

Reading Group Gold

The Exiles Return

by Elisabeth de Waal

1) The story behind the book is its own tale of exile: The author fled Vienna for England in 1939, wrote the manuscript there ten years later, and kept it hidden in her archives until they passed on to her grandson, who saw the book published. "My grandmother had spent her life in transit," Edmund de Waal writes in the foreword. Could you sense this perspective in the story? Did it feel written as a simple chronicling of the exile life, a yearning for her own return to Vienna, as catharsis?

2) Dr. Krieger hides his Nazi history at first, and when he finally reveals it, justifies it with his exoneration — "I was acquitted and vindicated," he says — as if a successful trial could change past events. How does the novel suggest we approach the past? Do our own personal histories exist as irreducible facts, or are they their own stories, which we can edit, retell, hide, or erase entirely?

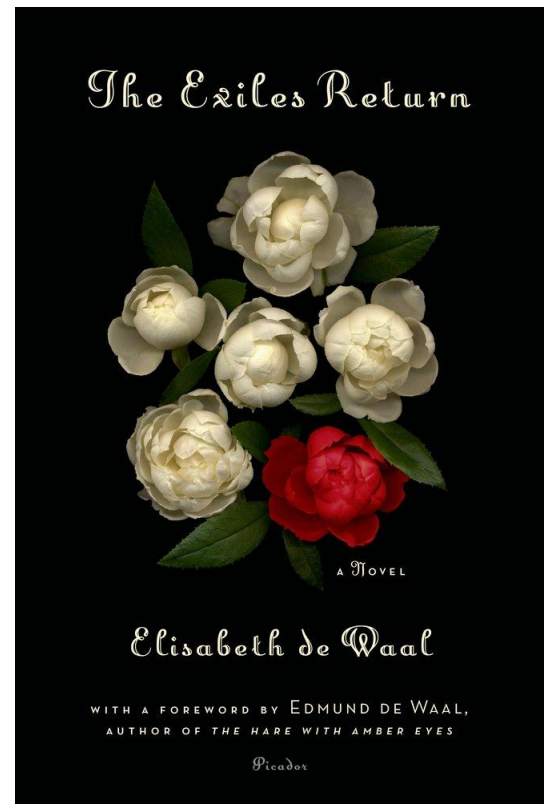
3) Kanakis returns to Vienna to buy an eighteenth-century villa — his "dream house," a "hotel particulier." Is he trying to relive the past, or preserve it, by owning it? Is that possible?

4) What is Vienna itself like, as a character? Is its identity constructed more by old historic families like Nina's in her palace, or by the newest arrivals, the "Czech and Pole and Croat, Magyar and Italian, and Jew of course" who, Kanakis says, "enrich this German city, which through them became unique and truly imperial."

5) Adler says in the book's opening chapter that, despite his wife's disapproval, "the urge to go had been irresistible." As he explains to Dr. Krieger, "I came home. I am an Austrian. I belong here." Is Adler's return as simple as that, or are there deeper reasons for it? Why do you think he came back? Would you?

6) How does returning from exile change the characters? Do they become more themselves — reclaim some missing piece of their identity lost when they fled — or do they become different people entirely?

7) What does the novel tell us about free will and destiny? It opens with Adler, on a train returning to Vienna, conflicted about his own freedom — feeling on the one hand like "an automaton, like a piece of machinery" and on the other, rationalizing with himself that "he could, of course, have got out in Zurich," that he "still was a free agent." Are the novel's characters driven by forces beyond their control, or are they masters of their own future? Are some characters more free than others?



- 8) Adler is disgusted by the sin of his wife's fashion business, and by the aesthetic hedonism of Kanakis; Nina is depressed by her appearance, saying "all men are alike, a fair face was what attracted them" while she herself wants to "penetrate the mask" of Adler's looks. What do these characters find immoral about superficiality?
- 9) Can a place exist both as our memories of it, and as something real? Which is more potent — its present reality or what we remember it to be? "Strange how these early memories persist and remain untouched by later experience," Adler thinks. Can we keep the past separate from the present?
- 10) Do you agree that where one comes from is an inescapable part of one's identity, that, as Kanakis's father told him, "being Viennese ... was something which you cannot lose." Or can we choose and construct our identities independently of our birthplace? Or is it some combination of the two?
- 11) Adler's loneliness upon returning to Vienna "was of a different kind from the loneliness he had experienced in exile." How so?
- 12) What does the author mean when she calls Austria a "God-created, man-cultivated, man-cared-for country?"

About the Author

Elisabeth de Waal was born in Vienna in 1899. She studied philosophy, law, and economics at the University of Vienna, and completed her doctorate in 1923. She also wrote poems (often corresponding with Rilke), and was a Rockefeller Foundation fellow at Columbia. She wrote five unpublished novels, two in German and three in English, including *The Exiles Return* in the late 1950s. She died in 1991.

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Reading group guide written by William Bostwick