

Muriel Barbery

THE ELEGANCE
OF THE
HEDGEHOG

*Translated from the French
by Alison Anderson*

From August 26th
available everywhere books are sold

Excerpt – not for resale


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Europa Editions
116 East 16th Street
New York, N.Y. 10003
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First Publication 2008 by Europa Editions

Translation by Alison Anderson
Original title: *L'élégance du hérisson*
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data is available
ISBN 978-1-933372-60-0

Barbery, Muriel
The Elegance of the Hedgehog

Book design by Emanuele Ragnisco
www.mekkanografici.com

Cover photo: © Randy Faris/Corbis

Printed in Italy
Arti Grafiche La Moderna – Rome

My name is Renée. I am fifty-four years old. For twenty-seven years I have 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 have bunions on my feet and, if I am to credit certain early mornings of self-inflicted disgust, the breath of a mammoth. I did not go to college, I have always been poor, discreet, and insignificant. I live alone with my cat, a big lazy tom who has no distinguishing features other than the fact that his paws smell bad when he is annoyed. Neither he nor I make any effort to take part in the social doings of our respective kindred species. Because I am rarely friendly—though always polite—I am not liked, but am tolerated nonetheless: I correspond so very well to what social prejudice has collectively construed to be a typical French concierge that I am one of the multiple cogs that make the great universal illusion turn, the illusion according to which life has a meaning that can be easily deciphered. And since it has been written somewhere that concierges are old, ugly and sour, so has it been branded in fiery letters on the pediment of that same imbecilic firmament that the aforementioned concierges have rather large dithering cats who sleep all day on cushions that have been covered with crocheted cases.

Similarly, it has been decreed that concierges watch television interminably while their rather large cats doze, and that

the entrance to the building must smell of *pot-au-feu*, cabbage soup, or a country-style *cassoulet*. I have the extraordinary good fortune to be the concierge of a very high-class sort of building. It was so humiliating for me to have to cook such loathsome dishes that when Monsieur de Broglie—the State Councilor on the first floor—intervened, (an intervention he described to his wife as being “courteous but firm,” whose only intention was to rid our communal habitat of such plebeian effluvia), it came as an immense relief, one I concealed as best I could beneath an expression of reluctant compliance.

That was twenty-seven years ago. Since then, I have gone every day to the butcher’s to buy a slice of ham or some calf’s liver, which I slip into my net bag between my packet of noodles and my bunch of carrots. I then obligingly display these pauper’s victuals—now much improved by the noteworthy fact that they do not smell—because I am a pauper in a house full of rich people and this display nourishes both the consensual cliché and my cat Leo, who has become rather large by virtue of these meals that should have been mine, and who stuffs himself liberally and noisily with macaroni and butter, and pork from the delicatessen, while I am free—without any olfactory disturbances or anyone suspecting a thing—to indulge my own culinary proclivities.

The issue of the television is trickier. In my late husband’s day, I did go along with it, for the constancy of his viewing spared me the chore of watching. From the hallway of the building you could hear the sound of the thing, and that sufficed to perpetuate the charade of social hierarchy, but once Lucien had passed away I had to think hard to find a way to keep up appearances. Alive, he freed me from this iniquitous obligation; dead, he has deprived me of his lack of culture, the indispensable bulwark against other people’s suspicions.

I found a solution thanks to a non-buzzer.

A chime linked to an infrared mechanism now alerts me to

the comings and goings in the hallway, which has eliminated the need for anyone to buzz to notify me of their presence if I happen to be out of earshot. For on such occasions I am actually in the back room, where I spend most of my hours of leisure and where, sheltered from the noise and smells that my condition imposes, I can live as I please, without being deprived of the information vital to any sentry: who is coming in, who is going out, with whom, and at what time.

Thus, the residents going down the hall would hear the muffled sounds that indicated a television was on, and as they tend to lack rather than abound in imagination, they would form a mental image of the concierge sprawled in front of her television set. As for me, cozily installed in my lair, I heard nothing but I knew that someone was going by. So I would go to the adjacent room and peek through the spy-hole located opposite the stairway and, well hidden behind the white net curtains, I could inquire discreetly as to the identity of the passerby.

With the advent of videocassettes and, subsequently, the DVD divinity, things changed radically, much to the enrichment of my happy hours. As it is not terribly common to come across a concierge waxing ecstatic over *Death in Venice* or to hear strains of Mahler wafting from her loge, I delved into my hard-earned conjugal savings and bought a second television set that I could operate in my hideaway. Thus, the television in the front room, guardian of my clandestine activities, could bleat away and I was no longer forced to listen to inane nonsense fit for the brain of a clam—I was in the back room, perfectly euphoric, my eyes filling with tears, in the miraculous presence of Art.

Profound Thought No. 1

*Follow the stars
In the goldfish bowl
An end*

Apparently, now and again adults take the time to sit down and contemplate what a disaster their life is. They complain without understanding, and, like flies constantly banging against the same old windowpane, they buzz around, suffer, waste away, get depressed then wonder how they got caught up in this spiral that is taking them where they don't want to go. The most intelligent among them turn it into a religion: oh, the despicable vacuousness of bourgeois existence! Cynics of this kind frequently dine at Papa's table: "What has become of the dreams of our youth?" they ask, with their smug, disillusioned air. "Those years are long gone, and life's a bitch." I despise this false lucidity that comes with age. The truth is that they are just like everyone else: kids who don't understand what has happened to them and who act big and tough when in fact all they want is to burst into tears.

And yet there's nothing to understand. The problem is that children believe what adults say and, once they're adults themselves, they exact their revenge by deceiving their own children. "Life has meaning and we grown-ups know what it is" is the universal lie that everyone is supposed to believe. Once you become an adult and you realize that's not true, it's too late. The mystery remains intact, but all the available energy has long ago been wasted on stupid things. All that's left is to anesthetize yourself by trying to hide the fact that you can't find any meaning in your life, and then, the better to convince yourself, you deceive your own children.

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. That might deprive you of a few good moments in your childhood but it would save you a considerable amount of time as an adult—not to mention the fact that you'd be spared at least one traumatic experience, i.e. the goldfish bowl.

I am twelve years old, I live at 7, rue de Grenelle in an apartment for rich people. My parents are rich, my family is rich and my sister and I are, therefore, as good as rich. My father is a parliamentarian and before that he was a minister: no doubt he'll end up in the top spot, emptying out the wine cellar of the residence at the Hôtel de Lassay. As for my mother . . . Well, my mother isn't exactly a genius but she is educated. She has a Ph.D. in literature. She writes her dinner invitations without mistakes and spends her time bombarding us with literary references, ("Colombe, stop trying to act like Madame Guermantes," or "Pumpkin, you are a regular Sanseverina,").

Despite all that, despite all this good fortune and all this wealth, I have known for a very long time that the final destination is the goldfish bowl. How do I know? Well, the fact is I am very intelligent. Exceptionally intelligent, in fact. Even now, if you look at children my age, there's an abyss. And since I don't really want to stand out, and since intelligence is very highly rated in my family—an exceptionally gifted child would never have a moment's peace—I try to scale back my performance at school, but even so I always come first. You might think that to pretend to be simply of average intelligence when you are twelve years old like me and have the level of a senior in college is easy. Well,

not at all. It really takes an effort to appear stupider than you are. But, in a way, this does keep me from dying of boredom: all the time I don't need to spend learning and understanding I use to imitate the ordinary good pupils—the way they do things, the answers they give, their progress, their concerns and their minor errors. I read everything that Constance Baret writes—she is second in the class—all her math and French and history and that way I find out what I have to do: for French a string of words that are coherent and spelled correctly; for math the mechanical reproduction of operations devoid of meaning; and for history a list of events joined by logical connections. But even if you compare me to an adult, I am much smarter than the vast majority. That's the way it is. I'm not particularly proud of this because it's not my doing. But one thing is sure—there's no way I'm going to end up in the goldfish bowl. I've thought this through quite carefully. Even for someone like me who is supersmart and gifted in her studies and different from everyone else, in fact superior to the vast majority—even for me life is already all plotted out and so dismal you could cry: no one seems to have thought of the fact that if life is absurd, being a brilliant success has no greater value than being a failure. It's just more comfortable. And even then: I think lucidity gives your success a bitter taste, whereas mediocrity still leaves hope for something.

So I've made up my mind. I am about to leave childhood behind and, in spite of my conviction that life is a farce, I don't think I can hold out to the end. We are, basically, programmed to believe in something that doesn't exist, because we are living creatures; we don't want to suffer. So we spend all our energy persuading ourselves that there are things that are worthwhile and that that is why life has meaning. I may be very intelligent, but I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to struggle against this biological tendency. When I join the adults in the rat race, will I still be able to resist this feeling of absurdity? I don't think so. That is why I've made up my mind: at the end of

the school year, on the day I turn thirteen, June sixteenth, I will commit suicide. Careful now, I have no intention of making a big deal out of it, as if it were an act of bravery or defiance. Besides, it's in my best interests that no one suspect a thing. Adults have this neurotic relationship with death, it gets blown out of all proportion, they make a huge deal out of it when in fact it's really the most banal thing there is. What I care about, actually, is not the thing in itself, but the way it's done. My Japanese side, obviously, is inclined toward seppuku. When I say my Japanese side, what I mean is my love for Japan. I'm in the eighth grade so, naturally, I chose Japanese as my second foreign language. The teacher isn't great, he swallows his words in French and spends his time scratching his head as if he were puzzled, but the textbook isn't bad and since the start of the year I've made huge progress. I hope in a few months to be able to read my favorite mangas in the original. Maman doesn't understand that a little-girl-as-gifted-as-you-are wants to read mangas. I haven't even bothered to explain to her that "manga" in Japanese doesn't mean anything more than "comic book." She thinks I'm high on subculture and I haven't set her straight on that. In short, in a few months I might be able to read Taniguchi in Japanese. But back to what we were talking about: I'll have to do it before June sixteenth because on June sixteenth I'm committing suicide. But I won't do seppuku. It would be full of significance and beauty but . . . well . . . I really have no desire to suffer. In fact, I would hate to suffer; I think that if you have decided to die, it is precisely because your decision is in the nature of things, so you must do it in a gentle way. Dying must be a delicate passage, a sweet slipping away to rest. There are people who commit suicide by jumping out of the window of the fourth floor or swallowing bleach or even hanging themselves! That's senseless! Obscene, even. What is the point of dying if not to *not* suffer? I've devoted great care to planning how I'll exit the scene: every month for the last year I've been pilfering a sleeping pill from

Maman's box on the night-table. She takes so many that she wouldn't even notice if I took one every day, but I've decided to be particularly careful. You can't leave anything to chance when you've made a decision that most people won't understand. You can't imagine how quickly people will get in the way of your most heartfelt plans, in the name of such trifles as "the meaning of life" or "love of mankind." Oh and then there is "the sacred nature of childhood."

Therefore, I am headed slowly toward the date of June sixteenth and I'm not afraid. A few regrets, maybe. But the world, in its present state, is no place for princesses. Having said that, simply because you've made plans to die doesn't mean you have to vegetate like some rotting piece of cabbage. Quite the contrary. The main thing isn't about dying or how old you are when you die, it's what you are doing the moment you die. In Taniguchi the heroes die while climbing Mount Everest. Since I haven't the slightest chance of taking a stab at K2 or the Grandes Jorasses before June sixteenth, my own personal Everest will be an intellectual endeavor. I have set as my goal to have the greatest number possible of profound thoughts, and to write them down in this notebook: even if nothing has any meaning, the mind, at least, can give it a shot, don't you think? But since I have this big Japanese thing, I've added one requirement: these profound thoughts have to be formulated like a little Japanese poem: either a haiku (three verses) or a tanka (five verses).

My favorite haiku is by Basho.

*The fisherman's hut
Mixed with little shrimp
Some crickets!*

Now that's no goldfish bowl, is it, that's what I call poetry!
But in the world I live in there is less poetry than in a Japan-

ese fisherman's hut. And do you think it is normal for four people to live in fifteen hundred square feet when tons of other people, perhaps some *poètes maudits* among them, don't even have a decent place to live and are crammed together fifteen or twenty in seventy square feet? When, this summer, I heard on the news that some Africans had died because a fire had started in the stairway of their rundown tenement, I had an idea. Those Africans have the goldfish bowl right there in front of them, all day long—they can't escape through storytelling. But my parents and Colombe are convinced they're swimming in the ocean just because they live in their fifteen hundred square feet with their piles of furniture and paintings.

So, on June sixteenth I intend to refresh their pea-brain memories: I'm going to set fire to the apartment (with the barbecue lighter). Don't get me wrong, I'm not a criminal: I'll do it when there's no one around (the sixteenth of June is a Saturday and on Saturday Colombe goes to see Tibère, Maman is at yoga, Papa is at his club and as for me, I stay home), I'll evacuate the cats through the window and I'll call the fire department early enough so that there won't be any victims. And then I'll go off quietly to Grandma's with my pills, to sleep.

With no more apartment and no more daughter, maybe they'll give some thought to all those dead Africans, don't you suppose?

A Selection of Reviews from the Foreign Press

“Run Hedgehog, Run!”

By Alain Beuve-Méry

Le Monde (France)

October 2, 2007

The Hedgehog’s running, all right. And from the offices of Gallimard, its French publisher, they’re watching the phenomenon with a kind eye and . . . well, licking their lips. Fifty-five weeks after its release, Muriel Barbery’s novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is still on all of the country’s bestseller lists. Even better: during the week of September 17th, it returned to second place among fiction titles, right behind Amélie Nothomb’s most recent labor, but ahead of Yasmina Reza.

At Gallimard’s Paris headquarters in rue Sébastien-Bottin, they’re underlining the fact that you’d have to go back to January 2000 and Dai Sijie’s *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, or Philippe Delerm’s *We Could Almost Eat Outside: An Appreciation of Life’s Small Pleasures*, which sold 800 thousand copies between 1997 and 2000, to witness a similar phenomenon.

“It is the very definition of a long-seller,” notes Gallimard’s commercial director Philippe Le Tendre. In other words, as opposed to the classic bestseller, its sales start slow and last for many, many months.

On September 25th, Gallimard decided to send the fiftieth reprint to press, thanks to which the book passed the 600-thousand-printed-copies mark. The *Hedgehog* has even surpassed the “hare” Jonathan Littell, whose novel was published in fall 2006. Nobody ever imagined that this tender, funny book with a philosophical vein would have enjoyed such incredible success. For

some, it is part *Sophie’s World* by Jostein Gaarder part *Monsieur Malaussene* by Daniel Pennac. While for others it resembles a written version of the film *Amélie*. Either way, readers are responding in vast numbers . . .

. . . Simultaneously a long-seller and a bestseller, the *Hedgehog* is every publisher’s dream. For a small press, this kind of success can guarantee several years’ worth of resources. For Gallimard, it is an acknowledgement of their good instincts and professionalism. And, given that Gallimard not only published the book but also promote and distribute it, enduring benefits are assured . . .

. . . A little overwhelmed by events, Muriel Barbery has decided to pull the plug for a while. She sold her house in Colleville-sur-Mer, in Calvados, asked the Ministry of Education for a year’s sabbatical, and left on a long voyage to the Far East with her family, before returning and sitting down to work on her third novel.

* * *

“Prescription Hedgehog”

L’express (France)

February 7, 2008

From bookstore windows to the psychoanalyst’s couch! Some therapists are prescribing Muriel Barbery’s bestselling novel to their patients.

Hedgehog or Prozac? At first, the question may seem absurd. But it becomes less so when one learns that a Parisian psychotherapist is prescribing Muriel Barbery’s bestselling novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* to her patients. “Yes, I am prescribing it, and I do mean *prescribing*. This book can do a lot of good,” affirms Maude Julien, the fifteenth arrondissement’s leading psychologist. “The novel is a real toolbox that one can look into to resolve one’s problems.” This, in retrospect, might largely explain the book’s success.

Muriel Barbery didn’t expect that her *Hedgehog* would gain her recognition of this sort. The novel was released to a quiet reception in the torpid publishing summer of 2006. A year and a

half and 900 thousand copies later, Renée the concierge, Paloma the prodigy, and Ozu of the sensitive soul fearlessly continue to challenge the various Goncourt winners, Stieg Larson's *Millennium* trilogy, and Phillip Roth on our bestseller lists. "One of my patients, completely transformed by this book, confessed that he had given it as a gift to thirty-four different people," says Maude Julien . . .

. . . So, why recommend this novel in particular? "Because it dramatizes, with great sensitivity, many situations in which our patients find themselves, above all our female patients," explains Alain Schmidt, another Hedgehogian therapist.

And, indeed, all women, at least once, even Carla Bruni, have lived through the kind of psychological self-denigration that Renée inflicts on herself in the opening scene of the book. The ultimate celebration of every person's invisible part (Renée smells of cabbage soup but reads Husserl) constitutes one of the book's most important operative factors.

* * *

"The Concierge Becomes a Bestseller"

By Manuela Grassi

Panorama (Italy)

January 10, 2008

200 thousand copies in three months thanks to word-of-mouth! *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, by the 38-year-old French writer Muriel Barbery, was the book most people chose to give as a gift this Christmas. With help from a concierge, the book hails the return of the *commedia* to literary fiction . . .

. . . In France, where Barbery's novel is published by Gallimard, over 700 thousand copies have been sold; in Italy, from October until [February] sales have run over 300 thousand copies according to the novel's publisher, Edizioni EO. In Milan, the Feltrinelli megastore has sold between 1000 and 2000 copies. A smaller bookstore, the legendary Milano Libri-

um, has sold more than 200 copies alone. "At Christmas it sold like hotcakes," says Anna Maria Grandini, the store's heart and soul . . . "When I heard that the book had won the French Booksellers Association prize," Grandini continues, "I was curious and after having read only the first eight pages I was sure it was going to go well here."

. . . The protagonists of this "social comedy" couldn't be more different. Paloma, twelve years old, child genius and the daughter of a rich parliamentarian, lives in an upscale apartment at 7 rue de Grenelle, Paris. Renée, fifty-four, is the building's concierge. Her self-portrait is delectable: "I am a widow, I am short, ugly, and plump, I have bunions on my feet . . ." But if Paloma hides her intelligence to survive in a world of mediocrity, then so too does Renée mask her true nature—that of a cultured autodidact—to avoid arousing the suspicions of her presumptuous and ignorant cohabitants.

Sandro Ferri, the book's euphoric Italian publisher, didn't foresee this kind of triumphant success when he acquired the rights at Frankfurt in 2006. "I believe that one of the keys to its success is precisely this," says Ferri. "In terms of the building's social hierarchy, both protagonists are losers, but in their interior lives they are triumphant. At a time in which appearances hold a tyrannical sway over us, it is comforting to maintain hope in the existence of a secret life."

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By Muriel Barbery

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