



Chicago Sun-Times

By Debra Bruno

September 7, 2008

"This story, like all great tales, will break your heart, but it will also make you realize—or remember—that sometimes the pain is worth it."

French novelist gets beyond the prickly to reveal life's true elegance

The Elegance of the Hedgehog, a quiet, graceful book by the French writer Muriel Barbery, works its way into a reader's affection slowly and carefully and is in some ways as unassuming as a hedgehog itself. And yet in other ways it leaps to soaring heights -- movingly and beautifully -- that would cause more cynical, ironic writers to cringe.

The main character, Renee Michel, is a 54-year-old concierge of a luxury apartment building in Paris. Although she has no formal education, she's well-read and cultured -- a trait she thinks would cause problems if the residents of her building knew. So she develops a traditional concierge persona as a facade, complete with a blaring television she never watches and unpleasant cooking smells. Her only friend is a Portuguese cleaning woman with impeccable manners and great warmth.

Renee's chapters are alternated with the "profound thoughts" of the precocious 12-year-old Paloma, a resident of the apartment building. Paloma is full of disdain for her wealthy parents and sister, and has convinced herself that since life has no meaning and her fate is to end up like her parents, she'll kill herself and burn down the apartment building. Paloma, of course, is so full of her own adolescent angst that she has trouble seeing the good in life. She does have one careful eye on the concierge, though: "Madame Michel has the elegance of the hedgehog," Paloma writes in her journal. "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."

When Kakuro Ozu moves into the building, both Renee and Paloma are immediately fascinated, in part because they've each developed a passion for Japanese culture: Renee for film and Paloma for manga, Japanese comic books and cartoons. What happens next unfolds with a sense of inevitability that doesn't feel at all forced.

The Elegance of the Hedgehog

By Muriel Barbery

Translated by Alison Anderson

Europa Editions

September 2008

ISBN: 978-1-933372-60-0



The strength of *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is Barbery's ability to create characters that come alive with each thought, gesture and literary reference. With her graceful language (translated elegantly from the French by Alison Anderson), Barbery shows prickly people slowly opening up to trust others, and to begin to reveal themselves honestly and without fear or shame. For Paloma, it's enough to save her life.

This is a novel that celebrates the gut feeling, the inspired moment when life changes forever because of a gesture, a laugh, a step off the pavement, or even a glimpse of a beautiful flower.

A warning, though: This story, like all great tales, will break your heart, but it will also make you realize -- or remember -- that sometimes the pain is worth it, that there's also enough beauty in the world, but only if you see beyond yourself.