

Book Review

The Elegance of the Hedgehog

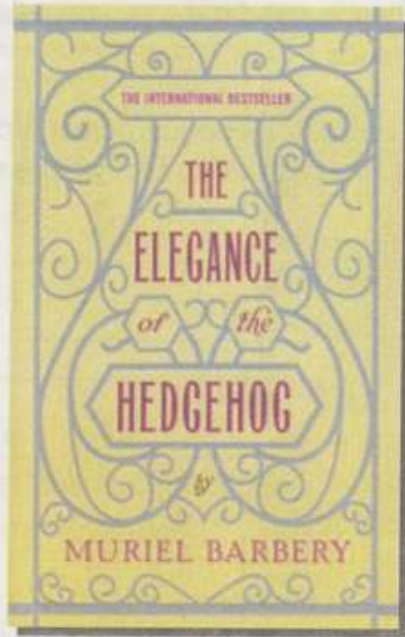
By Muriel Barbery
(Gallic Books)

WELCOME TO the world of Renee, a middle-aged, widowed caretaker in a plush Parisian apartment building on the Left Bank, inhabited by families with 'old money'.

Renee lives a strange double life between her everyday chores and secret side as someone with vast cultural knowledge.

But change is about to come when she gets to know the daughter of one of the tenants – Paloma, a highly intelligent and sensitive 12-year-old girl who is planning her own suicide.

Author Muriel Barbery spices the story with snippets of Paloma's notebook of 'profound thoughts', establishing a counterpoint to Renee's seemingly dull life and its everyday routine. Paloma, with her alert mind and rebellion against the quasi-aris-



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tocratic and decadent lifestyle of her family, slowly develops a friendship with Renee.

At the same time, new tenant Kakuro from Japan also realises Renee's masquerade and begins to lure her out of her timidity.

A bestseller in France, Barbery's novel is full of unexpected twists and turns while at the same time painting loving portraits of her diverse characters.

It is, in many ways, an optimistic book which invites readers to see beyond the surface and get to know the real person behind their outward face or role in life.

Renee's world is one where the upper class is exposed as shallow and where the simple concierge wins a moral victory. Despite her inelegant outward appearance, she turns out to be a more beautiful soul.

Barbery's background as a philosophy teacher certainly had a strong influence on this poetic and very funny novel. *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is a celebration of values not acquired through status or money.

by Isabel Roleff



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