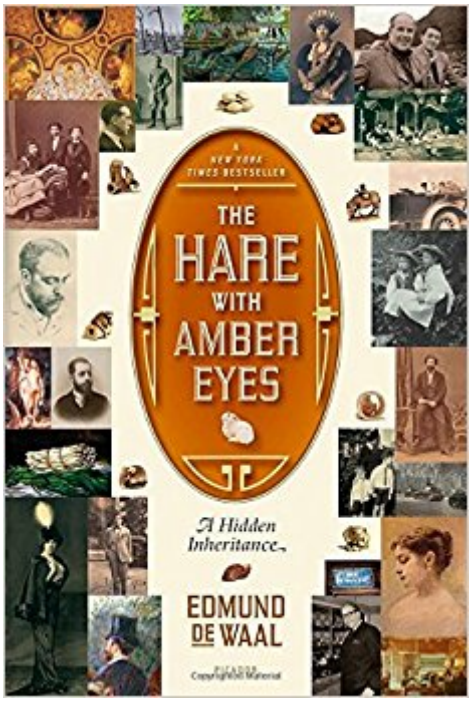
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The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance



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Synopsis

A New York Times BestsellerAn 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 potsÃ¢â ¬â ¢which are then sold, collected, and handed onÃ¢â ¬â ¢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 Rothchilds. 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

Best of the Month, September 2010: At the heart of Edmund de Waal’s strange and graceful family memoir, The Hare with Amber Eyes, is a one-of-a-kind inherited collection of ornamental Japanese carvings known as netsuke. The netsuke are tiny and tactile--they sit in the palm of your hand--and de Waal is drawn to them as "small, tough explosions of exactitude." He’s also drawn to the story behind them, and for years he put aside his own work as a world-renowned potter and curator to uncover the rich and tragic family history of which the carvings are one of the few concrete legacies.

De Waal's family was the Ephrussis, wealthy Jewish grain traders who branched out from Russia across the capitals of Europe before seeing their empire destroyed by the Nazis. Beginning with his art connoisseur ancestor Charles (a model for Proust's Swann), who acquired the netsuke during the European rage for Japonisme, de Waal traces the collection from Japan to Europe--where they were saved from the brutal bureaucracy of the Nazi Anschluss in the pockets of a family servant--and back to Japan and Europe again. Throughout, he writes with a tough, funny, and elegant attention to detail and personality that does full justice to the exactitude of the little carvings that first roused his curiosity. --Tom Nissley --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this family history, de Waal, a potter and curator of ceramics at the Victoria & Albert Museum, describes the experiences of his family, the Ephrussis, during the turmoil of the 20th century. Grain merchants in Odessa, various family members migrated to Vienna and Paris, becoming successful bankers. Secular Jews, they sought assimilation in a period of virulent anti-Semitism. In Paris, Charles Ephrussi purchased a large collection of Japanese netsuke, tiny hand-carved figures including a hare with amber eyes. The collection passed to Viktor Ephrussi in Vienna and became the family's greatest legacy. Loyal citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Vienna Ephrussis were devastated by the outcome of WWI and were later driven from their home by the imposition of Nazi rule over Austria. After WWII, they discovered that their maid, Anna, had preserved the netsuke collection, which Ignace Ephrussi inherited, and he settled in postwar Japan. Today, the netsuke reside with de Waal (descended from the family's Vienna branch) and serve as the embodiment of his family history. A somewhat rambling narrative with special appeal to art historians, this account is nonetheless rich in drama and valuable anecdote. 20 b&w illus. Copyright Ã Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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 desribes how the collection got into his family and what happend 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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