

MOVIES

# Review: Luca Guadagnino's gay love story 'Call Me by Your Name' is a new coming-of-age classic

Elio Perlman is spending the days with his family at their 17th-century villa in Lombardy, Italy. He soon meets Oliver, a handsome doctoral student who's staying at his home for six weeks. Video by Jason H. Neubert.

By JUSTIN CHANG | FILM CRITIC

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“Call Me by Your Name,” Luca Guadagnino’s gloriously al fresco new movie, sets the scene in its opening moments: “summer 1983, somewhere in northern Italy.” It’s a fittingly lazy description of a time and place that could hardly be more idyllic. Men and

women blissfully while away the hours, riding their bicycles by day and dancing well into the night. They read and play, swim and sunbathe, pausing to drink fresh-squeezed apricot juice and savor the sight of each other's bodies.

To describe this as one of the year's most pleasurable movies, in short, may be less a matter of critical insight than of simple observation. Pleasure isn't just Guadagnino's intended effect; it is one of his defining obsessions and guiding artistic principles. He has become one of world cinema's great sensualists, a filmmaker whose sun-kissed surfaces and woozy rhythms produce an atmosphere of sweet, heady intoxication.

His two previous films, "I Am Love" (2010) and "A Bigger Splash" (2016), both also set in his native Italy, were about the delightful if sometimes lethal consequences of pursuing desire without a safety net. "Call Me by Your Name" rings a less fatalistic but equally ardent variation on the same theme.

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Adapted from André Aciman's 2007 novel, a well-regarded addition to the pantheon of gay coming-of-age stories, the movie weaves a captivating chronicle of first love around Elio Perlman (a superb Timothée Chalamet), a smart, sensitive teenager with dark curls and suggestive eyes perched atop a reedy frame.

Like most of Guadagnino's characters, Elio enjoys a life of enviable privilege. He and his warm, erudite parents (Michael Stuhlbarg and Amira Casar) are Jewish intellectuals who have turned their countryside manse into the most inviting of scholarly retreats. The house is a cozy warren of books and manuscripts, where English, French and Italian are spoken interchangeably and conversations can drift from German philosophy to Gallic literature. Elio is precocious, to say the least, but at 17 he finds himself in desperate need of a more practical education, one that an on-and-off French girlfriend



Enter Oliver (Armie Hammer), a twentysomething American grad student who is revising a manuscript on Heraclitus when he becomes the Perlman's latest six-week summer houseguest. From the day Oliver pulls up in a cab and moves into Elio's bedroom, he seems almost too beautiful to be true, a towering blond Adonis in polo shirts and high-top sneakers. (Not since he played the Winklevoss twins in "The Social Network" has Hammer used his 6-foot-5 physique to such witty, self-effacing effect.) As the two begin spending odd afternoons together, playing volleyball with friends and hanging out alone poolside, the film's already warm temperature spikes several notches.

With his striking good looks and brash all-American confidence ("Later!" is his preferred farewell), Oliver charms his older hosts — especially Mr. Perlman, a Hellenic scholar — but stirs in Elio a strange mix of intense dislike and equally intense desire. The genius of "Call Me by Your Name" is that it refuses to distinguish between these two impulses.

In Aciman's novel, Elio, narrating in the first person, is forever lusting after Oliver while also trying to guess how much he knows and whether their desires might possibly be in alignment; the ambiguity becomes an unbearable source of shame, anxiety and even animosity.

Working from a supremely intelligent script by James Ivory, no stranger to teasing out repressed longing in upscale settings, Guadagnino has no interest in rushing Elio and Oliver toward a premature consummation. (The drawn-out waiting game is the whole point of the movie.)

And while the director lacks Aciman's access to Elio's innermost thoughts, he and cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, shooting on exquisite 35-millimeter film, turn the camera into a remarkably subjective instrument. The stop-and-go narrative rhythms suggest a teenager's wayward attention span. The snippets of Ravel we hear on

the soundtrack might be playing out in Elio's own musically gifted mind. (The gorgeous new Sufjan Stevens songs we hear are of a more mysterious provenance.)

A brilliant formalist, Guadagnino is especially fluent in the mechanics of Hitchcockian suspense and Antonionian languor, and in "Call Me by Your Name" he once again proves himself a veritable deconstructionist of desire. He channels the mystery of attraction into a kind of tactile, moment-by-moment suspense, turning key images — a hand on a bare shoulder, a pair of swim trunks hung up to dry, a piece of stone fruit put to unexpectedly creative use — into focal points of carnal anxiety. Crucially, however, the movie's emotional and psychological acuity is more than a matter of sterling technique.

Chalamet, who has an amusing supporting role in the current "Lady Bird," is a sensational talent, and Elio, whose cocky sense of mischief has the curious effect of making him seem all the more unguarded, is one of the year's most fully formed screen characters. He broods and blushes, schemes and fumbles, and seems both enraptured and terrified by the power of his physicality.

The young actor finds a splendid match in Hammer, who plays Oliver like a bunch of unusually dreamy Russian nesting dolls: He's something of a rival at first, a specimen of superior worldliness and masculinity, before opening up to reveal a trusted confidant and finally a generous, affectionate equal.

For all its simmering erotic intensity, "Call Me by Your Name" isn't a particularly explicit movie, especially when compared with other recent explorations of young gay desire like "God's Own Country" and "Beach Rats," or a more distant landmark like "Blue Is the Warmest Color." Indeed, since its well received premiere at this year's Sundance Film Festival, Guadagnino's movie has drawn criticism in some quarters for its visual discretion, which has struck even some admirers as a curious failure of nerve.

The detractors have a point, insofar as first love doesn't come with a no-nudity clause. But if the film is a bit eager to safeguard its characters' privacy, it remains an uncommonly enveloping and affecting experience, a romance that swoops you up and then gently sets you down. What stays with you is not just its visual beauty but also its melancholy wisdom, its understanding of the fickle, fleeting nature of what it's showing us. It knows that the agony of unmet physical desire, once relieved, can soon give way to a deeper emotional ache, which is why Elio and Oliver's relationship sometimes feels as though it were ending even as it's just beginning.

Guadagnino's storytelling is overpoweringly intimate but never narcissistic. He directs our gaze both inward and outward, toward the treasures and mysteries buried within this Italian paradise, and also toward the unseen, unspoken forces that have threatened bonds like Elio and Oliver's for millennia. Nearly every relic we see — a decorative reminder of the Fascist era, a Greek sculpture dredged up from the Mediterranean — speaks in some way to the vulnerability of their love and the tyranny of time.

It falls to Stuhlbarg's deeply moving performance as Elio's father, an authority on the ancient world and a man ahead of his moment, to make sense of this eternal conundrum. "Our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once," he says, and "Call Me by Your Name" embraces that truth with thrilling, devastating abandon.

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## **'Call Me by Your Name'**

(In English, French and Italian with English subtitles)

**Rating:** R, for sexual content, nudity and some language

**Running time:** 2 hours, 12 minutes