loving, reaction. The story of the man who finds his wife with another man and moves on without identifying himself because he had been declared fallen in action and does not wish to trouble the happiness his wife has found after her long mourning. In one story a man spreads the false rumor that the man who has now come home died in the war, and the latter takes his revenge on the former by killing him, while in another the man who returns reveals his identity and, having thus exposed and won over the man who spread the rumor, saves his wife from a bogus happiness. Max was especially partial to the variation in which the man happens to arrive on the wedding day and must decide what to do when he sees them on the way to the ceremony. He also liked the one in which the two men become friends and try to find a way out of the impossible situation together."

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But it puts, I think that the fact that you are able to catalog so many variations on the theme of the returning soldier from the Siberian—from the Russian front—which I'm sure is a typical story told in Germany, as in Italy I know these people come back years afterwards. But it's also the fact that there's all these possibilities, and which card shall I play, what way—how do we behave, given a particular situation? And I think that's the theme of the whole book, because every situation is open to some kind of—there is no rule, there is no good and bad. Sometimes the good is bad, sometimes the bad does bad deeds that turn out to have been good all along, and therefore you have to accept them. The fact that all these possibilities are out there, for me, was a way of

saying, yes, you can come home, but what you left behind was no worse than coming back and finding that your whole life has been upstaged for you, that somebody else is now being you. And I find that, I don't know, maybe existentially sort of discombobulating, to put it mildly. But it made me think.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And you will read now.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And I will read now. What I like, of course, is when you find that the parallels between two writers are—were not just parallels but they're so, we're so similar in many respects that...and I'm just going to read from one of my essays:

“Ultimately, the real sight of nostalgia is not the place that was lost, or the place that was never quite had in the first place. It is the text that must record that loss. In fact, the act of recording the loss is the ultimate homecoming, inasmuch as the act of recording one's inability to find one's home, on going back to it, becomes a homecoming as well.

Reading about this paradox is a homecoming. In Proust, even showing how everything is always in the wrong place whenever we go looking for it in the right place, is ultimately a way of finding the right thing for the wrong reasons in the right place at the wrong time, which, all told, is very much a homecoming as well.”

Obviously, you see that I'm dying to get home. **(laughter)** But not quite.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Reading is a homecoming and writing is a homecoming, we've talked about that.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** That's right.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And maybe there's a good reason why your first great book is writing about your childhood. Because I think much of what we long for when we long for home is we long for what we had as kids, and what of course we can never get back, so that's one of the reasons why homecoming is never quite what we initially expect it to be. We have to go through all kinds of reflections and experiences until we arrive at a lovely definition as the one you gave about love as homecoming: love and trust. It takes a long way. The first homecoming we long for is coming back to where we come from. And of course, we can never come back.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** No, we can't. You have to deal with my mother, for one thing. **(laughter)** Which is a disaster. But, I think we all long for our childhood. And that really—and I see it when I play the game with my children, sometimes we'll go back to their first school as a kind of nostalgic visit. And they say, oh my god, I remember, this was first grade, and this was the class where such and such a thing happened. And I say, but do you feel that you can slip back in? And the answer is, no, you can't, but you want to. And you wouldn't really do it if you could, it's the fact that you think you might want to. And I think this is enough for writers to get us going. The idea that we think we might want to, but we're not going to, definitely. It's sort of lodged in that paradox that I think

many writers find their voice. And maybe we—some people have questions with their voice? Yes, sir.

**Q:** I just finished *Out of Egypt* yesterday and I was very moved by how you described your mother and your frustrations with her deafness. Is she still alive, or...?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, you still have to deal with her, believe me. **(laughter)**

**Q:** How old is she now?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** She's quite old. **(laughter)** But she doesn't know it, which makes life quite difficult. **(laughter)**

**Q:** It was a very wonderful book. A great pleasure.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Thank you, thank you. She's a difficult person, and I wanted—in describing my mother—and I'm not going to say anymore—in describing my mother I wanted to show how much I loved her. But I couldn't do that because it's just impossible to do that and not become syrupy. So I decided to make her as beastly as I could in order just to make you understand how strong the bond was. And I think it was communicated to the reader.

**Q:** Well, actually, I wrote this question out when I was meditating before the lecture and there's been so much talk about homecoming so it maybe no longer be appropriate, but I was looking in your books, you know I've read most of them, and I know in one place you say that the true feeling of home is when you're with people who have a certain affinity of thought and manner and expression with you. Not necessarily people you know and not necessarily people who are connected with your past, but some kind of inner affinity. You say that in one of your short stories, and I was, you know, I have read André very much and I really like his work extremely, and of course I read the passage he quoted and just to go back, I do think there is a certain parallel between you, even if it's an ambivalent and ambiguous one. Because you have certain problems, Mr. Schlink, in thinking about your home because of all the things that happened during World War II, and you have certain problems in thinking about at a home which you say, as you always say, you never really cared for it that much. And there was also a certain trauma in leaving. So neither of you can really return to your homes. It's a touchy voyage home. So I felt, I don't want to make it too long, that you find your homecoming in an affinity for other people, and you find your homecoming in this thing of going back to moments—I've written that in all my diaries—in moments that seem happy, that seem to be full of fulfillment, and moments that seem to be full of potential happiness, because you're hoping all the time that things will still work out better than they are. You are full of aspirations as far as the future as concerned. And those are the moments you look back to in nostalgia, however horrible the environment and the moments really were.

So let me just begin—**(laughter)** I just want to say, I can identify with certain things because I also have a choppy past, **(laughter)** so, no, let me just finish. So I just want to say how important is it for a writer, is it negative or positive, for a writer to have these problems of thinking back to their origins, or is it better for a writer to have a homecoming in the full, normal sense? Do you think we, and I include myself, although I don't deserve to be included, are better off in having a fractured home to look back on, or are we enriched by that, or are we impoverished by that, as human beings, as artists, as writers?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** You take this one.

**(laughter/applause)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Thank you for the question.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** It's a wonderful and rich question. **(laughter)** No, I mean it. And I can't speak about anyone else, and the way I deal with my homecoming or my not coming home, is in a way the only way I know. And that's the way with which I write what I write.

**Q: (inaudible)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** I don't know, even for myself the notion of home has changed over the years and I'm still thinking about it. And the—what he said about love and trust and homecoming, it's something that comes kind of late to someone in life, to understand this. I remember when I was a small boy of five, my family had moved from one part of the town to the other part. And one day I was five, I walked—it must have been five kilometers or so—found my way back to the old house. And then of course the parents were infuriated and my siblings, and they finally found me, and they asked me what I had wanted. And I said I wanted to go home. Obviously, home for me, by then, was the house more than the family. **(laughter)**

And later when I remember, often I came back to Heidelberg on the train, and I don't love Heidelberg that much any more, it has been Disneylandized to a point that it isn't that appealing any more, but when the train comes towards the mountains, and it's mountains and rivers and where they break the sandstone, I see these red spots on the mountains. Wow, it feels like coming home! But of course I know that's not coming home. So the feeling of coming home I think occurs in all kinds of contexts. And only over the years one arrives to a fuller understanding of what it really means. Like the one you gave us, and that may be very different for different people. And what makes one a writer I think—I think probably you can be a very good writer and happily living—I mean, Alice Munroe obviously has always lived in the Canadian forests and she is a fantastic writer with a deep insight. I mean, I don't think there are any rules.



**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Ditto. **(laughter)** I agree totally. I totally agree. It makes perfect sense. Just to take the parallel of the train coming. Because moments by train are very eloquent. When I used to teach at Princeton, which I liked, but I didn't like being in Princeton, and so I would get away as fast as I could, to the chagrin of the other professors, who were stuck there. There was a wonderful moment when you would come by train, and suddenly—in those years—you could spot the Twin Towers, and as soon as you could spot those you knew, oh god, it's Manhattan, thank god, and you had this feeling of now I'm going to be safe, now I'm going to have dinner, now I'm going to be among the people I love. And, oh, I guess that's home, yes, that is home. And as soon as I get to Manhattan, okay, what am I doing in this country? **(laughter)** So it starts all over again.

But I do think that you need a fundamental, and I think every writer—I cannot believe everyone is happy with who they are, what they do, what they aspire to, I'm sorry.

**(laughter)** But I do think that for a writer, for anybody who's sort of tackling this horrible business of being by yourself all day long, in my case in front of a screen, if you're going to tackle that, you have to feel that this is going to be better than all the ambiguities and ambivalences that you have about your own life. That this is going to put things together. Now, a wiser part of you knows that writing or art is not going to put anything together because it's fraught with lies. Okay, so what's that going to do for you? But still, you go at it because you figure this is...the narrative I create has more of me, even when I make it up, than are the things I say when I speak.

And I think that the idea of narrative, which is so true, and I think that's why psychoanalysts always ask us, don't tell me what happened, tell me what your fantasies are. But my fantasies are unreal. Something going on in the fantasy life that is about you. And I think that a writer is a person who does business with fantasies, and takes them and culls them and puts them together. And essentially says, this is my life, and I hope that when you see what I have done with my life you will say, my god, this is mine too. And at that point I think the miracle of publishing, of writing, takes place. It's really wonderful that you get letters, I get letters, from people who say, this is my life. You just got my life. Now, I have no idea who this person is, but he's convinced that I've got his life. And it's a wonderful feeling to have, to have created a tissue of things that are in your fantasy and at the same time touched so many hearts. Who could ask for better?

**Q: (Inaudible)** In *Call Me By Your Name* the whole idea of romance and seduction is such a delicate art and both of you construct it so beautifully. And just the literal seduction, I mean forget that their unconventional romances in the slightest, but I feel like it is such a strange territory to map known—it's just like when you're talking about how we live in this consumption agency and this world where romance is quick and it's consumed and it's cheap and everything. But both of you have magically been able to possess this talent to translate romance and the romantic experience with very physical, visceral experience. And I just wondered if there was a method, or if while you're writing those scenes you think, well, am I going to write about being naked or just, you know, being in love, and if there's even a difference? Because I feel like with both of your

work, there's such a great fine line, that you just—it's just marvelous. So if there's any craft or secret, or if there's not a secret? You don't even think about it.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** It's not a secret but you've said the key word—you've used the word romance. And you didn't use—but then you used the word love as a backup or a cover. Romance is its own thing, and it's really the most beautiful thing we've invented. Because it doesn't last a long time, and we all—I'm sure most of you do—I don't believe there's any distinction between love and infatuation, it has to be the same. But romance is a particular moment, usually at the beginning—if it comes at the end, it's bad. **(laughter)** But the beginning of a moment of intimacy between two characters, when the magic of romance suddenly manifests itself. Which is a moment in which you say, oh my god, this thing that has happened to others—they've all spoken about it, they've all sung about it—it's finally coming into my life. It's going to be me too, I'm one of those people who will have experienced this thing called romance! I'm buying into it! And sure enough, the phone calls and emails or whatever it is you do are sort of cluttering your life and it's wonderful and everything because beautiful. And the seasons are right, whatever, and if you have two cells in your brain, you know that you've invented, that it's all projection, but so what!

But the second cell in your brain should tell you please, don't consummate it too fast. Do not—there's a reason why they tell us not to sleep with each other right away. Try to make it last longer because it exists precisely because it's an initiation. It will go away. Make sure that the magic is never dispelled. And I'm one of those who I believe in the

magic. I think it's the best part of it. The rest is affection and love and trust and all those things. But the romance part, I mean, you always ask yourself why movie actors have the kind of lives they lead. Because they're all into romance, there's nothing besides that. Which tells you of course that then things become shallow. But the courtship is the most beautiful thing in the world. And the hesitations and the fears, and you know, am I imagining this? No, it's real! And it's wonderful. **(laughter)** That's my method, I believe in that. **(laughter)** I don't know what your method is.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, that's not a method and it's wonderful. It's just—I'm not as skeptic as you are about romance just being this one moment. I think in a relationship it can come again and again. There are moments of surprise, I look at her and have the feeling, well, I look at her with new eyes. So these moments of romance, they can, I think, come over a longer relationship.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, you can fall in love again with the same person. You say, my god, I'm in love again. Which is you couldn't be in love again because you're supposed to be in love. **(laughter)** No, but you are in love again, and it's a wonderful feeling. It's that moment of magic when you're on that margin that is not real ordinary. And we love that.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** But there is no method of writing. There is no method of writing at all. Neither about this nor about anything else.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** But it's funny that your book begins with a vomiting scene. And mine ends with one. **(laughter)** And in both cases it leads to intimacy, which is...

**Q:** Schlink, in the *Homecoming*, a central theme is the question of the iron rule. We have two golden rules. One of them says: do unto others, and the second one says: do not do unto others. And my question is, what's the difference between the first golden rule, and your iron rule?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Well, the iron rule in my eye is a perversion of the golden rule because it says: what you are ready to take, that you are allowed to inflict on others. But it's presented as a principle that doesn't have to be tested. I mean, so, the character who writes this writes it in the context of what has been done to the Jews, or the Russians in the occupied parts of Russia. And he says, okay, if I were to lose or if I were to be an untermensch, okay, I would have to take this, but of course, I am not. But you are, I can inflict it on you under a premise that never will actually involve me. And that's why this iron rule in my eye is a perversion of the golden rule. The golden rule is a rule of actual symmetry, and the iron rule is not a rule under the premise of actual symmetry. That was a little bit too philosophical, I am sorry. **(laughter)** But the question was philosophical, so I had to answer it.

**Q:** I have a question for André. In your book *Call Me By Your Name*, you have a very strong sense of lust, and I had the feeling that in fact he was romanticizing what he was feeling but it was more lust than anything else because he felt very guilty about what he

was feeling. And I would love to know your opinion if it was lust, if it's really love, and you really can separate them, and...

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I, no, I mean, the answer very bluntly: it is lust. It is only lust. It was just hunger. But it was a hunger that was, I mean, if you read, I don't know, Andreas Capellanus, you see that every author has ways of sort of breaking down love and lust and appetite and imagination and all kinds of categories. But it was pure, physical, lust. And it was also tinged with curiosity. And it was I think extremely honest. There was never a desire to camouflage the lust for the body and of the body with sentiment. Any kind of sentiment. So that comes after, and it catches I think the character by surprise, that he should feeling things as well as just bodily functions. And ultimately, I think, at the very end of the book, I think it catches the reader by surprise to find that, my god, there's something quite moving going on. And yet, all it was for so long was just sloth.

And sure enough, I mean that was the point, is that eventually it takes you, and I never used, for those of you who really read carefully, I never use the word love in the book, ever. And I made a point not of using love, but all the reviewers, the intelligent and not so intelligent ones, used the word love, as though that were the conclusion that one had to draw. I never said that. But I mean, clearly I wanted—I mean, the idea is that we want to fall in love, that way. And I wanted to take you there.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** I find it interesting how many normative ideas of love are around. So can this really be true love? Is the question that we ask so often when we

encounter love in literature, I mean, the same with *The Reader*. She's 35 or 33 and he's 15. Can this be true love? As if there were a norm: what is true love? And then true love is between people of equal age and equal— **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Careers?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Equal careers.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Religions.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** And equal strength, and no one is abusing no one. They are using each other to each other's benefits, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. There's this normative notion of love that I think is so strange. **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, you're a lawyer, you teach law, you know how it is. It's this whole idea of there's a bill of rights in love.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Thank god there isn't.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, basically we are all created equal, we have the same appetites, you have yours, I have mine, da da da da da da, it's a nice democratic thing. I don't think the body works that way, and the imagination certainly doesn't, and what goes on in our minds sometimes had better stay there. But the idea that in fact you have a grown woman

with a very young kid, and I have a young kid who goes after a rather grown up man, so that the seduction is the other way around, and these are, if you think of it, these are not normal situations, and yet the reader certainly of both books accepts them as, oh my god, I'm moved, I understand. I even understand why Raskolnikov kills the pawnbroker, I would do it too, given the...(laughter)

Basically what we're trying to show is not that we want to challenge the reader to see that in extraordinary circumstances passion is possible, but I think that what we are trying to explore is that there is no rule, there are no golden rules when it comes to human beings. And I mean one of the healthiest lessons that was ever taught to me about human love and sexuality is that once your clothes are off, once you've removed the clothing, there is no taboo. And that came from my father, I mean what a genius, okay. (laughter) I mean, there are no taboos, once you've done that, you've basically agreed to go into that bedroom, then everything else is okay. I mean, you don't kill each other, okay, but essentially the idea is there is nothing that will make you come out of that room to feel mortified and ashamed of what you did. And certainly guilt is not part of the question.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** I sometimes wonder whether that was maybe truer for earlier generations than it is for our generation. I think kids who grew up, or we even grew up with all these notions from movies, how you have to kiss passionately. How you have to sleep with each other so that it looks nice and expresses passion, and when you have to cry and all these things. So I think there may have—norms may have seeped in our daily and actual and love expectations in a way that they didn't seep in in earlier days.



**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I agree.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** In old days, every kiss I think was—the first kiss was really the first kiss. They had never seen people kissing, they had to invent kissing. **(laughter)** Now they have seen it a million times and know how to do it properly.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And imagine the sense of pleasure when you think to yourself, god, I'm doing it exactly as they do it in the movies. **(laughter)** I mean, you become sort of—I mean, you can go into deconstruction, looking at yourself as the object you've been looking at back and forth, oh it's a disaster. But yes, we are all sort of in this cult of spontaneity, but it is just that. It has become a cult. And essentially yes, when you kiss the first time, you're supposed to have—I invented sexuality, as far as I'm concerned, **(laughter)** because I had never seen it done, I had never, I didn't know what was going to happen. So I invented it. And I think that is a wonderful feeling to have, so you don't model yourself after some kind of passionate role thing that you have out there. Anyway. But we're just complaining. **(laughter)**

**Q:** Changing the subject slightly but maybe not. I'm wondering about what role New York plays for you, having met each other here in New York. I've read all of Bernhard Schlink's books; I know New York always comes up somehow. I love New York is the slogan on so many t-shirts. What signifies New York for both of you?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** What does New York mean to me? Well, New York is changing. It has changed over the last decades. And I come to New York since the early 80s, thanks to my friend Michael Katz, who generously allowed me to stay in his place again and again. And then in the late 80s, early 90s, I began to get in touch with Cardozo Law School and since then I—it makes a difference whether you work in the city and whether you get on the subway not for some touristic adventure but you get on the subway every morning like everybody else to go to your workplace.

And so there are many things about New York I always loved and still love. The subway, for instance, in the morning—all these people who want something out of life. In Berlin, you see so many depressed people on the subway, it's sad but it's really true. And here, there is a sense of energy that I still enjoy. I think that New York, okay, it comes cleaner and cleaner, and more orderly and more orderly, and when I came first I had the impression: this is a city that is as much the whole world as a city can be. From rich to poor, from cultivate from non-educated, from beautiful buildings to ugliness. I thought yes, it's as much the whole world as a city can be. And okay, it's not the whole world anymore. It's a nice city in the affluent part the western world. Okay, but it inspired me again and again, that's why it appears in my fiction.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** New York is the place—I mean, first of all, it's the only city in the world where I can stay for more than two weeks without feeling I have to leave.

**(laughter)** I love many places in the world, I truly adore Rome, and I've lived in Rome for a long time. But now when I go there I have to leave after five days. And Paris I can't

tolerate for much longer than a week. But New York is that. But that's a love by default. In a sense for me, but New York is also most likely the only city in the United States that I like. Cleveland is not there. **(laughter)** But in a sense, but I love it for a very specific reason, is that it allows me to discover what I think I want from a city all the time. And so if I want—you said it's the world—I still think it's the world. It is the best that the world has to give. So if I want something Italian, and not that I need to go to an Italian restaurant, but it has an aspect of it that reminds me of Italy. And when I want something that's French, I'll find the French part of it in a different guise. And so it has everything that needs to put my imagination at rest. Whereas I find myself elsewhere in the world, I'm constantly longing, longing, longing, sort of prospecting: could I live here? No. Could I live there? No. Absolutely not. Do I like this street? Well, yes. But for five minutes, not more. **(laughter)** And I keep doing that constantly. Whereas in New York, the question is moot, I don't ask it. Or I ask it to give the answer yes. I mean, there are certain streets that I consider so beautiful that I will not leave New York, because I cannot think of not having these streets to see every week.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** For instance? **(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh. Riverside Drive.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Okay.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** I think Riverside Drive is probably the most beautiful thing that ever was invented in any city. And I cannot think of anything like it. It depends. I don't like the Hudson, but I like to be near the Hudson, looking at Riverside Drive. **(laughter)** And of course, imagining what it must be like when you're on Riverside Drive looking out at the Hudson. But that's me. But I do love Riverside Drive. I think it has a beauty and a charm and a peace, serenity. Everything is there. It's not trying to be anything else but what it is. And so it is, as it's a stunning place. And not to have it is like, you know, not having the Metropolitan Opera, even though I never go. **(laughter)** But you like to know that it's there if you want it!

Yes.

**Q:** There's a wonderful part in one of your books, I'm not sure which book it is, in which you talk about looking down a block at a little sliver of the Hudson River and thinking about being in Alexandria, and then when you're in Alexandria, you think about—you see a little sliver of river and you think about being in New York looking at the Hudson River and wishing you were in Alexandria. And your brother got very annoyed at you.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, that's a good memory. My brother hates that. He has no patience with that kind of thinking. But for me, that's a way in which I begin to articulate this sense of total, total ambivalence, vis-à-vis so many things. In other words, when I'm in New York I'm thinking of elsewhere, when I'm elsewhere I'm thinking of New York, thinking of myself in New York thinking of elsewhere. I could do this automatically. But

it just means that I'm sort of an unstable citizen. I'm not the kind of person you would expect to court, if you want me to vote for you, because I'll say yes I love what you said, but I heard him last so I love what he said. So, in my new book I'll call this amfibalance, **(laughter)** it's just a new way of saying ambivalence, but it's just this notion of being torn. And not exactly happy with the way things are. But that's something I can live with.

**Q:** I have a question which is a little bit more down to earth. Mr. Schlink, it's very difficult to get a foreign book published in the United States because the market is 99 percent American. You have made it and you are quite successful, so how much do you think it helps to have the Third Reich and the Nazis as a topic to sell a book here?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Oh, I have no idea. I mean, I didn't sell my book, my German or Swiss publisher sold the book, and, well, I'm glad he did. What else can I say?

**(laughter)**

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Good answer. I like that.

**Q:** This is a different tack, but when you have both finished your books, and you've put your "the end" and the page is—the book is over, how long does it take you to function as a non-writer for the next morning? Or do you still have—do you have your next book in your head? I'm sure you do—before you're finished—how do you function when you've finished that book, how long does it take you to get back to whatever normal is?

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** You start.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, it depends if I'm cooking that night, but...**(laughter)** No, I think, I mean, I don't want to see myself as being a writer. I am many other things, and I'm not sort of in it for—I mean a lot of people are writing one essay, they're publishing another one, another is landing, they're like a control tower. **(laughter)** I hate that notion. I'm not that way. I want to write something, I'm happy I'm finished, I may have something else I want to do, I may want to start writing right away, I may want three months. I don't like the idea that it's a job, and this is what I do for my living, it's my—I mean, I do it out of love. And so this idea that every writer is constantly, as they're publishing one book, already thinking of the next one, and there's another one that's in rough draft being seen by a—no, no. I'm not an assembly line. I like the luxury of not having to do anything afterwards. I mean, seriously, that's what it is. I'll go play tennis instead.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** Pretty much the same. Sometimes I have a next book in mind, and sometimes I don't. And even if I have it in my mind, it may still not be ready to be written. I mean, I play with a story, a plot, for a long time, and why it's ready to be written when, I don't know.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yeah.

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** So I play and play, and sometimes it's never ready to be written so I have to start playing with something else.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** And sometimes you play tennis. **(laughter)**

**BERNHARD SCHLINK:** I don't play tennis, but.

**Q:** This is a question for André. Right here.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Where are you? Oh, yes, yes.

**Q:** When you discussed the transition or when you began to suspect that the projection of home onto the outside world was beginning to wane and lose its power, and it was headed towards family, do you remember when you began to suspect when it started to shift? You know what I'm asking? You were talking about how it went towards love and family, and that feeling of home there, and it began to release that feeling of home again, to release itself from the kind of normal projection on some kind of place.

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Oh. When that happened?

**Q:** Yeah, do you remember when you began to sense that transition?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Yes, I do. **(laughter)**

**Q:** Would you like to share that with me? And us?

**ANDRÉ ACIMAN:** Well, it's when someone else basically told me that they trusted me, that they trusted what I had to offer, and that they were willing—she was willing—to stake everything on me. And I realized, oh my god, I'm like every other human being, I'm not just an exile, I'm a human being that somebody else is willing to take a gamble on and I was very much of a gamble in those days. So the fact that someone was willing to do that, and I said, okay, maybe it's not going to be Italy, it's not going to be Paris, it's going to be New York, and it's probably going to be with her. And it took a lot of conceding, of giving up this willowy thing that I had in my mind, of what I was going to, of what I was angling for, in life. When it was right there, and the irony is we lived on the same street.

Oh, yes, we have a book signing outside! **(laughter)**

**(applause)**