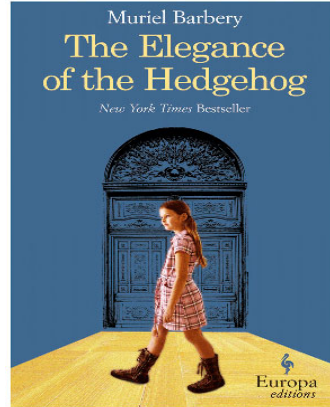


# The Elegance of the Hedgehog

by Muriel Barbery, translated by Alison Anderson



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## Discussion Questions

11. *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?

*(Questions issued by publisher.)*

# Interview with Muriel Barbery

By Elizabeth Floyd Mair Special to the Times Union

“The Elegance of the Hedgehog” focuses on two super-smart, super-solitary female characters — each of whom goes to great lengths to hide and protect her rich inner life from others — and the unlikely friendship that grows up between them. “Unlikely” because one is a 54-year-old concierge (“poor, discreet and insignificant”) of a luxury apartment building in Paris and the other a 12-year-old girl who lives in the building (“My parents are rich, my family is rich and my sister and I are, therefore, as good as rich”). The young girl is planning to kill herself on her 13th birthday, to avoid the mediocrity that she is sure will come with growing up, unless she is able to find something to make life worth living.

This light but ultimately affecting novel has been a tremendous success for its author, Muriel Barbery. This is her second novel; the first, “Gourmet Rhapsody,” was well reviewed but did not achieve the same kind of meteoric success. Since its publication in France in 2006, “The Elegance of the Hedgehog” has been translated into 31 languages and received many literary prizes. It was published in English in 2008 and has spent five months on the New York Times bestseller list, where it is currently at #13.

The University at Albany’s Writers’ Institute had planned to bring Ms. Barbery to Albany for a reading and panel discussion on April 28, but difficulties with the other panelists’ schedules have forced the cancellation of the entire event. We were able, however, to interview the author by email recently about the book and how its success has affected her.

**Q: Your book has been extremely successful in France and internationally. Has that success changed your life in many ways? Has it made it easier for you to devote yourself to your writing, or has it created new pressures?**

**A:** Many things have changed in my life, but not the essential things. My goals, aspirations, friends, and tastes have not changed. On the contrary, we’ve been able to realize what has for many years been our fondest dream, that is, to live in Japan, in Kyoto. I am free of all constraints and obligations, that is, beyond the obligation to write, which I freely consent to. As far as pressure is concerned, yes, that exists; but it does not have anything to do with success, which, on the contrary, has afforded me conditions that are exceptionally favorable to creativity. I feel exactly the same things I felt during the period between my first and my second novel, when I was completely unknown. I worry at not being able to write what I want; I am afraid of not progressing far enough, of deceiving myself.

**Q: How did the idea for these characters come to you?**

**A:** Renée, the concierge, was a secondary character in my first novel. I ended up reading some of the chapters of “Gourmet Rhapsody” several years after it had been published — totally by chance, because the book was buried in my library. And as I was reading I recalled something my editor had told me. In the original manuscript, I had Renée talking in a way that was extremely crude, stereotypical; she came across as a caricature of a concierge. My editor said : “You’re a novelist, anything is possible; your concierge could just as well express herself like the Duchess of Guermantes.” I remembered these words and I suddenly had the urge to attempt the voice of a well-read and erudite concierge; I sat down at my desk and wrote the first pages of “Hedgehog.” As far as Paloma is concerned, she emerged a little bit later and rather by chance during the rewriting. My husband (and first reader) found the character interesting and suggested I give her a voice.

**Q: When you were writing, did you move back and forth between the two characters after a few pages, the way the book does? Or did you spend more time with each character before returning to the other?**

**A:** Well, I wrote more than two hundred pages in which there was a single voice, that of Renée. Then Paloma emerged. I then changed the voice so as to insert the new chapters of the young girl between those of the concierge. Finally, I had almost finished using this technique of alternating voices. Only a few chapters from the end did I begin writing both characters concurrently.

**Q: Can I ask what brought you to Japan? Both your main characters love Japan — is this something that you share in common with them? What aspects of Japanese culture interest you?**

**A:** Yes, of course, the interest Renée and Paloma have for Japan is mine, and my husband’s, who actually introduced me to Japan. “Interest” is far too weak a word: we have long been lovers of Japanese culture and since we moved to Kyoto, a town that we are head over heels in love with, our feelings for this country have been confirmed. Our fascination began mostly as an aesthetic one, and has remained so: we are fascinated by the ability to create pure beauty, at the same time refined and pure; the kind of thing you see in the slow, sweet sumptuousness of Ozu’s films, in the splendor of the Japanese gardens, in the discreet sophistication of ikebana ... It has had us under its spell for over ten years. And we are still at the dawn of our discoveries ... But what we also love about Japan, without negating its somber and terrible face, is its repertoire of behaviors: the subtle politesse, the sense of security that results from social solidarity, a very special form of candor, as well. We don’t know how long these things can resist the infernal spirals of the contemporary world, but for now they make life here incredibly sweet and civil

*.Elizabeth Floyd Mair is a freelance writer living in Guilderland.*