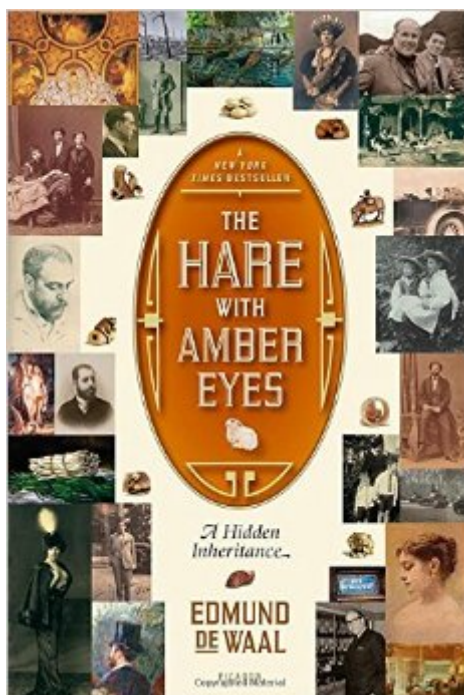


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The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance



Synopsis

An Economist Book of the Year Costa Book Award Winner for Biography Galaxy National Book Award Winner (New Writer of the Year Award) Edmund de Waal is a world-famous ceramicist. Having spent thirty years making beautiful pots which are then sold, collected, and handed on he has a particular sense of the secret lives of objects. When he inherited a collection of 264 tiny Japanese wood and ivory carvings, called netsuke, he wanted to know who had touched and held them, and how the collection had managed to survive. And so begins this extraordinarily moving memoir and detective story as de Waal discovers both the story of the netsuke and of his family, the Ephrussis, over five generations. A nineteenth-century banking dynasty in Paris and Vienna, the Ephrussis were as rich and respected as the Rothschilds. Yet by the end of the World War II, when the netsuke were hidden from the Nazis in Vienna, this collection of very small carvings was all that remained of their vast empire.

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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