



## **The New York Observer**

By Barbara Fisher

September 14 2008

### **Teen Metaphysics, French Style**

A best seller in France, this philosophical novel features a precocious 12-year-old girl

by Louise McCready | September 12, 2008

"The dual narratives complement one other like the summer pairing of ripe strawberries and refreshing rosé."

A cross between *Sophie's World* and a modernized Parisian Cinderella—and filled with philosophical and rhetorical questions most Americans would never think to ask themselves—*The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is the second novel of Muriel Barbery, a philosophy professor at the University of Saint-Lô, in Normandy. A surprise best seller, it has sold more than 1.2 million copies in France since 2006.

The novel alternates seamlessly between the musings of Renée, the 54-year-old concierge of an apartment building in the affluent seventh arrondissement, and the *pensées profondes* of Paloma Josse, a 12-year-old resident.

Renée tells us that for 27 years she has been the concierge at number 7, rue de Grenelle, “a fine *hôtel particulier* with a courtyard and private gardens, divided into eight luxury apartments, all of which are inhabited, all of which are immense. I am a widow, I am short, ugly, and plump. ... I did not go to college, I have always been poor, discreet, and insignificant.”

The dual narratives complement one other like the summer pairing of ripe strawberries and refreshing rosé. It's Paloma who gives the book its title with this description of a fellow resident of 7, rue de Grenelle: “Madame Michel has the elegance of the hedgehog: on the outside, she's covered in quills, a real fortress, but my gut feeling is that on the inside, she has the same simple refinement as the hedgehog: a deceptively indolent little creature, fiercely solitary—and terribly elegant.”



Impossibly precocious, Paloma is repulsed by adult hypocrisy and the superficial society she's poised to enter. Mistakenly thinking she's the first to feel disgusted when the veil of childhood innocence is lifted and adult mores are exposed, Paloma decides to commit suicide on her 13th birthday.

Paloma keeps a journal. This "work of great significance" is designed to live on after her death, and in it she explains her plans for self-slaughter: "All our family acquaintances have followed the same path: their youth spent trying to make the most of their intelligence, squeezing their studies like a lemon to make sure they'd secure a spot among the elite, then their entire lives wondering with a flabbergasted look on their faces why all that hopefulness has led to such a vain existence. People aim for the stars, and they end up like goldfish in a bowl. I wonder if it wouldn't be simpler just to teach children right from the start that life is absurd ... one thing is sure—there's no way I'm going to end up in the goldfish bowl."

Her voice is witty and poignant, and clearly too sophisticated for a pubescent girl. Here, for example, she dissects the appeal of a rue de Rivoli landmark, Angelina's: "... all these well-dressed people, nibbling preciously at their exorbitantly-priced patisserie, who were here only for ... well, for the significance of the place itself—belonging to a certain world, with its beliefs, its codes, its projects, its history, and so on. It's symbolic. When you go to have tea chez Angelina, you are in France, in a world that is wealthy, hierarchical, rational, Cartesian, policed."

Meanwhile, Renée the concierge ponders the paradox of a patrie founded on égalité in which the citoyens are obsessed with class. She considers the Portuguese housekeeper Manuela Lopes an aristocrat, though she cleans bidets for a living. Renée lives by the rule that "Friendship across class lines is impossible," and her wise observations indicate she is more deserving of wealth than the residents in her building—but I find it difficult to believe that the Park Avenue set in Paris is as one-dimensional as the haute bourgeoisie caricatures Muriel Barbery serves up.

Alison Anderson's translation of *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is smooth and accurate—but language can only bridge so many cultural barriers. In Paloma's opinion, "grammar is a way to attain beauty. ... When you are using grammar, you ascend to another level of the beauty of language. ... I find there is nothing more beautiful, for example, than the very basic components of language, nouns and verbs."

**The Elegance of the Hedgehog**

By Muriel Barbery

*Translated by Alison Anderson*

Europa Editions

September 2008

ISBN: 978-1-933372-60-0



Will this play in America, a country where political leaders and cultural icons substitute “myself” for “me,” where diagramming sentences dates you with the dinosaurs? Even Francophiles may have difficulty appreciating grammar as the path to beauty.