

1955, and *High Society* in 1956, which featured his last hit song, "True Love." Although he had several long-term homosexual relationships over the years and had separated from his wife in the early 1930s, they reunited after his accident. His leg was amputated in 1958 and he never wrote another song.

If you are a Cole Porter fan, you must get this book. If you do not know about him, you are missing a glorious piece of Americana. Many artists have recorded his songs but I strongly recommend the 1990 release "Red Hot + Blue." It contains modern versions of his songs by such artists as U2 and Deborah Harry. The compilation was produced as part of an AIDS benefit series, and in that context, the song "I've Got You Under My Skin" takes on a whole new meaning. I absolutely guarantee that when you hear the drums go wild in the song "Don't Fence Me In," you will crank up the stereo and, at least for a few minutes, feel overcome by youthful exhilaration.

In truth, Porter was a good but not great poet. There's no mistaking him for Robert Frost or T. S. Eliot (thank God!). But when he set his words to music, the results really were "delightful...delicious...de limit...deluxe," and "de-lovely."

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***The Story of French*, by Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2006, 496 pp, \$25.95.**

This is a wonderful book by the authors of the cleverly titled *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*, which explored the history, sociology, and modern trends of French culture. Both authors are Canadian and attended McGill University, but as their names reveal, one is French-Canadian and the other Anglo-Canadian. The two are married and write very well together.

Why do I say the book is wonderful? Well, because it once again mixes history, sociology, polemic, and modern trends, this time about the French language and, even more interestingly, the English language. At times the authors sound defensive and protective of the French and the French language, but for the most part they are surprisingly undefensive. It is also wonderful because one learns something with almost every page; for example, I learned that the term "zydeco" is a corruption of *les haricots* (French for "the beans"), that the name Clovis morphed into Louis, and that some words the French think are anglicisms are actually French in origin.

The book starts with a section on the origins of the language, essentially revealing that it is derived from the Indo-European language family and not Latin; that only 100 Gaulish words survive today (one of which is *sapin*, or "fir"); that Norse settlers contributed such words as *crabe* ("crab"), *homard* ("lobster"), and *vague* ("wave") and that the Franks contributed *gant* and *robe* ("glove" and "dress"), as well as *champion* and *guerre* ("war"); that many words were borrowed from Arabic (*amiral*, *alcool*, *coton*, and *sirop*); and that the split between the languages of northern (*oil*) and southern France (*oc*) persist to this day. Script was introduced in the 12th century and accents were only introduced in the 1530s; the battle for supremacy between Latin and French went back and forth.

While Anglos, especially Americans, have many preconceptions about the French Academy, or *Académie française* (namely that it is some form of language police), it's intriguing to learn that it was composed largely of amateurs (in the English sense) and not language experts, authors, or professors. The eight editions of the official dictionary published by the Academy have sometimes taken as long as 70 years to write (the view predominated that each word must have only one unique meaning, meaning no synonyms).

The second section deals with the spread of the French language, including as an instrument of building empires and as a means of diplomacy, the uses of French-based creole languages, and how in the French Revolution, language became a foundation of national identity (one of the reasons behind the creation of the national public school system was to teach proper French to all, as well as taking teaching out of the Catholic Church's hands).

Some things I learned that I had only a glimmer of before: in 1790 only 3 million of 28 million persons spoke French; there are still 30 dialects spoken today; and even in 1999, 12% of the French population claim to speak a regional language. In addition, French friends have told me that despite years of instruction, the French are reluctant to speak English for fear of not being perfect, the result of a strong tradition of dictation, writing, and speaking without fault (which would be akin to a sin for the French).

The third section is on adaptation of the language; more specifically, how French (and English) is an instrument of foreign policy, cultural importance, and power. The stories of how French became the second "working language" at the United Nations and why ex-colonists "chose" to continue teaching and learning French are wonderful.

Finally, the authors deal with changes to the language in the concluding section. I suspect that unless you watch French news every night (especially "Les Guignols de l'info") or eavesdrop on adolescents speaking the Arab-influenced language of the *cités* (suburban high rise buildings for the poor) or *verlan* (similar to "pig Latin" in English), you won't be much interested in what's happened most recently. However, readers should be interested in how the *passé simple* has been done in by the *passé composé*, how French has adapted to the Internet and the computer, and the battle between English and French in Europe and North America.

In sum, if you love words, grammar, and French in any form, get this book. One can indeed still learn something new every day.

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***Call Me By Your Name*, by André Aciman. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 256 pp, \$23.00.**

Before Freud, there were the novelists, and they continue to contribute their own unique wisdom of the human condition. This is the first novel for André Aciman, author of the classic memoir *Out of Egypt*, and perhaps another classic. It is an exquisitely detailed portrait of the erotic experiences of a teenage boy filtered through the razor-edged intelligence and acuity

ity of his adult memory. Central to the book is a brutal longing for perfection, achieved briefly in a star-crossed relationship so ferocious it retains its influence for life—an intense experience turbulently adrift in a sea of transience.

Elio is a scholarly, sensitive 17-year-old boy; Oliver is a 24-year-old charming, worldly professor of philosophy and summer houseguest of Elio's father in their lush Italian seaside villa. The first half of the novel is a tour de force account of the tortuous on-and-off dance between the two, beginning when Elio serves as tour guide for Oliver and ending 132 pages later in bed. Each advance between them writes a new page in a thesaurus of approach-avoidance; their lurches apart, fueled by uncertainty and danger, are reversed by the relentless magnetism of their attractions.

The thrill of someone new, the promise of so much bliss hovering a fingertip away. Fumbling...in desperation to be wanted, I put up screens between me and the world, not just one, but like layers of rice paper, sliding doors embossed on every sight, sound and smell I'd grown up with, suddenly turned to acquire an inflection forever colored by the events of the summer Oliver came into our house. (p. 10)

Oliver is by turns charming and diffident—fire to ice and back, “but when his kinder gaze fell on me it came like the miracle of the resurrection” (p. 9). The two run together on the beach each morning: “Our feet were aligned, left with left, and struck the ground at the same time, leaving footprints on the shore that I wished to return to and, in secret, place my foot where his had left its mark” (p. 11). After the first casual touch Elio panics “like a virgin touched for the first time, stirring nerves they never knew existed.... I hoped he wouldn't notice my overreaction, but was certain that my struggle to conceal would expose me. I needed to stare at him, but could never stare long enough to find out why I couldn't” (p. 16). Elio's reluctance is finally undone by their symmetry in taste, wit, and intelligence. Their minds seem to travel in parallel, exchanging affirmations with a private glance. The recurrent incarnations of fire and ice progress until they finally bed each other in the last week of summer, aware in retrospect that each had misread the other's shyness. Elio feared rejection, uncertainty, and making a fool of himself; Oliver feared abusing the influence of his seniority. Both are traversing forbidden terrain, capped by three Bacchanalian days in Rome celebrating denial in grand hypomanic style. The intimacy that is over in one realm becomes indelibly engraved on another.

Other villa residents reflect various prisms of the romance. Mafalda, cook and housekeeper, hears all, washes the bed sheets, and knows everything. The theme of loss is poignantly introduced by Vimini, the ten-year-old girl next door, who conveys with precocious maturity that she has leukemia and a foreshortened life expectancy. She charms Oliver and they walk the beach daily. Her impending death foreshadows the end of summer. Another chord in the story is the reality of a double life, spoken of to Elio by his father after Oliver's departure. “You had a beautiful friendship. Maybe more than a friendship. In my place, my parents would hope the whole thing goes away, but I am not such a parent. We rip out too much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we should, but our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once. Most

of us can't help but live as though we've got two lives, one is the mockup, the other the finished version. But there's only one” (p. 224). He advises Elio that to hurry sorrow away “wears out the heart.”

Aciman considers a different aspect of transience in an earlier essay on his love for the sea in which he wrestles with the question, “What do you do with so much blue once you've seen it?” (1). The aura of that question haunts this novel: how do you go on with your life when you possess what you've wanted more than anything else in the world and must let go of it? No one fails to suffer the urge to stop time, but each must settle instead for the archives of memory. If the intensity of the memory matches Elio's, a return to the villa is a mistake, and it is one he makes.

There is a reunion at Christmas, and when Elio's plea of “one last time” is refused, his loss is revisited. The next summer Oliver marries and much of the rest of Elio's life is filled with “what ifs” and relationships marked “before” and “after” Oliver. Their second reunion occurs 15 years later, filled with ragged acceptance of the life lived.

Did I want to be like him? Or did I just want to have him? Or are “being” and “having” thoroughly inaccurate verbs in the twisted skein of desire, where having someone's body to touch and being that someone we're longing to touch are one and the same, just opposite banks of a river that passes from us to them, back to us and over to them again in this perpetual circuit where the chambers of the heart, like the false-bottomed drawer we call identity, share a beguiling logic according to which the shortest distance between real life and the life un-lived, between who we are and what we want, is a twisted staircase designed with the impish cruelty of M. C. Escher. (p. 67)

This book may complicate our concepts of intimacy, identity, and a few other things, but it describes some aspects of relationships and the workings of memory better than any textbook. Such are the humbling contributions of novelists.

Reference

1. Aciman A: In search of blue, in *False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, p 28

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***The Entitled: A Tale of Modern Baseball*, by Frank Deford. Naperville, Ill., Sourcebooks, 2007, 352 pp, \$24.95.**

The aptly named Howie Traveler is a baseball manager who, after bouncing around the farmtowns and milltowns that populate baseball's minor leagues, has finally gotten his call-up to “The Show” as manager of the Cleveland Indians. Unfortunately for Howie, the book begins at the point that his life as a big league manager seems about to end.

As he prepares his underachieving team, including underperforming superstar Jay Alcazar, to play a series against the Orioles, Howie is certain he is about to be fired. More precisely, that he “won't get outta Baltimore alive.”