

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

THE ELEGANCE OF THE HEDGEHOG

By Muriel Barbery

- This book has been translated into 31 languages . What do you think accounts for its popularity?
- Some critics call this novel a book about class. Many thought this wouldn't fly in the U.S. because it is a critique of a French class-based society. Do you think class prejudices and class boundaries are less pronounced here than in France?
- How did you feel about the obvious disdain that Renee and Paloma express for many of the people around them? Do you think the disdain is genuine or part of a defense mechanism in either case?
- There are many philosophical musings and allusions in the novel. Do you think that they detracted or enhanced the story?
- This book has been described as a “book for readers” as opposed to a book for critics, reviewers, and professors. What do you think is meant by this comment? The book has also been described as “a toolbox one can look into to resolve life’s problems.” Do you feel this is an accurate characterization of the novel?
- In one reviewer’s opinion Barbery uses Paloma “as a vessel for some profound thoughts but she still remains a very thin character.” Do you agree or disagree?
- Renee refers to herself as an autodidact (self -taught person). Why is this definition so important to her self-image?
- Do you think Renee and Paloma appear as real characters or caricatures?
- How would you describe Renee’s relationship with Paloma?
- When Mr. Ozu appears, he discerns Renee’s inner intelligence as no one else had. Why?
- Mr.Ozu tells Paloma , with reference to Renee, that “I suspect that she’s not what we think.” Paloma describes her in the following way. “Madame Michel has the elegance of the hedgehog: on the outside, she’s covered with 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....” (Profound Thought No. 9) Would you agree with her description?



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- Why does Renee admire Mr. Ozu for having only one of everything?
- How would you describe Renee's relationship with Mr. Ozu?
- Do you think Mr. Ozu seems too good to be true?
- What did you think about the end of the novel? Did you think Renee's death was contrived?
- Do you think this is a novel of affirmation?