

## = The Elegance of the Hedgehog =

The Elegance of the Hedgehog ( French : L 'Élégance du hérisson ) is a novel by the French novelist and professor of philosophy Muriel Barbery . The book follows events in the life of a concierge , Renée Michel , whose deliberately concealed intelligence is uncovered by an unstable but intellectually precocious girl named Paloma Josse . Paloma is the daughter of an upper @-@ class family living in the upscale Parisian apartment building where Renée works .

Featuring a number of erudite characters , The Elegance of the Hedgehog is full of allusions to literary works , music , films , and paintings . It incorporates themes relating to philosophy , class consciousness , and personal conflict . The events and ideas of the novel are presented through the thoughts and reactions , interleaved throughout the novel , of two narrators , Renée and Paloma . The changes of narrator are marked by switches of typeface . In the case of Paloma , the narration takes the form of her written journal entries and other philosophical reflections ; Renée 's story is also told in the first person but more novelistically and in the present tense .

First released in August 2006 by Gallimard , the novel became a publishing success in France the following year , selling over two million copies . It has been translated into more than forty languages , and published in numerous countries outside France , including the United Kingdom ( Gallic Books , London ) and the United States ( Europa Editions , New York ) , and has attracted critical praise .

## = = Plot = =

The story revolves mainly around the characters of Renée Michel and Paloma Josse , residents of an upper @-@ middle class Left Bank apartment building at 7 Rue de Grenelle ? one of the most elegant streets in Paris . Divided into eight luxury apartments , all occupied by distinctly bourgeois families , the building has a courtyard and private garden .

The widow Renée is a concierge who has supervised the building for 27 years . She is an autodidact in literature and philosophy , but conceals it to keep her job and , she believes , to avoid the condemnation of the building 's tenants . Likewise , she wants to be alone to avoid her tenants ' curiosity . She effects this by pretending to indulge in concierge @-@ type food and low @-@ quality television , while in her back room she actually enjoys high @-@ quality food , listens to opera , and reads works by Leo Tolstoy and Edmund Husserl . Her perspective is that " [ t ] o be poor , ugly and , moreover , intelligent condemns one , in our society , to a dark and disillusioned life , a condition one ought to accept at an early age " .

Twelve @-@ year @-@ old Paloma lives on the fifth floor with her parents and sister whom she considers snobs . A precocious girl , she hides her intelligence to avoid exclusion at school . Dismayed by the privileged people around her , she decides that life is meaningless , and that unless she can find something worth living for , beyond the " vacuousness of bourgeois existence " , she will commit suicide on June 16 , her thirteenth birthday . Planning to burn down the apartment before dying , she also steals her mother 's pills . For the time being she journals her observations of the outside world , including her perceptions of Renée .

Paloma is the only tenant who suspects Renée 's refinement , and for most of the novel , the two " cross each other but don ' t see each other " , in the words of Time Out reviewer Elisabeth Vincentelli . Although they share interests in philosophy and literature , nothing happens between them until the death of a celebrated restaurant critic who had been living upstairs . A cultured Japanese businessman named Kakuro Ozu , whom Renée and Paloma befriend , then takes a room in the same apartment building . Ozu comes to share Paloma 's fascination with Renée : that the concierge has the " same simple refinement as the hedgehog " .

Towards the end of the novel , Renée comes out of her internal seclusion , teaching young Paloma that not all adults pursue vanity at the expense of their intelligence and humanity . However , only shortly after Renée realizes that the beauty of life and her connections with the world makes life worth living , she dies in the same way as Roland Barthes ; she is struck down by a laundry van . This leaves Paloma and Ozu devastated but leads Paloma not to commit suicide .

= = Characters = =

= = = Renée Michel = = =

Renée Michel is a 54 @-@ year @-@ old widowed concierge . She has never been to college because she considers herself to always have been poor , discreet , and of no significance . Renée , however is self @-@ taught ; she reads works of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and Russian writer Leo Tolstoy ( and even names her cat " Leo " ) , disdains the philosophy of Edmund Husserl , adores 17th @-@ century Dutch paintings , likes Japanese art @-@ house films by Yasujiro Ozu , and listens to the music of composers Henry Purcell and Gustav Mahler .

Renée , who conceals her true self to conform to the lowly image of typical concierges , introduces herself as " a widow , short , ugly , chubby " , with " bunions on my feet and , on certain difficult mornings , it seems , the breath of a mammoth " . Her outward appearance is summarized by The Guardian reviewer Ian Samson as " prickly and bunioned " . When Paloma eventually discovers Renée 's identity , she describes the latter in her journal as having the " elegance of the hedgehog " ? although like the spines of the hedgehog , she is covered in quills and prickly , within , she has in the words of the English translation of the book quoted by Viv Groskop " the same simple refinement as the hedgehog : a deceptively indolent little creature , fiercely solitary ? and terribly elegant " .

= = = Paloma Josse = = =

Paloma Josse , an advanced soon to be twelve @-@ year @-@ old , belongs to one of the conventional families living in the posh apartment building where Renée works . Daughter of an important parliamentarian father ( a former government minister ) , and a Flaubert @-@ quoting mother , Paloma has a penchant for absurdism . She regards her sister 's scholarship as " cold and trivial " and deems her mother 's culture as conventional and useless . Paloma herself values Japanese works , and reads manga , haiku , and tanka . She keeps two diaries , one called " Journal of the Movement of the World " to record her observations of the world around her , and the other called " Profound Thoughts " to record her many and wide @-@ ranging reflections on art , poetry , people and herself . She is introspective , and truly kind , though she tries her best to avoid the inquisition of others . She understands many facets of the world that are unseen by others , and deeply understand the way the world works , and the many perils and pitfalls of adulthood and the many hypocrisies of modern society , and therefore resolves in not an all melodramatic way , to commit suicide . However , a drastic plot twist at the end of the tale opens to her an amazing new truth : beauty , that provides meaning to our lives .

= = = Minor characters = = =

Other characters developed by Barbery in the novel include Kakuro Ozu , the cultured Japanese businessman , and Manuela , a Portuguese cleaner . Ozu , a tenant , shares Paloma 's fascination with Renée 's masked intelligence and brings her out of her shell ( and also happens to set the entire book in forward motion ) , while Manuela is responsible for cleaning the apartments ' toilets and is Renée 's only real friend .

= = Content = =

= = = Style and character development = = =

Barbery developed the character of Renée because she was " inspired by the idea of a reserved , cultured concierge who turned stereotypes on their head and at the same time created a compelling comic effect " ; for the author , Renée " opened the door on a kind of social criticism " . In an

interview with Time magazine , Barbery added that she created characters " who love the things [ she does ] , and who allowed [ her ] to celebrate that through them " . Barbery dedicates the book to her husband , Stéphane , a sociologist , with whom she wrote the book .

The novel 's two narrators , Renée and Paloma , alternate in each mostly short chapter , although the former dominates throughout . The novel consists of the " diaries " of the protagonists , and the heading styles and fonts change as it develops , signalling the change of the narrators ' character .

Most critics considered Barbery 's narrative presentation to be essayistic ; the individual chapters are more akin to essays than fiction , as The New York Times ' Caryn James expresses it , " so carefully build [ ing ] in explanations for the literary and philosophical references that she seems to be assessing what a mass audience needs " . The early pages of the novel contain a short critique by Renée on the topic of phenomenology .

#### = = = Themes = = =

Barbery incorporates several themes into the novel . References to philosophy , for instance , abound throughout , getting increasingly dense as the story progresses . Barbery confesses to having " followed a long , boring course of studies in philosophy " , and comments that " I expected it to help me understand better that which surrounds me : but it didn 't work out that way . Literature has taught me more . I was interested in exploring the bearing philosophy could really have on one 's life , and how . I wanted to illuminate this process . That 's where the desire to anchor philosophy to a story , a work of fiction , was born : to give it more meaning , make it more physically real , and render it , perhaps , even entertaining . "

Themes of class consciousness and conflict are also present in the book . Critics interpreted the stance the novel took against French class @-@ based discrimination and hypocrisy as quite radical , although some French critics found that this made the novel an unsubtle satire of fading social stereotypes . There are also literary allusions in the novel , referencing comic books , movies , music , and paintings .

#### = = Publication = =

The Elegance of the Hedgehog was first published in August 2006 under the title *L 'élégance du hérisson* by the leading French publisher Éditions Gallimard . The initial print run of the novel was 4000 copies , but by the following year , over a million had been produced . On September 25 , 2007 , Gallimard released the fiftieth reprint of the novel .

The French Voice program extended help to Gallimard in the translation of the novel to other languages and publication outside France . In partnership with the PEN American Center , French Voice funds the translation and publication of up to ten contemporary French and Francophone works each year . The Elegance of the Hedgehog was one of 30 works chosen between 2005 and 2008 by the organization , spearheaded by a committee in its selection process of professional experts .

The novel 's translation rights have been sold to 31 countries , and it has been translated to a half @-@ dozen languages . Novelist Alison Anderson translated *L 'Élégance du hérisson* into English as *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* , and this version was released in September 2008 by Europa Editions . Europa is an independent press based in Italy and New York , which focuses on translated works . In the United States , it will be among French novels receiving patronage from a major American writer , as yet unspecified . In the United Kingdom , the rights were bought by Gallic Books , a publisher specializing in French translations .

#### = = Reception = =

An acclaimed literary work , *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* has been considered by critics and press alike as a publishing phenomenon . Upon the novel 's release , it had received significant support from booksellers . The novel has earned Barbery the 2007 French Booksellers Prize , the

2007 Brive @-@ la @-@ Gaillarde Reader 's Prize , and the Prix du Rotary International in France . The Elegance of the Hedgehog has been adapted into the film *Le hérisson* ( 2009 ) .

The novel was a best @-@ seller and long @-@ seller in France , amassing sales of 1 @.@ 2 million copies in hardback alone . It stayed on the country 's best @-@ seller for 102 straight weeks from its publication , longer than American novelist Dan Brown 's best @-@ selling books . According to reviewer Viv Groskop , the philosophical element in the novel partly explains its appeal in France , where philosophy remains a compulsory subject . Anderson agreed , commenting that the novel became popular in France because it is " a story where people manage to transcend their class barriers " . The novel also received a warm response in Korea , and sold over 400 @,@ 000 copies in Italy . The release of the novel helped increase the sales of Barbery 's first novel , *Une Gourmandise* .

A week after the novel was published in the United Kingdom , The Guardian ran an article about French best @-@ sellers published in English , focusing on *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* . In it , writer Alison Flood contended that " fiction in translation is not an easy sell to Brits , and French fiction is perhaps the hardest sell of all " . Promotions buyer Jonathan Ruppin predicted that the novel would struggle to gain a readership in the United Kingdom because , according to him , in the UK market " the plot is what people want more than anything else " and the novel 's storyline is not its central aspect .

= = = Critical reviews = = =

*The Elegance of the Hedgehog* was well received by critics . In the earliest known review , for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* , Maurizio Bono writes that " [ t ] he formula that made more than half a million readers in France fall in love with [ *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* ] has , among other ingredients : intelligent humor , fine sentiments , an excellent literary and philosophical backdrop , taste that is sophisticated but substantial " . French magazine *Elle* reviewer Natalie Aspesi pronounced it one of " the most exhilarating and extraordinary novels in recent years " . Aspesi , however , tagged the novel 's title as " most curious and least appealing " . Praising the novel in his review for *The Guardian* , Ian Samson wrote that " *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* aspires to be great and pretends to philosophy : it is , at least , charming . " In an earlier review in the same paper , Groskop opined that the novel is a " profound but accessible book ... which elegantly treads the line between literary and commercial fiction " . She added that " clever , informative and moving , it is essentially a crash course in philosophy interwoven with a platonic love story " . A review in *The Telegraph* conjectured that " [ i ] f [ the novel were ] a piece of furniture , it would be an Ikea bestseller : popular , but not likely to be passed down the generations " . A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* went further , calling the book " pretentious and cynical , with barely any story . It reads more like a tract than a novel , but lacks even a tract ? s certainty of purpose . The characters are problematic : most are puppets , and those that aren ? t are stereotypes " .

Michael Dirda of *The Washington Post* complimented Barbery , saying , " Certainly , the intelligent Muriel Barbery has served readers well by giving us the gently satirical , exceptionally winning and inevitably bittersweet *Elegance of the Hedgehog* . " Louise McCready of *The New York Observer* praised Anderson 's translation of the novel as " smooth and accurate " . Caryn James of *The New York Times* hailed the novel as " studied yet appealing commercial hit " , adding that it " belongs to a distinct subgenre : the accessible book that flatters readers with its intellectual veneer " . *Los Angeles Times* ' Susan Salter Reynolds wrote that " [ *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* ] is a high @-@ wire performance ; its characters teeter on the surreal edge of normalcy . Their efforts to conceal their true natures , the pressures of the solitary mind , make the book hum " .

= = Film adaptation = =

The novel was adapted into a film *The Hedgehog* ( *Le hérisson* ) released in France in July 2009 , starring Josiane Balasko as Renée Michel , Garance Le Guillermic as Paloma Josse , and Togo Igawa as Kakuro Ozu , with a score by Gabriel Yared . The rights for the film were bought by

NeoClassics Film and it was released by the company in America on August 19 . Its reception at festivals was positive and it won the Filmfest DC 2011 , the Best of Fest Palm Springs 2011 , the Seattle International Film Festival 2010 , and the 2010 Col @-@ Coa Film Festival . Moira Macdonald of The Seattle Times called it " Whimsical and touching ... Mona Achache 's adaptation is wistful perfection " . Stephen Holden of The New York Times said it " suggests a sort of Gallic Harold and Maude " .