

## The Café with No Name

**Robert Seethaler**

**Katy Derbyshire, Translator**

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Set in the 1960s and 1970s in a city where World War II still reverberates, Robert Seethaler's tender novel *The Café with No Name* is about a Viennese restaurateur's interactions with his acquaintances and customers.

Robert, orphaned during the war, lodges with a war widow, Martha. In 1966, he trades working at a farmers' market for starting his own business. The thirty-one-year-old takes over the lease on the down-at-heel market café. The quarter it's in still bears physical evidence of the past: "many of its basement windows [were] still coated in the dust left behind by the war."

Robert hires Mila, a former seamstress, as his waitstaff. René, a wrestler, courts Mila; they embark on a turbulent relationship. The local butcher and cheese shop owner are among the café regulars who confide in Robert and Mila. A decade later, the beloved café is forced to close when the building is sold to cover the landlord's debts.

Trading between momentous and everyday events, the book follows along as the café furnace explodes, a baby is stillborn, and a bridge collapses. Throughout, the tone remains matter-of-fact and the prose stately. The rich secondary characters struggle with weighty troubles: Martha develops dementia. A drunk handyman, Arnie, meets a tragic end. Jascha, a drug addict and kleptomaniac, is, for a short period, a romantic prospect for lonely Robert. The chapters record a chorus of these patrons' voices with no speech marks or attribution; their chatter flows together just as it would in a noisy café. Robert becomes a repository for their gloomy life stories, and melancholy reigns. Certain ventures and relationships succumb to upheaval and decline; the years fly by, "leaving barely more than a few scattered traces of memory."

*The Café with No Name* is a valedictory novel that meditates on the passage of time and bonds that last.

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