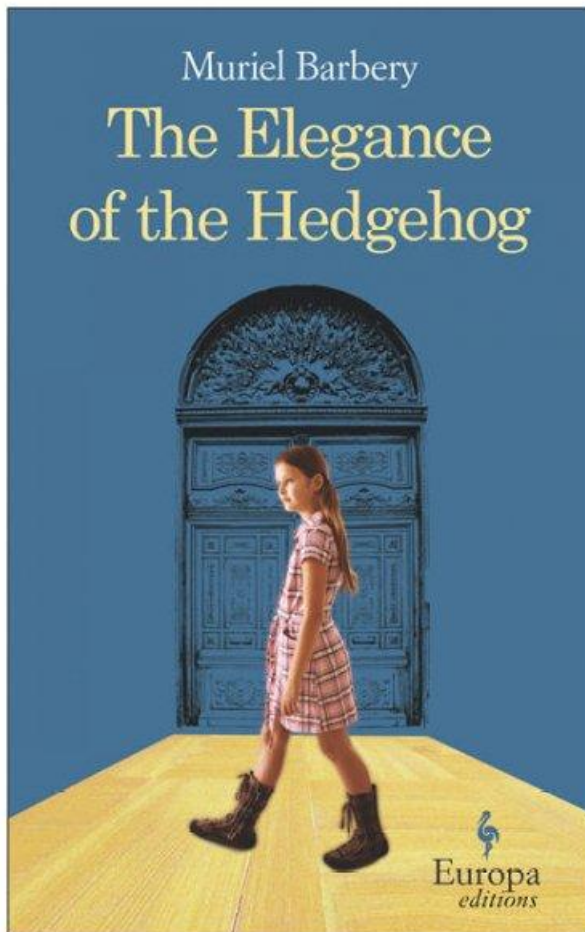


About the book...



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.

About the author...

Muriel Barbery was born May 28th, 1969 in Casablanca, Morocco. She was raised in France. She entered the École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay-Saint-Cloud in 1990 and obtained her agrégation in philosophy in 1993. She then taught philosophy at the Université de Bourgogne, in a lycée, and at the Saint-Lô IUFM. She currently lives in Japan with her husband Stéphane.



The Elegance of the Hedgehog is translated by Alison Anderson, author of two *Hidden Latitudes* and *Darwin's Wink*. For Europa Editions she has translated two novels by Sélim Nassib and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. She lives near Lausanne, Switzerland.

Reviews

Booklist

In a bourgeois apartment building in Paris, we encounter Renée, an intelligent, philosophical, and cultured concierge who masks herself as the stereotypical uneducated “super” to avoid suspicion from the building's pretentious inhabitants. Also living in the building is Paloma, the adolescent daughter of a parliamentarian, who has decided to commit suicide on her thirteenth birthday because she cannot bear to live among the rich. Although they are passing strangers, it is through Renée's observations and Paloma's journal entries that *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* reveals the absurd lives of the wealthy. That is until a Japanese businessman moves into the building and brings the two characters together. A critical success in France, the novel may strike a different chord with some readers in the U.S. The plot

thins at moments and is supplanted with philosophical discourse on culture, the ruling class, and the injustices done to the poor, leaving the reader enlightened on Kant but disappointed with the story at hand.

Library Journal /*Starred Review*/

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.

Kirkus Reviews

The second novel (but first to be published in the United States) from France-based author Barbery teaches philosophical lessons by shrewdly exposing rich secret lives hidden beneath conventional exteriors. Renée 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 has broad cultural appetites—for the writings of Marx and Kant, the novels of Tolstoy, the films of Ozu and Wenders. 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. Similarly, 12-year-old Paloma Josse, daughter of one of the well-connected tenant families, shields her erudition, philosophical inclinations, criticism and also her dreams of suicide. But when a new Japanese tenant, Kakuro Ozu, moves in, everything changes for both females. He detects their intelligence and invites them into his cultured life. Curious and deeply fulfilling friendships blossom among the three, offering Paloma and Renée freedom from the mental prisons confining them. With its refined taste and political perspective, this is an elegant, light-spirited and very European adult fable.

Publishers Weekly

This dark but redemptive novel, an international bestseller, marks the debut in English of Normandy philosophy professor Barber. Rene Michel, 54 and widowed, is the stolid concierge in an elegant Paris hotel particulier. Though "short, ugly, and plump," Rene 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 Rene, 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, Barberly 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.

The New York Times

"Thinking on the Sly" By CARYN JAMES

Will Americans embrace a heroine who skulks like a spy among the intelligentsia, an apparently unlettered concierge who secretly disdains Husserl's philosophy, adores Ozu's films and is so passionate about Tolstoy she named her cat Leo? Or will Muriel Barberly's studied yet appealing commercial hit be a purely European phenomenon, exposing a cultural fault line?

"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. (Alain de Botton's handy guide "How Proust Can Change Your Life" comes to mind.) The

novel's two narrators alternate chapters, but the book is dominated by Renée, a widowed concierge in her 50s who calls herself "short, ugly and plump," a self-consciously stereotypical working-class nobody. She is also an autodidact — "a permanent traitor to my archetype," as she drolly puts it — who takes refuge in aesthetics and ideas but thinks life will be easier if she never lets her knowledge show. Even the slippers she wears as camouflage, she says, are so typical, "only the coalition between a baguette and a beret could possibly contend in the domain of cliché."

Her unlikely counterpart is Paloma, a precocious 12-year-old whose family lives in the fashionable building Renée cares for. Paloma believes the world is so meaningless that she plans to commit suicide when she turns 13. Renée'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, Renée with erudition and Paloma with adolescent brio. Neither character realizes they share such similar views, from "the pointlessness of my existence," as Renée says, to their affection for Japanese culture. Paloma adores reading manga, while Renée goes into raptures over an Ozu scene in which the violet mountains of Kyoto become a soul-saving vision of beauty. Both skewer the class-conscious people in the building: Paloma observes the inanity of her politician father and Flaubert-quoting mother, while Renée knows that such supposedly bright lights never see past the net shopping bag she carries, its epicurean food hidden beneath

turnips. Both appreciate beauty in Proustian moments of elongated time. What Renée calls “a suspension of time that is the sign of a great illumination,” Paloma experiences while watching a rosebud fall. “It’s something to do with time, not space,” she says. “Beauty consists of its own passing, just as we reach for it.” And, exceedingly self-concerned though they are, each may be less perceptive about herself than about anything around her.

Especially in the novel’s early stretch, Barbery, a professor of philosophy, seems too clever for her own good. (This is her second novel; her well-received first, “Une Gourmandise,” will appear in English translation next year.) Her narrators mirror each other so neatly, the pattern threatens to become more calculated than graceful. Her brief chapters, more essays than fiction, so carefully build in explanations for the literary and philosophical references that she seems to be assessing what a mass audience needs. In just a few pages, Renée offers a mini-treatise on phenomenology.

Only one reference is missing. The sharp-eyed Paloma guesses that Renée has “the same simple refinement as the hedgehog,” quills on the outside but “fiercely solitary — and terribly elegant” within. Yet there is no mention of “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” Isaiah Berlin’s essay on Renée’s beloved Tolstoy, which may make this the slickest allusion of all. (What are the odds that a philosophy professor with a working knowledge of hedgehogs and Tolstoy would not have known it?) In Berlin’s famous definition of two kinds of thinkers — foxes gather multiple unrelated ideas, while hedgehogs subsume

everything into a controlling vision — Renée, intellectually eclectic yet determined to cram her thoughts into a self-abnegating theory of life, resembles Berlin's description of Tolstoy, who was "by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog."

Even when the novel is most essayistic, the narrators' kinetic minds and engaging voices (in Alison Anderson's fluent translation) propel us ahead. And the lives of both characters perk up when the rich, mysterious, charmingly attentive Mr. Ozu moves into the building. His name alone is enough to tantalize Renée, and he doesn't disappoint her. "You pace up and down a corridor and suddenly enter a room full of light," she says of their friendship, and his presence also brightens the book, adding emotion and an actual story. Quite near the end, Renée and Paloma become friends, too, and Barbery glides ahead more buoyantly than before, displaying her flair as a novelist

Naturally, such a philosophical fiction resolves some issues of life and death for its characters. The shallower question of best-sellerdom may come down to marketing. But the fate of this quirky European success might also defy or reinforce just the sort of baguette-and-beret stereotypes Renée finds so obvious and so true — oh, those philosophical French!

Caryn James, the author of the novels "What Caroline Knew" and "Glorie," is at work on two nonfiction books.

Discussion questions

(http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm/book_number/2220/The-Elegance-of-the-Hedgehog)

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?

Readalikes:

The Year the Gypsies Came by Linzi Alex Glass

In Johannesburg, South Africa, in the late 1960s, twelve-year-old Emily, who longs for affection from her quarreling parents, finds comfort in the stories of a Zulu servant and in her friendship with a young houseguest who has an equally troubled family.

Someone I Loved by Anna Gavalda; translated from the French by Catherine Evans

Abandoned by her husband, a young woman forms a profound and life-changing relationship with her father-in-law.

Mme. Proust and the Kosher Kitchen by Kate Taylor
The lives of three women intersect in this novel about memory and loss, prejudice and unrequited love - not to mention literature and cooking as a cure for heartbreak. Their stories crisscross between Paris in the 1890's at the height of the Dreyfus affair, **France** in 1942, and present-day Canada.

Watchalikes:



Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran (2003) , adapted from A novella by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt
Set in the 1960s in Paris' Jewish Quarter, *Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran* is about a troubled Jewish boy, Moses, or Momo, who strikes up an unlikely friendship with a solitary Muslim shopkeeper named Monsieur Ibrahim.



Le Hérisson (international title: *The Hedgehog*) is Muna Achache's screen adaptation of Muriel Barbery's French novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* (2009)

