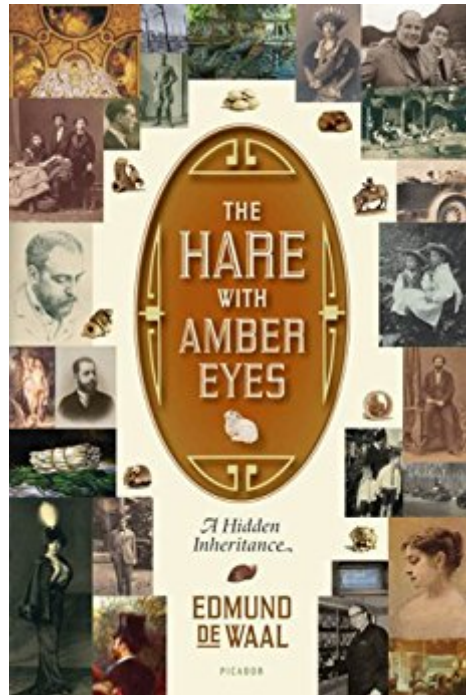




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# The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Family's Century Of Art And Loss



## Synopsis

The Ephrussi were a grand banking family, as rich and respected as the Rothschilds, who "burned like a comet" in nineteenth-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

This is a mesmerising many-layered book. The fascinating narrative of the fabulously wealthy Jewish Ephrussi family moves through the decades from commercial Odessa to the Paris of the Impressionists and artistic salons to the brutal destruction of the Anschluss of 1938 in Vienna and a familial diaspora over three continents. Parallel to this, we follow with the author his own emotive journey to reclaim the lives lived in the vanished rooms of his forbears. This he does sensitively and successfully, imagining his way there through archives, letters and contemporary fiction. He visits all the great houses and, in Odessa, tasting the dust of the demolished palace rooms, he rejoices in the survival of the Ephrussi family emblem on a last remaining banister. Such evocative writing and small discovered detail make this a story we want to follow with him and we find that this is not, after all, a tale of acquisition but of loss. The 264 tiny Japanese carvings (netsuke) bought in the 1870s in Paris are all that now remain of the family possessions. We also come to understand another loss: the Ephrussis no longer felt defined by their Jewish origins: artists and socialites passed through their grand salons. It is shocking to discover that even those who enjoyed their patronage were casually anti-Semitic. It is hard to read the vivid account of the abrupt violence of the Nazis as they took (almost) every precious possession from them, leaving them, in the end, only their Jewishness. The netsuke are the beginning and happy ending of the story. Their exquisite detail is emblematic of this beautifully crafted book and its touching story of the individuals through whose hands they passed. One or other of them seems, like a rosary, to accompany the writer in his travels: a constant reminder to keep faith with his past.

Edmund de Waal, a well-known potter, inherited a collection of 264 netsuke, small delicately carved Japanese objects, originally intended as a counterweight with a small bag on one side and the netsuke on the other, worn around the sash of a man's kimono. At the end of the 19th century they became all the rage in Europe as collectors' items. The author describes how the collection got into his family and what happened to it over the years. By doing so, he traces back his family's fascinating history. He conjures up the atmosphere in Paris and Vienna, describes in great detail homes and daily life of a super rich family, from their beginnings as bankers in Odessa to their dispersal into various countries. Especially the period around the second world war, in which everything is taken away from this Jewish family, is very moving. I found the beginning a little slow reading, but after a while I really got sucked into this story and often felt like a fly on the wall.

This was an extraordinary read to be savored. Not only is the Proustian manner in which the author's hidden family history is uncovered intriguing - the netsuke being the catalyst in de Waal's account, reminiscent of the opening of the ornamental party favor shell in Proust's *Combray* revealing a hidden world -- but the elegance of his writing, his virtuoso way with words, were a delight and, I admit, refreshing in these days of such mediocrity in the written word. Of course, central to the book's appeal was the galvanizing nature of the story. It is one we have heard before -- the unspeakable criminal acts of terrorism and brutality perpetuated by the Nazi regime. But it's the author's unfolding of the devastating travails endured by his courtly family, all the intricate and painstaking details so beautifully rendered (a process perhaps akin for a master ceramist to forming a magnificent vessel), in short, the wrenchingly personal nature of the book that makes it so exceptional. Finally, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* represents yet another testimony to the flawed nature of humankind that compels those in power the world over to commit brutal acts toward others. This gem of a book is an important reminder of our darker sides. May it also serve to inspire commitment, even if only in a small way, to do better as we proceed forward.

More than any account I have come across, this book depicts the horror a prominent, wealthy Jewish family experienced during the Nazi takeover of Eastern Europe. It also, on a very personal level, depicts the anti-semitism that existed long before the arrival of Hitler's army. Many of us grew up thinking that Hitler was some kind of aberration with his desire to obliterate the Jewish population when he was actually just fulfilling the fantasy of many people in many different parts of the world. I especially liked de Waal's way of exploring Paris, Vienna, Japan, England and Russia in order to

physically stand in the places where events occurred. When he visited Odessa at the end of the book and realized that it wasn't the ghetto so often depicted, he turned the whole "Jewish question" on its head. Coincidentally I watched the film "The Woman in Gold", another true story of loss in the Ringstrasse of Vienna, and it served to further fill in the history we are never taught in schools. By focusing on the netsukes his ancestor collected rather than one particular family member, he managed to avoid an over-sentimentalized look at the time period. His clear-eyed recounting of events revealed a family of resilience, hope and strength--a family that survived through adaptation as well as assimilation.

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