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# Edmund de Waal: 'If you make pots, you are used to things going wrong'

**The star potter, bestselling author and chair of the Booker prize reveals why he always returns to stories of loss and exile**

Words and pots. Books and porcelain. The two have always occupied an equal space in the mind of Edmund de Waal. He is a bestselling author and world-famous contemporary artist. Apart from having numerous art exhibitions opening in several European cities in 2024, de Waal is also chairing the Booker prize judging panel and has read 156 books in the past nine months. His bestselling family memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which retraced his Jewish European heritage from Tokyo to Odessa via 19th-century Paris and Nazi-occupied Vienna, was the recipient of numerous literary awards when it came out in 2010, so he knows what is at stake for the authors he is judging.

For a busy man, de Waal seems remarkably calm and low-key when I visit his spacious white-walled studio in south London. “It’s not normally this tidy,” he says self-consciously as he shows me round the former gun factory, explaining that a collection of his latest pots have just been shipped out to Norway for an exhibition.

Tall, thin, bespectacled and softly spoken, de Waal is strikingly modest. There’s no aura of success around him; instead he confesses to “being massively insecure”. He says: “Each time I begin a new project, whether it’s a book or an artwork, I wonder if it will find a place in the world. I don’t seem to be able to carry forward confidence from one thing to another.”

From October, his installation *library of exile* will be on display at the refurbished Warburg Institute in Bloomsbury, London. It's a structure coated in liquid porcelain on to which the artist has handwritten the names of libraries that have been destroyed, from ancient times to the present. The original inspiration was the library that belonged to his great-grandfather in Vienna. That was looted by fascist thugs during the Nazi Anschluss in 1938. The books were last seen disappearing on a truck, never to be found again. "It's made me hypersensitive and aware of other libraries being looted or destroyed over the years."

Over coffee he mentions the name of another destroyed library that could be added to this litany of book burning through the centuries: the Spellow Library in Liverpool, which was torched by far-right rioters in August. "Historically libraries have always been in the firing line. They're seen as dangerous. Just look at how they've been systematically targeted in Ukraine and Gaza," de Waal says.

There's a wonderful circularity to the fact that de Waal has donated his ceramic library to the Warburg because it is also a library in exile. It was founded in Hamburg in the early 1900s by the art historian Aby Warburg, and the entire collection and all the librarians moved to Britain in 1933 as the Nazis came to power. In 1944 the library was incorporated into the University of London, where it has been an invaluable source of research for art historians ever since. One of its directors was the Austrian-born Ernst Gombrich, who wrote *The Story of Art* as a way of introducing young readers to art history. It's still in print having sold eight million copies.

The Warburg's present home in Bloomsbury has undergone a £14.5 million transformation designed by the Stirling prizewinning architects Haworth Tompkins. De Waal's *library of exile* takes pride of place in a new exhibition gallery, open to the public for the first time. The artist jokes how, until now, "you could only visit the Warburg if you had multiple PhDs in art history ... this whole project is about opening it up, making it more accessible".

His personal connection to the Warburg dates back to his teenage years, when he met Gombrich over tea in a dark rambling house in Hampstead, north London. It was the home of an old family friend, another Jewish Viennese exile. “It was a proper Mitteleuropa Hampstead experience, quite scary and conducted in several different languages,” de Waal says. He adds that he’s finally applying for Austrian citizenship. It makes sense after Brexit for him and his three children to have European passports, but given his family history it’s something he has struggled with.

Having devoured *The Hare with Amber Eyes* when it came out, I was surprised to learn that as a child de Waal was largely unaware of his Jewish heritage; it wasn’t spoken about. It was only later that he embarked on his journey of discovery. He was raised next door to Lincoln Cathedral, where his father was an Anglican cleric (he would later become dean of Canterbury Cathedral). It was his father, Victor, who took him to his first pottery class aged five, an epiphany moment for the small boy, who fell in love with the process of moulding wet clay and determined then and there to become a potter.

After leaving school he spent five months in Japan studying with various master ceramicists. There he got to know his grandmother's brother, his great-uncle Ignace Ephrussi, who had settled in Tokyo after the war. His stories about life in prewar Vienna inspired the young man's interest in his Jewish heritage. His trip to Japan was followed by a two-year apprenticeship back home with the potter Geoffrey Whiting and then a three-year degree in English literature at Cambridge.

Words and clay. The intertwining of his two passions has informed everything de Waal does, whether it's writing books or making art. Much of his artwork consists of small, simple, handmade porcelain pots in white or black, displayed in vitrines or on shelves. They are meticulously spaced and arranged to look like notes on a music score or individual words or phrases spaced out on a page of poetry. Both the books and the artworks constantly return to stories of loss and exile, and the idea that memories are contained in objects.

He is writing another book but has had to pause to work on the Booker prize. I ask if any themes emerged from his reading or selection of winners. “Not really, we didn’t want issue-driven books on our shortlist. They are works of fiction which make us care deeply about people and their predicaments in a world that can be indifferent or hostile.”

This year’s shortlist of six includes a Dutch author, an Australian, a Canadian, two Americans and one British author. De Waal says: “I’m 100 per cent behind the opening up of the Booker prize to everyone writing in English language. Everything I do is about belonging in more than one place, so I love the fact that we have all these novelists from across the globe who have chosen to write in this language.”

He says he doesn’t have a routine when it comes to reading, writing or making. “I come in as early as I can to my studio when it is still dark and start work. I’m thinking about writing or reading when I’m making a pot and listening to music.”

I press him on what his next book is about but he’s reluctant to say, afraid to jinx it so early in the process. All he will reveal is that it’s about the psalms that he grew up hearing every day in the cathedrals where his father worked and that “it won’t be some great cultural history. Like all my books it’s a personal journey.”

Looking through the long list of exhibitions on his website, I’m struck by how prolific he is. I ask him where that drive comes from. “I’m turning 60 tomorrow so maybe that’s it,” he says, laughing, and then speculates about whether it comes from a refugee mentality, a need to belong or stake your place in the world. “I don’t take anything for granted. If you make pots, you are used to things going wrong. You learn to live with fracture and the reality that you can’t control outcomes, and that has been very grounding in my creative life.”

***library of exile* is on show at the Warburg Institute, London WC1, from October 2; warburg.sas.ac.uk**