



Gourmet Rhapsody

By Muriel Barbery

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From the author of the New York Times bestseller, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*.

In the heart of Paris, in the posh building made famous in *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, Pierre Arthens, the greatest food critic in the world, is dying. Revered by some and reviled by many, Monsieur Arthens has been lording it over the world's most esteemed chefs for years, passing judgment on their creations, deciding their fates with a stroke of his pen, destroying and building reputations on a whim. But now, during these his final hours, his mind has turned to simpler things. He is desperately searching for that singular flavor, that sublime something once sampled, never forgotten, *the Flavor* par excellence. Indeed, this flamboyant and self-absorbed man desires only one thing before he dies: one last taste.

Thus begins a charming voyage that traces the career of Monsieur Arthens from childhood to maturity across a celebration of all manner of culinary delights. Alternating with the voice of the supercilious Arthens is a chorus belonging to his acquaintances and familiars?relatives, lovers, a would-be protégé, even a cat. Each will have his or her say about M. Arthens, a man who has inspired only extreme emotions in people. Here, as in *The Elegance of Hedgehog*, Muriel Barbery?story celebrates life?s simple pleasures and sublime moments while condemning the arrogance and vulgarity of power.

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Gourmet Rhapsody By Muriel Barbery Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #160207 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Europa Editions
- Published on: 2009-08-25
- Released on: 2009-08-25
- Format: Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.24" h x .51" w x 5.30" l,
- Binding: Paperback
- 156 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best of the Month, September 2009: Proust's infamous *madeleine* cannot hold a candle to the lush, winsome memories of meals past that you'll find in Muriel Barbery's *Gourmet Rhapsody*. M. Pierre Arthens is France's premier restaurant critic—so premier in fact that he's simply called the Maître—and we meet him as he lies in bed, waiting to die. Fervently he mines years of gastronomic delights and discoveries in search of one single flavor, one that he says is "the only true thing ever accomplished." What unfolds—in vignettes narrated by him and by a chorus of his familiars (most human, some quite comically not)—is a portrait of a man in thrall to the very ingredient that makes French cuisine so inescapably, ecstatically, seductive: It's not cream, nor cognac, but the cook who defines those glorious tastes. "The only true work of art, in the end," he says, "is another person's feast." --Anne Bartholomew

Amazon Exclusive: Muriel Barbery and Alison Anderson on *Gourmet Rhapsody*

Amazon.com: What was it like returning to *rue de Grenelle* in *Gourmet Rhapsody*, after working on *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*?

Alison Anderson: I missed Renée (we only see her briefly, and she's grumpier than usual) and Paloma! This *rue de Grenelle* was a far more gloomy place, given both the character of Monsieur Arthens and the circumstances. But the dog and the cat provided some comic relief, and there are some lovely excursions away from *rue de Grenelle* (I particularly enjoyed the farm in Normandy...).



Alison Anderson



Muriel Barbery

Amazon.com: Do you see yourself writing more novels set in Number 7, *rue de Grenelle*?

Muriel Barbery: No, I think I am through with this locale. And it was by chance, I didn't plan to set my second novel in the same place as the first one. I have been lucky enough to have travelled a lot over the last two or three years and now I long for new literary horizons. Besides, the setting was not very important for me. It provided a means of amusing myself by deploying a satirical tone, but this is absolutely not the point

in either novel.

Amazon.com: This story teems with the Maître's lush, intimate memories of meals past. Are any of these memories your own? Do you have a favorite among them, or a personal food memory you could tell our readers about?

Muriel Barbery: I am an ordinary person and as it is for all of us, it is for me: food is linked with very early and intimate memories. All great chefs have such blessed remembrances of precocious culinary ecstasies. And those of the novel are mine, of course. I couldn't describe emotions and feelings that are not authentic. When I read it over, I think that the whiskey moment makes the greatest impression on me, because it was at the same time intense and unexpected.

Amazon.com: The Maître is a caustic, cryptic kind of character (outside of his own recollections), compared to Renée Michel, whose quirky intelligence endears you to her. Which is more challenging for you to write: a person you love or a person you hate?

Muriel Barbery: Both are easy and difficult to exactly the same extent. They match with different moments of my life; I don't choose the characters: they blossom naturally at an uncontrollable moment and I just try to follow their voice. But I spent much more time with Renée than with Pierre Arthens; this was a moment of writing infused with pure joy, with a feeling of freedom I had not felt when writing my first novel. I felt free to write with no fetters, for the mere intoxication of abandoning myself to all the sensations and emotions this voice was offering to me. She led me much further than I could have ever imagined.

But on the other hand, adopting Arthens's voice was an extraordinary experience: the voice of a man, a brutal one, without qualms or remorse, extremely distant from my own character, was a matchless means of addressing some significant matters I otherwise wouldn't have dared to evoke.

Amazon.com: Could you tell us more about Muriel Barbery's style? What in the original text helped you impart the emotional force found in the chorus of characters that make up *Gourmet Rhapsody*?

Alison Anderson: Muriel's prose is not easy to translate, but it is among the most rewarding I have ever worked with. She loves words, loves expressing herself, and a translator can tell when a text has been carefully written, so conveying the intent I mentioned above becomes the main issue. If I could taste the sashimi, or the tomatoes, in *Une gourmandise* [Editor's note: the French title of *Gourmet Rhapsody*], the reader of the English version has to be able to taste them too, so that's where I sometimes rely on my experience as a novelist...how to get that sensation across. And as I mentioned above, with regard to the chorus of characters, if I find the right balance between the original and my own "version" or reading of the text, it should work in the English...again, because Muriel wrote so well, so precisely, in *Une gourmandise*, the signposts were in the text pointing me in the right direction in English. I don't work with an overall vision for the text the way the author might, other than achieving consistency in style and voice, and that's really a question of word by word, phrase by phrase. I work with the leaves and the trees, not the forest....

Amazon.com: You thank the renowned French chef Pierre Gagnaire at the close of the novel. What was his role in your inspiration for the Maître's story?

Muriel Barbery: When I wrote the novel, I could not afford to go to fancy restaurants. But I wanted to write a scene in just such a setting, to show the contrast between complexity and simplicity, luxury and raw, rough but deep sensations. I had heard him speaking about his art, and he spoke with great poetry. I sent him a letter asking for a *carte* and a *menu* of his restaurant. I used it in the chapter about the mayonnaise. I often

think that denominations of dishes in French restaurants are slightly or frankly ridiculous and pompous. But sometimes it's beautiful. In this case, I enjoyed reading his *carte* a lot.

Amazon.com: The idea of a "last meal" is a seductive one, and certainly a hard choice. We won't give away the Maître's final feast, but we are curious to know what you'd choose.

Muriel Barbery: It's a very personal and intimate question, indeed. If I write novels, it's because I need fiction to put what I feel into words. And who knows what one would choose? The imminence of death is an extraordinary and radical counselor.

Amazon.com: How involved are you in the translation process? Would you compare it at all to having a piece of work adapted for stage or screen?

Muriel Barbery: Unfortunately, my level of English does not allow me to be as involved as I would like to be. I am very interested in the issue of translation, precisely because it's completely different from the challenges associated with other forms of adaptation. Novels are pure language before they are stories suitable for adaptation in other fields. How can the translator respect the spirit of the text while drawing in the genius and idiosyncrasies of his/her own language? This implies a complete reinvention within a framework that he or she is coerced into. And I adore comparing texts: it illuminates aspects of my own language.

Mainly, I am incredibly lucky to have such an excellent translator in Alison Anderson: I made a few remarks about the first version but it was already close to perfection. And I was amazed to discover the solutions she chose for very difficult passages.

Amazon.com: You are both a novelist and a translator. How would you compare the two roles?

Alison Anderson: They're very different. When I'm translating, I'm relieved of the responsibility of creating characters, developing a certain style, plotting—all the elements that put your creativity (and your soul) on the line, as a novelist. With translation your responsibility is to the author's text and words and you don't have the freedom to invent, or go off on a tangent. You have to be faithful to someone else's creativity. But at the same time there is a very pleasurable freedom in working with words, without the burden of having to make up the narrative.

Amazon.com: How did you find your way to literary translation? Given the enormous success of *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, do you think there is more opportunity now to expose U.S. readers to works of translation?

Alison Anderson: I trained as an "international organization" translator but then didn't find work. I was a sailing enthusiast and the French are great single-handed sailors so I translated a single-handed round-the-world chronicle and it actually was published! That gave me the confidence to try fiction, and eventually establish contacts in the literary world, through the American Literary Translators' Association.

It is my sincere hope that *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* will encourage more people to read books in translation. There is an unfortunate perception in the US that translated books are difficult or academic, (which can be true as many translations are published by university presses, who select the "cream" of foreign literature, often experimental works that may not be easily accessible to the "average" reader), but *Hedgehog* proves that there is an appetite for foreign fiction, and that there are many books being written in other languages that are enriching and humorous and well-written, and that offer a whole world for readers to

discover. I believe all types of literature deserve to be sampled in English (just as they are in German or French, or the vast majority of other languages in the world!) The boom in Scandinavian crime fiction is an interesting phenomenon for example, and books like these and Muriel Barbery's may open up the way for many more translations. Let's hope so.

From Publishers Weekly

French novelist Barbery's sensuous first novel, being released here after the phenomenal success of her second novel, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, encompasses a series of witty reflections on the life and career of famous, unlovable French food critic Pierre Arthen, as he lies on his death bed desperate to recapture a forgotten flavor. Lapsing through chapters into nostalgic memories of early, formative tastes, women and pets, Arthens reveals himself as a man driven by gastronomic ecstasies, from his childhood impressions of eating grilled meat in Tangiers to summers gorging on fresh fish in Brittany. Alternating with these splendid remembrances are decidedly more salty commentary by his resentful children (Die in your silk sheets, in your pasha's bed, in your bourgeois cage, die, die, die); long-suffering wife, Anna; the exultant tramp outside his Paris apartment building whom he ignored for 10 years; even his faithful cat, Rick (named for the character in the film Casablanca). Barbery's debut, occasionally rough-edged and uneven in structure, showcases her lush and satisfying prose and sets the stage for what has come. (Sept.)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

This trifle of a tale preceded Barbery's best-seller "The Elegance of the Hedgehog" in France but follows it in publication here, which is rather like serving the amuse-bouche after the entrée. An eminent and ruthless food critic lies dying, struggling to pinpoint the one flavor from his youth that constitutes "the first and ultimate truth" of his life. His lucid memories—of his first taste of sashimi ("a milky density unknown even by clouds") and of Scotch ("My organs no longer existed"), for example—are intercut with jejune plaints from a parade of figures, including the children he acknowledges he never loved, the wife he thinks of as a beautiful object, and, wincingly, his cat. Still, Barbery's invocations of gustatory pleasure are seductive. Biting into a freshly plucked tomato, the critic exults in "this plump little globe unleashing a flood of nature inside us: a tomato, an adventure."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Irving Gaston:

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Elaine Roberts:

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Lydia Baum:

Playing with family inside a park, coming to see the coastal world or hanging out with close friends is thing that usually you will have done when you have spare time, subsequently why you don't try thing that really opposite from that. One particular activity that make you not sense tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition associated with. Even you love Gourmet Rhapsody, it is possible to enjoy both. It is good combination right, you still would like to miss it? What kind of hangout type is it? Oh occur its mind hangout men. What? Still don't understand it, oh come on its known as reading friends.

Frank Arnett:

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