

## Overheard

**Dominik Barta**

**Gary Schmidt, Translator**

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Eavesdrop on the quiet chaos of a Viennese apartment building through Dominik Barta's provocative novel *Overheard*, wherein the lives of its tenants converge to reveal tender truths.

Kurt, a gay German and English teacher, settles into his aunt's old apartment in Vienna. On day one, he becomes aware of the building's thin walls thanks to the noisy stirrings of his neighbors. While bothersome at first, "the intrusive sounds of footsteps, urination, and throat-clearing" evolve into a mosaic that challenges Kurt's perceptions of his neighbors and himself.

Set in the mid-2010s, "when millions of refugees from Syria and other areas of the Middle East sought refuge in Europe," the novel captures cultural turbulence. Political tensions contextualize the narrative beyond the building residents' lives. Kurt's dreams, disappointments, and longings are extended to the rest of the universe, echoing broader grapplings with migration, identity, and displacement—a poignant exploration of how personal struggles and global crises interconnect. Indeed, the apartment building is a microcosm of society at large. Its residents include Drechsler, an elderly man burdened by one-sided romances, and Regina, a research scientist hellbent on complicating the lives of those in her path.

The prose is sharp and detailed to the point of being voyeuristic. Kurt narrates much of the text, and his analyses are honest and hilarious. His interactions with others are invigorating. People unpack their political anxieties, romantic woes, and simmering frustrations through verbose monologues and stream-of-consciousness tangents. New twists are introduced in the book's latter half—some hurried. Nonetheless, the colorful strangers around Kurt mend the hollows within their overlapping lives. And Kurt, both an observer and a participant in the apartment's raucous dance, is memorable throughout.

Neighborhood whispers result in communal self-discovery in the compelling novel *Overheard*.

BROOKE SHANNON (March / April 2025)

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