

[MUSIC]

Voice over: Welcome to Always Authors

Andre: Hello. My name is Andre Aciman and I am very very pleased to have a conversation with Edmund de Waal and it is a great pleasure to be here.

Edmund: It's such a huge pleasure, Andre, to be in the same space as you. Finally! And I'm hoping this is a sort of lock in together, with books, in a library. For at least a week. There's a lot to catch up on. A lot to talk about.

Andre: Okay. Anyway, well we started on the right note which is missed encounters. Things we never met and I know we're both big fans of each other. In part because our trajectory may be totally different but in essence it's identical in many ways. We've been in many places, have a lot of history behind us and we are just the mouthpiece for so many other people who are no longer on this planet.

Edmund: I mean that, I suppose, is the beginning and the end isn't it? For us, of a conversation which is, you know, all those deep questionings of belonging, of migration, of diaspora, of which language you dream in. I mean or all these things are things that are profoundly within your work and within your life. I mean, you know, I have to say right up front, Andre, of course, that I am an enormous enormous fan of yours and that it's there's a huge huge pleasure about being you know seeing you there—wherever you are i have no idea where you are in the world.

Andre: In New York

Edmund: In New York. Seeing you in New York, you know, you're there. I think it's the morning with you, it's the afternoon here, the sun is coming to my studio and I've spent since this invitation came in, a marvelous ten days reading you, thinking about this conversation. I have in my hands your new essays which I've—

Andre: Oh!

Edmund: —been devouring. Homo Irrealis and making endless lists of people who we share. So I have no idea where we're going to begin, but we share. We do share a lot.

Andre: Well, it's amazing. One of the authors that you seem to like a lot, and I mean aside from Proust, which whom we'll touch on I'm sure, but it's Virgil and Ovid and I happen to be a huge fan of Ovid and I've just reread the entire Aeneid this summer. In a wonderful translation that is totally untouted by the father of Daniel Day-Lewis who's—

Edmund: Ah! That great—that great translation. Yes, yes. Cecil Day-Lewis.

Andre: Who's a wonderful poet it is a fabulous translation. Yes, and it's actually stunning and I was in love with it. So I mean we start with antiquity, don't we, I mean in a way. You'd certainly do.

Edmund: Well we should. I mean perhaps that's the first thing to say is that you know it's completely unfashionable to talk about—

Andre: Yes.

Edmund: —the bedrock it's you know, I'm not sure how far that would get us in a lecture hall, actually you know, why shouldn't we start with Virgi? Or start with Ovid, you know because, you know, all those lines of thought, all those cadences, keep weaving in and out of the last two thousand years of all kinds of things that matter to us. Stuff to do with memory, stuff to do with well I mean Ovid, stuff to do with exile. You know, so going back and starting again with them seems to be an extremely good idea.

Andre: Well, it it seemed to make sense to me in good part because you do mention, I think, at the very end of the book, which I had to reread again, was the Tristia his poems that he wrote when he was in exile. Was it Bulgaria? I forget now where it is exactly, but it was a dark corner of the world at the very fringes of the Roman Empire and he was very miserable and he died there simply because of maybe something he saw, we're never quite sure what it was. But here's a great poet who wrote about desire in a way that still until today is almost as lascivious as any other writer that we know.

Edmund: Yes.

Andre: And, in fact, it has influenced most of western art. There's no artist who has not in one way or another painted a scene from Ovid as far as I can—

Edmund: Completely and I mean that— there's, you know, we had an exhibition here of Titian in the National Gallery recently and, you know, you felt—you felt how saturated by—with Ovid. Ovid was present in all those sort of stagings of desire. But Tristia, yes, Tristia, I don't know if you remember, but Tristia was the starting point of my library of exile that you came and experienced in Venice. The—this collection of—began as two thousand books and ended up as, for god's sake, four thousand books. But I began that idea of a literature of exile by placing my grandmother's copy of Tristia in the library and that was absolutely the kind of keystone for me of beginning to think about what what an exilic literature might be. What it might mean to be elsewhere, to have that elsewhere. To be writing home in a sense that—or writing about a lost possibility of return which is what Ovid does in Tristia. Return to a place, and a return to love. That kind of crunching together of place and displacement. So Ovid—that book, Tristia, is, for me, the beginnings of a whole thinking about where we belong

Andre: I think it's—you're totally right. I also know, I mean, one of the things that I liked about your book, *The Hare With Amber Eyes*, it's especially that you take time off whenever you tell a

story about the past to locate yourself, to situate yourself in the city. Looking at the building or looking at this particular netsuke looking at this or that because you're trying to say: "This is part of who I am. This is part of my family. This is part of what I could have been but never was. And of course I can walk back and try to use that horrible word 'return' to this other thing, this other place, this other time, but that's no longer possible." There's been some kind of ravagement has gone on and the people have died and they're gone and you can't even come to a reckoning with them. To essentially, um, bring them, bring their voice back and it all boils down to, as you also say, I don't know if this is a metaphor or not, but to a tiny little statuette. Very very small and it all boils down to just that. That you can put in your pocket. As if our entire past was a kind of pocket book—pocket version of the lives of many other people, many many other people, and many other places can they be reduced to something? Of course not! And so there's always a sense of of declaration wherever you go to look at things and you have a sense that: it happens, I'm alive, I have a family, things are okay, but the grandeur—the promises of the past have been totally erased and have not been kept. In that sense, I'm also reminded of another author, whom you don't mention, but I suppose you will mention, or you have mentioned elsewhere, which is W.G. Sebald. Who is—

Edmund: I'm raising my hands here! I mean we have to talk about Sebald. We have to, and indeed you do in your beautiful new book. You do write an extraordinary essay on him, Andre, and I think you write it also— you wrote about the immigrants didn't you when—

Andre: When it first came out. Yes.

Edmund: When it first came out. How do we unpick this because, you know, we've got this whole sense of—this shared—we've got the shared thing here haven't we? Just in front of us which is Out of Egypt. We've got your own extraordinary mapping of your own family history. Of how you can, with dignity and with accuracy, unflinchingly, talk about loss. Talked about it without nostalgia without the lens, that kind of greasy soft focus-y kind of way, you know. Which actually is a terrible sin to kind of inhabit, the lived experiences of your parents, your grandparents, my parents, my grandparents, great grandparents and the places they were and make it sort of a faux, saccharine, you know, life. Because it was reality, your reality, my reality is that it was beautiful and complicated. And to write about it without sentimentality, without melancholy, but knowing that the trope of melancholy is possible is bloody difficult! This will get us to Sebald, I promise you, but how did you start—I have to ask you, Andre, did you know you were going to write that book? Did you know that you had to write out—? How did that happen? I've always wanted to ask you this

Andre: Oh, no, it's so plebeian and so pedestrian really the way I started because I knew I wanted to write something. I was going to write a book about how to quit cigarettes but— which I was an avid smoker for many years, and I spoke to a publisher and I said, "You know I want to write this book because I can really make it happen, having quit myself." And she said, "That's a great idea, Andre, do you have any other ideas?" I said, "Well, yes. I could write about my past as a Jewish boy growing up in Egypt during the time of rabid anti semitism." She says, "Write that!" And I said, "I'm going to go home and start it." And I started it because it was a joke. It was

really easy to write, it was not difficult, so long as I did what you have recommended. As long as I didn't grease the lens, which is what, if you remember, Penthouse used to always grease their lens to give the naked women a particular sort of erotic aura. Which a sort of frank picture would not have. And so I decided that I'm going to attack nostalgia. I don't want to be nostalgic. But you can't write about this without being nostalgic. So the way I suffused it is with um— or diffused it, sorry. It was with humor.

Edmund: Yes. Absolutely, yes. Yes.

Andre: And with irony. I'm always being ironic. And you haven't gotten—you were not sentimental at all in your book. In other words, maybe your way of avoiding it was by speaking about those Japanese, sort of Netsuke—

Edmund: Yes, indeed. Indeed. Yeah.

Andre: —statuettes. That was your way out of this, sort of, lachrymose nostalgia that we are all—we live with it. I mean, it's not incidental to our lives, but it is not something we like to invoke and so we avoid it. And so I did it with irony and humor and making people sometimes look more beastly and more ridiculous and stupid than they actually were but this was my out. And I think that you have another out.

Edmund: It's such an important out. I mean that, you know, and I'm so conscious when I read you of voice—of your voice there in that book, you know. What's extraordinary about it is that, and perhaps we will get to unrealistic as an idea in this conversation, um, is—it's exploratory. It doesn't feel like—it feels like you are—it's the act of remembering. I mean, that's why it works so profoundly is that it's a transitive act. This encounter of memory. It's not a given that you've just sort of—which you're recounting—it's the act of the act of remembering which, of course, is an act of re-witnessing, of making something possible for people to explore themselves. Seems to me, a kind of obligation in this kind of writing, I mean it seems to me that's an essential part of it. That it isn't a sort of a gilded age recollection.

Andre: No, it's—it cannot be. And I think we both are well aware of the dangers of this. And one of the things, and I noticed it in your book as well, is that you are constantly—I mean, you have moments when you actually catch yourself almost, sort of, turning plangent and you cut yourself off by using, usually (and I notice it in style because I'm always interested in style) and you have a wonderful style, but one of the things that you do is that you sometimes use an idiomatic phrase. When you say, for example, I'm just going by memory now, “and that was it,” you know?

Edmund: Yes.

Andre: What a blunt way of saying something but it basically prevents you from going into this dimension which I think both of us knew that we had to avoid, otherwise we were writing—which a lot of people write. I mean, you as well as I do, get memoirs sent to you sometimes, I'm sure. Of people who have been through the war, in the second world war, and who were basic

survivors of one fourth and usually they're filled with tears—teary material. Which is felt and sincere but it doesn't make for a good book.

Edmund: It doesn't. It doesn't. And actually, do you know, I only read him after I'd finished my book but the austrian writer Jean Améry. Do you know his work?

Andre: Oh, gosh. Yes, very well.

Edmund: Isn't he extraordinary? Absolutely extraordinary. And there's an extraordinary essay he writes right at the very end of his life, right before he took his life away, where he talks about that nothing is resolved, nothing is settled. Remembering cannot become mere memory, you know. And this idea of not resolving things and not settling things within a text, within the act of writing, or act of remembrance, is quite extraordinary and that absolutely is something you—seems to me, so central to your really—to your credo, really, of writing. Which I feel these new essays have been where you talk about not resolving things. Can I read you? Can I read you to yourself, Andre?

Andre: [laughing] Sure. Okay. Please read to me.

Edmund: You talk about “the unthinkable, imponderable, impalpable, fluid, transitory, incoherent zone of the irrealis mood. A verbal mood to express what might never, could, shouldn't, wouldn't, possibly occur but that might just happen all the same.” This idea of the almost, the sort of imminence of possibility that is within a mood. Isn't that the same thing that Jean Améry is talking about?

Andre: I think so. I think so because there is a wonderful sentence that he uses and he says that once you've been through what the nazis have done to you personally you have lost trust in the world. And it is this very concept of trust in the world, when you no longer trust the world, the whole reality mechanism called “the world,” once you have lost that, then you have no place, you are not in time, you are basically floating about through the—and it's ironic that many of those survivors who have become writers ended up taking their own lives.

Edmund: Celan. Paul Celan.

Andre: Yeah. Celan and Primo Levi, if he did in fact commit suicide, i'm sure he did.

Edmund: Yeah.

Andre: All these people were not able to, um refind something about reality that they needed in order to go on living. They had lost it and it it has to do with place, it might have to do with even the planet itself, and it has to do with times you just no longer are part of humanity, as it were. You're just faking it. And one of the things that I suspect both of us are doing if not as writers maybe as human beings, as well, is that I've always had the feeling that maybe I am pretending

to be one of you guys, but I'm really not entirely sure that I am. In other words, I'm from a different planet. I'm from a different sense of identity. I have different sort of baggage that nobody can understand. I just have to speak your language. I have to write for you so that you can understand me and so that I can understand myself, as well, through the language, but at the same time I'm not one of you guys.

Edmund: This is so extraordinary and so important, Andre, but “not one of you guys.” So, tell me about the language of “not being one of you guys” because again, you know, you think of—oh this is extraordinary. You think of Jean Améry, in some way, not being able to finish the essays. Not wanting, not being able to put that final, you know—they run out into the page without finishing. You think of Celan, those late poems, you know, breaking the language open, you know. There's more white space than words in those last books or poems. I mean, extraordinary. Then I think, I have to say, Andre, I think if your extraordinary self-definition of being an “almost writer” and that, or you know, use the—you know—please tell me about being an “almost writer” because this chimes deeply with what you're saying about “not being one of those guys.” “Almost.” Tell me about “almost.”

Andre: Well, it's essentially, I mean, I'm particularly interested in my career as a writer, but it would mean nothing if it didn't reverberate on my career as a human being. As a person who lives with other people, who takes the subway with them, who basically walks the city, throws the garbage out at night, and all those regular things that we all do. But then, when we go back into our little hovel which is our study, or our room, or our desk, our computer there we basically reimagine our lives as we wish they were, or as wish they had turned out. And—but then even the reimagining, and this is where I'm coming to the “almost,” it's as if, and I'm using “as if” as another way of saying “almost” because nothing is ever precise. I have to nail down what it is that I want to say in order to believe what I have just said, knowing full well that as I'm writing it, as I'm writing that very sentence, I'm already disassembling it because I don't trust it. It is only words and writers are supposed to love words and I don't trust them because I don't trust anything. I don't trust anybody who believes in anything, so I'm almost always saying “almost” because everything is an approximation. Nothing is ever real and it will change its mind on me the moment I look back.

Edmund: I mean, goodness. I mean that's an extraordinary framing of the fissile nature of what you're doing. You know, each sentence, each paragraph, each book is, you know, is an attempt to start again, and it falls apart, and you start again. But nothing— it doesn't— Tell me more. It's really extraordinary, this is why I make pots, Andre. I make pots because [LAUGHING] this is why I make pots. I make pots because I can see what I've made, you know. I can spend— this morning I was making bowls, just up here in my studio, just the other side of the studio, and there is a quiddity, a this-ness, to be able to pick up a bowl, feel the weight, the balance, the warmth of it, and put it down again in the world and it actually isn't going to move until it leaves the studio and goes off on its travels. But, when I'm writing, you turn your back and it does disappear. It doesn't behave. It's elsewhere.

Andre: That's right. I totally totally believe that and I think that we're—you use the word “quiddity” of this thing. I wash dishes. I love washing the dishes because there's something extremely real and sort of anchoring about dishes. I mean, you create the dishes, I wash them, so we have a corporation going on here.

Edmund: Exactly. We're a team.

Andre: [LAUGHING] No, but it's ironic because I love doing dishes. I mean, we have a dishwasher but I like to wash them before they go into the dishwasher, because it is if, I call it “therapy,” but it's not just therapy. It is something that is very grounding standing by the sink and washing, and putting soap on the sponge, and washing those dishes. And I do many things that will give me a sense of belonging on this planet. And then when I decide to write it's the same thing that you mentioned, it disappears it basically—you put it down in words, you have the sentence that you wanted, it has all the rhythm, and the cadences that you wish it would have, and then you turn your back, or you turn off your computer and you come back the next morning, and you say “but this was terrible, let me redo it all over again.” And it's a form of—it's insatiable. But I wanted to ask you totally—

Edmund: It is insatiable.

Andre: Yeah. But I wanted to ask you another question, it may not seem related but it is, because one of the grounding things that I have never done, and I suspect you never have done, is we never reclaimed our property. The property that belonged to our family, that is ours, it is not anybody else's, it is ours. And I have never sought out legal opinions, legal advice, never hired a lawyer on retainer or otherwise, to have— I've hired lawyers when I fell and broke my arm, but I've never have done anything to reclaim my property. In other words, I have abandoned something that means the most to me and I don't know how you fit in that. I mean as a writer I can go back to to everything.

Edmund: That's so interesting. It's absolutely fascinating. I mean, I've, you know, I have a very equivocal relationship with the idea of restitution. The idea of reclaiming things. It's, you know, in my family's case it's been complicated by lost art collections, and property, and all kinds of things. It's also, for me, and people say to me, you know, around—since I wrote The Hare With Amber Eyes they said, you know, “have you got everything back? Can't I recommend a lawyer?” All this sort of stuff, basically, I just don't want to be in the company of lawyers. I mean, you know, that's one thing. That's straightforward. But a second more, kind of, a deeper response to it is that I think that writing—I think that writing something is such an unbelievably effective act of restitution. Because you turn it on its head. You don't say, “Well, all these nazis and Austrians stole all this property but what did they lose?” They lost our family from Vienna. They lost all these extraordinary people, and possibilities, and stuff, and so by actually—You do this thing which is to take your family back into the narrative, into the story, back to Vienna, back to Paris and you're restituting something. You're not waiting for someone to give you something back. You're doing it. You're finding the agency actually as a storyteller to do it. And surely the act of restitution is, you know, you can think of literature as restitution in a much more interesting way

cause it's much more, you know... You've taken your family back to Alexandria in a very profound way. You might not have the house, or you know, [LAUGHING] which might be quite nice but they can't, you know, the replacing of a family is something which I found is actually hugely moving and much more complicated than the lawyer bit.

Andre: You're totally right. A friend of mine, he's the father of a friend of mine, basically he was put on the Kinder transport, he and his brother, and they were taken to England where they were considered enemy aliens because they were Germans. But they were Jews, of course. That's an old narrative, but eventually forty-fifty years later he went back to Germany with his son, my friend, and they went back to visit the house, and they were very gently and very nicely received by the city, by the mayor of the town, by everything. In other words, they were welcomed back. But, nobody gave them back their property. The house where this man had grown up was basically belonging to somebody else who welcomed him into his house and said, you know, "please make yourself comfortable" but he never said "I'll give you back your house." For me, the act of writing, however grand it is and however satisfying it is to us, the writers, there's also the correlate which is not resolved and cannot be resolved. Partly because we no longer want it to be resolved. We prefer it to remain a transient narrative as opposed to one that has been locked down, and resolved, and our restitution has been given back, everything has been given back to us, and things are now fine with us. It would be like Proust realizing that he has recaptured the past and now he can go on living as a regular human being. Not possible! That's not what he was after to begin with. So, and I think that this is true of both you and me. We don't want it resolved.

Edmund: Yeah. Yeah, this and surely because we live in a state of desire.

Andre: [LAUGHING] Yes

Edmund: [LAUGHING] You know? That's the generative power of desire is that it makes you think, and read, and write, and create, doesn't it? That's why we read Proust. That's why we read Rilke, for God's sake. Because it's not about conclusions. The world is not conclusion.

Andre: Basically, it is inconclusive. We want it inconclusive because then we can lodge ourselves into this inconclusive universe that we create, and need to think about. As long as it's inconclusive then everything is, to use the word that I use, everything becomes an "almost" nothing is tangible. Nothing is fixed, or lodged, or anchored, or rooted. Everything can become something else. Everything is transient. And one of the things that I make fun of myself, when I speak to people about my books, I always say, "I'm writing the same book again, and again, and again. And I'm writing the same essay time and again because I cannot resolve the fundamental issue." And that fundamental issue is insoluble so I have to try again.

Edmund: Try again. Try again. Try again. Absolutely.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

Edmund: Well, these are books for, Andre. Okay, so I have Mahmoud Darwish.

Andre: Oh.

Edmund: Which you must know.

Andre: Yes, and I have never read it though.

Edmund: Amazing Palestinian. Amazing amazing Palestinian poet. Extraordinary. In *The Presence of Absence*. Beautiful beautiful beautiful and a very very good Arabic translation. Victor Segalen.

Andre: I don't know either.

Edmund: Hooray! I've managed to get a book across that you haven't read! That gives me such pleasure! These are just things that I've been reading and rereading and thought you might enjoy. And then do you know Anne Truitt, the extraordinary American sculptor

Andre. No, no I don't. No.

Edmund: Who was a great—who was one of the great sort of heroes 1960's sculpture who actually wrote an extraordinary beautiful series of journals about her practice so they're completely—I'm so thrilled. I've been looking at my shelves and thinking “damn it! What on earth do I give, Andre?”

Andre: There's only one book that I recommend because it's actually—I think it's my favorite book of all and it's *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. I think it is the most profound, distressing, sad book. Indictment of humanity that I've ever read in my whole life. And it's just so intelligent. It reminds me of one other person who is extremely intelligent and very creative and that's Johann Sebastian Bach. You can almost touch the intelligence. It is no longer just a cognitive faculty but it is a way of feeling things with intelligence. The only other person I know who's like that is Pascal the the French writer philosopher whatever intelligence—and because you always feel very stupid in comparison. I do! Because I just don't have the capacity to be so brilliant in analyzing people and that's always what I've wanted to do. So if you haven't read Thucydides in many years maybe it's time to revisit

Edmund: Thank you. I'm off to the bookstore.

Edmund: There's this idiotic thing that people say is, you know, they ask about genre.

Andre: Oh, yes.

Edmund: Is there a more...? You know, God help us. And, you know, they don't ask about voice but they ask about genre and they say, you know, "Is it, you know, is it? What is this? Is this auto..." I can't—there's that horrible new—

Andre: Auto fiction. I hate that fucking thing.

Edmund: Auto fiction! Isn't that just disgusting thing, you know? Memoir, hideous. Creative nonfiction, foul. You know, it's a book. It's a book. It's another book. It's an essay. It might somehow be a kind of novel. But, the relationship of putting yourself back into the world, seems to me that the crucial act, "the almost act" of beginning again. I have to say though, that this collection of essays that you've just published. And it's here in the UK in a very beautiful edition, it must be a similar edition in America that's just come out—you know: Freud, Cavafy, Sebald, Rohmer, Proust, Beethoven, Corot. Honestly! You wrote it for me! Why didn't you dedicate your book to me? These are all people [LAUGHING] that I—I was looking for your essay on Rilke, damn it! Why haven't—Have you written about Rilke?

Andre: No, I never have. I wouldn't dare because I've never read German well enough to be able to comment on the poetry. I read, for example, Rilke in English translation, um I forget the name of the man who translated it...he used to teach at Washington University...

Edmund: Not Leishman. Who...

Andre: No, he's he wrote a book on being blue... I forget you you you know um... I forget his name. He's very famous but he's dead. I read Celan in French, believe it or not, because my German is not up to par. But then he translated the poems himself into French, I think.

Edmund: Celan's translations are extraordinary because he translates all the time. I mean, I've never actually read anyone writing about Celan's translations. That's something to think about, actually, that would be very very interesting. As you know I obsess about Celan and I recently made a book, artist's book, it's just a book. I printed on extraordinarily beautiful paper all my favorite Celan poems, a huge edition, in German and English, and then I washed the pages with porcelain slip. The poems disappeared under porcelain and then I rewrote the poems again in hand, by hand, over it so it was a sort of palimpsest. It was just me trying to understand him by actually by writing them again which was a kind of way of, basically Andre, it was a kind of slowing down of reading. Because I knew them really well, I was worried that I was reading them too fast. So in this rather roundabout way, I printed a book, and lost the poems, and then rewrote them. But isn't that something that we all do that when we are rereading the things we care about. You remake the poem in the reading of them, or you translate it into a different language, or you find a different way of returning to the poem.

Andre: Or you look at the different translation of it just in order to be confronted by for the first time. Or maybe a better time than the previous one. I have to make an interruption here—going to open a parenthesis, I meant. Because the first time that I read Proust and I must have been what thirteen—fourteen. I was reading Proust not in a book but in a notebook that my father had

kept and where he used to copy all this favorite—any quotation that he liked and he would write copy pages from Proust. Many pages in his own handwriting. So my introduction to Proust was through my father's own re-scripting of Proust and copying Proust and of course there were points where—moments where he would put three dots in ellipses in order to say: “Well this went on for too long that's not the part I was interested in.” And of course that's totally plausible with Proust because there are times when you say: “stop it, already.”

Edmund: “Stop it.” Yes. But that's extraordinary. So you read you read in your father's handwriting.

Andre: Yes. Talk about edit of course.

Edmund: This is just—damn it. This is another book. I have to say. What an extraordinary reading. But that makes total sense, doesn't it, as a first reading. I mean isn't that extraordinary to have had that encounter

Andere: Well, it's like what you do with Celan. It's the same idea of basically rewriting in your own handwriting or seeing it written by someone else that happens to also be blood relative, in that case, and your father on top of everything so that raises issues. But at the same time, it is if you are trying to mold yourself into the poem— to become the poem. By rewriting it or re-copying it yet another—what tells you that you can't recopy it yet again if you like that poem so much. You can do it two times, three times, that's the nature of a real palimpsest is that it has three, four, five, six layers as Freud knew so well.

Edmund: Exactly. I mean, yes. Back to back to Berggasse. Up the staircase. Knock on his door. You'll be let in.

Andre: Yes! Did you go? Did you go to that place?

Edmund: Of course. Of course.

Andre: I never have.

Edmund: There was a \great great aunt of mine who was analyzed by him. Who my grandmother couldn't bear, but yes. So you know Freud emerges and reemerges and then gets buried again. But I love the idea of you reading Proust in that way. Actually I have my grandmother's copy she bought it as it as it was published.

Andre: Oh, gosh. So you have that edition.

Edmund: I've got all her books from Paris. I have that edition. Which is a hopeless edition, of course, it's absolutely rubbish edition. Hugely, badly, printed. Miss prints. Pages all over the place. But it's my addition now so that's my Proust. Where do we go, Andre...Actually I know! I have a really important question to ask you, which is that we share another thing, which I really

want to ask you about. Which is that we both wrote books about our families. And then our families read those books.

Andre: Yes. [LAUGHING]

Edmund: So, I want to ask you about—this is— I can only do with you. I don't think I can do with anyone else in the world, Andre. It was pretty hard for me. What was it like for you?

Andre: It was hard. It was difficult because my father was known for his amorous affairs while he was married to my mother. until the very end of his life. And that was it given and she never put up with it. She hated it. So, when I put it on paper I was making it official and my mother had friends here in New York who were going to read the book and find out about her husband's infidelities. And as for my father he wasn't too pleased either because he doesn't come out like a very nice man especially to his son where he was very strict and basically "You fend for yourself. Enough of this. Study your poem in Arabic. I don't care, whoever, you know. Whatever happens to you." There was a bit of that, but the one that was really offended was someone in England and she is my father's cousin and therefore my cousin, as well, my second cousin. And she said "how dare you say this about my father!" (who is the character of Uncle Vili. And I said "It is not Uncle Vili! This is a character that was drawn from various people in the family." And she said "No, it is my father because you gave the place where he lives which is in Surrey and he basically inherited this entire sort of mansion." Because of his spy work and she hated the thought that her father had been even sort of glamorous spy. And so she threatened to sue me and I said "Please. Please sue me. It would be great publicity for me." But there were people who were not happy the fact that my mother's deafness was mentioned was an anathema to many people in the family. And I don't know about you, I mean this is just a sampling of the people who reacted to my book. Worst of all is my brother who was is not even in the book! So his wife was very upset

Edmund: Because he was left out.

Andre: He was totally left out, yes.

Edmund: Yeah.

Andre: The way that Proust left out his brother, too. And it made for a better book!

Edmund: Exactly! So you have you make all these—

Andre: So anyway. How about you?

Edmund: "Snap1" As one of my children would say. Absolutely. The same—I mean...Really difficult. I mean on all levels. I mean, difficult. There were cousins because my grand—my great grandmother had lots of affairs and so there were, you know, there were cousins who—you

know, it was just common knowledge in Vienna that she had this great love affair and which that one of her children was not with my great grandfather. I thought that was rather wonderful.

Andre: Yes.

Edmund: In my innocence. They didn't like it at all. My father found it quite complicated being outed as being Jewish having been the you know the Anglican Dean of Canterbury for, you know— a Christian minister. But it has made a great accommodation, it was actually hugely helpful it's a very significant part of it. And my mother—I didn't mention my mother in the book, she's ninety- three now and she hasn't forgiven me. But that wasn't, you know, but the books wasn't about her. So. But the point bein, the point is that is if you tell a family story other people, who aren't writers, who have no intention of writing anything, or feel that you've taken their story from them, that somehow you've occupied this narrative space, you know. And then someone came up to me said “I could have written that, your book.” And I thought—

Andre: Well, why didn't you?

Edmund: Why the hell didn't you? But the point being, you know, back to the “almost” thing which is that, you know, the voice within your book, within my book, it's an attempt. It's an open text. It's saying “This is my understanding and my journey into trying to work out who the hell I am and how i've ended up in this particular place with all these extraordinary complex unresolved feelings and memories and desires. Write your own book! Write your own book but but this is mine.” But I just needed, Andre, I so needed to share the fallout with you

Andre: Oh the fallout is never going to go away, you know, because a lot of people were not hurt by what happens in the book. They were not hurt or damaged by it but they felt that I was, as you said, you to use the other word that has become very chic you were “colonizing” them. You colonized their story and taken it or appropriated it. And now it's become yours and it cannot be theirs any longer though they could very well sit down and write their own version of it. It would be probably even better, who knows! But they'll never do that. And they will be angry and that's what it is, and people are angry and—but in my case most of the people in the book have died and their descendants don't really care much, and they've basically looked the other way, and moved on. Which is basically what I wanted. I didn't want anything to fester long enough.

Edmund: Has anyone tried to make a film of that book?

Andre: Of *Out of Egypt*? Oh, they've spoken about it. Somebody even bought an option once upon a time years ago but it's for some reason it's not— they don't—nobody wants period pieces apparently, unless it's England in the Victorian age and everybody's wearing Laura Ashley patterns.

Edmund: Yes!

Andre: That's about the extent of what people want as far as period is concerned. They love that sort of period but otherwise they don't want that. Has anybody made a film of yours?

Edmund: No. Endlessly, kind of, people talk but I mean, you know, I have no expectations. Which is probably useful a useful place to be. I mean, like the whole world... *Call Me By Your Name* was just extraordinary. Did you write that? The script for that? I can't remember. Were you involved in the script?

Andre: No. No. James Ivory wrote the script. Many people did the script and eventually fell to the task of James Ivory to do it and then it was changed quite radically by the director Luca Guadagnino. So that I didn't have much—I didn't want to have any say. I figured I've had my say. I published the book, you want to make a movie, go ahead. And I left it at that. But it's done well and I'm happy that the book of course sold quite well as a result of the film so it accomplished a purpose in my life.

Edmund: I think there's something—that this huge honor in just in letting other people do with it. Something different. I think that's absolutely right rather than pretending you have any agency in a Hollywood film shooting about your own book.

Andre: No. I'm very—I hate when authors get upset because the director did something that they were not intending to do in their book. It's not your business. You've had your say. Now let somebody else have their time with it and let them enjoy doing what they wanna do.

Edmund: So I really want to know what you're writing now, Andre. What's happening?

Andre: Well, I'm writing a memoir, to use that term, of my year in Rome after leaving Egypt and what happened to me and so it's not exactly the same thing as having this magnificent cast of characters. It becomes totally me and so it becomes a more self referential kind of book with very little plot. So I'm not sure yet how it's going to turn out but that's what I'm doing. But I wanted to ask you a question about the *Commando* book, which I have not read, and in the ironies and we both are—

Edmund: I will send you a copy

Andre: Okay, fine. But that involves going to the post office which is a horrible thing to do.

Edmund: That I can do, Andre. Pleasure.

Andre: But the *Commando* book is interesting because we both are fascinated by the Commandos. Because in a sense they represent a totally extinct family.

Edmund: Absolutely so. It is. It is. So as you know Istanbul, Constantinople, Jewish family arrives in Paris, 1868, exactly the same time as my own family and they build houses ten doors away from each other on the Rue de Monceau and, you know, the extraordinary thing about the

museum that's created there, that remarkable collection, that remarkable house, is that it is untouched since 1936. So since he died and then of course his daughter and my cousins were murdered in Auschwitz. I mean the reason I wrote that book was I just simply had to write the book. I've known that house forever. I've been in it constantly. I remember my grandmother talking about visiting there in the 1920's, so there was this sort of force field around it as a place because, Andre, because because because, of course, it's got that extraordinary thing of being a memorial for the wrong reason. You know, he creates as a memorial for his son who dies in the first world war but it becomes a memorial to the family who were killed in the Holocaust. So this extraordinary complexity of one memorial not fitting the shape of another and it's that sort of that emotional space that I wanted to explore with this book. So, it's in the form of letters to Moise de Camondo. But the epigraph would please you, I hope, because the epigraph is *Lacrimae Rerum*, the tears of things. From Virgil, from the Aeneid. *Lacrimae Rerum*. The tears of things. It's trying to understand what is still present in that house when the family aren't there. That was my one minute stump speech.

Andre: No but, I was—one one of the things I heard and I may—I read two books. There are two books on the Commandos that I know and one is by what's his name, the brother of the publisher... Assouline. The other one is there too but I was interested in basically as soon as they died somebody locked the house and they didn't open the house until after the war. Is that true?

Edmund: No it's not true

Andre: Oh okay.

Edmund: It's not true. So the extraordinary thing is it's given to the state in 1936, by the family, under the will of the Comte Commando. So he gives it in his will and it becomes a very popular museum in Paris in the late 1930's.

Andre: Ah, see, I didn't know that.

Edmund: And then because it's the property of the French—because it's the property of the French state, it's no longer a Jewish house.

Andre: I see, I see, I see.

Edmund: So, it's not looted. It's not pillaged. It's not taken over, or ransacked even though, my god, you know, the whole of that street were full of Jewish houses, as you know. I mean Rue de Monceau, they're all destroyed but—so the house is untouched and collection is untouched even though, you know, Beatrice Commando, and her husband, and my cousins, are all deported. And so then in 1946 they put a tiny little marble plaque up in the in the porte-cochère saying, you know, “For Beatrice and Reinach, the Commando family...” You know, and people just walk straight, you know, it's barely there. It's barely there. You go into the house...and the house is you know people just don't... it's so strange. It's so strange

Andre: That's another one of those things, that I went to the first time with my father. To the Commando museum.

Edmund: Did you?

Andre: Yes, because he wanted to see. The name was familiar to him from his growing up in Istanbul, or Constantinople, and so he wanted to see the museum and said "why don't you come with me" so I went with him. And that's the first time I went. I went there many times as well, but not sort of as a habit the way you might have been, because I wanted to do something about the Commandos. And I never—I even spoke to a gentleman who was a sort of wealthy banker here in New York, Ezra Zilkha. I don't know if you ever met him, but he belonged to the Zilkha family that were Iraqi Jews who basically founded the Egyptian bank and I asked him "how did the Commanders make their money?" There's this is ordinary person and nobody seems to know, I mean other than as moneylenders, you know. But you know that your family comes because they were wheat, they speculated on wheat, is that correct?

Edmund: Yes. Yes. That's correct. Odessa, yes.

Andre: So there's something real there but nobody knows how Commandos make their fortune.

Edmund: So, what's the extraordinary thing is, Andre, so you've been around the museum but there's a particular door on the third floor, near the bedroom of Musee Nissim de Camondo that you open that door and it takes you into the whole hidden service wing of the house, and the attics, and it's absolutely extraordinary. So that you go in and there's the old butler pantry in the silver rooms where they kept their silver and you got up further, and there were all the rooms where the valets had their, you know...you open a cupboard and it's full of Louis Vuitton trunks from 1925. Or light fittings from 1910. Or Louis chairs. But up there is a storeroom that had been locked which has all the banking records from 1850. They're all there!

Andre: Oh my god. Okay.

Edmund: There's a whole archive up there in the attics, you know, and there's all the things he buys and the little receipts. There's a letters from Proust up there, you know, et cetera, et cetera. But it's all there, hidden away in the house. So there's the public facing side to the house and then you know it's that wonderful cinematic moment, I have to say, of opening a different door, you know, and you go from sort of extraordinary polished floors to a kind of raw oak underfoot and then you are in the in this archival world which is completely intact it's absolutely bizarre. So up there are the records!

Andre: That's funny. I didn't know that. I mean, 1850 goes back quite a bit.

Edmund: It does. It does. And there is that absolutely compulsive feeling there of someone who's thinking that he wants to pass something on, you know, so he keeps absolutely everything. I mean, you know, every single receipt from his wine merchant or the receipts for his

collar studs from the, you know, they're all there. You know, alongside all the treasures and everything else so this is sort of this plangent, to use the word, the feeling of someone who wants who's trying desperately to hold something together and pass it on into the future which, of course, he spectacularly fails not to do.

Andre: [LAUGHING] Yeah, he fails not to do. Well said. That's very well said. Anyway maybe we have a few minutes to talk about our dear beloved Proust or Sebald whichever one you wish to speak.

Edmund: Oh my god, where shall we go?

Andre: Well you mentioned Proust many times in the book and of course he's inspired by the family, your family, and I think that there's--it's the whole book is--your book it's--and I suspect mine too because, I mentioned, I don't mention Proust by name but it is an allegation.

Edmund: He's there. He's there.

Andre: But it's again, it's the attempt to reinvent the past, or recreate, if you prefer to use that term but i think it's imagination and altering certain things not so that you can live with them but so that you can write them and i think that that is how we-- I like to use the word to "hijack." We hijack the past in order to be able to narrate it because otherwise we wouldn't know how to do that. I would never know how to write about my family as it was.

Edmund: Yes. So I absolutely-- that's said much more beautifully than I could possibly say it. It's that beautiful impossibility, of going, of return. The instability of it. You know, and that learn from Proust, I mean that's-- you can't try and do this kind of work without having, in some way, that the sort of somatic memory of those sentences in you. Those sort of--the turns of those of Proust's sentences, sort of embodied somehow, in the way that you you try and do it. That's a rubbish of putting on, it's absolute rubbish. We've talked for an hour. I'm losing my grip. I gonna lose my way, lose my way in a Proustian sentence and never emerge.

Andre: I want to read something--I will read something because you use the word "return" and you used it quite a few times in the book but I will quote. May I? May I quote from your book?

Edmund: I'd be honored.

Andre: Like the--okay-- "Like the repeated themes in the netsuke, Japanese prints also give the possibility of the series. Forty Seven views of the famous mountains suggested a way of returning in different ways and reinterpreting formal pictorial elements. Haystacks, the bend of the river, poplars, the cliff face of Rouen Cathedral, all share this poetic return." The idea of a poetic--in other words, we we don't only want to go back once. We want to go back many many many times maybe because the return is imperfect each time or maybe because we love returning. We loved just the simple fact of going back.

Edmund: That could be the most perfect ending or pausing of a conversation. The simple act of going back. Absolutely, I mean, Andre. That's—that's it.

Andre: Maybe we should end here since we have— but I do think this it is something that means a lot, I think to both of us. We need to return, maybe because returning is, to put it paradoxically if I may, it's our way of going forward. It's by returning. Like as my father used to say “you are like a shrimp.” It works—it goes forward by going backward. He used to call me that, and so but I— that's why I'm particularly sensitive to this known notion of returning. The idea of the “nostos” as the Greeks used to call it.

Edmund: Yes yes yes. It's absolutely there and I think it's also there in, you know, it's sort of there in the psalms really. It's there in the sense of, you know, the repeated return to the songs of exile, you know, you actually— you never can fully return but you can return to the singing of the songs. The psalms, you know.

Andre: Yes!

Edmund: In all their beauty and anger and cadence, you know so so—

Andre: Well that's why we're the people of the Book in the end, as they used to call us.

Edmund: We are actually the people of the Book, yes indeed.

Andre: Alright, I think this is is a good place to end, don't you think?

Edmund: It's a wonder, Andre such a gorgeous invitation from you. I've absolutely loved this hour honestly, I really have.

Andre: Thank you so much, Edmund, for me as well. Absolutely. And if I come to London or if you come to New York we'll just have to sit and at least have a meal, not a cup of coffee.

Edmund: We have to have a meal.

Andre: Okay

Edmund: I'd love that. Please. Yes, please. Absolutely. You're on. Thank you.

Andre: Thank you again, very much, Edmund.

Edmund: Thank you. Bless you.