

The Scoundrel, the Bore, the Madman, and Other Collector Stereotypes in Books and Movies

by Jeanne Schinto

Early on in Henry James's novella *The Aspern Papers*, published in 1888, the main character, who is a young, unnamed American writer and publisher, is given a diagnosis by a friend. She calls his obsession with acquiring a certain cache of letters penned by a once renowned, romantic poet, Jeffrey Aspern, "a fine case of monomania." "One would think you expected from it the answer to the riddle of the universe," she remarks. The young man denies "the impeachment," but an equivocation quickly follows. He denies it "only by replying that if I had to choose between the previous solution and a bundle of Jeffrey Aspern's letters I knew indeed which would appear to me the greater boon." It's an ambiguous statement, to be sure, but the remainder of the narrative leaves little doubt which prize he would prefer.

Leon Edel, James's biographer, characterized *The Aspern Papers* as a "moral fable for historians and

James sets up for his readers a series of questions at this suspenseful juncture shortly before the denouement. Is the young man willing to go through with a distasteful marriage to "a plain dingy elderly person" in order finally to possess the object of his desire? Is he willing to pay that high a price? If he does, is he a scoundrel? If he doesn't, is he a fool? It would be interesting to discuss this novella with a group of collectors and hear their differing views. I'd be curious to learn not only what they think of the young man's ultimate choice but also their thoughts on James's characterization of him. Then again, "plot is character revealed by action," according to Aristotle. In a genuine work of literary art such as this one, it should be impossible to separate the two.

I would not want to hear what collectors might say about the unremittingly unsympathetic portrayal of the collector in a literary work of the same period written by James's good friend Edith Wharton. I'd be afraid of getting an earful. Published in 1905, *The House of Mirth* features one Percy Gryce, a dull, unimaginative New York man of wealth who collects Americana in the form of books. Supported by a fortune made by his dead father's invention of dubious value, "a patent device for excluding fresh air from hotels," he is a bachelor living with his mother, "a monumental woman with the voice of a pulpit orator and a mind preoccupied with the iniquities of her servants." This milquetoast is in the gun sights of the novel's main character, the young, attractive, financially desperate Lily Bart, a gold digger in pursuit of a rich husband. Gryce is one possibility, if she can only just tolerate his incessant book chatter.

"She had been bored all the afternoon by Percy Gryce," Wharton's omniscient narrator tells us, "—the mere thought seemed to waken an echo of his droning voice—but she could not ignore him on the morrow, she must follow up her success, must submit to more boredom, must be ready with fresh compliances and adaptabilities, and all on the bare chance that he might ultimately decide to do her the honor of boring her for life."

Gryce is not only a bore; he is something of an ersatz collector, for the core of his library did not originate with him. It was bequeathed by a bibliophile uncle—a fact Gryce has conveniently forgotten, taking "as much pride in his inheritance as though it had been his own work." To be fair, he continues to add to the collection, but he goes about it dispassionately. His only reading consists of journals and reviews about book collecting, which he scours for mentions of the Gryce Americana collection. That is what truly excites him.

Lily Bart not only listens to Gryce's talk about "some



Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, author of *Collector's Progress*, in a 1956 photo. Credit: Walpole Society Archives, Winterthur Library. Used by permission of the Walpole Society.

rubbishy old books," she actually studies up on the subject so that she can ask intelligent questions, the better to stroke her prey's ego. As monomaniacal as any other obsessive, she has clear motives: she "determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it.... and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence."

What's perhaps most maddening about Gryce is that he knows he is a bore. When he begins to answer one of Lily Bart's questions, he is "prepared for the look of lassitude which usually crept over his listeners' faces." He's surprised when that doesn't happen, "and he grew eloquent under her receptive gaze." Poor innocent Gryce. He should have taken that absence of glazed eyes as an omen. For it's a truth universally acknowledged that only fellow collectors aren't bored by the endless details of one's collection.

It's called friendship. Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, whose *One Man's Education* I wrote about in my previous sampler, includes the friendship theme in another of his books, *Collector's Progress*, published in 1951 and subtitled *The Collector's Own Story of the Formation of the World's Greatest Collection of Books and Manuscripts by and about Horace Walpole*. His life's work, it is dedicated to a man 21 years his junior, "Edward Clark Streeter, M.D. / 1874-1947 / Collector, Teacher, Friend." In 1928 the New York Academy of Medicine bought Streeter's rare book collection. Considered one of the finest private medical libraries ever assembled, it was sold to the institution by the legendary dealer A.S.W. Rosenbach. Streeter also collected weights and measures, approximately 3000 individual objects, which he gave to Yale University, his alma mater, along with related books on the subject.

Lefty Lewis and Ned Streeter met in 1925 on the dock at Southampton, both of them sailing home. As Lewis puts it, compared to Streeter, he himself had "hardly reached the letter B in the alphabet of collecting as [Streeter] practiced it." Nonetheless, the two became friends and the following year went on a collecting trip to England together. "We would go our several ways during the day," Lewis wrote in *Collector's Progress*. "Ned listened in the evening with kindness and courtesy to the details of my finds, even though they were only of books printed in the eighteenth century." Some of Streeter's weights and scales were Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Islamic, Greek, and Roman. As for the books, "Ned belonged to the elite of the book world," owning "incunabula by the yard." Still, they talked and talked in the smoking room at Brown's Hotel after dinner. "We sat in semi-darkness, deep in leather chairs that crackled when we moved." The waiter, delivering brandies to others, "would glance at us and no doubt wonder what there could be in it for this strange American pair who bought books and weights all day long and talked about them all night."

Were they mad? Collectors as madmen is a theme never far from the surface in any book on the collecting theme. "He was a short, stocky man, aged (as he told me) seventy-seven, with the intense expression of the lifelong collector

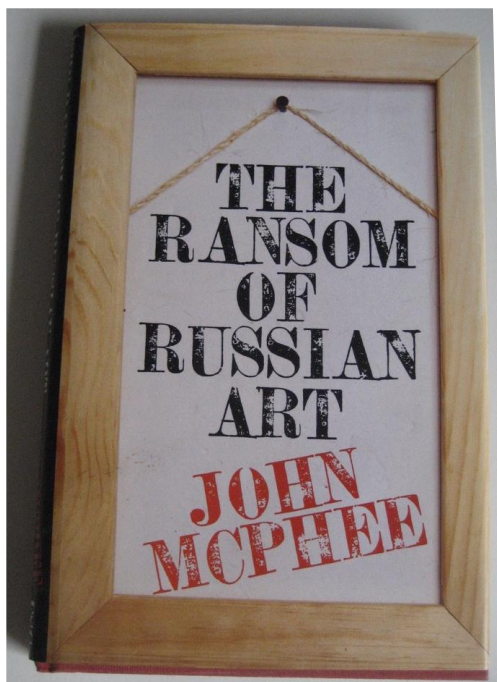


High Fidelity's star John Cusack, center, with two of his fellow collectors, who are employed in the Cusack character's vintage record shop.

biographers." Given that the protagonist is hell-bent on a rare acquisition, the lessons of this cautionary tale apply equally to collectors. My previous essay about books on collectors and collecting for these pages (*M.A.D.*, May 2017, p. 3-B) didn't address the many negative stereotypes of those with a penchant for acquiring. I am taking the opportunity to do that in this sequel. I'll point out some offending characters as found in nonfiction and fiction books and consider a masterpiece of a short story, a contemporary graphic novel, and a few films.

As it happens, production is underway in Venice on a new film version of *The Aspern Papers*. It will star Jonathan Rhys Meyers, the leading man in Woody Allen's tragicomedy *Match Point* (2005); Vanessa Redgrave will play Aspern's long-ago lover Miss Juliana Bordereau, to whom the Aspern letters were written; and Redgrave's daughter Joely Richardson has the role of Miss Juliana's niece Miss Tina, a frowsy, middle-aged spinster (for lack of a better term). Given the stellar cast, it's thrilling to imagine how this adaptation will turn out, especially since the novella has so many cinematic aspects. I also wonder how sympathetic the acquisitive young man will be.

The Aspern Papers is among James's best-known, most acclaimed, and accessible pieces of fiction, but if you don't know it or need a refresher, here is the plot. A Miss Havisham-like crone, Miss Juliana lives with Miss Tina in a decaying Venetian palazzo. Having learned of the letters in Miss Juliana's possession, the young man rents rooms there. He makes himself a model tenant—supplying his landladies with fresh flowers, restoring their overgrown garden, being generally charming—and waits for the right moment to make a play for his quarry. The women, meanwhile, are not above unscrupulous behaviors of their own. Miss Juliana, aware that people have become willing to pay good money for "gimcracks," asks an exorbitant sum for an ivory miniature, which ironically happens to be a portrait of Aspern. Miss Tina, flattered by the young man's attentions and having learned about his reason for being in Venice, attempts to secure the letters for him. Then a reversal occurs. Miss Juliana dies and the correspondence is inherited by Miss Tina. She holds the power now, prompting her to offer it in exchange for a wedding vow.



The Ransom of Russian Art by John McPhee.

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Stereotypes have their place in satire and, if presented responsibly, can be effective purveyors of truth. In *Ghost World* collectors aren't the only ones who get stereotyped. The film also does a number on pretentious art teachers. Roberta Allsworth, played by Ileana Douglas (right), shows her video, “Mirror, Father, Mirror,” on the first day of summer art class for Enid Coleslaw (left). This instant, guffaw-inducing classic, whose elements include decapitated doll heads, crucifixes, a toilet bowl, and bad, atonal piano music, can be seen on a YouTube clip (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cd1Q6LsOR8o).

who wants to be certain that strangers do not think his hobby is proof of madness,” Lewis writes in *Collector's Progress*. Likewise, Stanley W. Fisher, in his 1957 book with the same title as Lewis's, says: “No wonder that we collectors are looked on as cranks! We scour the countryside for rare pieces, we bring them together to form a harmonious whole. And then, having gone to all that trouble, we separate them so that someone else may begin all over again!”

I submit that if you want insanity, take up John Fowles's 1963 novel *The Collector* or see the film made of it a couple of years later, starring Terence Stamp. Since it isn't about real collecting—Fowles's madman is only metaphorically a collector—I won't be discussing that distorting work here.

Lewis does acknowledge the existence of scoundrels in collecting circles, but his indictment is reserved for dealers. “Many of Walpole's books have been destroyed not by fire or flood, but by the trade,” he reports. Some dealers made a practice of soaking off the bookplate found in books from Walpole's library; they would sell the bookplate and book separately. Other times they pasted the bookplate into books that Walpole never owned. Unimportant books in poor condition that legitimately were from his library they thought nothing of pulping.

Lewis doesn't tell us what he thinks of that complex, conflicted figure, the collector-dealer. That is left in the capable hands of V.S. Pritchett, whose marvelous story “The Camberwell Beauty” was published in his 1974 collection as the title piece and republished in *Selected Stories* in 1978. Pritchett's narrator is a young dealer among older ones, all of whom sell furniture (their “bread and butter”) south of London shortly after the end of World War I. Each of them, however, has a specialty beyond tables and chairs, a collection that they treat like any other collector's collection, and within it, one elusive object. Each one “broods on [it] from one year to the next most of his life.” It is “the thing a man would commit murder to get his hands on if he had the nerve, but I have never heard of a dealer who had; theft perhaps.” And if that dealer does somehow manage to capture his unicorn? He will “never let it go or certainly not to a customer—dealers only really like dealing among themselves.” One dealer, named August, was an “ivory man.” A second collected “Jades, Asiatics, never touched India.” A third went exclusively after ephemera. For many others, it was Georgian silver. There are also several Foxes, a name undoubtedly not chosen by Pritchett at random, with various desires. One of them, we learn offhandedly, had an uncle in Brighton “who went mad looking for old Waterford.”

Pritchett's narrator lists some of the illusions that collecting in particular categories can foster and feed. “August's lust for ‘the ivories’ gave to his horse-racing mind a private oriental side.” That make-believe world of August, “who was not much better than a country junk dealer,” was peopled by “rajahs, sultans, harems.” The dealers who went after silver developed similarly associational fantasies, except theirs related to the rich families who had originally owned these heirloom trays and coffeepots. “You acquire imaginary ancestors,” the narrator observes. As for an old dealer named Pliny, who

coveted Meissen, he pictured himself “a secret curator of the Victoria and Albert museum—a place he often visited.”

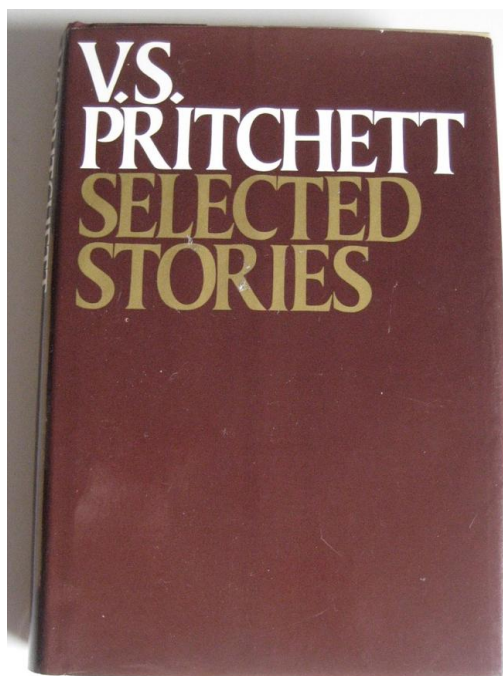
By the narrator's lights, Pliny resembles “a dressed up servant” with “raw eyes,” “big wet ears,” onions on his breath, and yellowed teeth. But these attributes don't prevent his marriage to a young woman who seems to adore him. The narrator is incensed that Pliny was “treating her like one of his collector's pieces.” He wants to rescue her, perhaps claim her as his own—he and Pliny come to blows over it—but, inexplicably, she doesn't want rescuing. When Pliny gets knocked down, she takes up the defense. “We're not interested,” she says. They're words the narrator must accept.

The collector-eccentric—i.e., dotty, not daft—is another common occurrence in the literature and other media on the subject. There is, for example, Norton Townsend Dodge, subject of John McPhee's *The Ransom of Russian Art*,

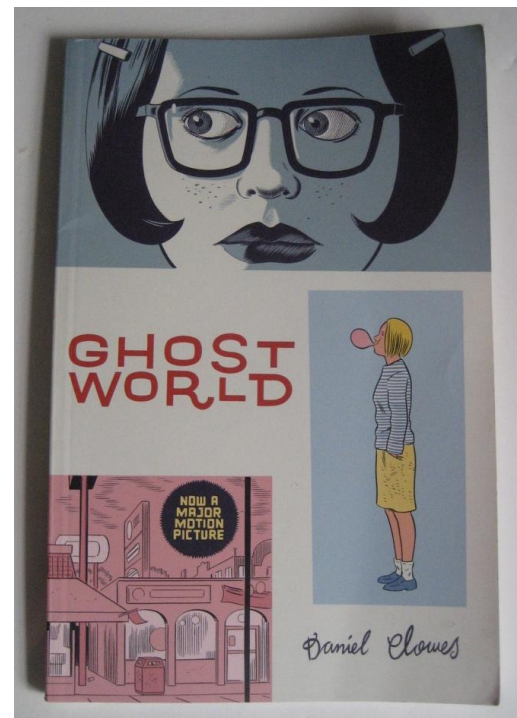
published in 1994. During the decades between 1956 and 1986, Dodge spent more than \$3 million buying approximately 9000 works by more than 600 underground artists in the former Soviet Union—a collection that is “by far the largest and (in the scholarly sense) most exhaustive in the world.”

For McPhee, Dodge, who died in 2011 at age 84, is a hero on many levels. If he hadn't collected these “subversive” works, many would have been destroyed. His purchases also provided financial support for the artists and their families. Those weren't the reasons why Dodge made his collection, however. Nor was investment on his mind, although the art was later worth many times more than what he had paid for it. (It's also true that Dodge was a world-class investor in the stock market, having started playing it in his head at age 13 and then for real not too many years later.) A friend and colleague said Dodge simply “like[d] the stuff, and that is why he did it.”

McPhee doesn't fail to highlight Dodge's many peculiarities, however. Invariably dressed in ill-fitting used clothing, the professor of economics, who sported “a Guinness Book mustache” not as a fashion statement but because he didn't take notice of its growth, was sloppy, clumsy, certifiably accident-prone (one car wreck every other year), and “absentminded to a level that no competing professor may yet have reached.” McPhee reports that various friends of Dodge likened him to “an unmade bed.” One of them told McPhee that when she was to meet Dodge for the first time she was advised to “watch for a guy to come in with food all over his tie.” Another said: “You expect to find socks in his refrigerator.” Dodge



V.S. Pritchett's *Selected Stories*. “The Camberwell Beauty” can be found here and also in *The Camberwell Beauty and Other Stories*.



Ghost World by Daniel Clowes.

was also a world-class talker. When he sat down next to McPhee on an Amtrak train in 1993—that's how they met—he spoke, by McPhee's estimation, 40,000 words about his Russian art in the mere two and a half hours it took to travel from Washington to Trenton.

To be sure, it takes a well-suited life partner to tolerate the talk of a dedicated collector, even a disingenuous one. Whom, for example, does Percy Gryce marry? It is not Lily Bart, who dies alone and poor, but rather Evie Van Osburgh, “the youngest, dumpy, dullest of the dumpy daughters whom Mrs. Van Osburgh, with unsurpassed astuteness, had ‘placed’ one by one in envious niches of existence!” As for Norton Dodge, he was divorced in 1970, then remarried in 1980 a woman who seems a saint. Just one evidentiary detail among many: she actually let him drive even though it was his habit to tear clippings out of newspapers he had been reading while behind the wheel. Since his right eye was blinded after a pedestrian accident in New York, she was prone to say to him from the passenger seat, “Norton, I hope you have the other eye open.”

Nor was Russian art Dodge's only collecting area. Vintage records was another. As McPhee described those holdings after his visit to Dodge's Maryland farmhouse: “Beyond the parlor is a small impacted space that may once have been a den but now is an outcrop of stacked periodicals and a collection of recorded music about as large as his collection of Soviet art.”

Rob Fleming, a 36-year-old collector of vintage records and owner of a store that sells the same, is at the heart of Nick Hornby's comedic novel *High Fidelity*, published in 1995, then made into a film directed by Stephen Frears and starring John Cusack. The adaptation, released in 2000, is fairly faithful to the book, except for a change of Rob's surname, from Fleming to Gordon, and the setting, which is Chicago instead of London. It doesn't matter. What motivates Rob and his fellow collectors, no matter where they are, is their obsession with vinyl. How obsessed? They are, Hornby writes, “young men, always young men... who seem to spend a disproportionate amount of their time looking for deleted Smiths singles and ‘ORIGINAL NOT RERELEASED’... Frank Zappa albums. They're as close to being mad as makes no difference.”

They share one other attribute: their unluckiness in love. In Rob's case, he has bungled another relationship and been dumped by his latest girlfriend, Laura. To cope with his loneliness, he reorganizes his record collection. “I often do this at periods of emotional stress,” he says, alluding to the familiar idea of collecting as stress reliever. One might suppose that he would want to organize them alphabetically or chronologically. He's already gone through each of those processes in the past. This time, he organizes them autobiographically, according to the date of purchase. Says Rob, “I have a couple of thousand records, and you have to be me... to know how to find any of them.”

Rob's scruples are tested when he goes on a house call. As he starts going through the records, he realizes “straightway that it's the haul I've always dreamed of finding, ever since I began collecting records. There are fan-club-only Beatles singles, and the first half-dozen Who singles, and Elvis originals from the early sixties, and loads of rare blues and soul singles.” It's worth \$6000 or \$7000, and the woman wanting to sell them knows it.



The 1993 Woody Allen film *Manhattan Murder Mystery* features Carol and Larry Lipton (played by Diane Keaton and Woody Allen), whose aging neighbors, Paul and Lillian House (Jerry Adler and Lynn Cohen), are portrayed as duller than duller. They boast of their twin cemetery plots. The husband collects stamps. ("This guy gets his jollies licking the backs of postage stamps," moans Larry to Carol after he has had to sit looking at Paul's collection. "My favorite thing in life is, you know, looking at canceled postage.") The movie doesn't make a point of it, but the Liptons themselves are collectors, although that's not what they may call themselves. One scene takes place at a Manhattan flea market, where it seems apparent they are regulars. Their apartment is decorated with a large illuminated Art Deco wall clock, vintage posters, and art pottery; and, as you can see in this still from the movie, an old subway sign hangs above their bed.

Still, she says, "Give me fifty quid and you can take every one away with you today." He wonders what's going on. Were the records stolen? As it turns out, they belong to her husband, who has gone to Spain with a twenty-three-year-old—a friend of her daughter, no less. "He had the f—king cheek to phone up and ask to borrow some money and I refused, so he asked me to sell his singles collection and send him a check for whatever I got, minus ten percent commission."

So does Rob take the records and run? "When I get back to the shop I'm going to burst into tears and cry like a baby for a month, but I can't bring myself to do it to this guy," he confesses. "How come I ended up siding with the bad guy, the man who's left his wife and taken himself off to Spain with some nymphette?... All I can see is that guy's face when he gets his pathetic check through the mail, and I can't help but feel desperately, painfully sorry for him." Misplaced compassion? Or was it the right decision to make? Collectors, what would you have done in the fictional Rob's shoes?

Daniel Clowes's graphic novel *Ghost World*, published in 1997, devotes only a bit of ink to a vintage-record collector, but the film version, directed by Terry Zwigoff and released in 2001, makes a major character of him. Named Seymour, he is a schlubby assistant manager at the corporate headquarters of Cook's Chicken, a fast-food chain that has employed him for 19 years. Girlfriend-less, he can't remember the last time a woman has talked to him. What he does have is a collection of 1500 78 rpm records. Seymour, embodied perfectly by the rubber-

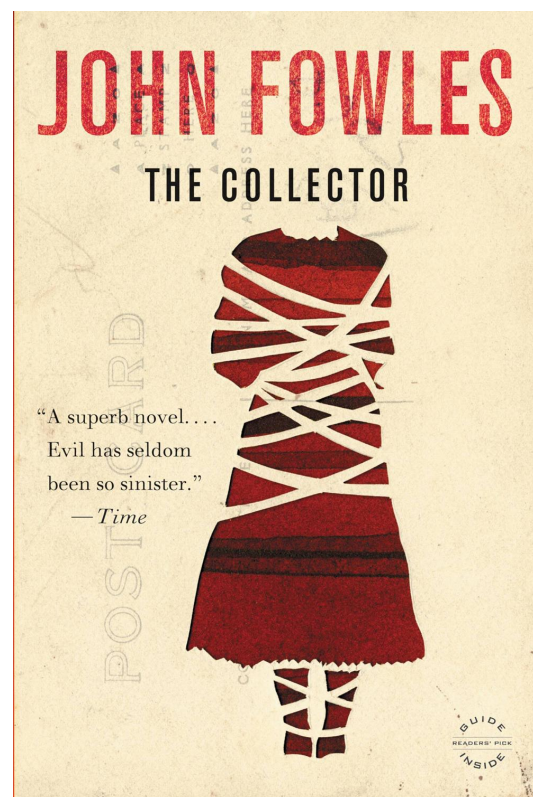
faced Steve Buscemi, is a caricature of a loser—*Ghost World* is a wicked satire—but I wonder if every audience comprehends the purposes of its cartoonish exaggerations.

In the film two friends, played by Thora Birch and Scarlett Johansson, are newly graduated from high school and having a tough time transitioning from aimless snarks to purposeful adults. Named Enid Coleslaw—her father changed the family surname legally from Cohen—and Rebecca Doppelmeyer, the two have been watching Seymour and mocking him as they meander around their unnamed city. He isn't their lone victim; they mock everyone. As a kind of mean-spirited social experiment and way to show off to Rebecca, Enid decides to befriend Seymour. When she gets an invitation to see his collection, she exclaims in insincere amazement: "Look at all this stuff. You are, like, the luckiest guy in the world. I would kill to have stuff like this." Seymour, oblivious to her playing him, rejoins: "Please. Go ahead and kill me. You think it's healthy to obsessively collect things? Can't connect with other people, so you fill your life with stuff."

Enid makes it part of her friendship game to find Seymour a girlfriend. "I guess I just can't stand the idea of

a world where a guy like you can't get a date," she tells him to explain her motivation. Convincing him that all he needs is to meet the right person, she suggests they "find a place where you can go to meet women who share your interests." To which Seymour replies: "Maybe I don't want to meet someone who shares my interests. I hate my interests."

Enid takes him to a blues club, where he meets a girlfriend prospect, but then starts spouting esoteric information at her in the manner of Percy Gryce. He's slump-shouldered



John Fowles's *The Collector*.

our last glimpse of him he is seeing a psychiatrist and alluding to the fact that he has moved back in with his mother.

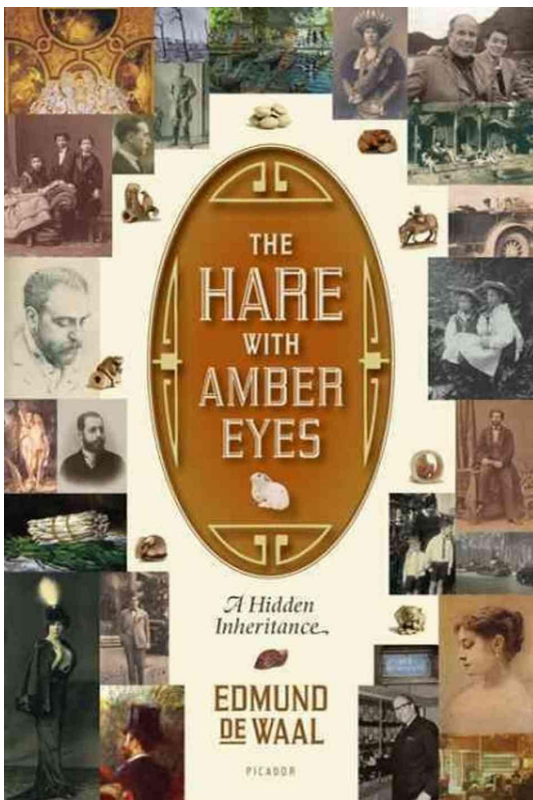
So what are Zwigoff and Clowes, who helped Zwigoff write the script, trying to say with their devilish humor? In my view, it is an intelligent and highly original commentary on authentic friendship and, thanks to the spot-on summer art school scenes, authenticity in general. Enid and Rebecca can never be the true friends that, say, Lefty Lewis and Ned Streeter were. And as the two girls part ways, feebly speaking of "getting together sometime," we know they never will.

"Objects have always been carried, sold, bartered, stolen, retrieved, and lost," Edmund de Waal writes in *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Art and Loss*, published in 2010 and re-subtitled in subsequent editions *A Hidden Inheritance*. "It is how you tell their stories that matters." I'll end with that book, because it is a counterpoint to the previous examples. The author's website gives the book this gloss: "I have spent the last few years writing a very personal book. It is the biography of a collection and the biography of my family. It is the story of the ascent and decline of a Jewish dynasty, about loss and diaspora and about the survival of objects."

The collection comprises 264 Japanese netsuke, including the hare of the title. We follow the fate of these fanciful miniature carvings, which easily fit into the palm of a hand, as we learn the stories of their various owners over a span of 140 years. Among them were the author's great-grandparents Viktor and Emmy von Ephrussi. They lived a life of luxury, Rothschild-rich, in the vast Palais Ephrussi on the Ringstrasse in Vienna before the Nazis arrived. In 1938, when the Nazis invaded and appropriated the palace, the collection was nearly lost, except that a servant, Anna, smuggled the figures out in her apron pockets and hid them in her mattress. She carried them from the Ephrussis' former residence a few at a time. It took her two weeks. "And they didn't notice," Anna later recounted. "They were so busy. They were busy with all the grand things"—paintings, books, jewelry. "They didn't notice the little figures."

Besides Vienna, the book's other settings are Paris, Tokyo, and, finally, London, where the author, the collection's current owner, lives and works as a potter with a significant international reputation. "How things are made, how they are handled and what happens to them has been central to my life for over thirty years," de Waal states on his website. He has also been a curator of ceramics galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, just as one of V.S. Pritchett's fictional collector-dealers harmlessly daydreamed himself to be.

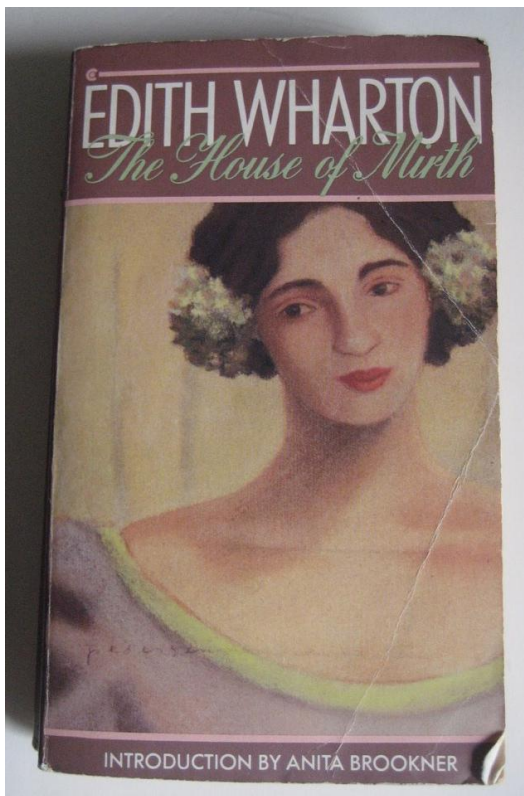
At the opening of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, de Waal uses an epigraph from Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way*. Art critic, collector, and bon vivant Charles Ephrussi, who created the collection of netsuke, was purportedly the model for Charles Swann. The epigraph says in part: "Even when one is no longer attached to things, it's still something to have been attached to them; because it was always for reasons which other people didn't grasp." Think of the young wife of Pritchett's ugly old Pliny and of her devotion to him. Some people's choice of a love object simply cannot be fathomed. Let's just leave it at that.



The Hare with Amber Eyes by Edmund de Waal.

as he and Enid exit. "I can't relate to ninety-nine percent of humanity," he whines. "I'm not even in the same universe as those creatures back there."

While Enid persists with her Seymour project, Rebecca secretly starts seeing a boy in whom both she and Enid have shown interest. There is another subplot, too. Enid is taking a summer art class with a teacher who is a video and performance artist and annoyingly, cloyingly, politically correct—a brilliant stereotype in her own right. Eventually, Seymour does manage to begin a relationship. On one occasion, he and his date go antiquing. "She doesn't dislike this stuff," Seymour tells Enid afterwards, though that's certainly not the same as liking it. "Anyway, she's trying." But the woman doesn't keep the whirligig she bought. "Said it would go better with my 'old-time thingamajigs.'" Things go downhill from there, hitting bottom with a thud after Enid inadvertently gets Seymour fired after exhibiting an artwork that usurps Cook's Chicken's old, racist logo and name (Coon Chicken). In



Paperback edition of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.