



Review: Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*

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 **UCLPRESS**

REVIEW

Edmund de Waal, *The Hare With Amber Eyes* (Chatto and Windus, 2010)

by Michael McCluskey

The Ephrussi family were not only the grain kings of Odessa but also the centre of parvenu social life in fin de siècle Paris and Vienna. Their money, power and ostentatious homes were lost amid the chaos of World War Two, but a particular family inheritance survived and ultimately made its way into the ownership of Edmund de Waal: a collection of 264 netsuke, small wood and ivory figures carved in Japan and first purchased by Charles Ephrussi, one of the models for Proust's Swann. *The Hare With Amber Eyes* (one of de Waal's favourites among the collection) tells the story of this dynasty through the passing ownership of the Japanese figures. It sounds like a handy and, perhaps, ham-fisted method to move from one generation to the next; but it works. The netsuke fade in and out of the multiple, and more interesting, stories of migration and assimilation.

If de Waal had been completely besotted with his relations and if he were a less engaging storyteller, *The Hare With Amber Eyes* would be a risible piece of indulgence that rivals the most selfish claims of family history as social history: the type of consanguineal grandstanding that expects us all to find these aunts and uncles endlessly fascinating. However, de Waal's sensitivity to, and criticism of, particular details of his extended family's many possessions make this memoir an evocative study of space, place and scholarly research. de Waal relies somewhat on family resources ('What else have you got in the suitcase under your bed?' he asks his father), but, for the most part, undertakes an extensive journey through the archives of city halls, synagogues and museums. His research is encouraged by the long paper trail made available to him. Family members were not only rich, but also ambitious in their literary and artistic pretensions. Charles Ephrussi collected the netsuke as well as furniture, tapestries and paintings; served as the patron for, among others, Manet and Renoir; and wrote essays of art criticism. His personal secretary was Jules Laforgue, and his activities were recorded in the diaries of Edmund de Goncourt. Another relation, Viktor Ephrussi, collected rare books for his new home on Vienna's Ringstrasse, and de Waal's grandmother Elizabeth wrote a novel about the last days in this Vienna house when Nazi soldiers commandeered it for their headquarters and forced the Jewish Ephrussi to flee.

de Waal assesses the material evidence shrewdly and keeps us apprised of his thoughts on these things and these people. He finds Charles's writing and his 'stage set' existence a bit strained at first, but notes 'his growing confidence and his passion' in his collecting, his writing and his assimilation into the city's social circles.

Assimilation, fitting in, proper placement and arrangement factor into de Waal's descriptions of both people and possessions. He catalogues the collections and artistic contributions of the Ephrussi, and he excavates the motivations that produced them through a Bachelardian orgy of topoanalysis. de Waal's training and practice as a potter alert him to the subtleties of form and texture; his curiosity and humour spin this material into several studies of individual psychology and interior design. Here he is on the young Charles:

I write down this long list of his new possessions and try to imagine being twenty-three, with these crates of treasures heaved up the winding stairs to the second floor and opened with all the shavings and splinters flying; arranging them in my own suite of rooms, trying out their disposition in relation to the morning sun that floods in from the street. As visitors come into the salon, should they see a wall of drawings or a tapestry? (34)

de Waal is a curious, cutting and, at times, awkward observer. His lack of entitlement to the Ephrussi riches distances him from the grand lifestyles he describes and, along with his use of the present tense, invites the reader to share in his wide-eyed wonder. This works in some places more than others. His description of the Palais Ephrussi in Vienna is emphatic and, well, funny: 'All I can see is marble: there is lots of marble. This does not say enough. Everything is marble.' Other passages, such as his tales of Uncle Iggy, suggest that de Waal has, indeed, inherited the overindulgent gene.

The most fascinating and revealing parts of the book are not about the netsuke (their World War Two survival provides a brief thrill because de Waal, thankfully, steers the story just south of mawkish). Rather, the Ephrussi houses offer examples of the ostentation and adaptability of the family. The gilded palaces still stand, but the Hôtel Ephrussi 'is now, rather crushingly, an office for medical insurance', and the Palais Ephrussi, 'a bit Cecil B. de Mille', serves as the headquarters for Casinos Austria. de Waal is only admitted to these spaces with the permission of the new owners, businesses that broadcast their financial success and market position through each structure's intimidating but not impenetrable façade. For most of the book, however, de Waal stands outside, imagines choreographies and reconstructs stories, some tragic, that spring from collections and migrations.

Michael McCluskey