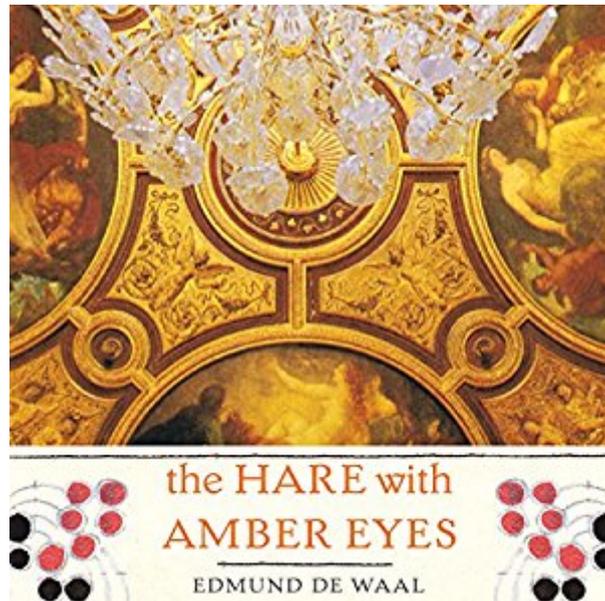


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The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Family's Century Of Art And Loss



Synopsis

The Ephrussi were a grand banking family, as rich and respected as the Rothschilds, who "burned like a comet" in 19th-century Paris and Vienna society. Yet by the end of World War II, almost the only thing remaining of their vast empire was a collection of 264 wood and ivory carvings, none of them larger than a matchbox. The renowned ceramicist Edmund de Waal became the fifth generation to inherit this small and exquisite collection of netsuke. Entranced by their beauty and mystery, he determined to trace the story of his family through the story of the collection. The netsuke—drunken monks, almost-ripe plums, snarling tigers—were gathered by Charles Ephrussi at the height of the Parisian rage for all things Japanese. Charles had shunned the place set aside for him in the family business to make a study of art, and of beautiful living. An early supporter of the Impressionists, he appears, oddly formal in a top hat, in Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Marcel Proust studied Charles closely enough to use him as a model for the aesthete and lover Swann in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Charles gave the carvings as a wedding gift to his cousin Viktor in Vienna; his children were allowed to play with one netsuke each while they watched their mother, the Baroness Emmy, dress for ball after ball. Her older daughter grew up to disdain fashionable society. Longing to write, she struck up a correspondence with Rilke, who encouraged her in her poetry. The Anschluss changed their world beyond recognition. Ephrussi and his cosmopolitan family were imprisoned or scattered, and Hitler's theorist on the "Jewish question" appropriated their magnificent palace on the Ringstrasse. A library of priceless books and a collection of Old Master paintings were confiscated by the Nazis. But the netsuke were smuggled away by a loyal maid, Anna, and hidden in her straw mattress. Years after the war, she would find a way to return them to the family she'd served even in their exile. In *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, Edmund de Waal unfolds the story of a remarkable family and a tumultuous century. Sweeping yet intimate, it is a highly original meditation on art, history, and family, as elegant and precise as the netsuke themselves.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Imagine you are the descendant of one of those families of 19th-century Jewish financiers who spread around the major capitals of Europe to forge a continental empire. Along the way, the family comes to feature an art collector who served as a patron for the Impressionists and inspired Proust's Swann. A later generation includes one of the first women to attend university in the early twentieth century; she graduates as a lawyer, becomes a writer and corresponds with Rilke. Imagine that the family's wealth disappears in the blink of an eye when Germany annexes Austria. That is in a nutshell the story of the Ephrussi clan, which Edmund De Waal chronicles in "The Hare with Amber Eyes." That is only a peek at the material that the author had at his disposal, which should have made the work relatively simple to write. But the author set himself a challenge. He refused to produce a straightforward history: "It could write itself, I think, this kind of story. A few stitched-together wistful anecdotes, more about the Orient-Express, of course, a bit of wandering around Prague or somewhere equally photogenic, some clippings from Google on ballrooms in the Belle Epoque. It would come out as nostalgic. And thin." Instead of a predictable tale from Mitteleuropa about lost grandeur, the author takes a (slightly Proustian) shortcut that leads to unexpected and sometimes deeply moving places. One of the illustrious ancestors collected tiny but incredibly intricate Japanese carvings called netsuke used in early modern Japan as toggles for purse strings. The book traces the story of these sculptures as they are passed down from one generation of Ephrussi to the next.

There are men and women who write beautifully, every word inevitable, the paragraphs building into chapters, the chapters adding up to a great book, and we never suspect that their work is a phenomenal trick --- that they bled over every word, turned every sentence around a dozen times, missed meals with their children, sacrificing all to make their writing look effortless. And then there are men and women who write beautifully because they're tuned to a different frequency and do everything beautifully. They may work to make their writing better, but they're starting at such a high

level they really don't need to --- they're in humanity's elite. Edward de Waal is in that second group. And so we start with an irony --- the author of the most exquisite memoir you're likely to read this year isn't a writer. He's a potter, said to be one of the best in England, and Professor of Ceramics at the University of Westminster. You could say the eye that judges a pot is also a writer's eye. And you could say a gifted Brit who studied English at Cambridge really should be able to write a compelling family story. But none of that would explain the fierce attachment early readers of "The Hare with Amber Eyes" have for it, why they can't help talking about it, why they press copies on friends. Let me try. Start here: "The Hare with Amber Eyes" has, as they say in show biz, everything. The highest echelons of Society in pre-World War I Paris. Nazi thugs and Austrian collaborators. A gay heir who takes refuge in Japan. Style. Seduction. Rothschild-level wealth. Two centuries of anti-Semitism. And 264 pieces of netsuke, the pocket-sized ivory-or-wood sculpture first made in Japan in the 17th century.

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