The Elegance of the Hedgehog by Muriel Barbery

The lives of fifty-four-year-old concierge Rene Michel and extremely bright, suicidal twelve-year-old Paloma Josse are transformed by the arrival of a new tenant, Kakuro Ozu.


About the Author: Muriel Barbery is a French novelist and philosophy teacher. Her 2008 novel, “The Elegance of the Hedgehog” quickly sold more than a million copies. (Wikipedia)

Questions for Discussion

1. The story is presented through the interplay of two narrators. Would it have been as effective (or more, or less) if we hand only one point of view? Why not Kakuro Ozu as well? Would you have liked to experience his voice more directly?

2. What do Paloma and Rene have in common? Each has a secret life and a desire to stay hidden. How so and why?

3. What did you think of Rene’s double life?

4. Int he passage from which the title is taken, Paloma writes:

   Madame Michel has the elegance of the hedgehog; 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 terrible elegant. (143)

   Would you agree with her description? Would Ozu?

5. Were there any of Paloma’s “Profound Thoughts” or “Journal of the Movement of the World” entries to which you found yourself especially responding?

6. What do Paloma and Rene teach each other? Does Ozu teach and/or learn as well from them?

7. In what ways is Paloma still a child? Would you say she is neglected?

8. What of Paloma’s family? What roles do they play in the story? (mother, sister, father)

9. How is social class reflected in this book?

10. What is the “goldfish bowl” and how is it important to the story?

11. How is identity also a theme throughout The Elegance of the Hedgehog? Think about how Rene might define herself as well as Paloma’s observations about the people around her.

12. Is Ozu a fully-realized character, or is he primarily a catalyst for the two women?

13. How did Rene’s backstory (her husband, her sister, contribute to her understanding of herself? To our understanding of her?
14. How did you react to the shocking event at the end? Why do you think the author chose this development and that it unfold in this way? Would you have preferred a happier ending?

15. Did any of Rene’s parting words resonate with you? What of Paloma’s epiphany and, similarly, her last paragraph?

16. Did the book inspire you to explore literature, art, film, music, manga, language or philosophy?

17. Did the book surprise you at all? In what ways?

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