

Café Shira

David Ehrlich

Michael Swirsky, Translator

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In David Ehrlich's contemporary novel *Café Shira*, a literary coffee house located in the heart of Jerusalem becomes a temple for the patrons who frequent it.

There are many people who regularly spend their time in Café Shira. They include Rutha, a hardworking, weary waitress; Avigdor, its tortured saint of an owner; Ruhama, a poet; Raymond, a local who is slightly off-center; Naor, a writer who's in love with Rutha; and Christian, a French tourist who wants to be a priest, but who is also falling for Rutha. Their stories are rooted in Café Shira and coalesce around it. Passersby, dwellers who insist on sitting at certain tables, and personal histories that are glimpsed through overheard conversations are all grounded in their location: a unique, loved business.

With shifting points of view and dialogue extracts, *Café Shira* portrays the collision of personalities, experiences, and ways of life that exist in Jerusalem. As Rutha observes, "the whole world and all the experiences it offers come together in this one café. So many stories, all you have to do is listen." *Café Shira* is not a novel about a person, but about a place. Its strength is in the variety of lives that are condensed into the moment they step through the café's doors, but that are not diminished by it. While this variety could become overwhelming, the utilization of the café as a point of contact keeps the number of characters and story lines manageable. The translation from Hebrew is simple, direct, and leaves traces of the original language, too.

Café Shira is an anthropological novel set in a bustling corner of Jerusalem, wherein people are observed and their psychology is explored.

MICHAEL ELIAS (July / August 2022)

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