

The great Waal of china



The ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal has become unimaginably rich from his pots. Yet his road to success has been fragile, leading all the way back to concentration camps. By *Christina Paterson*. Portraits: *Alex Lake*





WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Edmund de Waal at work in his studio, an old munitions factory in south London. "Things break," says the sculptor. "I broke a pot recently"

"There's this thing about white not being available to you. It's something to get rid of, because creativity starts the moment white disappears"

AT the heart of ceramics," says the potter Edmund de Waal, "is this thing about things going wrong." You're telling me, I want to say, as I sip coffee from a cup I'm terrified I'll drop. The cup isn't just a cup, it's an Edmund de Waal cup, and it's made of something that feels more like eggshell than any kind of clay. I fear it might shatter.

I have been in a state of terror since I walked through the door of this old factory in south London, a state of terror and wonder and — well, OK, let's call a spade a spade in the way de Waal calls a tiny cylinder of breathtaking beauty and delicacy "a pot". I have been in a state of envy. I have walked into this old gun factory in West Norwood and entered a temple to art, beauty and grace. It's huge. It's airy. It's white. It's bright, and inside it are thousands of exquisitely crafted pots — all breakable.

De Waal's dog, Isla, a french basset hound, pads about gently. She has clearly

learnt to feel the fear of walking through this hallowed space. So have de Waal's assistants, all ceramicists or artists in their own right. One of them, a beautiful young woman called Nerissa who is also his researcher, has shown me round. There are shelves of tiny pots and, in the glaze room, the pots are each labelled with a number, the list of glazes, which range from things like "ice trap" to "Ellen", the name of Isla's predecessor, who died. Some of the pots are black, or speckled variations on black. Some are variations of pale blue. But most are white. Edmund de Waal has made his name with white pots. Oh, and with an internationally bestselling memoir called *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.

Most potters would be happy to scrape a living from their work. Edmund de Waal can get £500,000 for a small collection of his pots, which he now sells in carefully curated huddles behind Perspex or glass. His work has been shown at the V&A, Tate Britain and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and in a leading solo exhibition at the Gagosian

Gallery in New York. He's the most famous potter in the country after Grayson Perry, but he is chalk to Perry's (much more colourful) cheese. De Waal's pots are so stunning in their simplicity, they can almost make you catch your breath.

When de Waal first had the idea of tracing his family's history through a set of miniature sculptures he inherited, his publishers probably stuck the book in the category of "minority interest/eccentric charm". The tiny sculptures, called netsuke, carved in wood and ivory and designed to be hung from the cord of a kimono, belonged to de Waal's Uncle Iggy, who, in 1947, took them "home" to Japan. But they were first bought by a cousin of de Waal's great grandfather, Charles Ephrussi, who in 1857 moved from Odessa to Vienna and then, in 1871, to a huge "palais" in Paris. Jewish grain traders turned bankers, the Ephrussi were, he says in the preface to *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, "staggeringly rich".

Charles Ephrussi fell in love with the

Paris art scene. He knew Monet, Renoir and Degas, and bought work from all three. He's the man in the top hat in Renoir's Luncheon of the Boating Party, and one of the inspirations for Charles Swann in his friend Proust's seven-volume novel, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Charles gave the netsuke as a wedding present to de Waal's great-grandfather, Viktor, who lived in Vienna. What follows is a gripping history, as anti-semitism rises and then the Nazis strike. The *New Yorker* described *The Hare with Amber Eyes* as "the most enchanting history lesson imaginable" and the reviewer in this paper called it "a masterpiece". The book sold more than a million copies.

So what, *exactly*, I'm tempted to ask, when we're sitting down for that coffee in those *very* precious cups, has gone wrong for you? We are in another beautiful corner of his studio, with his desk, computer and books, and across from us is the mezzanine with his potter's wheel. It is, to echo AS Byatt, the Platonic ideal of a writer's writing space: a sanctuary of peace and light. But I don't ask the question, because de Waal seems anxious. "Phew!" he says, when I tell him that I really like his new book.

The book, *The White Road*, is a cultural history of porcelain, but it's also, as its subtitle says, "a pilgrimage of sorts" to "three white hills in China and Germany and England", the three places where porcelain was invented, or reinvented. The book, he says, is "a paying of dues to those that have gone before".

De Waal has previously talked about how he begged his father to let him go to a pottery class when he was five. As soon as he made his first pot, he knew this was what he wanted to do. The teacher offered him a range of colours, but he, unlike most five-year-olds, chose white, and the significance of the colour is referenced in his book title. Does he remember why he chose the colour?

De Waal places his hands on his forehead as if I had just asked him to explain the theory of relativity. He looks a tiny bit like a hare: long-limbed, rangy, slightly twitchy. Unlike the hare in the netsuke collection, his eyes aren't amber, but when he's talking about something he cares about, they blaze. "It was just an impossible colour," he says. "White is an invitation. You're always told: here's a sheet of paper, now do a big, colourful picture. There's always that thing about white not being available to you. It's something to get rid of, because creativity starts the moment white disappears." Then he bangs the table. He actually bangs the table. "Sorry!" he says. "I just remember thinking: that's so ridiculously odd."

As a teenager, he explains, and an apprentice to the pottery teacher at his school, white was "unavailable", because his teacher thought white "was crockery, it was Stoke on Trent, it was standardisation, it was all these things that were to be rejected and

reviled". His pottery teacher was called Geoffrey Whiting, so God only knows what was going on there. It was much later, after de Waal had spent two years as a full-time apprentice, and three years reading English at Cambridge, and seven years working by himself "in silent, ordered studios on the borders of Wales", that he plucked up the courage to go against the teaching of his master and ditch the grey stoneware for shiny white porcelain. As youthful rebellions go, it seems on the tame side.

"There was," says de Waal, "a real feeling of covert, shady goings-on in the studio. And it was really difficult. This new material, porcelain, was very sticky. But the newness was really exciting, wonderful, in fact!"

The love of this "sticky" white material is one that often seems to have bordered on obsession. The *White Road* traces the history of that obsession. De Waal starts in China, in Jingdezhen, the place where porcelain was first invented 1,000 years ago, and then goes with his son to Venice, to see the porcelain jar Marco Polo brought back from China, after his visit to the court of Kublai Khan. After Dublin, he goes to Dresden, and to the castle in Meissen where, in 1708, a mathematician called Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and an apothecary's boy called Johann Friedrich Böttger fired a mix of clay and alabaster and produced a "milk-white jar".

He then returns to England and follows in the footsteps of a Quaker apothecary called William Cookworthy who read a book about China which changed his life. The cider tankard he eventually produced was the "first piece of true porcelain ever made in England", a good few years before Josiah

Wedgwood practically swapped porcelain for his name. The book was meant to end in England, but de Waal finds himself dragged back to Germany, to a porcelain factory at Allach, which was taken over by the SS and moved to the concentration camp at Dachau.

How did he feel about being dragged back into painful history he thought he'd left behind? "It is," he says, "a bit like the Cornish landscape, where things give way all the time. You're walking in territory you think is very safe, and suddenly there's a hidden mineshaft or fault line, and that was my feeling of being taken somewhere you didn't really want to go. I thought, 'F*** it. I hadn't expected that.'"

Porcelain, de Waal discovered, wasn't just big among the Nazis. It was also popular in the Cultural Revolution. In order to destroy "old customs, old habits, old culture and old thinking", school masters and university lecturers were forced to work seven days a week, producing porcelain pandas, porcelain "dunces" (the Chinese intellectuals who were forced to wear dunce caps during the revolution) and porcelain Maos. Did this have any effect on De Waal's relationship with porcelain? Or on his use of the colour white? De Waal looks away and there's a very, very long pause. "After the Allach experience, I went back to interview someone who was a collector and dealer, who sat in his little suburban house near Dachau with a whole vitrine of Allach porcelain he was selling to neo-Nazis. You come back and you think, 'What am I doing, putting white things out into the world?'"

De Waal's relatives were among the lucky ones. When Hitler marched in to Vienna, they were not bundled off to ➤➤➤



TOP OF THE POTS
De Waal's studio is bursting with pots.
A small selection can sell for up to £500,000

Dachau. They were beaten and locked up, but after signing away their homes, property, business empire and art collections, they managed to get out of Vienna. De Waal's grandmother, Elisabeth, a poet and lawyer who had married a Dutch businessman, helped her father get a one-way visa to Britain. Her sister and brothers were already safe in Mexico and America. But for her mother, it was too late. She died in Czechoslovakia, en route. The word "suicide", says de Waal in *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, was not mentioned, but it was understood that she "could not go on".

De Waal's great-grandfather, Viktor, went, with Elisabeth and her two sons, including de Waal's father, Hendrik, to start a new life in Tunbridge Wells. From a palace in Vienna to a rented house in Tunbridge Wells must have been quite a shift. De Waal was surprised to find out how rich his family had been. "It was an extraordinary discovery. I was shocked by the scale of their wealth."

It isn't hard to see why de Waal might not approve. He can seem like a parody of a self-effacing Englishman: modest, shy, hating a fuss. But then he's the son of an Anglican vicar. His grandmother, Elisabeth, converted to Christianity, and his father was dean of Canterbury Cathedral. His childhood, he says in *The White Road*, was "choppy with priests, Gestalt therapists, actors, potters, abbesses, writers, the lost, the homeless and family-hungry, God-damaged, pilgrims".

What wasn't mentioned, in this rather eccentric childhood, was the fact that his father was a Jew. This, says de Waal, was "never part of the equation". He himself is not Jewish (his mother's a Gentile), but "what's quite strange and amazing" is that he has "been adopted by the Jewish community as a sort of lost Jew. I feel kinship," he adds, "but my kids are being brought up in a classic mishmash way".

De Waal doesn't share his parents' faith. Does he share his parents' politics, which, presumably, are vaguely liberal left? De Waal nods. "That's exactly where I'd put myself." Corbyn? "No, not Corbyn. Passionate, but pragmatic." Who, then? "I don't know. I'm slightly in despair. I can't believe there's not a serious, realigned alternative out there."

Unlike his parents, he is rich off the back of the success of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Did he, I ask, expect to make money through his work? This time, he laughs. "No, but you should ask Sue about that." Sue is his wife. They met at Cambridge and she has, from the way he talks, been the centre of his universe ever since. "We got together," he says, "when Sue was working for Save the Children Fund and I was making nothing, so, no, there's never been any expectation about this. Of course, it's extraordinary." Well, yes. When a few pots sell for the price of a house, you can probably say it is.

The money, it soon becomes clear, all gets re-invested in the work. "What it allows



HOUND AND VISION
De Waal's dog, Isla, treads carefully while following her master through the huge studio

me to do," he says, "is museum shows. Last year, for example, I had a big exhibition at Turner Contemporary, which was these vitrines hanging up, which was there for a year. That's not paid for by anyone." So he basically subsidises his own shows? "Yes."

He is currently working on a big installation for an exhibition in January at the Gagosian Gallery in LA. He has said in other interviews that he sometimes writes through the night. Does he ever relax?

De Waal looks a bit hurt. "Yes, with the family." De Waal, Sue and his children, who are 13, 15 and 17, live in a 1960s house in Dulwich. They watch Netflix, go for walks, and go on holiday in a croft that he and his wife own in Ardnamurchan, near Mull.

Midway through the conversation there's an almighty crash from downstairs. I'm so relieved I haven't caused it. De Waal, too, looks relaxed. "Things break," he says matter-of-factly. "That," he adds, "is part of the book. Which reminds me. I broke a pot

recently. In Japan they gild the fragments, so I asked one of my assistants to do the same. The other bits have gone right round the world. These," he says, holding out two jagged fragments, "are the last two." He offers me a choice of one to keep.

Greedily, I pick the bigger piece. It is luminous, white and strangely beautiful. One sharp edge has been dipped in something that looks like gold. As I slip it in my bag, I feel as if I have been given a talisman. And I can't help thinking, as I leave that palace of white and light, that if this is what happens when things go wrong, it seems pretty damn good to me ■

The White Road (Random House, £xx) is out now. To buy it for £ inc p&p, call 0845 271 2135 or visit [thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop](https://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop). Edmund de Waal talks at the Cheltenham Literature Festival on Friday, October 2 at 4pm. Times+ members can enjoy priority booking for the festival. Visit mytimesplus.co.uk/cheltenham