

The Elegance of the Hedgehog
By Muriel Barbery
Translated by Alison Anderson
Europa Editions
September 2008
ISBN: 978-1-933372-60-0



The Boston Globe

By Barbara Fisher

September 14 2008

Astute social satire and abstruse German philosophy are rarely found together, but here they are in this ingenious work of fiction. Renée works as the concierge in a luxury apartment building in Paris. She appears to correspond to the easily decipherable cliché of her job - poor, old, ugly, insignificant, addicted to television, which she watches in the company of a fat, dozing cat. But, in fact, behind this facade, she hides her impressive knowledge of philosophy, her deep appreciation of art, and her utter contempt for the haute bourgeois tenants of the building: rich people who hang Francis Bacon paintings in the bathroom and give Prozac to their stressed-out pets. Paloma, the 12-year-old child of the couple who hang Bacon in the toilet, is an improbably precocious and amazingly clever child, who hides her intellectual gifts and her desperate detachment behind the sullen silence of a pre-teen. Thus they both strive to make themselves invisible and, in succeeding, mock the banal and sturdy assumptions of their world.

As Renée and Paloma present their similar views and strategies in alternating chapters, a reader waits for them to discover each other. Eventually, with the help of a new tenant, a wealthy, elegant, soulful Japanese gentleman, they connect. Waiting for this event forms the suspense of the novel, and it is more than sufficient. Renée is an especially engaging narrator, discoursing on Dutch landscape painting, Japanese film, or German philosophy. In her person, she neatly disproves Husserl's phenomenology - all that exists is our perception of it. She is not what people perceive her to be. And in her life, she makes the case for the transforming power of art.