



The Elegance of the Hedgehog by Muriel Barbery, (translated by Alison Anderson) (2009)

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In the center of Paris, in an elegant apartment building inhabited by bourgeois families, we find Renée, the concierge, witness to the lavish but vacuous lives of her numerous employers. Outwardly she conforms to every stereotype of the concierge: fat, cantankerous, addicted to television. Yet, unbeknownst to her employers, Renée is a cultured autodidact who adores art, philosophy, music, and Japanese culture. With humor and intelligence she scrutinizes the lives of the building's tenants, who for their part are barely aware of her existence. Twelve-year-old genius Paloma is the daughter of a tedious parliamentarian, a talented and startlingly lucid child who has decided to end her life on the sixteenth of June, her thirteenth birthday. Until then she will continue behaving as everyone expects her to behave: a mediocre pre-teen high on adolescent subculture, a good but not an outstanding student, an obedient if obstinate daughter. Paloma and Renée hide their true talents and their finest qualities from a world they suspect cannot or will not appreciate them. They discover their kindred souls when a wealthy Japanese man named Ozu arrives in the building. Only he is able to gain Paloma's trust and to see through Renée's timeworn disguise to the secret that haunts her. This funny and triumphant novel exalts the quiet victories of the inconspicuous among us.

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