The Hare with Amber Eyes

11 Aug 2010 by Jancis Robinson

I know this is a wine website and so I shouldn't really go off-piste, but I do occasionally allow myself to do so in this obscure corner of the site and I hope you will indulge me in this holiday season. For those of us in the northern hemisphere, it is high summer and many of us are looking for recommendations for summer reading. I wanted to share my enthusiasm for the book that has impressed me most among those I have consumed so far here in the Languedoc (a non book-related holiday snap that sums up summer to me appears below).

The first book I raced through was the paperback, airport edition, of Labour spin doctor Peter Mandelson's preposterously self-important and self-justifying memoir *The Third Man*. (My favourite phrase: 'The jobs I had in mind for Tony and Gordon were…') If you were around at the time, it is hugely entertaining to read this very partial view of New Labour.

Others I have enjoyed included *The Last Life* by Claire Messud, kindly left for me by Julia, who was staying here before us. I hadn't come across this much-admired writer before (she is married to James Wood, literary critic of *The New Yorker*) and learnt much about Franco-Algerian relations from this racy family saga. I finished an unusual novel about opening an Indian restaurant in the Jura, Richard C Morais' *The Hundred-Foot Journey,* and I started (not for the first time) the first volume of Proust's epic. I'm pretty sure the other five volumes will continue to sit on the shelf. I'm only about two-thirds of the way through *In Search of Lost Time* (no, I'm *not* reading it in French) and keep finding more alluring things to read such as, for the umpteenth time, Ian McEwan's first book, the short stories in *First Love, Last Rites* and, for the first time, George Eliot's gripping *Mill on the Floss.*

My non-fiction reading (discounting Mandy of course) has been a bit more limited. Michael Lewis's *The Big Short*, a valiant attempt to make the story of subprime mortgages and financial meltdown readable, is horrifying but not nearly such a good read as *Liar's Poker*, his much earlier account of being a bond salesman at Salomon Brothers. No index. Black mark. There is of course a rash of books on the subject of the world's financial crisis. Our FT colleague Gillian Tett's account seems well regarded but sounds even more technical than Michael Lewis's. Can anyone recommend a book that even an economic idiot will find riveting?

I was hoping to learn to understand our French neighbours better by reading *The Secret Life of France* by Lucy Wadham but this is really an introduction to the mores of BCBG Parisians followed by a brief French history lesson. Definitely a game of two, mildly unsatisfactory, halves. (Those blurbs on book jackets get less and less reliable in my experience.)

Much more satisfying was a book my elder daughter produced, *Wedlock - How Georgian Britain's Worst Husband Met His Match* by Wendy Moore. (I assume it is a coincidence that she is a relatively recent bride herself.) My namesake Andrew Robinson Stoney really was a bounder of the highest order and tricked the richest woman in England into marrying him (before effectively taking her prisoner) via a faked duel with the Rev Sir Henry Bate, editeur-provocateur whose Gainsborough portrait was the first painting my daughter, mother and I happened to look at when we toured Tate Britain last week. I agree with the blurb on this book that it is 'as gripping as any novel'.

Oh and I did read one wine book, in fact re-read Alice Feiring's *The Battle for Wine and Love or How I Saved the World from Parkerisation* - fun, passionate and nothing if not polemical. I look forward to her next book which is apparently even more closely devoted to the topic *du jour* 'natural wines'.

But the book that I really want to recommend most strongly is the most unusual of them all. In *The Hare with Amber Eyes - A Hidden Inheritance* ceramicist Edmund de Waal has written so much more than a memoir of his extraordinary family. There is the usual complicated family tree at the beginning and fascinating accounts of the Ephrussis and their various branches in Odessa, Paris, Vienna, the English provinces and eventually Japan. At one stage the Ephrussis were on a par with the Rothschilds for their wealth, possessions and property. (Indeed the family name lives on in the sugar-pink Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild on Cap Ferrat on the Côte d'Azur.) But this book is about very much more than just rich folk and their goings-on. There is for a start the tragic near-end to the dynasty as the Nazis invade Vienna. But as Professor of Ceramics at the University of Westminster, de Waal has many considered and pertinent observations about the

relationship between people and objects, particularly beautiful objects. The real subject of the book is the collection of 264 tiny Japanese toggle-like carvings known as netsuke, originally bought by an aesthete ancestor in Paris and passed around the family until, almost by chance, they dictated the course of de Waal's great uncle's life, and de Waal's too. But most of all he writes beautifully and thoughtfully. The whole volume is deeply satisfying in every way.

I have just noticed that de Waal uses as his preface a quote that begins '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…' It comes from Proust's *Cities of the Plain* (or *Sodom and Gomorrah*). So he got as far as Volume IV then. Most impressive.