

Edmund de Waal is a world-famous ceramicist. Having spent thirty years making beautiful pots—which are then sold, collected, and handed on—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 Rothschilds. 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.

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