

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



## Time

By Bruce Crumley

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"Wins over its fans with a life-affirming message...and Barbery's frequently wicked sense of humor."

Many authors dream of getting their books onto best-seller lists, but few pull it off with the panache of French writer Muriel Barbery. Her second novel, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, has been at or near the top of France's sales charts for 102 straight weeks since its September 2006 publication. It has been translated into a half-dozen languages and is being adapted for film. In South Korea and Italy, the book has generated the same sort of enthusiasm and devotion that made it a publishing phenomenon in France. Now, with the release of an English translation on Sept. 7, *Elegance* is pursuing a goal that has proved devilishly elusive for modern French novelists: success in the U.S. and Britain. Barbery acknowledges the challenge. "But given what the book has done elsewhere thus far, I guess I'm willing to believe anything is possible," she says. "It has been like a dream."

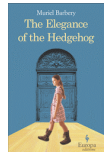
Only two years ago, Barbery, 39, was a philosophy teacher in Normandy whose spare-time fiction writing had produced a single published work: the 2000 novel *Une Gourmandise* (*A Delicacy*). That tale of a world-famous food critic with deathbed yearnings for life's forgotten tastes won her a single award for culinary writing and a few encouraging reviews. *Elegance*, by contrast, which the weekly *L'Express* hailed for celebrating "the tiny pleasures of life . . . with the timeless nostalgia of a Marcel Proust," seems to have scored a direct hit on the global zeitgeist.

Central to the book's appeal is the compelling voice of its main character, Renée Michel, a 54-year-old Paris apartment-building concierge who struggles to hide her self-taught erudition and cultivation from snobby, rich tenants. She disdains their élitist notions of class and social order, but she knows the residents would be outraged at discovering what a deep grasp the hired help has of art and learning. So Renée masks her intellect behind the persona expected of her lowly station.

"I'm a widow, short, ugly, chubby; I have bunions on my feet and, on certain difficult mornings, it seems, the breath of a mammoth," Renée says by way of introduction. "But

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above all, I conform to the image assigned to concierges. It would never occur to anyone that I am better read than all these self-satisfied rich people."

But the novel is not Renée's alone. It also features the precocious 12-year-old Paloma, the daughter of one of the rich couples in Renée's building. A youthful idealist, she too is dismayed by the petty posturing of the gifted, privileged adults around her; so dismayed, in fact, that she intends to commit suicide by her 13th birthday. As the two characters' lives overlap, Paloma comes to discover Renée's secret gifts, and to appreciate her self-effacing elder as having "the elegance of a hedgehog: a real fortress, bristling with quills on the outside . . . deceptively sluggish, ferociously independent, yet terribly elegant."

As she brings Renée out of her shell and guides young Paloma toward realizing that not all adults sacrifice their intelligence and humanity to vanity, Barbery demonstrates her own deep love and command of art, philosophy, and literature. Indeed, *Elegance* can be a bit intimidating when Renée's philosophical references and brainier ruminations run thick. In the end, however, the novel wins over its fans with a life-affirming message, a generous portion of heart and Barbery's frequently wicked sense of humor.

Class-consciousness and conflict are central to Barbery's story, which some French critics have deemed a heavy-handed satire of waning French social stereotypes. That reading misses her point, Barbery says. "For me, those factors were only anecdotal in telling the story of these two solitary women, and how they arranged their lives to give full rein to their passions," says Barbery by phone from Kyoto, which she and her husband adopted as home earlier this year. "To be honest, I was just creating characters who love the things I do, and who allowed me to celebrate that through them."

Despite its triumphs elsewhere, the question now is whether a story that deconstructs French social prejudices to hail the eternal value of culture can seduce readers in the U.S. and Britain. Barbery thinks her book has enjoyed such universal success because people everywhere are worried about superficiality overtaking substance in their lives. She says her cast of "improbable characters and clashing perspectives has managed to interest an equally improbable range of readers from very different backgrounds." It would be a surprise if those who read English proved any less susceptible to this book's charms.