

# THE RINGS of SATURN

I recommend reading as far as you can get for our first seminar without glossing or skimming. Then, over Thanksgiving break, hopefully you'll have plenty of time to read through the whole text....

This is not your typical novel. It may be brilliantly fascinating to you; or it may not be your cup of tea. I personally find it beautiful because of the language, its historical, philosophical, and imaginative scope, and because of its unique approach to both history and the novel.

The sentences are long; there's very little plot. Sebald works by following themes, silken connections from one event to another; sensations of nature lead to philosophical positions lead to historical figures and events. There are many "proper nouns," obscure references, allusions, etc. Most of these, while intriguing, aren't exactly necessary to understand, so don't let them deter you.

To some extent, it is wise to read it as fiction. Presuming that something is not real or true is to presume that there is some intention behind its inclusion, its details, etc. Presuming intention is what allows it to have meaning. In the case of the Rings of Saturn, it seems as though much of what he records is true, and occasionally, this sense of truth may distract you from the CHOICES that Sebald is making. He doesn't have to record any of this, not in this order, in this way, or with accuracy. He chooses. This is not to say that it is appropriate to take a skeptical approach to Sebald. Though I think some pleasure is to be had in wondering what is true and what is not, even in following leads in the attempt to confirm his accounts, the pleasure or challenge of the book does not lie in the discernment of the truth nor in the critique of his presentation. He has, as it were, creative license.

Why are we reading this? For a number of reasons. But let's be clear that we are most definitely switching gears with this book. It picks up just a few significant threads that we encountered in *Lure* and *Painting*. Most importantly, as mentioned already, this book deals with history, the telling of history, the meaning of history, and so on. Coincidental, really, is that this book is a rather extravagant example of "local knowledge." Sebald is, as he announces early on, on a walking tour of the county of Suffolk. On his way, his encounters prompt memories and investigations that weave an almost painfully subtle web of connection and coincidence that traces the decay of an empire and leaves the narrator in the state that we find him on page one, in hospital, immobilized. Perhaps too much local knowledge is not such a good thing.

Lucy Lippard was relentless in her claim that art needed story. Her Place Ethic is founded on knowledge of communal stories. Komar and Melamid made art in the process of gathering stories, created a painting that does not exist without the story of its creation and cannot be rightly seen except in the context of the story of art. History is driven, for good and ill, by the need to tell our stories and by the conviction that telling stories and knowing the past allow us to understand the present.

But what is a story? Is any sequence of events a story? *I got up. I walked north. I turned. I touched my nose.* With the same bravado that allows artists to claim anything as art, perhaps a writer is one to whom we have given a similar power over the definition of story. Sebald is working in multiple genres. He is and he is not writing history, memoir, travelogue, epic. This mix of genres makes for a difficult read at times, and it gives us a story that is not immediately recognizable, that is, there are no specific conventions to judge it by, nor are there many works to compare it to.

Much of the trouble with history stems from the need for a story and the overzealous or covertly destructive rendering of events into stories with perfectly formed beginnings, middles, and ends. Our desire for

stories that fit this model, stories with heroes and villains and so on, stories that, bottom line, perpetuate whatever power and privilege dictates, is nearly insatiable, even to the extent that we are convinced by the sheer tidiness of the story, though our reason (or our compassion) urge otherwise. As a kind of example of this, imagine the power struggle involved in how the story of “9-11” (and what does it mean that we call it that?) will end. Certainly there are those who want the story to end with American military victory. For others, the story cannot truly end until the cultural and political tensions that led to it have been resolved. For others, simply the death of Osama would end the tale. Who decides how far into the future to trace the effects of that day in order to find the end of it? Who decides how far back into the past we must go in order to understand its beginning? Whatever the case, we know that this is a story that will be told, and it will become a piece of cultural, mythical property.

Sebald’s approach to history challenges and plays with all of these problems of storytelling and history. The sleight of hand in a single sentence can lead you from one tale to the next; the reason for a move is sometimes purely coincidence, necessitated as much by the grammar of sentence as by anything else. From the very beginning, Sebald dives into his recollections as if it were inevitable, “I cannot help but think of Michael Parkinson...,” which merely leads to another friend, which leads to a coincidental connection to Browne’s skull, which leads to a discussion of a Rembrandt painting.... and so on. Why, we have to wonder, could he not help thinking of Michael Parkinson? Notice, too, that Thomas Browne’s father was a silk merchant, which means nothing now; but even just glancing over the table of contents, it is clear that silk appears in the book over and over again.

Finally, as we dive more and more into history and how history relates to, feeds, and makes art what it is, Sebald’s writing provides a very unique model for writing and thinking about history. As we seek out themes and ideas embedded in stories drawn from reality (which has no inherent themes), Sebald is there again a good model for making the truth seem as strange and beautiful as fiction.

This study guide will spend a little time looking at how the writing works in the first chapter. Beyond that, your task will be to trace themes, notions about history, memory, storytelling, and coincidence, and there will be some general questions to target these themes.

A last word of advice. I find it incredibly helpful to read this book with a pencil in hand and to mark in the text wherever I perceive a shift in the narrative, from one story to the next, or from history to the present, in and out of landscape, etc. It might also be useful to indicate the content in the margins with a word or two.

1. Based on the comments on the back of the book, the quotations before the table of contents, the table of contents, and any portion of the text that you’ve read thus far, why do you think the book is called “The Rings of Saturn”?

2. The goal of several of these questions is to help you to map out the first chapter and to slow your reading down so that you make an effort to gather meaning from each diversion and avenue that Sebald follows. Once the narrator (I’ll refer to him as Sebald for convenience) has introduced us to his situation, the narrative proper seems to begin just beneath the first photograph (a rather unusual image). The first allusion is to Kafka’s story, *Metamorphosis* (in which Samsa wakes one morning to find that he has become a cockroach [or some kind of gross bug]). The allusion is simple enough, but it is a good introduction to the way Sebald uses stories and metaphors. First of all, such an allusion tells you about the character you’re dealing with. He reads; he thinks in terms of books; he is, in fact, throughout this book, far less present than the past, far less real than the landscape, and far less familiar to us than any of the people he describes from history. Secondly, the reference to Kafka’s story cannot be without untold depths (in fact, one of Sebald’s other works has much to do with Kafka). Suffice it to say that Kafka’s character, Gregor, after having been a bug for a while, hurls

himself out of the window and dies. This alone makes the reference (perhaps the net in the photograph as well) a bit more unsettling. And of course, as with much of Kafka's work, the central problem before the reader is: What the hell is this about? Is it psychological? political/social commentary? both? So as we read Sebald, whatever our knowledge or understanding of *Metamorphosis* is can come to bear. At the same time, Sebald has given us plenty of indication of what we need to know from the story in order to get the image and have it be meaningful enough ("his little legs trembling," "no longer remembering... the sense of liberation...").

3. At the bottom of page 5, it seems the narrative jumps into full swing, fully departing from the hospital room and into the past, with Michael Parkinson. Pages 6 & 7, then, introduce two characters who are largely defined by their studies and their deaths. The death count in this book, while subtle, rises quickly.

4. The descriptions of Janine Daykins' office, the seas of paper, etc., set a good stage for the way Sebald views knowledge and history.

5. (p 7-8) Meanwhile, Janine's obsession, Gustave Flaubert, and Sebald's summaries of his concerns in writing, "fascination for obscure detail," "abysmal errors and lies, the consequences of which were immeasurable," "the whole Sahara... [in a grain of sand]," provide more stage setting ideas related to Sebald's own writing style and his concerns, especially the sense of "immeasurable consequences."

6. Attune yourself to the writer's obsessions: notice on page 7-8 ("sinking into sand...sand conquered all...arid plains, etc.) the descriptions of sand related to Flaubert's work. When, in the middle of the page, the narrator switches to Janine, he refers immediately to a "flood of paper... glacier when it reaches the sea...." Two readings present themselves, not necessarily exclusive of each other: the switch to water after sand gives a sense of relief from the dryness, harshness, and despair of Flaubert's thought; and, of course, that water and sand are really quite intimate, meeting at the shore, where Sebald happens to spend much of his time as he explores the countryside.

7. On page 9, Janine provides the bridge to a new narrative, the pursuit of Thomas Browne's skull and the discussion of his writing and ideas. Before Sebald gets properly focussed on Browne, he digresses to ponder the Anatomy Lesson. Because this section is relatively concise, take a moment to look it over. Why is Sebald including this in the chapter? What does he seem to learn from it? In what ways does this story seem to introduce or set the tone for other parts of the story? In what ways does it relate to Thomas Browne's ideas?

8. Take a moment to puzzle over the digression on page 17-18, in which he describes his time in the hospital and the two nurses, ending very forebodingly with the vapor trail. What's going on here? Notice the transitional sentences at the end: "The aircraft at the tip of the trail was as invisible as the passengers inside it. The invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us remained an unfathomable mystery for Thomas Browne..."

9. Aside from anything else, we must presume that there is some reason that Sebald is meditating on, or obsessed with Thomas Browne. What is it? Is he looking for solace? Are Browne's ideas feeding into whatever darkness seems to be closing in on the narrator?

10. On page 19, there is another reflection, it seems, through Browne, on writing, which seems to give us window into how Sebald thinks of his own writing: "out of the fullness of his erudition...."

11. Next is the description of Browne's work with the "Quincunx." Why is Sebald interested in this? Notice how it leads into a more general discussion of nature, natural phenomena, and from there right into fantastical beasts, or at least our interest in the bizarre.

12. On the bottom of page 22, there is mention of Borges, who will come up again later.
13. Page 24 and 25. By this time, we can be pretty sure that Sebald is very interested in death and decay.
14. How do you answer the question on page 26? Consider how placing this question at the end of the first section seems to set the rest of the novel as the answer.
15. Chapter one, then, has mixed the present with the recent past, with the more distant past. The rest of the book concerns some middle distance, at least as far as Sebald's personal memories go: not as far back as Michael Parkinson, but before hospital and before the investigations into the whereabouts of Browne's skull. Consider the first part as an overture or preamble of sorts. As with overtures in music, it is common in literature that all of the ideas and moods and concerns of the book be somehow condensed into the very first part, sometimes the very first sentence. Sometimes, like a hologram, every part contains the whole. So take some time to note your general recollections of the chapter, write a summary, or go back and try to identify connections between the various parts: connections of mood, image, idea, etc.