

Café Unfiltered

Jean-Philippe Blondel

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Jean-Philippe Blondel's delicate and delightful novel *Café Unfiltered* dips into the musings of several people who have gathered in a French café over the course of one day.

In France, the COVID-19 lockdown has just been lifted. Le Tom's customers begin to venture back to the café, which is already open at 9:00 a.m. when the narrative begins. Here, Chloe, a thirty-one-year-old woman, sits alone, draws, and sips her coffee, having returned to France from Finland for reasons that are revealed as the day wears on.

While Le Tom's owner, Fabrice, his employee Jose, and the café's former owner, Jocelyne, are recurrent presences, others appear to have a drink or a meal and then move on. A mother meets her adult son to tell him that she is divorcing his father. An author meets an old friend, once the object of his unrequited love, after reconnecting with him on social media. These customers are linked through momentary asides, as when they notice each other at another table.

Much of the book's activity, though, occurs not on this day, but in the café patrons' and staff's past, with events related through inner monologues. For some of them, including Jose, the recent lockdown led to reckonings or consequential choices; Jose plans to act in the near future. And although Chloe sits drinking, eating, drawing, and chatting all day, her life is about to change, too.

The book's compressed time frame and its personal stories conveyed across tables result in a sense of intimacy. By the time morning comes, some of these characters feel like passing acquaintances, but others burrow into the heart like old friends.

Café Unfiltered is a warm hug of a novel that brims with hope.

SUZANNE KAMATA (July / August 2023)

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