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**The artist whose secret family history became the surprise book of the year**

David Sexton



Ph: Graham Jepson

*Life-changing project: Edmund de Waal, pictured at his Tulse Hill studio, feels "liberated" by his book's success*

This time the Books of the Year choices came up with one stunning result. Sure, there were plenty of mentions for Jonathan Franzen and Candia McWilliam. But the clear winner among British writers was a new face — Edmund de Waal for his family memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which tells its story via a collection of Japanese netsuke that has been inherited through the generations.

The tributes were almost embarrassingly profuse. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, the book was chosen over and over again. For once, sisters AS Byatt and Margaret Drabble could agree — this was the book of the year. The military historian Michael Howard called it "the book, not only of the year, but of the decade ... a quite enchanting book, to be kept and reread by as many generations as it describes".

This coup followed on from a complete set of extraordinarily acclamatory reviews when the book was published back in June. In this paper, Rosemary Hill praised the book for combining the charm of a personal memoir with the resonance of world history.

In the *Sunday Times*, Frances Wilson said pretty definitively: "In the present literary climate of dumbed down, throwaway narratives, to be handed a story as durable and exquisitely crafted as this is a rare pleasure ... Like the netsuke themselves, this book is impossible to put down. You have in your hands a masterpiece."

And for once, sheer excellence, critically acclaimed, has prevailed commercially as well. The Hare with Amber Eyes, originally published with modest sales expectations, has become a bestseller, now on its 12th reprinting, outdoing most of the idiotic ghosted celeb memoirs that the publishers paid over the odds for yet again.

From the beginning, it has been enthusiastically supported by independent bookshops who continue to exist partly in order to find books such as this and back them against the tide of discounted trash. Latterly, the chains have joined in, with stacks of the book now prominently displayed all around Waterstone's, a privilege usually paid for. Altogether, the success of The Hare with Amber Eyes hearteningly proves that the whole business of publishing and bookselling can still respond to merit alone. Who knew?

And none of this applause is exaggerated, I daftly proved to myself while going to see de Waal in his studio in Tulse Hill last Friday.

Although I had read the book when it came out, I started browsing a chapter again and was soon so absorbed that, when I next looked up, I had sailed past my stop and was in East Croydon, necessitating an icy little tour of south London before I could get back, an hour late.

Although this is de Waal's first appearance as a literary writer, he's not an unknown quantity. Indeed, his eminence in his other career, as a ceramicist, could hardly be greater. His porcelain pots, increasingly made to be installed in large groups, are enormously sought after and much imitated. His writings on ceramics, which include a caustically revisionist study of Bernard Leach, have revolutionised the subject. His position was pretty much formally recognised when, for the re-opening of the V&A ceramics galleries last year, he made an extraordinary, scarlet-framed circular installation high in a dome, reconceiving the museum's riches, from early Chinese celadons through to high modernism.

For all his charm and apparent diffidence, de Waal, now 46, has achieved all this through the most ferocious dedication. He decided that he wanted to become a potter — as soon as he'd tried it — aged five. At King's School Canterbury, he was taught by the Leach-inspired potter Geoffrey Whiting and although he went up to Cambridge to read English, taking a First, he kept working at it. After graduation, he set up a pottery in the Welsh borders making repeat domestic ware, as the Leach tradition demanded.

But in his late twenties, studying in Japan, he discovered both that Leach's claim to have understood Japanese tradition was flawed — and that he wanted to make quite different pots, not heavy green stoneware but fluid, gleaming porcelain, a material with great historical resonance, at the time remarkably little used by studio potters. Now it's everywhere, so great has his influence been in that world.

Yet few of those who knew him in this context knew anything of the story he tells in The Hare with Amber Eyes. Much of it he discovered for himself in writing the book. For although de Waal was brought up in high Anglican circles — his father, Victor de Waal, was Dean of Canterbury, his mother, Esther, still writes on the rule of St Benedict and Celtic spirituality — he is descended from one of the great Jewish banking dynasties, the Ephrussis.

When he was in Japan, he saw a lot of his adored great-uncle Ignace von Ephrussi, who had settled there. Among Iggy's possessions was a case of 264 netsuke, tiny, caressable Japanese carvings in ivory and wood. Edmund de Waal inherited this collection, after his great uncle's death, and in this memoir sets out to discover its history in his family, uncovering an extraordinary story, stretching from Odessa, where the family fortunes were first established in the grain trade, through Paris, where the collection was first acquired by Charles Ephrussi, the wealthy patron of the Impressionists who was one of Proust's main models for Swann. In 1899, Charles sent the netsuke to Vienna as a wedding present for a cousin, where they survived, remarkably, until 1945... The book manages the move from these tiny objects to the great events of history, including the Holocaust, with extraordinary deftness and grace.

The book changed a lot between first and second drafts, de Waal admits. The first was portentous, "channelling a slightly professorial kind of voice — actually, it was bollocks!" It pretty much belonged, he admits, to that dire Nineties wave of books about single commodities such as salt or cod.

Then he realised that he needed to put himself in the story — "to find a voice to really inhabit the experience of actually finding things out and really changing your mind about things as you go along". That made it unlike anything he had previously written.

To the indignation of his agent Felicity Bryan, the book then got "turned down by absolutely everyone. It got turned down by Faber. The editor there said there's absolutely no market for Jewish memoirs — if you win a prize, it might have a life, but no way am I publishing this". At Murray, Roland Phillips also told him it was not his kind of thing.

Eventually, there were two offers of an advance of £10,000 — one from a friend, Simon Prosser at Hamish Hamilton, the other from Clara Farmer at Chatto, which he went with. It's not a lot for four years of hard work, he points out. Some of the editors who turned him down have since written to de Waal to acknowledge their mistake.

The first print run was just 5,000 copies and de Waal himself didn't expect it to be a big seller. "Because how on earth could I have known at all I'd get any response to it? It's such an odd matrix of personal obsessions." But then he was overwhelmed by the reviews.

The Hare with Amber Eyes sold 5,000 copies last week alone. ("That was the best week of my life," he says, surprisingly, given the scale of his success as an artist.) In the US, it's going well, too — "it hasn't been as epic as it has been here but they've reprinted five times in America."

He has thrown himself into promotion, up to a point. He went to the naff Galaxy Book Awards, self-described as the Oscars of the book trade, where he won New Writer of the Year, and was asked what his book was about by the compere David Baddiel, whom he does not admire, to put it mildly. Next year, he's up for the Costa prize for Biography.

And he has been on the publicity circuit, albeit trying to make each personal appearance different — so that, for example, he'll be talking about Mourning and Melancholia at the Freud Museum in January rather than just the book itself.

Not all of these experiences have proved enjoyable. "In America, it was very scary because of course there's not the politesse here — people stand up and say, 'Have you brought your kids up Jewish?' or, 'Why did your father convert?'"

The book is about "what assimilation means and what inheritance means", to be sure, but "in America, some of those sensibilities are slightly elided", as he delicately puts it.

"Obviously it has been quite interesting for my father here as well, because people have said, 'I didn't realise this about your family' — not surprisingly, since he spent 80 years not talking about it. But he's actually very happy about it.

"Part of the timing of the book was very much wanting to write it while he's around, and while my kids were growing up so that there could be some kind of conversation between us, me and him, and him and my children, which has happened and for which I'm really grateful."

For himself, the book's success has been a liberation. He says he doesn't feel the need to write about pots any more and he has resigned as Professor of Ceramics at the University of Westminster. "I feel I am free. It's absolutely wonderful, it's been the most amazing six months — there's a sense of letting go of lots of things I thought I had to do... Obviously there's quite a lot of pressure from publishers at this point to do the next book but I don't know what I will write next and I don't know how long it will take to do it." One friend joshingly advised him never to do another.

In the meantime, he says, his anxiety is that "everybody is going to buy it for each other at Christmas and there are going to be these piles of my book by the dustbins on Boxing Day. F\*\*k, six copies of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*!" If that happens, just pass them on, I say. It's one good book, in a sea of bilge.