



The Elegance of the Hedgehog: a novel **by Muriel Barbery**

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(English translation)

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Summary

The lives of fifty-four-year-old concierge Rene Michel and extremely bright, suicidal twelve-year-old Paloma Josse are transformed by the arrival of a new tenant, Kakuro Ozu.

Description (from the publisher)

We are in the center of Paris, in an elegant apartment building inhabited by bourgeois families. Renée, the concierge, is witness to the lavish but vacuous lives of her numerous employers. Outwardly she conforms to every stereotype of the concierge: fat, cantankerous, addicted to television. Yet, unbeknownst to her employers, Renée is a cultured autodidact who adores art, philosophy, music, and Japanese culture. With humor and intelligence she scrutinizes the lives of the building's tenants, who for their part are barely aware of her existence.

Then there's Paloma, a twelve-year-old genius. She is the daughter of a tedious parliamentarian, a talented and startlingly lucid child who has decided to end her life on the sixteenth of June, her thirteenth birthday. Until then she will continue behaving as everyone expects her to behave: a mediocre pre-teen high on adolescent subculture, a good but not an outstanding student, an obedient if obstinate daughter.

Paloma and Renée hide both their true talents and their finest qualities from a world they suspect cannot or will not appreciate them. They discover their kindred souls when a wealthy Japanese man named Ozu arrives in the building. Only he is able to gain Paloma's trust and to see through

Renée's timeworn disguise to the secret that haunts her. This is a moving, funny, triumphant novel that exalts the quiet victories of the inconspicuous among us.

Reviews

The Elegance of the Hedgehog, a best seller in France and several other countries, belongs to a distinct subgenre: the accessible book that flatters readers with its intellectual veneer...Renee's story is addressed to no one (that is, to us), while Paloma's takes the form of a notebook crammed with what she labels "profound thoughts." Both create eloquent little essays on time, beauty and the meaning of life...Even when the novel is most essayistic, the narrators' kinetic minds and engaging voices (in Alison Anderson's fluent translation) propel us ahead.- **New York Times**

This dark but redemptive novel, an international bestseller, marks the debut in English of Normandy philosophy professor Barbery. Renée Michel, 54 and widowed, is the stolid concierge in an elegant Paris *hôtel particulier*. Though "short, ugly, and plump," Renée has, as she says, "always been poor," but she has a secret: she's a ferocious autodidact who's better versed in literature and the arts than any of the building's snobby residents. Meanwhile, "supersmart" 12-year-old Paloma Josse, who switches off narration with Renée, lives in the building with her wealthy, liberal family. Having grasped life's futility early on, Paloma plans to commit suicide on her 13th birthday. The arrival of a new tenant, Kakuro Ozu, who befriends both the young pessimist and the concierge alike, sets up their possible transformations. By turns very funny (particularly in Paloma's sections) and heartbreaking, Barbery never allows either of her dour narrators to get too cerebral or too sentimental. Her simple plot and sudden denouement add up to a great deal more than the sum of their parts. **Publishers Weekly**

Published in France in 2006, this work quickly captured the European imagination, and the advance praise is sufficiently glowing to guarantee attention in the English-speaking world. The novel itself is more problematic. Philosophy professor Barbery-the author of one previous novel, *Une gourmandise*-has fashioned a slow and sentimental fable out of her own personal interests-art, philosophy, and Japanese culture-about a widow who serves as caretaker of a Parisian apartment building and a troubled girl living in the building. Barbery attempts to make the story appear more cutting-edge by introducing dizzying changes in typography, but the effect seems precious from the outset and quickly grow tiresome. Recommended for public libraries where literature in translation is in demand and for academic libraries to complement their French collections **Library Journal**

Barbery teaches philosophical lessons by shrewdly exposing rich secret lives hidden beneath conventional exteriors. Renee Michel has been the concierge at an apartment building in Paris for 27 years. Uneducated, widowed, ugly, short and plump, she looks like any other French apartment-house janitor, but Mme Michel is by no means what she seems. A "proletarian autodidact,". She ponders philosophical questions and holds scathing opinions about some of the wealthy tenants of the apartments she maintains, but she is careful to keep her intelligence concealed, having learned from her sister's experience the dangers of using her mind in defiance of her class. But

when a new Japanese tenant moves in, everything changes He detects their intelligence and invites them into his cultured life. Curious and deeply fulfilling friendships blossom **Kirkus Reviews**

Biography of Muriel Barbery



- Birth—1969
- Where—Casablanca, Morocco
- Education—École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud

The Elegance of the Hedgehog is Muriel Barbery's second novel. Her first book, *Une gourmandise*, has been translated into twelve languages.

Muriel Barbery is a French novelist and professor of philosophy. Barbery entered the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud in 1990 and got her degree in philosophy in 1993. She then taught philosophy at the Université de Bourgogne, in high school and at the Institute Universitaire de Formation des Maitres of Saint-Lo. Her novel *L'Élégance du hérisson* (its English title: *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*) has undergone 50 reprints and sold 600,000 copies, topping the sales 30 weeks in a row.

Bibliography: Novels

Une Gourmandise, Gallimard, 2000.

L'Élégance du hérisson, Gallimard, 2006.

Elegance of the Hedgehog (English) 2008.

Gourmet Rhapsody (English) 2009

An Interview with Muriel Barbery Elegance Brings Joy

By Viviana Musumeci April 2008

Before becoming a literary sensation in 2007, Barbery had published *Une gourmandise* (to be published in 2009 by Europa Editions), a novel that was awarded the Bacchus-Bsn Prize. But

then “He” arrived in all his reserved and entertaining elegance, the Hedgehog. In other words, then came that jewel of a book that swept aside every other bestseller in France, reaching sales of over a million copies thanks to its readers’ word-of-mouth publicity and its having been awarded an array of prizes. The author of this masterpiece, Muriel Barbery, is thirty-nine years old, currently resident in Japan.

What sensations does being the publishing sensation of the year provoke?

Surprise, incredulity and joy! When the book was first published in France, in September 2006, I thought that nobody would read it and I was readying myself for some other pursuit, in addition to teaching. The fact that the book corresponded to the tastes of readers, and that it has crossed the borders into other countries, surprises me. I still cannot completely explain to myself what happened. I am, also, incredibly happy about this unexpected fate. This success has allowed me to realize some of my dreams, to live in Japan and to be able to write full-time.

Why did you decide to set your book at a street address in Paris, Rue de Grenelle to be precise, where in real life there is a Prada store?

I did so because that street is located in one of the chicest neighborhoods of Paris. Only after the book was out, did I head down there for the first time and I discover the boutique. The building described in my book, however, is pure invention, and even the street bears no connotation and is not terribly important.

Is Renée an echo in some way of Simenon’s characters?

As far as I know this is the first time that anyone has made this comparison. I am honored. But I don’t believe I was thinking of Simenon, of whom, I’m embarrassed to admit, I read little during the writing of my novel.

Glossary of words posted in *Elegance of the Hedgehog*

abjection n. ~ the state of being cast off

appanages n. ~ the grant of an estate, title or offices given to a young male sovereign

aristocrat n. ~ one considered to be the best of its kind

autodidact n. ~ derived from the Greek; a self-educated person

banlieue n. ~ suburb, or territory without the walls, but within the legal limits, of a town or city.

conation n. ~ an instinct, drive, wish, craving, etc. to act purposefully

conatus n. ~ effort, endeavor, impulse, undertaking, striving

eructation n. ~ belch, breaking wind, burp

exeunt ~ used as a stage direction to indicate that two or more performers leave the stage

haka n. ~ a Maori dance, war, ceremonial, celebratory

incunabulum n. ~ a single sheet of printed material; a book; Latin for swaddling clothes or cradle

kairos n. ~ right or opportune moment

laconicism n. ~ the practice of using few words to say much.

phenomenology n. ~ philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness. primarily concerned with making the structures of consciousness, and the phenomena which appear in acts of consciousness, objects of systematic reflection and analysis.

seppuku n. ~ Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. *True life is elsewhere...*

One French critic called *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* “the ultimate celebration of every person’s invisible part.” How common is the feeling that a part of oneself is invisible to or ignored by others? How much does this “message” contribute to the book’s popularity? Why is it sometimes difficult to show people what we really are and to have them appreciate us for it?

2. *This book will save your life...*

The Elegance of the Hedgehog has been described as “a toolbox one can look into to resolve life’s problems,” a “life-transforming read,” and a “life-affirming book.” Do you feel this is an accurate characterization of the novel? If so, what makes it thus: the story told, the characters and their ruminations, something else? Can things like style, handsome prose, well-turned phrases, etc. add up to a life-affirming book independently of the story told? To put it another way—Renée Michel’s way—can an encounter with pure beauty change our lives?

3. —*a rose*

By any other name would smell as sweet. Both Renée and Paloma use stereotypes to their benefit, hiding behind the perceptions others have of their roles. Our understanding and appreciation of people is often limited to a superficial acknowledgement of their assigned roles, their social monikers—single mother,

used car salesman, jock, investment banker, senior citizen, cashier... While we are accustomed to thinking of people as victims of stereotypes, is it possible that sometimes stereotypes can be useful? When, under what circumstances, and why, might we welcome an interpretation based on stereotypes of our actions or of who we are? Have you ever created a *mise en place* that conforms to some stereotype in order to hide a part of yourself?

4. *"One of the strengths I derive from my class background is that I am accustomed to contempt."* (Dorothy Allison)

Some critics call this novel a book about class. Barbery herself called *Renée Michel*, among other things, a vehicle for social criticism. Yet for many other readers and reviewers this aspect is marginal. In your reading, how integral is social critique to the novel? What kind of critique is made? Many pundits were doubtful about the book's prospects in the US for this very reason: a critique of French class-based society, however charming it may be, cannot succeed in a classless society. Is the US really a classless society? Are class prejudices and class boundaries less pronounced in the US than in other countries? Are the social critique elements in the book relevant to American society?

5. *Hope I die before I get old...*

Paloma, the book's young protagonist, tells us that she plans to commit suicide on the day of her thirteenth birthday. She cannot tolerate the idea of becoming an adult, when, she feels, one inevitably renounces ideals and subjugates passions and principles to pragmatism. Must we make compromises, renounce our ideals, and betray our youthful principles when we become adults? If so, why? Do these compromises and apostasies necessarily make us hypocrites? At the end of the book, has Paloma re-evaluated her opinion of the adult world or confirmed it?

6. *Kigo: the 500 season words...*

Famously, the Japanese language counts twelve distinct seasons during the year, and in traditional Japanese poetry there are five hundred words to characterize different stages and attributes assigned to the seasons. As evidenced in its literature, art, and film, Japanese culture gives great attention to detail, subtle changes, and nuances. How essential is Kakuro's being Japanese to his role as the character that reveals others' hidden affinities? Or is it simply his fact of being an outsider that matters? Could he hail from Tasmania and have the same impact on the story?

7. *Circumstances maketh the woman...*

Adolescent children and the poor are perhaps those social groups most prone to feel themselves trapped in situations that they cannot get out of, that they did not

choose, and that condition their entire outlook. Some readers have balked at the inverse snobbery with which the main characters in *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* initially seem to view the world around them and the people who inhabit it. Is this disdain genuine or a well-honed defence mechanism provoked by their circumstances? If the later, can it therefore be justified? Do Renée's and Paloma's views of the world and the people who surround them change throughout the book? Would Paloma and Renée be more prone to fraternal feelings if their circumstances were different?

8. *"Unprovided with original learning, unformed in the habits of thinking, unskilled in the arts of composition, I resolved to write a book."* (Edward Gibbon)

In one of the book's early chapters, Renée describes what it is like to be an autodidact. "There are days when I feel I have been able to grasp all there is to know in one single gaze, as if invisible branches suddenly spring out of nowhere, weaving together all the disparate strands of my reading—and then suddenly the meaning escapes, the essence evaporates, and no matter how often I reread the same lines, they seem to flee ever further with each subsequent reading, and I see myself as some mad old fool who thinks her stomach is full because she's been attentively reading the menu. Apparently this combination of ability and blindness is a symptom exclusive to the autodidact." How accurately does this describe sensations common to autodidacts? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being self-taught?

9. *The Philosopher's Stone...*

Much has been made of the book's philosophical bent. Some feel that the author's taste for philosophy and her having woven philosophical musings into her characters' ruminations, particularly those of Renée, hampers the plot; others seem to feel that it is one of the book's most appealing attributes. What effect did the philosophical elements in this book have on you and your reading? Can you think of other novels that make such overt philosophical references? Which, and how does *Hedgehog* resemble or differ from them?

10. *A Bridge across Generations...*

Renée is fifty-four years old. Paloma, the book's other main character, is twelve. Yet much of the book deals with these two ostensibly different people discovering their elective affinities. How much is this book about the possibilities of communication across generations? And what significance might the fact that Renée is slightly too old to be Paloma's mother, and slightly too young to be her grandmother have on this question of intergenerational communication?

11. *Some stories are universal...*

The Elegance of the Hedgehog has been published in thirty-five languages, in over twenty-five countries. It has been a bestseller in France, Spain, Germany, Italy, South Korea, and America. In many other countries, while it may not have made

the bestseller lists, it nonetheless has enjoyed considerable success. In the majority of these cases, success has come despite modest marketing, despite the author's reticence to appear too often in public, and her refusal to appear in television, and despite relatively limited critical response. The novel has reached millions of readers largely thanks to word-of-mouth. What, in your opinion, makes this book so appealing to people? And why, even when compared to other beloved and successful books, is this one a book that people so frequently talk about, recommend to their friends, and give as gifts? And what, if anything, does the book's international success say about the universality of fictional stories today?

12. "...a text written above all to be read and to arouse emotions in the reader." In a related question, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* has been described as a "book for readers" as opposed to a book for critics, reviewers, and professors. What do you think is meant by this? And, if the idea is that it is a book that pleases readers but not critics, do you think this could be true? If so, why?

Discussion Questions from the Senior learn

website http://www.seniorlearn.org/bookclubs/readerguides/Elegance_Barbery.html

* *Marx Preamble* ~ pgs.17-27

1. A concierge who reads Marx! Might one suspect she is contemplating subversion or joining a union? Why is she reading his *German Ideology*?
"Mankind would do better to confine itself to its own needs." Does it appear that Mme. la Concierge is doing just that? Do you understand the title of this chapter: "Whosoever sows desire harvests oppression?"
3. Do you think Renée fits the stereotype of the typical French concierge? How has Muriel Barbery so carefully and clearly described her?
4. How does the tone and the attitude of the second narrator contrast with that of the concierge?
5. Would you say Renée and Paloma are both hedgehogs? What might they each be hiding from, or frightened about behind their protective cover?
6. What did you learn about the German occupation of Guernsey in these pages? How do you think the Islanders managed to survive the occupation for five years?
7. Is it so unusual for an adolescent to think about suicide? Do you think Paloma's dream of a "delicate slipping away" jives with her actual plan? How can it possibly achieve social justice?
8. What is an *autodidact*? Or - "the most recent *eructation* of the ruling corporate elite." Shall we keep a vocabulary list of unfamiliar words? Which ones have you noted?

On Grammar ~ pgs. 133-170

1. According to psychoanalysts, what does an involuntary act signify? What is it about the new tenant that causes the concierge to shudder at their first meeting at the elevator?
2. What made the tenant suspect that this lowly employee, the concierge, would know the source of her comment regarding happy/unhappy families?
3. Why is Paloma so taken with Mr. Kakura Ozu? Is it believable that he would confide his suspicions in this child - that the concierge is not what she appears to be?
4. What had Paloma observed earlier that made her think Mme. Michel is not a "real" concierge? How can she see what no one else can see, "the refinement of the hedgehog" in the concierge? Does she exaggerate her elegance here?
5. What is it about M. Paul Nguyen that makes Renée forget to hide who she really is? Is there something straightforward about the Japanese that causes this response, not just Mr. Kakura Ozu?
6. Why does Manuela's description of the new sliding doors delight Renée? Is it the doors, or the conversation they are having about the doors?
7. How do Madame Michel and Paloma view the importance of proper grammar? Did you agree with Paloma's views on education as expressed in her debate with her French teacher, Madame Fine?
8. How does Paloma regard those who "know neither the enchantment nor the beauty of languages"? Does Madame Michel regard such people in the same way?
9. Why does Madame Michel admire M. Kakuro for having only one of everything? What does this tell her about him? Do you have matching end tables, lamps? Do you tend to buy things in "twos"?
10. Do you agree with the Japanese, that you can only savor a pleasure if you understand it is ephemeral?

***Camellias* ~ pgs.31-129**

1. Do the cited instances of class prejudices have less of an impact on those of us who do not live in class-based societies, or is this a universal tendency? Is it only the rich who look down on the poor? How do the have-nots regard the rich in these pages?
2. Do you agree with Mme. Michel's definition of an "aristocrat"? Do any of the tenants at 7, Rue de Grenelle fit this description?
3. Is Paloma's cynicism and her constant criticism of her family normal for a twelve year old girl? Why is she keeping two separate notebooks? Do you think she is seriously considering suicide or just the idea of the effect it would have on others?
4. Do the philosophical musings help you to understand Renée Michel, the way she thinks, learns and arrives at conclusions - or do they get in the way? How have Kant's views of what we can know of the world, influenced Renée in her pursuit of education?

5. Contrast Paloma and Renée's early educational experience. Does Paloma seem to be into books the same way that Renée was at her age?
6. Is it fair to say that Renée learns from books while Paloma from her observation of others? How do Renée's reading habits compare to your own?
7. It has been said that Paloma and the concierge mirror one another in the conclusions they reach on the meaning of life - and death. From their journal entries, can you cite any specific similarities in thinking?
8. Is Paloma asocial, a "loner"? Does she turn to anyone for companionship or guidance? How does she compare to Mme. Michel, holed up in the back room of her loge?
9. How did you react to Paloma's visit to her grandmaman in the nursing home? Were you appalled, or did you find yourself agreeing with her observations?
10. Do you detect a slight shift in your own attitudes towards life or death - or somewhere in between? Are you contemplating any life changes, even small ones? Do you still drink that "nasty" coffee, par exemple?

Summer Rain ~ pgs.173-238

1. Why does Mr Ozu treat Madame Michel with more consideration and interest than other tenants in the building? Why does his interest make her feel naked? If she didn't want to dine with him, why do you think she accepted?
2. Why do you think Tolstoy has left such an impression on Renée? Is it the romance? Do they have a similar world view? Is this what interests the new tenant?
3. "If you have but one friend, make sure you choose her well." Were you surprised about the way Manuela took over the preparations for the "date"? Would Renée have managed this without her?
4. Do you find that Paloma's reaction to the school choir reveals a different side to her character that wasn't apparent before? What is it about the choir that overcomes her? How is this a worthy entry for her Movement notebook?
5. Following her makeover, why does Renée worry that she looks like "a real lady"? Why does she consider it "blasphemous" to enter his apartment? How does M. Ozu react to her new look? To her obvious uneasiness?
6. What more do we learn of Paloma's schoolmates in this chapter? Were you surprised to learn that she has a best friend? Do you see any similarities between the two narrators' close friends, Marguerite and Manuela?
7. What is in Mr Ozu's personality that makes him the first person to break through Renée's hard shell? What effect does he have on Paloma? Do you detect a glimmer of hope for her future?

8. What is the purpose of Art, as described here? Can you compare the effect of her school choir on Paloma and Renée's response to Pieter Claesz's still life?

9. What shared tastes were revealed during the rather humorous, embarrassing bathroom episode? Do you detect a blossoming friendship - or romance, even? Has a "summer rain" revived our concierge?

10. Did you find Paloma's entry in *Profound Thought #13* rather surprising, considering the disturbing revelation during the meeting with her mother's psychoanalyst?

Paloma ~ pgs.241-315

1. Has Paloma entered the concierge's loge to hide from the world, just as Renée seems to be emerging from her camouflage?

2. Do you think Renée has any business resenting the affectation of the rich, like Colombe, who dress as if they are poor? What of intelligent people who disguise themselves as ignorant?

3. Why is Renée dismayed as she reads the final draft of Colombe's thesis? Do you think that Renée too has an obligation to use her acquired knowledge to contribute to the common good? Does Renée believe that?

4. Why do kids burn cars? Why does Paloma want to burn the apartment? Do the answers to both questions relate to Renée's situation?

5. Were there instances of "laconicism" and humorous exchanges that you enjoyed in these chapters while attempting to grasp the deeper philosophical implications?

6. Why is the movement of the falling rosebud so special to Paloma? Do you see Beauty in a fallen rosebud yet to blossom - or does it make you sad?

7. Why did Renée turn down Kakuro's invitation to celebrate his birthday? Was it the photo of his beautiful wife, Sanae? Would she have faced the real reason had Paloma not forced the issue?

8. How did Renée's tearful revelation affect Paloma? 9. What did Kakuro tell Renée at dinner that changed everything and caused her not to sleep that night?

10. "Suddenly class struggles seem less important." Were they ever really as important as Renée believed them to be? Do you believe class differences are real or imagined?

My Camellias < ~ pgs.316-325

1. Do you find yourself wishing that the book ended before the "My Camellias" chapter? Did the preceding chapters prepare you for such an ending?

2. How did the swings in mood and tone from scenes of comedy to moments of tragedy affect your reaction to the novel? Was it important or distracting to hear from the alternating narrators?

3. Who are Renée's Camellias? What new information was revealed in her final thoughts of

each of them?

4. Why does Renée believe that Manuela will feel remorse for the dry cleaning incident? And then, why did Manuela collapse with the words, "forgive me" on her lips?

5. What are Renée's final thoughts of Kakuro - and "what might have been"?

6. Why does Renée begin to cry at the thought of Paloma, the daughter she never had? What does she wish for her?

7. "The important thing is not the fact of dying, but what you were doing in the moment of your death." What does Renée say she was doing?

8. Do you think it was significant that Renée died while trying to help the homeless drunk who ran into the traffic?

9. Why does Paloma feel shame when she learns of Mme. Michel's death? Did she ever really intend to commit suicide? Had she understood its meaning until now?

10. On what note does the author choose to end the story? Were you affected or changed in any way by this book?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Special Topics in Calamity Physics by Marisha Pessl

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo by Stieg Larsson

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie by Alan Bradley

Netherland by Joseph O'Neill

Fault Lines by Nancy Huston

Goldengrove: A Novel by Francine Prose

Out Stealing Horses by Per Petterson

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle by David Wroblewski

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz

The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters

The Monsters of Templeton by Lauren Groff