

Books

The writer behind the hare

The potter and award-winning memoirist Edmund de Waal explains why Proust is at the heart of his family's story

I have just come back from Paris. *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, my attempted retracing of the history of my Jewish family over 200 years through a very large collection of very small objects, was being launched in France. I had a round of interviews and lectures to survive. The book's new name, *La Mémoire Retrouvée*, could not be more Proustian and I was convinced this was a hostage to fortune. My very first radio interview was short. The interviewer was svelte and cross. You are an Englishman, she told me, and I believe you are actually a potter. Your book seems to concern Proust. How has this come about?

So I start to tell her that my great-uncle Iggie in old age, sitting in his armchair in his Tokyo apartment after an autumnal lunch with plums from the orchard of his country cottage in Izu, began talking of the plum dumplings *mit schlag* made by their cook in Vienna. That when my grandmother Elisabeth died and I inherited her 14 black-bound volumes of Proust, printed on cheap thin paper by Gallimard, the ink smudged, I found that they were interleaved with postcards and photographs and scraps of pocketbook jottings marking – what? I start to say that I simply didn't know that when this journey started six years ago, airy with ambition and purpose, I would be charting a journey into memory. I start and she has packed up her microphone.

I had no intention to let Proust into my book. My story started in Belle Époque Paris as that was the home of the first collector of these little Japanese carvings, a glamorous and ridiculously rich *mondain* cousin of my great-grandfather's called Charles Ephrussi.

But as I haunted the archives and paced my routes between old houses and offices, vagabonding in museums, aimless one moment and over-purposeful the next, I kept coming across the places where Charles Ephrussi and Charles Swann intersected. Before I started my journey I knew in the broadest terms that “my” Charles was one of the two principal models for Proust's character – the lesser it was said, of the two. I remember reading a dismissive remark on him (“a Polish

Jew... stout, bearded and ugly, his manner was ponderous and uncouth”) in the biography of Proust published by George Painter in the Fifties and taking it at face value.

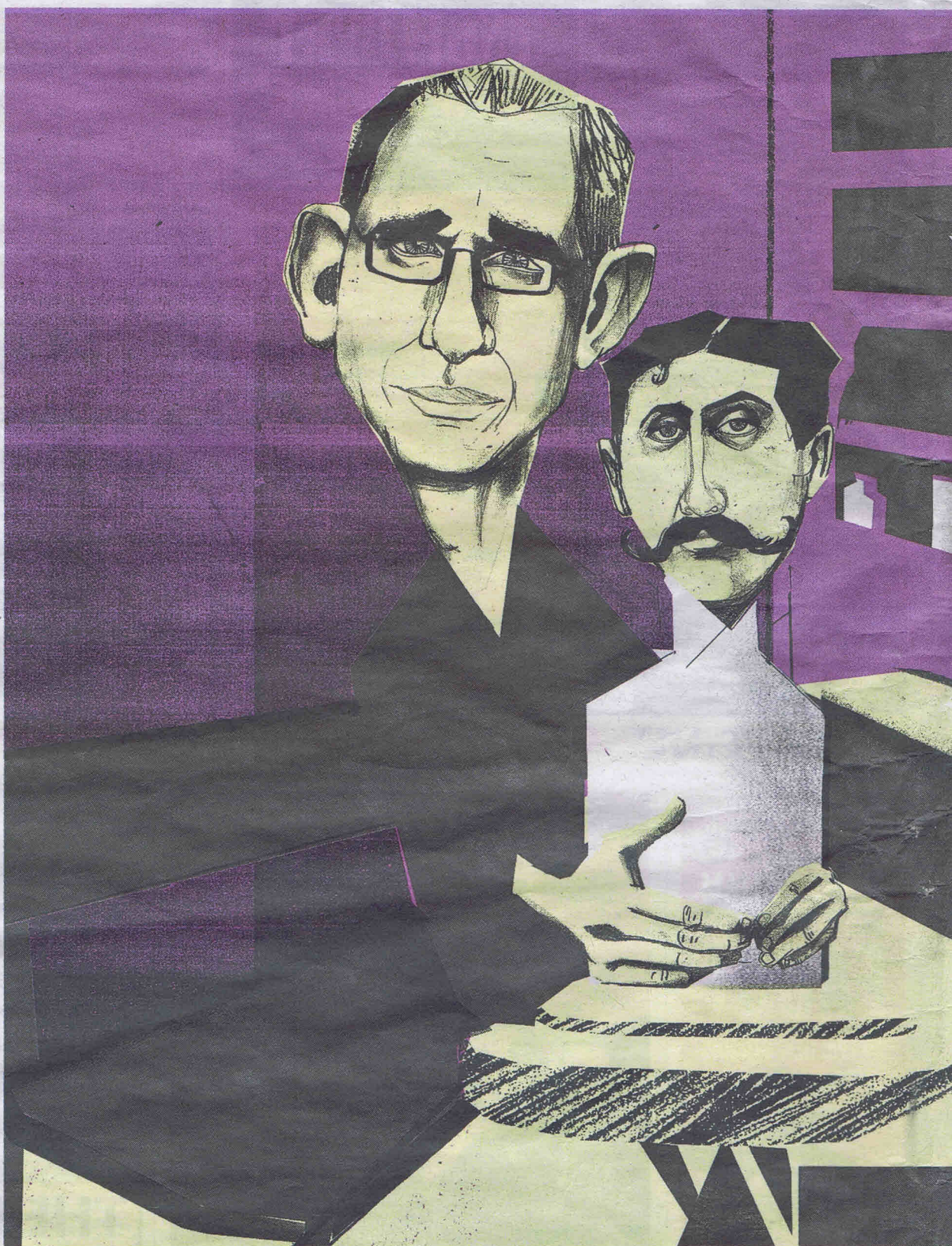
But as I started to trace Charles's passage through Parisian life, his early friendships and love affairs, his passionate and partisan collecting, his attempts to learn to write on art, I fell under the spell of this first owner of my collection of ivories. And I kept coming on Proust. Proust seen whispering to Charles in the corner of a salon. Proust asking his advice on

The Charles in my book was one of Proust's models for Charles Swann

his translation of Ruskin, using the library at the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* where Charles was editor, visiting the apartment at the Hotel Ephrussi in the Rue Monceau to see Charles's new paintings, the 40 Manets, Renoirs, Degas, Sisleys. One of his Monets, a painting of the break-up of ice on the Seine, is alive in Proust's description of it: “A day of thaw... the sun, the blue of the sky, the broken ice, the mud, and the moving water turning the river to a dazzling mirror.”

As I tried to map the straightforward correspondences that my Charles and the fictional Charles share, the lineaments of their lives, I grew more and more confident of this metamorphosis. They were both Jewish. They were both men of the world. They had a social reach from royalty (Charles conducted Queen Victoria around Paris, Swann was a friend of the Prince of Wales) via the salons to the studios of artists.

They were art lovers deeply in love with the works of the Italian Renaissance, Giotto and Botticelli in particular. They were both experts in the wildly arcane subject of Venetian 15th-century medallions. And they were both collectors, patrons of the Impressionists, incongruous in the sunshine at a boating party of a painter friend. At the very back of Renoir's *Boating Party*, slightly apart



from the louche drinking and the flirting in singlets and loose dresses, is Charles, dressed for the opera rather than this late lunch. And Proust weaves him in: “A gentleman... wearing a top hat at a boating party where he was clearly out of place, which proved that for Elstir he was not only a regular sitter, but a friend, perhaps a patron.”

Both write monographs on art: Swann on Vermeer, my Charles on Dürer. They advise society ladies on which paintings to buy. They are both dandies, both *chevaliers* of the *Legion d'honneur*, both infatuated with unsuitable, complex women.

But there was something beyond this delight in finding that the collector of the netsuke had this other reimagined life in Proust: both Charles Ephrussi and Charles Swann were Dreyfusard. For my family found that their carefully constructed life in Parisian society was deeply riven by their Jewishness, when “the

precarious structure of assimilation”, in Walter Benjamin's words, came crashing down around him. They were reviled in the anti-Semitic press, excoriated in pamphlets, threatened.

Paris changed for Charles. He was a *mondain* with doors shut in his face, a patron ostracised by some of the artists he had supported. He collects only “Jew art”, says Renoir. And the clearest, most potent expression of this fissure comes in Proust. I think of what these times must have been like, and recall Proust writing of the Duc de Guermantes's anger: “As far as Swann is concerned... they tell me now that he is openly Dreyfusard. I should never have believed it of him, an epicure, a man of practical judgment, a collector, a connoisseur of old books, a member of the Jockey, a man who enjoys the respect of all, who knows all the good addresses and used to send us the best port you

could wish to drink, a dilettante, a family man. Ah! I feel badly let down.”

Swann, gravely ill and shocked by this illumination of his place in society, is grateful to Dreyfus for revealing “the paths that his forebears had trodden and from which he had been deflected by his aristocratic associations”. It is as if this terrible light causes him to reassess who he is. I am moved when I find that my Charles, terminally ill at the moment of Dreyfus's partial rehabilitation in 1905, helped endow a school in Odessa for indigent Jewish boys. The place where he and his brothers came from is still in his life.

And so, though of course I wanted him to be Swann – driven, loved, graceful – I didn't want Charles to disappear into source material, into literary footnotes. I feared losing him to Proust Studies. And I cared too much about Proust to turn his fiction

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ELLIE FOREMAN-PECK

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Literary line: Edmund de Waal and Proust both play with the real and the invented

into some Belle Epoque acrostic. "My novel has no key," Proust said, repeatedly.

During the years of travelling and researching, recalling conversations and attempting to replace memories with actual rooms and streets, this slippage between what was "real" and what was in fiction became one of the greatest complexities for me. For the family turned up in the novels of Joseph Roth and the stories of Isaac Babel – often, I have to say, as terribly *arriviste*.

Proust played with the interpenetration of the real and the invented; his novels have a panoply of historical figures who appear as themselves mingling with characters reimagined from recognisable people. Elstir, the great painter who leaves his infatuation with *Japonisme* to become an Impressionist, has elements of both Whistler and Renoir, but has another dynamic force. And Proust's characters stand in front of

actual pictures. The visual texture of the novels is suffused not just with references to Giotto and Botticelli, Dürer and Vermeer, Moreau, Monet and Renoir, but by the act of looking at paintings, by the act of collecting them, remembering what it was to see something, the memory of the moment of apprehension.

So as I try to track down what my great-grandfather saw on the way to his office off the *Schottengasse* in Vienna a century ago, or what pictures hung in his salon, I am attempting to bring alive a memory of an early morning walk on a dusty street, the memory of real pictures lost, looted and scattered.

And so, to answer the radio journalist, I am an Englishman but I have to think of Proust.

● *The Hare with Amber Eyes* is published by Vintage at **£8.99** (plus 99p p&p). Edmund de Waal will talk about Proust at the Institut Français on Thursday at 7pm