

## Reading Group Questions

### *The Life of Elves* by Muriel Barbery

- One of the narrators of Muriel Barbery's novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* is a twelve-year old girl, like Clara and Maria in *The Life of Elves*. Why do you think the author is drawn to writing about girls of this age? How do Clara and Maria compare to other young heroines in literature?
- Muriel Barbery says she was inspired to write the novel during her time living in Japan, where she encountered gardens whose otherworldly perfection made her muse that they could have been created by elves. What is the role of nature in the book?
- 'The novel is essentially a parable about the power both of art, which abolishes the "border between earth and mind," and of women,' wrote the *New Yorker*. Do you agree?
- Muriel Barbery is the author of *The Gourmet*, in which she tells the story of a dying food critic's quest to pin down an elusive flavour. What do the evocative descriptions of food in *The Life of Elves* add to the novel?
- 'I had no idea I was writing a fantasy novel, even though it borrows elements from the genre. I see it as a very classical novel, with some weird animals,' Barbery told the *New York Times*. To what extent can *The Life of Elves* be described as a work of fantasy or fairy tale? Or of pastoral literature?
- *The Life of Elves* departs from the Parisian setting of Barbery's previous novels. How did you find the depiction of place in the novel?
- The elves in the book are unlike those found, for example, in Tolkien. What are the characteristics of Barbery's elves, and why has she created them in this way?
- How would you describe the style of the book? What is the effect of archaic language in the book?