

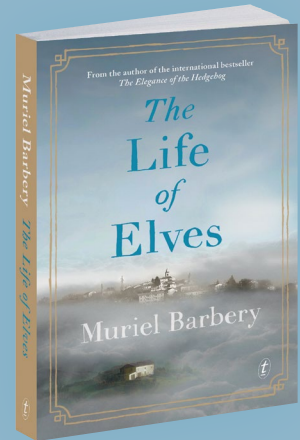
# The Life of Elves



Muriel Barbery

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FICTION, TRADE PAPERBACK

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## About Muriel Barbery

Muriel Barbery was born in Morocco in 1969. She is the author of two previous novels, *Gourmet Rhapsody* and *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, which sold over six million copies worldwide and was described by *Le Figaro* as 'the publishing phenomenon of the decade'. She lives in France and is working on the sequel to *The Life of Elves*.

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## A reader's introduction to *The Life of Elves*

The age-old narrative arc of good versus evil is given original form in Muriel Barbery's genre-defying new novel. A mysterious dark force threatens both the world of elves and the world of humans—two worlds connected through a misty bridge, nature, art, and, of course, the powerful girls at the centre of the story. Elf-child Maria and half-elf Clara are themselves connected to one another by mystical forces. And it is the purity and power of the girls that will be called upon as humans and elves stand against evil.

Maria has an extraordinary affinity for nature, Clara has a prodigious talent for music, and each girl can see the past, the future, and the present. These gifts not only mark the girls out and hint at their power but encapsulate the novel's themes. Ideas about connections, oneness and essence; art and nature; faith and mystery: all these swirl through the book. Nature, in this novel, is a way into the divine. And music is another way to connect with place.

Each girl is deeply connected and formed by the land of their upbringing. Maria's home in a French peasant village is a rural idyll, Clara's presbytery in Italy is set against a harsh grandeur. So too are the human characters part of the land in which they live.

Elaborately constructed sentences force the reader to slow their pace. We are to dwell in the land as

the characters do, noticing the fine detail of flora and fauna. We are also allowed glimpses into the misty world of the Elves.

This is the first book in a trilogy, so of course the battle between good and evil is not settled by the end of the novel. Instead, we feel that we are only just beginning to understand some of the mysteries to which we have been inducted.

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## Questions for discussion

1. 'There is a war coming, a war that will be even longer and more terrible than any that has gone before, a war desired by men who are even stronger and more terrible than in the past.' (68). What is this war? Does it represent a real historical war? Do you think the story is a direct analogy to historical or current events, is it a looser analogy, or is not an analogy or even a parable at all?
2. When do you think the novel is set? Is *The Life of Elves* directly or indirectly critical of the modern world? According to the Council Head, a 'modern world' means 'old and disenchanting'. What does Barbery mean by this? Do you agree?
3. Discuss the importance of harmony, oneness and connection in the novel. Have we lost a sense of connection in the modern world? Are connection and enchantment linked in the world of the novel?
4. Is *The Life of Elves* an argument in favour of reconnecting with the natural world?
5. Discuss how nature and art intertwine in this novel.
6. Muriel Barbery is a philosopher and her bestselling *Elegance of the Hedgehog* engaged directly with philosophy. How do you think *The Life of Elves* engages with philosophy, if at all?

7. Why elves? Why not some other kind of mythical/magical being? What are the differences between humans and elves in this book?
8. One of those differences is that elves do not tell stories. Why do you think Barbery has made this a defining feature of her imagined creatures?
9. Discuss gender in the novel. Do men and women have quintessentially different strengths in this novel? Why do we only see male elves apart from Maria? Why are the two characters who must stand against evil female?
10. What is the significance of the 'I will maintain' motto?
11. The idea of essence recurs often. In the clearing where she stands with the creature that turns out to be her father, Maria 'contemplates the dance of essences greeting and mingling as they trace the steps of knowledge and faith' (22). What does Barbery mean when she talks of essences here and elsewhere?
12. There are several types of mysticism portrayed in this novel—magical, Christian and natural. How are they similar and different? Does the novel present religion as one of many equal divine mysteries, or as a lesser or greater divine mystery?
13. What do you make of Barbery's descriptions of evil? How has she given evil form? Do you recognise your conception of evil in these descriptions and forms or have you rethought how evil might manifest?
14. Discuss the different ways landscape affects people in the novel. What about in life? What about in your life in particular?
15. In an interview transcribed on the Text Publishing web site ([www.textpublishing.com.au/blog/an-interview-with-muriel-barbery](http://www.textpublishing.com.au/blog/an-interview-with-muriel-barbery)), Barbery says of *The Life of Elves* that 'you have to subscribe to the style in order to get into the story'. How would you describe that style? Did you 'subscribe' to it? How do the style and the story relate to each other? You may like to discuss Barbery's other comments in this interview too.
16. Petrus tells Clara that the secret of a good story is 'Lyricism and nonchalance with the truth. However, one must not trifle with the heart' (169). Has *The Life of Elves* been written according to this definition?