

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

[The Hare with Amber Eyes](#)

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The Hare with Amber Eyes is an extraordinary memoir pieced together with exquisite care by British ceramicist Edmund de Waal. He tells the story of his family, the Ephrussi, who went from Jewish shtetl in Odessa in the 1800s to opulent palaces in Vienna and Paris by the early 1900s. They became one of the wealthiest banking families in Vienna until they lost almost everything to the Nazis in 1938.



[Photo Credit](#)

The book's title gets its name from one of the 264 netsuke figurines that were among the family's few possessions that survived the Holocaust, thanks to the ingenuity of a beloved housekeeper. I read the book when it came out in 2010 and had the opportunity recently to see the collection of netsuke at The Jewish Museum in New York. Given their winding and, at times, tumultuous journey through five generations within the Ephrussi family, these decorative objects function as storytellers of a tale that is at once unique and universal.

1. What are netsuke? Mostly carved from wood and ivory, netsuke are Japanese ornaments that are tucked into the [obi](#) (sash) worn with traditional Japanese men's [kimono](#). They are typically small enough to hold in the palm of your hand. Netsuke had a very specific purpose. Because their kimono had no pockets, men would use [inro](#) (small cases) to hold things like tobacco. They suspended the inro from their obi and attached the netsuke by a cord to serve as a counterweight. The netsuke became an expression of style, much like neckties in western dress. Among de Waal's collection are owls, fish, frogs, elephants, fishermen, baskets, nuts, gourds, and giving the book its title, a hare carved from ivory that sits perched on its back legs with a raised forepaw and amber eyes.

2. The netsuke tell a story of craftsmanship. The 264 netsuke are works of art first and foremost. The craftsmanship associated with designing and carving the myriad figurines requires a high degree of imagination, concentration, precision, and training. Engaging in a practice of skills development and mastering a craft has substantial mental health [benefits](#), including reduced anxiety, enhanced sense of wellbeing, and higher self-esteem. Drawing on these known benefits, the field of art therapy has a vast and well-established

history and practice. Schools, mental health programs, and community centers serving young and old alike benefit from incorporating art therapy in their programming, given its demonstrated [efficacy](#) in promoting mental health among people of all ages.

3. The netsuke tell a story of displacement. De Waal's netsuke are part of the permanent collection at the Jewish Museum in Vienna, but they have been exhibited worldwide and are presently on exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York. Edmund de Waal hopes that they will bring the story of "migration, identity, and exile to a new audience." At this very moment, around the world, more than [84 million people](#) are displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. People and communities are remarkably resilient, but displacement increases the risk of mental health problems for many. The experience of forced migration and displacement exacerbates risk and vulnerability for those with serious mental illness. It is associated with elevated levels of common mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

4. The netsuke tell a story of both keeping and losing. The netsuke tell a story of love and loss. One of the complex truths of our psychological world is that loss and pain are the inverses of connection and love. We experience pain and loss because we have known connection and love. Most of us have objects that we treasure because they provide an emotional and psychological bridge to people and times that conjure up feelings of joy and pleasure. This act of remembering can bring back pleasant feelings tied to the original experience, which can be observed in our brains' neural circuitry. Using fMRI technology, Professor Megan Speer and colleagues have conducted [research](#) documenting enhanced activity in the striatum and medial prefrontal cortex associated with positive autobiographical memory. The effect is so pleasurable that participants in their study were willing to sacrifice a more tangible reward, money, in order to reminisce about positive past experiences.

5. The netsuke tell a story of resilience. These Japanese ornaments went from Japan to Paris at a time when Europeans were intrigued by Japanese arts and culture thanks to the opening of Japan's borders in the 1860s after 250 years of isolation. Charles Ephrussi acquired the netsuke in the 1870s and subsequently sent them to Vienna as a wedding present to his cousin, Mr. de Waal's great-grandfather. They were proudly displayed in a vitrine in Vienna until 1938. As the Nazis ransacked and occupied their home, a devoted housekeeper surreptitiously managed to hide the netsuke - a few at a time - by taking them away in the pockets of her apron. They survived and were passed on to Iggie Ephrussi, Edmund De Waal's uncle, who lived in Japan after the war. Upon his death, they were bequeathed to Edmund De Waal. The survival of this collection in the face of dislocation, distress, and destruction over generations required a mix of fortitude and good luck at multiple junctures - symbolic inspiration for each of us as we strive to be resilient in our own lives.

If we are lucky, we each possess our own version of netsuke that elicit positive autobiographical memories. Such objects connect us to our family stories and help stimulate our brains in ways that enhance well-being. More than their material value, they are priceless in their meaning-making.
