

A Smattering of Stuff about Sebald & Rings of Saturn

reviews from amazon.com

Man and His Decaying Place on Earth, October 8, 2000 Reviewer: James Carragher (see more about me) from Santiago, Chile

Early in this book, a series of lengthy ruminations on, inter alia, hung criminals, manor burnings in the Irish civil war, and silk worms, ruminations triggered by small moments in Sebald's walk along the eastern coast of England, he writes twice of Jorge Luis Borges and the Argentine's stories of other worlds hidden just slightly askew to our own. It's an apt choice, for much of this book recalls Borges and his labyrinths. The erudite and obscure histories Sebald writes could just as well be fictions, so remote and dazzling strange are they, qualities especially evident as he recounts the destruction of the garden of Yuan Ming Yuan. Reading the pleasantly convoluted sentences often felt like the last scattered vision before sleep or, at the end of the night, before waking. Sadness, loss, decline and decay are constant companions here to both the hiker and the reader. The narrator winds up in a mental hospital a year after the walk and various friends unexpectedly die. Hotels in beach towns that once welcomed European royalty go weeks without guests. And lest we lose perspective on the place of man and mankind in all this, Sebald reminds that "...the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark." Or, "...whenever one is imagining a bright future, the next disaster is just around the corner." This should all be quite gloomy, as should Borges, but somehow it is not. Rather, it reminds us of what an ongoing pageant we have all entered for a small role in a brief moment of the planet. So why not five stars? Because Borges got there first and finest to these truths. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Was this review helpful to you?

All Customer Reviews Avg. Customer Review:

Write an online review and share your thoughts with other customers.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful:

Unraveling History's Shroud, August 8, 2002 Reviewer: Maria M. Benet (see more about me) from Greenbrae, CA United States

There is no literary alembic to condense the vast scope in aim and accomplishment of W.G. Sebald's "The Rings of Saturn" into a convenient representative snapshot. Those who are familiar with Sebald's work already will find the familiar narrator traveling, this time on foot, without an apparent aim, a past or a future, ruminating about a landscape and its people, present and past.

In "The Emigrants" Sebald's concern seemed to be the undoing of our individual sense of roots, of historical identity. In "The Rings of Saturn" it is history itself that gets displaced in the tales of glory and destruction of empires, countries, social classes, towns, houses, cycles of herring, forests and ancient trees that rise and ebb as the narrator orbits along his path on in Suffolk along the eastern coast of England.

The narrator's drawing forth of historical facts about the Congo, Ireland, the Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi, the silk trade in China and Europe, as well as his lyrical passages of the lives of people whose lives have been buried in these facts, creates a psycho-mythic arc for these shards of what it means to be human to orbit in our consciousness.

The literal ruins, the torn trees, the fields gone to pasture, the garden of Yuan Ming Yan ablaze, and the literary ruins, such as the impossible tie between Charlotte Ives and the Vicomte de Chateaubriand or the dream-like lives of the Ashburys in Ireland, all take on a peculiar beauty and vivacity that surpass whatever former and first glory they might have had.

The book starts with an account of the travels of Sir Thomas Browne's skull, the container shard of a mind that searched for "that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration," which Browne, a silk merchant's son, observed in caterpillars and moths. It ends with a return to Thomas Browne's "Museum Clausum" or "Bibliotheca Abscondita," a collection of things that, according to Sebald, were "likely the products of his imagination, the inventory of a treasure house that existed purely in his head and to which there is

no access except through the letters on his page.”

What interests Sebald in Browne’s museum of oddities is the bamboo cane in which two friars have smuggled the first silkworm eggs to Europe from China. The thread that ties Sebald’s narrator’s stories into a pattern emerges in this last chapter on Sir Thomas Browne and on the history of sericulture in Europe, and especially in Germany.

Buried in this last chapter is also a reference from 1822 to an old master dyer named Seybolt, who was employed by the Bavarian Royal Gardens. Perhaps he was one of Sebald’s ancestors, thereby tying Sebald’s narrator to Sir Thomas Browne in the way in which they both attempt to weave a grand design of humanity from the filament of transmigration. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Was this review helpful to you?

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful:

The Eternal Present, March 17, 2002 Reviewer: A reader from Budapest, Hungary

The 17th century philosopher, Sir Thomas Browne, spoke of an “Eternal Present,” in which one could move through space and time and interconnect all things with...all things. In this brilliant book, the late W.G. Sebald has accomplished what Browne could only write about. He has obliterated time and distance and caused “memory” to live in the present, rather than the past, tense, and he has done so in a spectacularly successful manner.

Outwardly, Sebald takes us on a walking tour of East Anglia (County Suffolk), but in reality he is leading us on a journey through time and memory in which one thing inexorably leads to another and yet another and yet another. For example, a simple ride on a miniture railway train built for the Emperor of China leads Sebald to think about dragons, which leads him to think about the Taiping mass suicide of 1864. That, in turn, leads the author to thoughts of the cruel and evil dowager Empress Tzu Hsi, an empress who poisoned her nephew, Kuang Hsu, in a slow and terrible manner.

A not-so-lovely Rembrandt painting, “Anatomy Lesson,” causes Sebald to think about 17th century Dutch customs; the mass executions in the Balkans lead to thoughts of Kurt Waldheim. There are many, many more fascinating juxtapositions and comparisons.

Sebald begins each chapter with a personal memoir, then begins to expand and connect, erasing the barriers of time and distance and causing us to question what is fact and what is fiction. After all, we would not put it past the inventive Sebald to create much of what he is relating himself. However, it really doesn’t matter what is historically true and what is not. In this book, the question is not, “What?” but “Why?” Why did Edward FitzGerald translate nothing but “The Rubiyat?” How did Chateaubriand manage to keep living after falling so deeply and madly and passionately in love with Charlotte Ives? In this book, ghosts inhabit time and space side by side with the living; the world of memory becomes as real and tangible as the world just outside our door.

Interestingly, each chapter contains musings regarding silk. In the first chapter, we learn that Sir Thomas Browne’s father was a silk merchant; in the last chapter Sebald’s musings are of the habits of the silkworm and the culture of silk, itself. For Browne, Sebald tells us in Chapter One, silk was a metaphor of the “indestructability of the human soul.” I found that Sebald’s preoccupation with silk also provided a wonderful metaphor for this book, a book which is spun and enlarged much like a silkworm spins her web, entangling the reader with the writer. The central metaphor of “The Rings of Saturn,” however, is one of burning, something that continually brings our memory back to the Holocaust.

If you’ve read “The Emigrants,” you’ll find this book more accessible and more expansive, but also more haunting and, in a sense, strangely odd. In “The Emigrants,” time was compressed; in “The Rings of Saturn,” time is expanded into annihilation. Sebald wrote this book after suffering a “nervous breakdown” and he weaves strands of his suffering into his reminiscences. And, although this is a haunting and melancholy book, it is by no means depressing. It’s enigmatic, hallucinatory, transcendent, luminous. Sebald’s prose is, as it always is: crystalline and perfect, though curiously detached and muted. Sebald writes of loss and of decay and devastation, yet he keeps himself, and us, at arm’s length from it. Although he had lived and taught for many years in England, Sebald’s prose shows us that he remained German to the core. Michael Hulse’s translation is absolutely superb.

The rings surrounding the planet, Saturn, were apparently formed from the frozen particles of one of its moons. Just as these particles of a long, lost moon circle Saturn again and again and again, so do our memories, frozen in time and space, circle our lives until their very end. W.G. Sebald was a writer like no other. He was a true artist

who, with his melancholy yet luminous prose, created a new way of seeing ourselves and the world around us. We are so lucky to have the work he left us. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful:

The Eternal Present, March 17, 2002 Reviewer: A reader from Budapest, Hungary

The 17th century philosopher, Sir Thomas Browne, spoke of an "Eternal Present," in which one could move through space and time and interconnect all things with...all things. In this brilliant book, the late W.G. Sebald has accomplished what Browne could only write about. He has obliterated time and distance and caused "memory" to live in the present, rather than the past, tense, and he has done so in a spectacularly successful manner.

Outwardly, Sebald takes us on a walking tour of East Anglia (County Suffolk), but in reality he is leading us on a journey through time and memory in which one thing inexorably leads to another and yet another and yet another. For example, a simple ride on a miniture railway train built for the Emperor of China leads Sebald to think about dragons, which leads him to think about the Taiping mass suicide of 1864. That, in turn, leads the author to thoughts of the cruel and evil dowager Empress Tzu Hsi, an empress who poisoned her nephew, Kuang Hsu, in a slow and terrible manner.

A not-so-lovely Rembrandt painting, "Anatomy Lesson," causes Sebald to think about 17th century Dutch customs; the mass executions in the Balkans lead to thoughts of Kurt Waldheim. There are many, many more fascinating juxtapositions and comparisons.

Sebald begins each chapter with a personal memoir, then begins to expand and connect, erasing the barriers of time and distance and causing us to question what is fact and what is fiction. After all, we would not put it past the inventive Sebald to create much of what he is relating himself. However, it really doesn't matter what is historically true and what is not. In this book, the question is not, "What?" but "Why?" Why did Edward FitzGerald translate nothing but "The Rubiyat?" How did Chateaubriand manage to keep living after falling so deeply and madly and passionately in love with Charlotte Ives? In this book, ghosts inhabit time and space side by side with the living; the world of memory becomes as real and tangible as the world just outside our door.

Interestingly, each chapter contains musings regarding silk. In the first chapter, we learn that Sir Thomas Browne's father was a silk merchant; in the last chapter Sebald's musings are of the habits of the silkworm and the culture of silk, itself. For Browne, Sebald tells us in Chapter One, silk was a metaphor of the "indestructability of the human soul." I found that Sebald's preoccupation with silk also provided a wonderful metaphor for this book, a book which is spun and enlarged much like a silkworm spins her web, entangling the reader with the writer. The central metaphor of "The Rings of Saturn," however, is one of burning, something that continually brings our memory back to the Holocaust.

If you've read "The Emigrants," you'll find this book more accessible and more expansive, but also more haunting and, in a sense, strangely odd. In "The Emigrants," time was compressed; in "The Rings of Saturn," time is expanded into annihilation. Sebald wrote this book after suffering a "nervous breakdown" and he weaves strands of his suffering into his reminiscences. And, although this is a haunting and melancholy book, it is by no means depressing. It's enigmatic, hallucinatory, transcendent, luminous. Sebald's prose is, as it always is: crystalline and perfect, though curiously detached and muted. Sebald writes of loss and of decay and devastation, yet he keeps himself, and us, at arm's length from it. Although he had lived and taught for many years in England, Sebald's prose shows us that he remained German to the core. Michael Hulse's translation is absolutely superb.

The rings surrounding the planet, Saturn, were apparently formed from the frozen particles of one of its moons. Just as these particles of a long, lost moon circle Saturn again and again and again, so do our memories, frozen in time and space, circle our lives until their very end. W.G. Sebald was a writer like no other. He was a true artist who, with his melancholy yet luminous prose, created a new way of seeing ourselves and the world around us. We are so lucky to have the work he left us. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Amazon.com In August 1992, W.G. Sebald set off on a walking tour of Suffolk, one of England's least populated and most striking counties. A long project--presumably *The Emigrants*, his great anatomy of exile, loss, and identity--had left him spent. Initially his tour was a carefree one. Soon, however, Sebald was to happen upon "traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past," in a series of encounters so intense that a year later he found himself in a state of collapse in a Norwich hospital.

The Rings of Saturn is his record of these travels, a phantasmagoria of fragments and memories, fraught with dizzying knowledge and desperation and shadowed by mortality. As in *The Emigrants*, past and present intermingle: the living come to seem like supernatural apparitions while the dead are vividly present. Exemplary sufferers such as Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement people the author's solitude along with various eccentrics and even an occasional friend. Indeed, one of the most moving chapters concerns his fellow German exile--the writer Michael Hamburger.

"How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?" Sebald asks. "The fact that I first passed through British customs thirty-three years after Michael, that I am now thinking of giving up teaching as he did, that I am bent over my writing in Norfolk and he in Suffolk, that we both are distrustful of our work and both suffer from an allergy to alcohol--none of these things are particularly strange. But why it was that on my first visit to Michael's house I instantly felt as if I lived or had once lived there, in every respect precisely as he does, I cannot explain. All I know is that I stood spellbound in his high-ceilinged studio room with its north-facing windows in front of the heavy mahogany bureau at which Michael said he no longer worked because the room was so cold, even in midsummer..."

Sebald seems most struck by those who lived or live quietly in adversity, "the shadow of annihilation" always hanging over them. The appropriately surnamed George Wyndham Le Strange, for example, remained on his vast property in increasing isolation, his life turning into a series of colorful anecdotes. He was "reputed to have been surrounded, in later years, by all manner of feathered creatures: by guinea fowl, pheasants, pigeons and quail, and various kinds of garden and song birds, strutting about him on the floor or flying around in the air. Some said that one summer Le Strange dug a cave in his garden and sat in it day and night like St. Jerome in the desert."

In Sebald's eyes, even the everyday comes to seem extraterrestrial--a vision intensified in Michael Hulse's beautiful rendition. His complex, allusive sentences are encased in several-pages-long paragraphs--style and subject making for painful, exquisite reading. Though most often hypersensitive to human (and animal) suffering and making few concessions to obligatory cheeriness, Sebald is not without humor. At one point, paralyzed by the presence of the past, he admits: "I bought a carton of chips at McDonald's, where I felt like a criminal wanted worldwide as I stood at the brightly lit counter, and ate them as I walked back to my hotel." *The Rings of Saturn* is a challenging nocturne, and the second of Sebald's four books to appear in English. The excellent news is that his novel *Vertigo* is already slated for translation. --Kerry Fried

A New York Times Notable Book of 1998; New York Times Book Review, 6 December 1998 This self-confident hybrid of fiction, travel, biography myth and memoir traipses through time and space to visit everyone the author cares about, whether living, dead or imaginary.

The London Times, Russell Celyn Jones *The Rings of Saturn*, described as "fiction/history/travel" on the dust-cover is going to have booksellers running around like headless chickens looking for the appropriate shelf in an already balkanised book culture. But stock it they must (under memoir?) for this is a magnificent text.... It is tempting to identify Sebald's journeys of the mind with one of the contemporary figures in the book, Thomas Abrams of Orford, who has been building a model of the Temple of Jerusalem for the past 20 years. Sebald's quest is as eccentric and wonderful as that of Abrams, and if you buy only one book this summer, make it this one.

Wall Street Journal, Merle Rubin, 28 October 1998 [A]n extraordinary palimpsest of nature, human, and literary history.

The Los Angeles Times Sunday Book Review, Richard Eder *Rings* lacks the thunderous current; it eddies and scatters, sometimes aimlessly, it seems, and with considerable prolixity. It may be a while before the reader realizes that for Sebald the Holocaust set in motion a shock wave for all, not just part, of mankind. It has leached away the illusion of life and permanence that allows humanity to take pleasure in its endeavors even if theoretically aware

of their mortality.

From Kirkus Reviews Like his much praised novel *The Emigrants* (1996), this new work by Sebald is steeped in melancholy. Its also highly idiosyncratic, beginning as the record of a fictional walking tour along the coast of Suffolk in southeast England before turning into a broad, rich meditation on Britains past and the power of history. Observations en route link with psychological and historical elements to form a kind of dreamscape, the boundaries of which become increasingly hard to define, though the 17th-century naturalist and physician Thomas Browne acts as fixed point of reference. The walk starts at the remains of the fairy-tale palace known as Somerleyton Hall, once a Victorian railway king's monument to extravagance. On the nearby coastline are other ruins, from the recently foundered town of Lowestoft (where Joseph Conrad first made landfall in England), a wreck after the Thatcherite bubble burst, to the more spectacular ghost of the once-mighty port of Dunwich, which over several centuries toppled inexorably into the North Sea. Each of the sites prompts stories of Britains past. A railway bridge, for instance, leads to the story of the odd train that once ran over it and of the trains unlikely connection with the Emperor of China and the silk trade. Turning inland, the trail leads to writer Michael Hamburger (a number of writers, most long dead, figure in the journey), whose story of flight from the Nazis in 1933 resonates with the narrator's own more recent history, and on to a disorienting sandstorm among the remains of a forest uprooted by the freak hurricane of 1987 before turning back to the history of Britains colonial involvement in the silk trade, which binds many threads of this trek together. Erudition of this sort is too rare in American fiction, but the hypnotic appeal here has as much to do with Sebalds deft portrait of the subtle, complex relations between individual experience and the rich human firmament that gives it meaning as it does with his remarkable mastery of history. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Rings of Smoke by Ruth Franklin

I. If there is an underworld where the darkest nightmares of the twentieth century dwell, W.G. Sebald could be its Charon. Starting with *Vertigo*, which combines sketches of Kafka and Stendhal with a fictionalized record of travels in Italy and elsewhere, and ending with *Austerlitz*, the story of a boy sent to England via Kindertransport in 1939 and brought up under a false name, all of Sebald's books have been about bridging gaps, and about the impossibility of bridging gaps--between memory and forgetting, between art and reality, between the living and the dead. These extraordinary works are different on each reading, constantly in flux. Sebald's sudden death in a car accident last December was tragic for many reasons, but for his readers foremost because his books, all of them variations on a small group of themes, seemed parts of a whole that had not yet been brought to completion but had already broken new literary ground. Like the origami figures that open and close with a twist of the fingers, Sebald's prose moves simultaneously inward and outward. The opening of *Austerlitz* is exemplary:

In the second half of the 1960s I traveled repeatedly from England to Belgium, partly for study purposes, partly for other reasons which were never entirely clear to me, staying sometimes for just one or two days, sometimes for several weeks. On one of these Belgian excursions which, as it seemed to me, always took me further and further abroad, I came on a glorious early summer's day to the city of Antwerp, known to me previously only by name. Even on my arrival, as the train rolled slowly over the viaduct with its curious pointed turrets on both sides and into the dark station concourse, I had begun to feel unwell, and this sense of indisposition persisted for the whole of my visit to Belgium on that occasion. I still remember the uncertainty of my footsteps as I walked all round the inner city, down Jeruzalemstraat, Nachtegaalstraat, Pelikaanstraat, Paradijsstraat, Immerseelstraat, and many other streets and alleyways, until at last, plagued by a headache and my uneasy thoughts, I took refuge in the zoo by the Astridplein, next to the

Central Station, waiting for the pain to subside. I sat there on a bench in dappled shade, beside an aviary full of brightly feathered finches and siskins fluttering about. As the afternoon drew to a close I walked through the park, and finally went to see the Nocturama, which had first been opened only a few months earlier. It was some time before my eyes became used to its artificial dusk and I could make out different animals leading their sombrous lives behind the glass by the light of a pale moon. I cannot now recall exactly what creatures I saw on that visit to the Antwerp Nocturama, but there were probably bats and jerboas from Egypt and the Gobi Desert, native European hedgehogs and owls, Australian opossums, pine martens, dormice, and lemurs, leaping from branch to branch, darting back and forth over the grayish-yellow sandy ground, or disappearing into a bamboo thicket. The only animal which has remained lingering in my memory is the raccoon. I watched it for a long time as it sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped that all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own.

The single-mindedness with which this passage proceeds is Sebald's signature. Each sentence, bizarre or mundane, contributes another piece to the overall structure until that structure seems unable to sustain any more weight. The straightforward remark that opens the book, about the trips to and from Belgium, is immediately complicated. What are these reasons that were never clear to the speaker? How can these "excursions," all within the country, take him "further and further abroad"? The next sentences deepen the mystery: the narrator's sudden illness, the fantastic street names--Jerusalem, Nightingale, Pelican, Paradise, and, most evocatively, Eternal Soul--and finally the Nocturama itself, a symbol so potent that, like all of Sebald's symbols, it stops just this side of parody. And here, too, we get a final shrug of contradiction: Sebald claims to have difficulty remembering which animals he saw in the Nocturama, but at the same time he offers an almost comically specific series of examples. The tug-of-war between what is and what cannot be never stops.

The world of Sebald's books is its own Nocturama, inhabited by creatures at home in the dark. Like the raccoon that he describes so plaintively, Sebald's characters emerge with sudden clarity from the haze of their surroundings, obsessively repeating whatever action they have chosen, though it will not bring them the escape for which they so desperately yearn. They are destroyed souls, fractured under the burden of the pain that they bear. There is the tortured Kafka in *Vertigo*, sick and disoriented while traveling in Austria and Italy, tormented by dreams "in which everything was forever splitting and multiplying, over and again, in the most terrifying manner." There is the painter Max Ferber in *The Emigrants*, a Jew sent to England as a child during the war, whose parents died in Dachau: "that tragedy in my youth struck such deep roots within me that it later shot up again, put forth evil flowers, and spread the poisonous canopy over me which has kept me so much in the shade and dark in recent years." There is the Ashbury family in *The Rings of Saturn*, who embroider cloth all day and undo their work each night, and feel that "we never got used to being on this earth and life is just one great, ongoing incomprehensible blunder." And there is Jacques Austerlitz, whose life journey is driven by a blind and unsatisfiable longing to recapture the childhood memories he has entirely, unwillingly suppressed.

The strangest thing about Sebald's incomparably strange work is that upon first reading it gives us no reason to think that it is fiction. Though Austerlitz was largely taken as a novel, Sebald himself refused to designate it as such; in an interview he called it "a prose book of indefinite form." Indeed, why must the passage above be anything other than notes from an idiosyncratic travel journal? The street names, improbable though they may be, are easily verified with a map of Antwerp, and the zoo, located near the central train station just as he says, does in fact have a Nocturama. But though the books are marked by an extraordinary profusion of facts--snippets from Kafka's letters, notes on the mating practices of herrings, even reproductions of train tickets and restaurant receipts

that appear to document the narrator's journeys--fiction pulls at them with the force of gravity.

The four stories that constitute *The Emigrants* are connected by a single image that flits through each of them: the figure of Nabokov with his butterfly net, sometimes a grown man, sometimes a boy. And the four sketches of *Vertigo* each contain a line from a story by Kafka, slightly rephrased on each repetition, describing a corpse lying beneath a cloth on a bier. The improbability of all four characters in *The Emigrants* crossing paths with Nabokov, and the impossibility of a manifestation of Kafka's image appearing in all four parts of *Vertigo*, is but one signal of the turn into fiction. As one reads more deeply into Sebald's work, its fictionality becomes utterly essential.

But while fiction tugs at one sleeve, reality tugs at the other with nearly equal force, most dramatically in the black-and-white photographs that Sebald has strewn about all his prose books. The photographs have neither captions nor credits to give a clue to their provenance; the text describes the taking of some of them, while others seem to be more generally illustrative, and still others entirely random. In the last chapter of *Vertigo*, for instance, the narrator, visiting his hometown after many years of absence, mentions a photo album that his father gave his mother as a Christmas present during the first year of the war. "In it are pictures of the Polish campaign, all neatly captioned in white ink. Some of these photographs show gypsies who had been rounded up and put into detention. They are looking out, smiling, from behind the barbed wire, somewhere in a far corner of Slovakia where my father and his vehicle repairs unit had been stationed for several weeks before the outbreak of war." We are then shown a photograph of a woman carrying a baby in a bundle, dressed in gypsy-like clothes, behind a wire fence, with the caption "Zigeuner" (the German word for gypsy) in white ink. But for every photograph such as this one, there is another that firmly denies any easy correspondence with the text. Several pages earlier Sebald mentions an iron memorial cross that stands in the town graveyard to commemorate four young soldiers who died in a "last skirmish" in April 1945, and he lists their names. When we turn the page there is the cross; but it looks as if there are five names on it, not four, and the photograph is too blurry to make out any names.

The conflict between fact and fiction reaches its epitome in the voice that narrates all these stories of loss. Sebald seems to encourage us to think of this persona as something like his own. His narrator (the books share a single voice) occasionally offers biographical details that are identical with Sebald's own life: he is married, he lives in East Anglia, he was born toward the end of World War II in an Alpine German town, and came to England in the 1960s. Yet these details, like the photographs, obscure as much as they reveal. There are moments of startling intimacy, but even as Sebald's narrator seems to bare his soul, he tells us nothing about himself. And he favors a particularly disorienting narrative device: most of Sebald's characters tell their stories through direct encounters with the narrator, in monologues. At a crucial moment in some of the monologues, Sebald will switch from third person to first person, so that the narrator vanishes, leaving the character behind. Since he does not use quotation marks, the shift is seamless. This is not an "unreliable narrator," it is an unreliable narrative. But even as Sebald builds layer upon layer of disguise, his books stumble over their own sentences in their desire to explain themselves to the reader, as the crushing pile of symbols in the opening to *Austerlitz* illustrates. The books search for patterns in nature and in human life, and as they do so they obsessively repeat themselves. To take one instance: *The Rings of Saturn* begins with a quotation from an encyclopedia that describes the planet's rings as "consist[ing] of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect." The circular motif is repeated throughout the book, in everything from the déjà vu the narrator experiences visiting a friend's apartment to an extraordinary vision that is one of Sebald's most beautiful and mystical moments: "At earlier times, in the summer evenings during my childhood when I had watched from the valley as swallows circled in the last light ... I would imagine that the world was held together by the courses they flew through the air." The momentum created by the piling of image upon image, of figure upon figure, is so powerful that when one reaches the end of the book--I have experienced this with all of Sebald's books, and others have mentioned it as well--one feels an irresistible compulsion to turn it over and begin again.

Yet there is something unsettling about the spell that Sebald's books weave; and it is not only the disequilibrium

that is constantly evoked by the differences between fact and fiction, art and life—a state in which Sebald’s narrator continually finds himself, and that Sebald seeks to induce in the reader as well. It is a deeper paradox. In the first chapter of *Vertigo*, Sebald traces the adventures of the young Stendhal (then known as Marie Henri Beyle) in Napoleon’s army, and comments on the writer’s own difficulty in recollecting them: “at times his view of the past consists of nothing but grey patches, then at others images appear of such extraordinary clarity he feels he can scarce credit them.” He finds also that “even when the images supplied by memory are true to life, one can place little confidence in them”—years later Beyle will discover that he had replaced his own mental image of Ivrea with that of an engraving of the town. “This being so,” Sebald concludes, “Beyle’s advice is not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one’s travels, since before very long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say they destroy them.”

Art is the preserver of memory, but it is also the destroyer of memory: this is the final tug-of-war in Sebald’s work, and the most fundamental one. As he searches for patterns in the constellation of grief that his books record, he runs the risk that the patterns themselves, by virtue of their very beauty, will extinguish the grief that they seek to contain. Sebald’s peculiar alchemy of aestheticism and sorrow unwittingly underscores its own insubstantiality. Even as he investigates the roots of memory, Sebald, like the weavers whom he finds so emblematic, continually unravels his own creations.

JOE CUOMO: A friend of mine, a writer, a very good writer, said to me that as soon as he finished reading “The Rings of Saturn” he immediately started from the beginning again, because he couldn’t figure out what had just happened to him. I was wondering how you approached this in the writing of it, the idea of narrative form. Was the structure a function largely of your unconscious associations during the writing process? Or was the structure something you plotted out in advance in a very deliberate way?

W. G. SEBALD: I can’t quite remember how it worked. I had this idea of writing a few short pieces for the German papers in order to pay for the extravagance of a fortnight’s rambling tour. So that was the plan. But then, as you walk along, you find things. I think that’s the advantage of walking. It’s just one of the reasons I do that a lot. You find things by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian which is in a tiny little museum somewhere, and which you would never find in London. And in that you find odd details that lead you somewhere else, and so it’s a form of unsystematic searching, which, of course, for an academic, is far from orthodoxy, because we’re meant to do things systematically.

But I never liked doing things systematically. Not even my Ph.D. research was done systematically. It was done in a random, haphazard fashion. The more I got on, the more I felt that, really, one can find something only in that way—in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you

look at a dog following the advice of his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplottable manner. And he invariably finds what he is looking for. I think that, as I've always had dogs, I've learned from them how to do this. So you then have a small amount of material and you accumulate things, and it grows, and one thing takes you to another, and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials. And, as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between the two things. If you look for things that are like the things that you have looked for before, then, obviously, they'll connect up. But they'll only connect up in an obvious sort of way, which actually isn't, in terms of writing something new, very productive. You have to take heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to do something that it hasn't done before. That's how I thought about it. Then, of course, curiosity gets the better of you. This discovery process—the dog running in the field—is any of that happening while you're actually writing? Occasionally. I think when you write or do anything of the sort, there are times when you almost know that you're on the right track. You don't quite believe it, but you feel more positive about what you're doing than at other times, and I think this is confirmed when things come in from the wings. You know, as you sit there, doing your header note, trying to straighten out a page. And, as it comes right, then quotations or figures or things that you hadn't thought of for eighteen years offer themselves all of a sudden. I've always found it to be quite a good measure that things are going in a way that you can trust when, even in the writing process itself, things happen. For instance, the last part of this book is all about silk, and that section, in turn, finishes with a number of pages on the culture of mourning. And on the very day when I finished these pages, I looked in, I think it was the Times, the daily circular, and there were all these events I needed from the list of what had happened on a certain day one hundred and thirty years ago or two hundred and twenty years ago. And they all slotted into the text, as if I had been writing toward that point. It was quite amazing. But it does happen occasionally—it's very gratifying when it does. That process itself seems to be one that you described in the novel: something inexplicable occurs; we don't really know what to make of it, but the fact that it does occur seems to carry enormous significance. Yes. I think it's this whole business of coincidence, which is very prominent in my writing. I hope it's not obtrusive. But, you know, it does come up in the first book, in "Vertigo," a good deal. I don't particularly hold with parapsychological explanations of one kind or another, or Jungian theories about the subject. I find those rather tedious. But it seemed to me an

instance that illustrates that we somehow need to make sense of our nonsensical existence. You meet somebody who has the same birthday as you—the odds are one in three hundred and sixty-five, not actually all that amazing. But if you like the person then immediately this takes on more . . . and so we build on it, and I think all our philosophical systems, all our systems of our creed, all constructions, even the technological worlds, are built in that way, in order to make some sort of sense, when there isn't, as we all know.

One of the things that's so remarkable about the book is that you never try to use these coincidences toward some end, which is, I think, the point you're making: that we don't feel that we're being manipulated to see the world in a certain way. I mean, in a lot of these pop-psychology novels there's a realization that "Oh, because our birthdays are on the same day it means that we should stay married." Or something like that. There's a tendency to reduce the world to something that this then becomes the proof of. And it's amazing to me that you resist that urge in novel after novel.

Because I would trivialize it.

Yes.

Nevertheless, it has significance. I mean, the first section of "Vertigo" is about Stendhal, and this rather short piece finishes with Stendhal's death in a certain street in Paris, which is now called the Rue Danielle-Casanova. I didn't know who Danielle Casanova was—Casanova meant something for me in the context of that book, but not Danielle Casanova. The following summer I went to Corsica. I was walking through the mountains, and I came to the coastal village of Piana, and there was a little house with a plaque on it, and it said it was a memorial plaque for Danielle Casanova, who had been murdered by my compatriots in Auschwitz. She'd been a dentist and a Communist and was in the French Resistance. And I went past the house three or four times, and it always seemed closed. On one occasion, I went round the back, and there was her sister. And then I talked to her for a week. [Laughter from the audience.] These things do happen. I have all her papers, and now I don't know what I shall do with them. But it's that sort of connection. And if that sort of thing happens to us then we think, perhaps, that not everything is quite so futile. It gives one a sort of passing sense of consolation, occasionally.

We were talking backstage about your first book in German, "After Nature," which hasn't been published

here yet—I think it will be coming out next year—and about how that book came about.

Yes. It may be of interest because you don't know how I got into this strange business of writing books of this kind. I mean, I had never had any ambitions of becoming or being a writer. What I felt toward the middle point of my life was that I was being hemmed in increasingly by the demands of my job at the university, by the demands of various other things that one has in one's life, and that I needed some way out. And that coincided with my just happening to be going down to London and reading a book by someone, a rather obscure German writer called Konrad Bayer, who was one of the young surrealists, as it were—postwar surrealists who'd been kept down by the famous Gruppe 47—and who subsequently took his own life. He'd only written a number of very slender little things, among them was a book called "The Head of Vitus Bering," and that had in it a footnote referring to an eighteenth-century German botanist and zoologist called Georg Wilhelm Steller, who happens to have the same initials that I have, and who happened to have been born in a place that my mother visited when she was pregnant, in 1943, when she was going from Bamberg, which is in the north of Bavaria, down to the Alps, where her parents were, because the bombers were coming in increasingly. She couldn't go through Nürnberg, which is the normal route, because Nürnberg had just been attacked that night and was in flames. So she had to go around it. And she stayed in Windsheim, as that place is called, where a friend of hers had a house.

Which is in the book.

And that's mentioned. You know, this preoccupation with making something out of nothing, which is, after all, what writing is about, took me—what I liked about it is that if you just change, as it were, the nature of your writing from academic monographs to something indefinable, then you have complete liberty, whereas, as you well know, as an academic there are people constantly saying, "Well, it's not correct, what you put there. It's not right." Now I can say, "It doesn't matter."

A theme that's all over your work, it seems to me, is that the part of the world that we know is minuscule. And the part of the world that we don't know is enormous. Yet, within the part that we do know—there's such a great deal of agonizing in your work over getting that part right and getting the voice true. And, yet, it may be that we're trying to do this just so that we can convince ourselves that we do know something about the world after all.

I think that's pretty much how it is. You can't always see, I think, the reality of what we're doing in the pathological

variant, because all—most—behavior has a pathological bearing. And writing and creating something is about elaboration. You have a few elements. You build something. You elaborate until you have something that looks like something. And elaboration is, of course, the device of paranoia. If you read texts written by paranoiacs, they're syntactically correct, the orthography is all right, but the content is insane, because they start on a series of axioms that are out of synch. And the elaboration is absolutely fantastic. It goes on and on and on. You can see from that that the degree of elaboration is not a measure of the truth. And that is exactly the same problem, certainly, in prose fiction: you have to elaborate. You have one image, and you have to make something of it—half a page, or three-quarters, or one and a half—and it only works through linguistic or imaginative elaboration. Of course, you might well think during the course of this process that you are directing some form of sham reality.

Two more things I just want to get into before we close. There is a passage from "The Rings of Saturn," when Thomas Browne speaks, that reminds me of a speech by Father Zosima in "The Brothers Karamazov"—that, in both instances, what is suggested is that our own palpable experience is somehow linked to a world that is beyond that which is palpable. This passage also brings to mind the work of poets like Czeslaw Milosz and Adam Zagajewski and Joseph Brodsky. Do you see yourself as writing in a similar vein as any of them?

Well, what I think some of these people have in common is an interest in metaphysics and, certainly, in Dostoyevsky this is evident. I think the best sections in Dostoyevsky's writings are those that are metaphysical rather than religious. And metaphysics is something that's always interested me, in the sense that one wants to speculate about these areas that are beyond one's ken, as it were. I've always thought it very regrettable, and, in a sense, also foolish, that the philosophers decided somewhere in the nineteenth century that metaphysics wasn't a respectable discipline and had to be thrown overboard, and reduced themselves to becoming logisticians and statisticians. It seemed a very poor diet, somehow, to me.

So metaphysics, I think, shows a legitimate concern. And writers like Kafka, for instance, are interested in metaphysics. If you read a story like "Investigations of a Dog," it has a subject whose epistemological horizon is very low. He doesn't grasp anything above the height of one foot. He makes incantations so that the bread comes down from the dinner table. How it comes down, he doesn't know. But he knows that if he performs certain rites then certain events will follow. And then he goes, this dog, through the most extravagant

speculations about reality, which we know is quite different. As he, the dog, has this limited capacity of understanding, so do we. So it's quite legitimate to ask—and, of course, it can become a kind of parlor game—as these philosophers said, “Are we sure that we're really sitting here now?”

I haven't asked you about the photographs in the book. And two things occur to me. One is that in “The Emigrants” you've said, I think, that ninety per cent of the photographs are authentic. But there's a passage in “Vertigo,” speaking of Kafka, where the narrator is on a bus and he encounters two twin boys who look exactly like Franz Kafka did at that age. He's travelling to a place where Kafka had spent some time, and he wants to get a photograph of these two boys, and he asks the parents of the boys to send him a photograph, without giving their names, just because he needs to have this photograph. Of course, the parents think that he's a pederast and don't want to have anything to do with it. But then the passage ends, “I remained motionless on that bus seat from then on, embarrassed to the utmost degree and consumed with an infinite rage at the fact that I would now have no evidence whatsoever to document this most improbable coincidence.” And I was wondering if this was another form of documentation—that the photographs are sometimes used to document coincidence itself.

Well, that particular episode actually happened, as it is described, and it is from that time onward that I always have one of those small cameras in my pocket. It was a completely unnerving afternoon. But, you know, it does happen. I mean, sometimes one asks oneself later on whether one's made it up or not. And it's not always quite clear.

The last question is, again, about coincidence. It does seem that you were saying that some of the photographs are for that purpose, to document coincidence.

Yes.

I was wondering, going back to that theme that we discussed earlier on, if you feel sometimes that coincidence and duplication is a way in which nature is breaking through the surface of our civilized lives. That is, we may not know what it means. But we have a sense that something beyond us is taking place.

Certainly, my own life experience is that when I thought I had things sorted and I was in control, something happened that completely undid everything I had wanted to do. And so it goes on. The illusion that I had some control over my life went up to about my thirty-fifth birthday. Then it stopped. Now I'm out of control.

Sebald's fiction is an innovative hybrid of memoir, travelogue and history, its text scattered with grainy, black-and-white photographs without captions which lend an unsettling feel of documentary. He often uses real names, in an endless journeying saturated with European cultural allusions and metaphysical meditations on loss, exile and death. "At a time when everything is classified and marketed cynically, Sebald defies all genres," says Bryan Cheyette, professor of 20th-century literature at Southampton University. Cheyette sees him as a "post-Holocaust writer", obliquely exploring the long aftermath of the Third Reich.

On his approach to factual "material", Sebald says: "There was a vogue of documentary writing in Germany in the 70s which opened my eyes," he says. "It's an important literary invention, but it's considered an artless form. I was trying to write something saturated with material but carefully wrought, where the art manifests itself in a discreet, not too pompous fashion." The big events are true, he says, while the detail is invented to give the "effect of the real". "Every novelist combines fact and fiction," he insists. "In my case, there's more reality. But I don't think it's radically different; you work with the same tools."

For the writer Eva Hoffman, this blurred boundary between artifice and reality, memory and history, is "embedded in his tone - one doesn't know what's fact or fiction". That uncertainty, fuelled by forged documents or suspect portraits, is Sebald's aim. "It's the opposite of suspending disbelief and being swept along by the action, which", he says drily, "is perhaps not the highest form of mental activity; it's to constantly ask, 'What happened to these people, what might they have felt like?' You can generate a similar state of mind in the reader by making them uncertain."

The impulse to question, fostered by his work, is a virtue not only of the reader but the citizen. Passages in *Austerlitz* on the infamous ghetto of Theresienstadt, north-west of Prague, which the Nazis passed off as a model town to the Red Cross, draw on the painstaking record of HG Adler. "When you read the fascist jargon they evolved in 10 years, you can't believe you're a Jew. You need that tension between documentary evidence and questioning in the reader's mind: 'Can it really have been so?'" To read with vigilance is to question authority. In contrast to 19th-century novelists, who were "at pains to tell you this was a true story", Sebald layers his narration; we learn things indirectly, unreliably: "I try to let people talk for themselves, so the narrator is only the one who brings the tale but doesn't instal himself in it. There's still fiction with an anonymous narrator who knows everything, which seems to me postmodern. I content myself with the role of the messenger."

The Emigrants (1993), which gradually links the stories of four displaced Germans to the Holocaust, emerged when Sebald learned of the suicide of one of his teachers not long after Jean Améry killed himself in 1978. In the tale of the schoolmaster, who is "one-quarter Jewish, as they used to say", he sifts memories of the silence and "normality" of his own village, mindful of the "great time lag between the infliction of injustice and when it finally overwhelms you".

The writer Linda Grant was struck by "calm prose that packed an extraordinary emotional charge, but you couldn't see how it was done. There are no fireworks, he's the opposite of showy, but he does something magical." He is free, she adds, of a "tendency to sentimentalise when non-Jews write about the Holocaust". Byatt finds the tone "perfectly judged: it's a mournful, crab-wise, tactful way of getting at history, making tiny steps before he puts the knife in. The primary emotions are not anger but grief and tragic terror." By contrast, the German novelist Georg Klein detests what he sees as Sebald's "sweet melancholic masochism towards the past", which claims a "false intimacy with the dead".

Sebald has his own scruples about the "morally questionable process of falsification. We're brought up to tell the truth, but as a writer you're an accomplished liar. You persuade yourself it's to achieve a certain end. But there's a problem in departing from the literal truth to achieve an effect - in the worst case, melodrama, where you make someone cry. It's a vice."

He is conscious of the danger of usurping others' existences. While all four emigrants are based on real people,

the painter Max Ferber, who obsessively scratches out then redoes his work, is a composite of Sebald's Mancunian landlord ("I found out he'd skied in the same places as I had") and the London-based artist Frank Auerbach. Without naming Auerbach, Sebald says he felt he had the right – "because the information on his manner of work is from a published source". Auerbach, however, refused to allow his paintings to appear in the English edition. Sebald modified the character's name from Max Aurach in the German. "I withdraw if I get any sense of the person's discomfort," he says.

Hoffman admires Sebald's delicacy. "He doesn't feel an entitlement to go at history frontally; he goes at it from an oblique angle". As Sebald says: "Do I, who carry a German passport and have two German parents, have the right? I try to do it as well as I can. If the reactions were different, I would stop – you do take notice." (That tentativeness perhaps carries to his view of Israel. "The situation is deplorable, there's no question. But it's an issue I've avoided.") In Byatt's view, "Sebald's generation weren't involved in the war, but they've had to look at their own parents with horror. They're a wandering, lost generation that felt they had no right to speak. He's started speaking painfully out of that silence."

One strategy is to avoid the sensational. "The details of Susie Bechhofer's life, with child abuse in a Calvinist Welsh home, are far more horrific than anything in Austerlitz. But I didn't want to make use of it because I haven't the right. I try to keep at a distance and never invade," Sebald says. "I don't think you can focus on the horror of the Holocaust. It's like the head of the Medusa: you carry it with you in a sack, but if you looked at it you'd be petrified. I was trying to write the lives of some people who'd survived – the 'lucky ones'. If they were so fraught, you can extrapolate. But I didn't see it; I only know things indirectly."

Sebald loathes the term "Holocaust literature" ("it's a dreadful idea that you can have a sub-genre and make a speciality out of it; it's grotesque"). While he commends Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), he is doubtful about recreations. "It can only become an obscenity, like *Schindler's List*, where you know the extras who get mown down will be drinking Coca-Cola after the filming." In *The Emigrants*, it is the slow accretion of fictional details of an annihilated culture that fuels an overwhelming sense of loss. "It's full of an ache for the past," says Grant, "something destroyed, not just for Jews but for Germans." It may partly be an awareness of that lingering absence that repels Sebald from Germany. "As a consequence of persecution, the country is much poorer," he says. "It's more homogeneous than other European nations."

He has turned down job offers at German universities, but says: "The longer I've stayed here, the less I feel at home. In Germany, they think I'm a native but I feel at least as distant there. My ideal station", he half smiles, "is possibly a hotel in Switzerland."

He travels almost monthly to the continent, "digging around" in archives, "servicing" his books with readings and appearances ("I try to keep this to a minimum") or visiting friends and relatives. His sisters live in French- and German-speaking Switzerland, while his mother is still alive in Sonthofen, Bavaria. "Going home is not necessarily a wonderful experience," he says. "It always comes with a sense of loss, and makes you so conscious of the inexorable passage of time." He adds: "If you're based in two places, on a bad day you see only the disadvantages everywhere. On a bad day, returning to Germany brings back all kinds of spectres from the past."

In *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), subtitled in German "an English pilgrimage", WG takes a rucksack on a walking trip across East Anglia to "dispel emptiness". He discerns destruction and the dark undercurrents of European history all around. His mind travels from Conrad's sojourn in Lowestoft to the Belgian Congo, whose slave labour foreshadowed the concentration camps. Britain has its own amnesia about an imperial past, and Sebald has said he finds the English "not so obviously guilty".

The Rings of Saturn reveals links between beauty and brutality. "Culture is not the antidote to the mayhem we wreak – expanding the economy or waging wars," says Sebald. "Art is a way of laundering money. It still goes on."

Hecites the slave-driven sugar profits that built the Tate. "It's more obvious with art because it's an expensive commodity. But literature is also affirmative of society – it oils the wheels."

Austerlitz too explores the link between architecture and fascism. "The Nazis had megalomaniac fantasies which Speer, the court architect, was going to realise," says Sebald, who grew up near the Sonthofen Ordensburg, a former college for the Nazi elite. "There were concerts, and you were dwarfed by the architecture of power-crazed minds. It was prefigured by the bombast of the 19th-century bourgeois style – it always comes from somewhere. These vast edifices depended on slave labour. The SS ran quarries next to concentration camps. It's not an accidental link."

A year after his travels along the coast, the narrator in *The Rings Of Saturn* is "taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility". While one reviewer assumed he had been incarcerated in a mental asylum, Sebald explains: "Walking along the seashore was not comfortable – one foot was always lower than the other. I had a pain, and the following summer, I stretched, and something broke in my back." Threatened with paralysis, he had a four-hour operation for a shattered disc. "They mended me pretty well."

Some found comedy in the morose narrator, an afflicted writer battling foul weather and fouler hotels, who was parodied in *Private Eye* as an Eeyore-like figure of gloom. It is an image Sebald himself laughs at. Evoking a boyhood photograph of his mother looking brightly at the camera and "me being my usual self", he pulls an absurdly lugubrious face. His sombre reserve is relieved by a kindness, deadpan wit and occasional flashes of laughter. Self-deprecation builds with comic force as he mocks his late starts in life.

While Hoffman says his "mode of ironic melancholia" is in a "vein of English eccentrics, and entirely consistent with his personality", for Robinson, Sebald is "not so much melancholic as burdened by history: the wryness, the sardonic humour, is how he engages with experience he'd otherwise find too painful to contemplate". Byatt, for whom Sebald's narrator "journeys in great circling spirals in order not to go home, to get away from his origins", sees melancholy as a "cover for something more savage: he suddenly puts the knife in about the Germans".

Sebald, who relaxes by "walking and taking the dog out", travels alone: "You can't see anything as a pair; you have to be by yourself." He is clearly burdened by his writing. "You have no conception when you begin; it seems like an innocent occupation, but it's not easy. You become a boring person for those around you. It must be extremely uncomfortable to live with a writer – all that preoccupation and brooding." He revises both his English and French translations, scans his Italian ones, and has "intervened massively" in the past ("I literally rewrote them"). He is also oppressed by growing fame. "The phone calls and letters could drive you out of writing. I'm on the brink of saying, no more readings. At the same time, one doesn't want to be too capricious."

His celebrity in Germany spread beyond literary circles with the non-fiction *Air War And Literature* (1999), which will be published in Britain next year. It attempted to broach what he sees as a "muteness" in Germany about the Allied firebombing of German cities in the final stages of the war. "We didn't want to be reminded partly because of the shame," he says. "The country was reduced to rubble, and people were scavengers in the ruins – the same people who were 'sanitising' Europe were all of a sudden among the rats." There is still resentment that it remains a taboo, says Sebald, "but we should know where it came from: we bombed Warsaw and Stalingrad before the US came to bomb us. When Dresden was bombed and there were countless corpses, special commanders were brought in from Treblinka because they knew how to burn bodies."

Amid TV debates spawned by the book, "it was very disagreeable to get 100 letters every day at breakfast," he recalls. "Nobody had had an outlet for these feelings before. Some wrote hysterically about their experiences. It took the lid off. Others said the bombing had been masterminded by Jews abroad. There's a danger of getting applause from the wrong side."

Sebald prefers his British readers to his German ones: "I get very odd letters from my native country, horrified that there aren't any paragraphs in Austerlitz, or taking me up on errors of fact. It's an attitude problem, an inability to put yourself into the place of another person. There's definitely something like a national character, even though it's frowned upon to say so." He thinks ambivalence about the "official culture of memory" remains widespread, and suggests his books make a splash but then sink with little trace. "After that, there's silence. It's an indication of resentment, that somebody is making you think about all that again. People are saying, 'it's enough - it's time to think about ourselves'."

Although his claims for the act of writing are so tentative, so doubt-ridden, Sebald feels writers have an obligation to air what others cannot bear to remember. Writing may even be a minute step towards expiation. "It would be presumptuous to say writing a book would be a sufficient gesture," he reflects. "But if people were more preoccupied with the past, maybe the events that overwhelm us would be fewer." At least, he adds, "while you're sitting still in your own room, you don't do anyone any harm".