

The Hedgehog

Based on a recent popular French novel by Muriel Barberry, “The Hedgehog “ (Le hérisson) achieves an expansive, humane power in telling a story of three apparently mis-matched people in a very circumscribed setting. Paloma Josse (Garance Le Guillermic), a precocious and somewhat morbid 11-year-old girl, Renée Michel (Josiane Balasko), a dowdy 50-something concierge, and Kakuro Ozu (Togo Igawa), an elegant Japanese widower, are the unlikely triumvirate in a Parisian building containing five luxury apartments.

Paloma is alienated from her rich but distant family and contemplates suicide while she spends all her time videotaping people (especially when they do not want to be taped) and constructing intricate grids of ink drawings. Mrs. Michel, a widow with only a cat for company, measures out her life in garbage cans but possesses a private library where she can indulge her secret passion for literature. During one of Paloma’s taping sessions, she labels herself as “ugly, fat, and surly”—and she has bunions. Mr. Ozu is the new tenant, a wild card who becomes both attentive to Renée and encouragingly gentle with Paloma. How the three work out—slowly and delicately—a *modus vivendi* is the triumph of “The Hedgehog” and its first-time writer/director Mona Achache.

Young Garance is appropriately sullen and spunky as Paloma, though her considerable precociousness—revealed through a confidential voice-over narration—can seem too knowing at times. Igawa is a strikingly handsome and serene presence, a man of class whose every move seems tasteful. However, Balasko, a long-time screen veteran, takes the prize in “The Hedgehog.” An actress showing no vanity whatsoever, we see her incarnate the draining repetitiveness of Renée’s life—“I’m the janitor”—then blossom as she finds new things to care about in her life. Few recent movies have shown a better and more subtle depiction of simple, benevolent friendship and how it can be found in the unlikeliest of places and among the unlikeliest of souls.

(“The Hedgehog” is rated “R,” runs 100 minutes, and is in French with English subtitles.)

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