



# THE HARE WITH AMBER EYES

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

In 2007 Chatto & Windus editor Clara Farmer was reading the *Guardian* newspaper, when she came across this article <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/jun/30/art.architecture> on the potter Edmund de Waal.

It described Edmund de Waal's spare, slightly ethereal installations of pots, his views on the craft, and – almost in passing – mentioned that de Waal was writing a memoir, based on an inherited collection of netsuke.

Intrigued, Clara Farmer wrote to de Waal at his studio. Was this correct? Could she see the memoir when it was ready? She could, and in 2008 Chatto received a proposal for the book.

The story outlined was *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, and it began with a beguiling collection of 264 netsuke. These small, portable objects were designed by craftsmen to be used as toggles for kimono, but became coveted and collected. This particular group included a beanpod, a beggar crouched over his bowl, a skull, and many more, including, of course, a hare with amber eyes. Their purchase, in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, was part of a wave of *Japonisme* – a fashionable enthusiasm for all things Oriental – and the collector was Edmund de Waal's great-great-grandfather Charles Ephrussi. Part of the fabulously wealthy Ephrussi banking family, Charles was a collector, a man about town, a contemporary of Proust (and one of the models for Swann in *À la recherche du temps perdu*) and a patron to the arts.



CHARLES EPHRUSSI

In following the netsuke we discover their story, but also the story of Edmund de Waal's family and, by extension, a microcosm of twentieth-century history: one family's experience of the tumultuous effects of war, occupation and conflict. The narrative moves from Paris to Vienna, and eventually to the horrors of the Anschluss and the Second World War; events which would sweep the Ephrussi family themselves to the brink of oblivion and leave the survivors scattered around the world. And by the time the tsunami of war receded, there was nothing left of the Ephrussi's once legendary wealth – just a few books and paintings, some photographs and memories, and the netsuke.

In 2010 the book was published to almost instant acclaim. Margaret Drabble described it as 'an extraordinary and touching journey with a backdrop glittering with images from Proust and Zola and Klimt' in the *Times Literary Supplement*. 'A book of astonishing originality,' said the *Evening Standard*. 'You have in your hands a masterpiece,' said Frances Wilson in the *Sunday Times*. It won the 2010 Costa Biography of the Year and The Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize, and was shortlisted for the Duff Cooper Prize, the Jewish Quarterly Wingate Prize, the PEN/Ackerley Prize, and the Southbank Sky Arts Award for Literature, and longlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize and the Orwell Prize. Edmund de Waal was named New Writer of the Year at the 2010 Galaxy Book Awards.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edmund de Waal's porcelain is shown in many museum collections round the world and he has recently made installations for the V&A and Tate Britain. He was apprenticed as a potter, studied in Japan and read English at Cambridge. He lives in London with his family.



EDMUND DE WAAL

## ABOUT THE NETSUKU



A SELECTION OF EDMUND DE WAAL'S NETSUKU

Netsuke (Japanese: 根付 – usually pronounced NET-suh-key or sometimes NET-skee) are small carved sculptures which originated in seventeenth-century Japan, as an ornamental yet practical toggle for the Japanese kimono robe. Kimonos, by tradition, had no pockets, and so, in order to carry around their belongings, the wearers hung pouches or boxes from the kimono sash, suspended by a cord held fast by a carved toggle – a netsuke.

Though they began as a practical solution to a practical problem, the netsuke evolved into extraordinarily beautiful objects created by craftsmen. In *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, Edmund de Waal relates how some of these craftsmen would spend years working on a single netsuke, and how one family might specialise solely in netsuke in the form of rats, and devote their lives to carving the perfect, quintessential example of this form.

Other popular subjects include masks, craftsmen at work, people, animals (particularly octopus), nuts, erotic studies, deities, and everyday objects such as fruit or vegetables. They come in several categories – some are long and thin and designed to hook behind the kimono sash – but the most popular kind are kabori netsuke which are carved in a round shape easy to carry around in your pocket or hold in your hand, and always have a hole somewhere for the cord to attach.

Although the production of netsuke was at its height during the Edo period, around 1615 to 1868, they became popular in the west as part of the wave of *Japonisme* that swept Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth century (when Charles Ephrussi purchased his collection). A display of netsuke was a popular addition to any drawing room, and many collectors bought up entire ready-made groups of varying quality. Today the art lives on, and examples by modern artists are still highly collectable.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

**1) *The Hare with Amber Eyes* has been described as a memoir, a history, a family history, the biography of the netsuke; how do you see it, and how did you envisage project when you started out?**

It all started with the netsuke. I wanted to discover the places where these objects had been, how they were handled, who held them. So this is in many ways a history of touch, a history of objects. Objects need biography – there aren't many books out there that take objects themselves seriously.

Of course, it was also a personal quest for me to try to work out what I could about my family and their story. I wanted to find out why I grew up not knowing this story.

That's perhaps why it's been described as completely cross-genre, because I had no template for it when I began. I envisaged it initially as something quite dry and academic, but I could never have foreseen the way it took shape.

**2) You were a professional potter long before you wrote *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Do you now see yourself as a potter who writes, or a writer who makes pots?**

I'm now completely confused! I've been a maker all my life; that's my core and how I describe myself. But I also love telling stories. I was surprised, in writing this, how much I enjoyed making and shaping stories.

**3) Do you take anything from your pot-making into your writing or vice versa? How do your two lives intersect?**

I suppose I have quite a physical sense of language; sentences and paragraphs and chapters have a kind of aural weight to them – I can feel them as well as hear them. It sounds odd to describe them in that way, but that's how I experience it. And a lot of my installations come from snatches of poetry and writing and time spent in archives.

Also, obviously, my installations are collections of objects, and *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is an investigation of why objects work together and how they can be kept together and what happens when they're not kept together. So there's a very strong dialogue between the two. In the end the two halves of my life are all of a piece, interlocking.

**4) At the start of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* you seem to be slightly ambivalent towards your family's past. You talk about not being entitled to feel nostalgic, and of not wanting to be greedy about Iggy's anecdotes. Did you end up by resolving that, or do you still feel a certain ambivalence towards your heritage?**

Nostalgia feels an easy route into family memory and I wanted something harder and more exacting.

That's why I expressed my ambivalence so strongly. I really didn't want to channel some sepia melancholic bit of memoir. Having spent so many years researching, travelling and writing, I've resolved my feelings about my inheritance. I can see my family as a real group of people, living in extraordinary times.



ELISABETH, EDMUND DE WAAL'S  
GRANDMOTHER

**5) Did you have a favourite among the people you encountered in your research?**

Probably Charles. I began by thinking I wasn't going to like him much, this hugely privileged young man. But as I grew to know him I became more and more fond of him – this young man, making his way in the world, trying to find a place for himself. But I also have enormous affection for my grandmother, Elisabeth, and my great-uncle Iggie. I hope this comes across in the book, my respect for them and what they accomplished. They are really the reason I wrote the book in the first place.

**6) In the book we never discover any more about Anna or even her surname – have you found anything since?**

No, but I'm certain that we will. The book has just come out in Austria and Germany and I am certain that someone will recognise her story. It would be a wonderful end to the journey.

**7) The process your family undergoes in the book is one of gradual cultural assimilation, culminating in your grandmother's conversion to Christianity. How do you feel about this?**

Since the book has been published I've been amazed and delighted by its reaction from the Jewish community. So many other families have been through parallel stories of exile and diaspora and many of them recognise that assimilation is a way of protecting your family identity. What families tell themselves about where they come from is complex and profound. My grandmother was able to be Christian and proud of her Jewish background.

**8) Much of the book is about trying to read people through the objects they own – a ducal bed, a fur toque, a netsuke in the shape of an overripe medlar. What do you think your own objects say about you?**

Well the first thing to say is that my ancestors would undoubtedly be horrified by how I live! Which is in a kind of muddle, with the objects I make and the objects I own knocking about side by side in an unhierarchical mix. I am resolutely unhierarchical about my possessions. My journey in the book was about finding out more about the objects we own, the objects we give, the objects we are given. Particularly the objects we are given. Because a gift is always loaded with certain expectations – they come with a responsibility attached. Whether we choose to accept that responsibility is another matter of course.

**9) Do you have any plans to seek restitution of any of the lost objects mentioned in the book?**

No. I have enormous respect for the people involved in restitution, which is a hugely important part of the process of justice – restorative justice. However I have no desire to pursue what's gone from my own family. In a way, writing this book has been my way of restoring what was lost. I feel that I have restituted a story and am giving it back to Vienna. My own form of restorative justice.

**10) And finally – do your children play with the netsuke in their turn?**

That's their story.

## AN ESSAY BY EDMUND DE WAAL

Netsuke are very small. Smaller than a matchbox, often as small as the joint of my little-finger, these Japanese ivory, bone and wooden carvings are hard explosions of exactitude. You roll them in your hands and find the carver has added a joke: the tail of a disappearing rat, a deliquescent plum fallen from a basket. Some of the netsuke are studies in running movement, so that your fingers move along a surface of uncoiling rope or spilt water. Others have small, congested movements that knot



IGGIE'S APARTMENT IN TOKYO

your touch: a girl in a wooden bath, a vortex of clam shells. Some do both, surprising you: an intricately ruffled dragon leans against a simple rock. You work your fingers round the smoothness and stoniness of the ivory to meet this sudden density of dragon. There is often a supplementary pleasure in finding where the signature of the carver is placed, on the sole of a sandal, the end of a branch, the thorax of a hornet.

When I look at these marks I think of the moves you make when you sign your name in Japan – the sweep of the brush into the ink, the first, plosive moment of contact, the return to the ink stone – and wonder at how you could develop such a distinctive signature using the fine metal tools of the netsuke maker.

When I look at these marks I think of the moves you make when you sign your name in

I have 264 netsuke: street vendors, beggars and monks, rat catchers, dogs, lovers, a woman and an octopus, an elderly lady on an elderly horse, a witch trapped in a temple bell, a persimmon about to split, a hare with amber eyes. It is a very big collection of very small objects.

I pick one up and turn it round in my fingers, weigh it in the palm of my hand. If it is wood, chestnut or elm, it is even lighter than the ivory. You see the patina more easily on these wooden ones: there is a faint shine on the spine of the brindled wolf and on the tumbling acrobats locked in their embrace. The ivory ones come in shades of cream, every colour, in fact but white. A few have inlaid eyes of amber or horn. Some of the older ones are slightly worn away: the haunch of the faun resting on leaves has lost its markings. There is a slight split, an almost imperceptible fault line on the cicada. Who dropped it? Where and when?



IGGIE AND JIRO

I first saw them lit up at night in a long vitrine in the sitting-room of my great-uncle Iggie, in his apartment looking out over Tokyo. I was 17 and had come to Japan to spend a summer making pots. I was halfway through my two-year apprenticeship to a rather severe English potter. Iggie and Jiro, his Japanese friend in the adjoining apartment, looked after me, bought me some smarter clothes from

one of the department stores in the Ginza, took me to the theatre and gave me my first whisky sours in the bar at the Imperial Hotel. He would say that these ivories were the reason he had come to Japan, an inheritance from Vienna and Paris. He had brought them home.

When Iggie died I stood in the temple on the outskirts of Tokyo where he was to be buried and after the sutras had been chanted and he had received his kaimyo, the Buddhist name that would help him through the next life, I said the Kaddish for the Baron Ignace Leon von Ephrussi, fashion designer, soldier, banker, 'long-term resident of Tokyo', the last of a dynasty. And afterwards, back in the apartment, Jiro picked up his brush and wrote and sealed a document to say that when he had gone, I should look after this collection.



IGNACE EPHRUSSI

So I was to be next. But what was I looking after? What had come with this inheritance?

I knew the outlines of the story. The collection had been bought in Paris by a cousin of my great-great-grandfathers called Charles Ephrussi, an art critic and a passionate supporter of the Impressionists. Charles is there at the very back of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, an unlikely figure among the louche crowd, dressed in black with a slightly tilted top hat. You can just see a rufus haze of beard. He is deep in conversation with his secretary, the young poet Jules Laforgue.

Charles had given the collection of netsuke – and the grand black lacquer vitrine with deep velvet shelves and a mirrored back which housed them – as a wedding present to my great-great grandfather Viktor when he married a beautiful young socialite. This extravagant gift arrived in the vast Palais Ephrussi on the Ringstrasse in Vienna just as the new century was about to begin. And they survived a very complicated century, coming back to Japan in a battered attaché case with my great-uncle Iggie. And I know that the Ephrussi family were almost unimaginably rich – rich even among their circle of Jewish bankers. Originally from Odessa, they had cornered the trade in grain, and by the 1860s were known as 'Les Roi des Blés', the Kings of Grain, their coat-of-arms a proud little sailing ship on a stormy sea.

But what concerned me was how to navigate my way through this parade of sepia memories, the gilt and marble blur of lost houses, estates, a golden dinner service, balls and racehorses, flunkeys. These objects seemed too specific to be co-opted into a narrative of loss, annoyingly melancholic. I have a strong aversion to nostalgia for a past that isn't yours. And the thought of yet another posh Mitteleuropa memoir set to Strauss, cross-generational misery-lit, made me slightly sick.

I was anxious because what I'd been given with these netsuke was far, far more interesting than a generic set of anecdotes. I'd been given objects with memories. I'd been given part of a story, a few echoes, a sense of untold narratives. And this challenge: anecdotalise this odd collection for the rest of your life. Or work it out.

I make things for my living. This means that how objects are handled and where they are placed is a question that has been at the heart of my life for 30 years. But it also means that I am endlessly letting

objects go. My porcelain vessels get wrapped in tissue, and then in bubble-wrap, and are crated up and lifted into the backs of vans, and I sign a piece of paper and they are gone. They are off into the world of commodities to be sold, collected, handed on, given. And so I have a strong sense of the story-telling around how objects get handed on. I am giving you this because I love you. Because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. What is remembered and what is forgotten? There can be a chain of forgetting, the rubbing away of previous ownership as much as the slow accretion of stories. What is being passed on to me with these small Japanese objects?

I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden thing that I am rolling between my fingers – hard and tricky and Japanese – and where it has been. I want to be able to walk round each room it has been placed in, to know what pictures were on the walls and how the light falls from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in and what they felt about it and thought about it. If they thought about it. I dislike anthropomorphising objects, but I want to know what it has witnessed, whether I can talk of the memory of objects.

This was the challenge. Find the places where the collection had been – In Paris, Vienna and Tokyo, and try to find out what it might have meant to open the vitrine of netsuke and reach in and pick one out and roll it in your hands. Find the secret history of touch.

I had memories of conversations with my grandmother and great-uncle, a slim file of letters and photographs from my father: the family archive held in a Somerfield plastic bag. I knew where they had lived. It seemed scant evidence to go on.

So I go and stand outside Charles Ephrussi's first house in Paris, the Hotel Ephrussi on a hill of golden, neo-classical mansions, and look up at the windows to the rooms where he held his salons. Up there, hanging alongside the rich burgundy embroideries he had bought in Italy, were his new Degas and Monet and Renoir paintings. This was where the netsuke collection first lived, its first resting-place in the heart of passionate talk about what art could mean. It was also his study. This is where Charles wrote passionately about the need to look at paintings and sculpture – and then look again. And this is where Charles, Jewish, charming and social, a collector, art historian and editor, entertained and encouraged Proust. Charles becomes one of the models for Charles Swann. So I find that I am writing a book about memory haunted by Proust.

And then I have to leave my Parisian archives and go to Vienna, and I walk past the Palais Ephrussi which seems to take up an absurd amount of skyline on the Ringstrasse, with its caryatids and urns and towers. The Palais belonged to a parade of make-believe buildings – a Potemkin city of paste-board and plaster, according to the fierce social critic Adolf Loos. This fairytale palace of gilded ceilings, a statue of Apollo in the courtyard, corridors full of paintings, marble and malachite, was also the family home of my fabulously dressed great-grandmother, my bibliophilic great-grandfather and their four children. The netsuke were relegated to the dressing room, a room in the charge of her maid Anna.



EDMUND DE WAAL'S GREAT-GRANDMOTHER EMMY,  
DRESSED AS MARIE ANTOINETTE

This is where I should be able to write about the frissons of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, Mahler, Klimt and the Secession. But in this implacable palais this kind of modernity was kept firmly at bay, just as the great oak doors on to the Ring were closed to the anti-semitic brawling from the university opposite. Here I find the strange refractions of the dislike of this rich family into books – the novelist Joseph Roth makes Ephrussi a rich jeweller in *The Spider's Web*: 'lank and tall, and always [wearing] black, with a high collared coat which just revealed a black silk stock pinned by a pearl the size of a hazelnut'. His wife, the beautiful Frau Efrussi, is 'a lady: Jewish: but a lady'.

And here in Vienna I have to deal with other kinds of archive. Not just the wills and inventories but the lists in the Israelitische Kulturgemeinde in Vienna, each member of the Jewish community recorded over 200 years. And here I find the bank details, the lists of objects requisitioned by the Gestapo, comments by Viennese art-historians debating the merits of family pictures, the arguments over which should be sent to Berlin for Hitler to look over. It is here in Vienna that I begin to uncover the extraordinary story of what happened to the netsuke during the war, the story of Anna's smuggling of the collection to safety, one piece at a time, in her pockets.

Finally I am back in Japan, trying to make sense of a collection of netsuke to a postwar world of deprivation. This is the Tokyo my great-uncle Iggie moved to in 1947 – a city so poor that there was talk of takenoko, where you sell first one layer of your possessions, then another, like an onion skin, just to survive. What did these carvings – owned by a westerner – mean now?

Why I thought researching this history would take an autumn I do not know. After three years I begin to see how you can derail your life, return to an archive for another week, find a need to walk along a particular street in Paris to check a journey time. I wonder if I should go to every museum that houses one of Charles' pictures, or to the villages in Japan where the netsuke of the rat catchers was carved 200 years ago. I seem to be spending too long in cemeteries trying to find the graves of relatives.

My files of notes get longer and longer. I spend a winter reading anti-semitic tracts, a month studying Charles' essays on Dürer. I start to be a bore about the Viennese fashion for furs before the Great War. But my questions condense. What did these small things mean? Why does touch matter? And what survives?

(This essay originally appeared in the *Guardian* under the title *The God of Small Things*. It is reprinted with permission from the *Guardian* newspaper. Find a link to the original piece here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2010/may/29/edmund-waal-hare-amber-netsuke>)

## STARTING POINTS FOR YOUR DISCUSSION

- 1) Edmund de Waal states in the interview above that he found himself particularly charmed by Charles during his research. Who was your favourite character in the book and why?
- 2) Much of *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is about trying to discover who people are by the objects they own and the objects they value. Do you think this is a good way to find out about people?
- 3) Do you have any inherited objects? What stories do they tell?
- 4) What do your favourite belongings say about you, and what conclusions do you think would be drawn if one of your descendants investigated you in this way?
- 5) Why do you think Edmund de Waal was unable to trace Anna?
- 6) In the interview above, Edmund de Waal says, 'Objects need biography – there aren't many books out there that take objects themselves seriously.' What do you think he means by this, and do you agree?
- 7) Some non-fiction history books fill in the gaps in available evidence by reconstructing the past, for example, by imagining possible conversations and thoughts. Edmund de Waal mainly avoids this, and concentrates on giving the reader concrete facts or relating first-hand anecdotes. Which technique do you prefer?
- 8) Have you ever tried to trace your own family history? If so, what did you find?
- 9) In his *Guardian* essay, de Waal closes with a series of questions: 'What did these small things mean? Why does touch matter? And what survives?' What do you think?
- 10) The online resources listed below give links to galleries of the netsuke. Which netsuke appeals to you most? Would you have entitled the book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, or something completely different?

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Edmund de Waal's personal website. Here you can find a list of press and reviews for *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, photographs of the netsuke, and information and images of his pottery installations.  
[www.edmunddewaal.com](http://www.edmunddewaal.com)

Netsuke gallery at the Vintage website:  
<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/books/harewithambereyes/>

Vintage podcast interview with Edmund de Waal (requires sound):  
<http://www.vintage-books.co.uk/authors/vintage-podcasts/Podcast6/>

*The Hare with Amber Eyes* interactive mini-site at the *Sunday Times* website, featuring an author interview, reviews and a gallery of images of the netsuke (requires subscription):  
[http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non\\_fiction/article300432.ece](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article300432.ece)

The *Sunday Times* interview and review are available for free here:  
Interview: [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article7138126.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/non-fiction/article7138126.ece)  
Review: [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/book\\_reviews/article7137505.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/book_reviews/article7137505.ece)

Photo gallery of the netsuke, with captions by Edmund de Waal, at the *Guardian* website:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/gallery/2010/jun/25/edmund-de-waal-netsuke-hare?intcmp=239>

*Guardian* podcast interview with Edmund de Waal (requires sound):  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/audio/2010/jun/24/israel-maggie-gee?intcmp=239>

Website of the Villa Ephrussi Rothschild in Vienna:  
[www.villa-ephrussi.com](http://www.villa-ephrussi.com)



A SELECTION OF EDMUND DE WAAL'S NETSUKE

## FURTHER READING

*A Time of Gifts* by Patrick Leigh Fermor

*Paintings in Proust* by Eric Karpeles

*The Radetzky March* by Joseph Roth

*Swann's Way (Du côté de chez Swann)* by Marcel Proust

*Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald

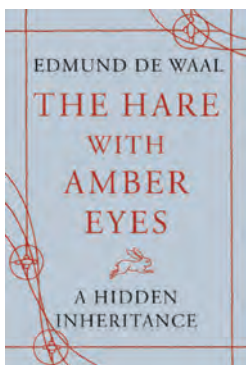
*Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* by Martin Gilbert

*The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil

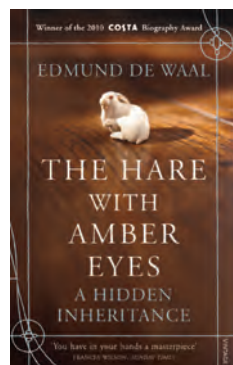
*The World of Yesterday* by Stefan Zweig

*The Hare with Amber Eyes: The Illustrated Edition* by Edmund de Waal

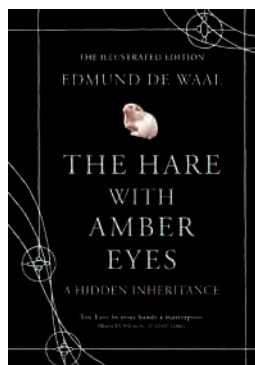
*An Introduction to Netsuke* by Joe Earle / V&A Museum



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Paperback edition.  
ISBN 9780099539551  
Price: £8.99



Illustrated edition.  
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