



# The elegance of the hedgehog

By Muriel Barbery

First published in 2006 (in French)

Genre & subjects

Humorous stories

French Fiction

## Synopsis

Renee is the concierge of a grand Parisian apartment. To the residents she is honest, reliable and uncultivated but Renee has a secret. Beneath this conventional facade she is passionate about culture and the arts, and more knowledgeable than her self-important employers.

Several floors up, twelve-year-old Paloma Josee is determined to avoid a predictably bourgeois future, and plans to commit suicide on her thirteenth birthday. But the death of one of their privileged neighbours will bring dramatic change to number 7, Rue de Grenelle, altering the course of both their lives forever.

## Author biography

Barbery obtained her professorship in philosophy in 1993. She went on to teach philosophy at the Université de Bourgogne.

Her novel *L'Élégance du hérisson* (translated into English by Alison Anderson as *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*) topped the French best-seller lists for 30 consecutive weeks. It was reprinted 50 times. By May 2008 *Elegance of the Hedgehog* had sold more than a million copies.

## Discussion starters

- The *Elegance of the Hedgehog* has been described as a 'life-affirming' book. To what extent do you feel this is true?
- The story is told through Renée's 'musings' and Paloma's journals. How well do you think having two narrators works and why? How different would the book be with just one narrator?
- Renée is an untypical heroine. Is she presented sympathetically? How far can the reader relate to her world view and personal situation?
- As well as being very bright, Paloma shows great wisdom for a twelve-year-old. Do you find her maturity believable? How does her character develop as the book progresses?
- What does the novel tell us about culture and learning? Are Renée and Paloma's enthusiasms presented in a way that makes you want to explore them further?

- Friendships are central to the story. Is there one you find particularly convincing and if so why?
- How important is the Japanese dimension to the story?
- Renée and Paloma share a fascination with language that makes them acutely sensitive to what the people around them say or write. Are they unusual in this?
- What does the book tell us about the influence that family and background can have on an individual's life?
- The mood and tone of *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* are wide-ranging: from scenes of comedy to moments of tragedy. Has this added to your enjoyment of the novel, and if so why?

#### If you liked this book you may also like...

Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Strout

Suite française by Irène Némirovsky

Cutting for stone : a novel by Abraham Verghese

A visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan



If you are looking for something new to read try NoveList! It is a free database to help you find that perfect book. Visit [www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/library](http://www.ryde.nsw.gov.au/library)

*Synopsis, author biography and discussion starters provided by publisher.*