

Rings of Saturn

Study Guide Continued

1. The photographs, maps, diagrams, ticket reproductions, newspaper articles, etc. in the book appear to document the stories that Sebald is telling, lending a sense of verifiability to the writing. On closer examination, some of the photos are so ambiguous (p. 44, 138, 155) that they almost make the reader question the point of their inclusion. Does the “documentary evidence” make you more or less sure of what is really true? Which appear to be undeniable, and which make you question the story? Are there any points during your reading when you wished there were a picture, and it wasn’t there?
2. Sebald has stated that the photographs are there to “document coincidence”. In his terms this is the act of making meaning by creating patterns out of the seemingly disparate elements of life. He says our seeking out coincidence and duplication is a way that nature breaks through the surface of our civilized lives, giving us “control” over situations.
3. “I have set up the projector in the library. Mother was wondering if you would like to see what it used to be like here.” (p. 213) Pictures can have the effect of supplying memory when there really is none (baby pictures, etc.) or displacing actual memory (whatever that may be) which calls into question the whole idea of memory itself.
4. “Whenever a shift in our spiritual life occurs and fragments such as these surface, we believe we can remember. But in reality, of course, memory fails us.” (p. 177) No matter who does it, the writing of history depends upon the accurate accounts of the memory of the writer and those witnesses chosen to support their story. Do you believe memory is inherently reliable or unreliable? What does that mean about the reliability of history?
5. “Is this terrible story, I asked myself, as I sat overlooking the German Ocean, (?) the report of a credible witness?” (p. 67) Who will “...substantiate the stories”? (p. 233) As the narrator questions the validity of his source, the reader in turn questions the credibility of the narrator. Is he a “credible witness” in your mind? Why or why not?
6. “...in histeriography, the indisputable advantages of a fictitious past become evident.” (p. 71) What are the advantages of a fictitious past? “This then, I thought, as I looked around about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was.” (p. 125) How does this false perspective echo the story of *The Anatomy Lesson* (p. 12-17) and *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*?
7. When he relates the story of Casement (p. 131), the narrator states that the executive and judicial systems deliberately falsified the facts through the public records, therefore rendering history meaningless, since it is in part based on the “facts” of government statistics and records. How is this meaninglessness related to the polls of Komar and Melamid?
8. Statistics are again used in the story of the herring--the records of the numbers of fish caught,

the probability of their dying out, and then the narrator states “Given these quantities, the natural historians sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction wrought in the cycle of life.” (p. 57) Do the epic tales of destruction that are related throughout the book validate the natural historians’ rationalization: the herring, the Congo, the manors and country estates, World War II, the forest fires, the effects of the pesticides on the sea? Can you find any examples that validate their claim?

9. In a number of places throughout the book, Sebald’s narrator suddenly shifts from the third person (he, she, they) to the first person (speaking from the point of view of one of the characters *in* the story) in the middle of an account. He slips in and out of first person in the story of Korzeniowski (p.115) and adopts the voice of Mrs. Ashbury (p. 214 & 219). Do you find the seamless-ness of these transitions unsettling, unremarkable, or did you even notice that it was happening? In your opinion, how does this affect the narrator’s credibility or authenticity, if he is able to move back and forth so easily?

10. Sebald begins each chapter back in the present on the journey along the Suffolk shore, and many of these stories appear to be personal memoir. Yet, how much do these personal stories really reveal about the narrator and his past? How well could you describe the narrator: his profession, personal life, habits, age, experience? Why would Sebald intentionally obscure the narrator’s identity?

11. Think about the following literary categories: travel, fiction, biography, myth, memoir, historical fiction. In what ways does *Rings of Saturn* exemplify each of these genre of writing? In what ways is it a combination of all of them? What genre would you call *Rings*? Is it a hybrid, a new form or an updated version of a traditional form? Find examples of the different styles and genre in the book.

12. Many times, Sebald begins to branch off on a story after looking at the landscape, and the memories and history that it evokes. At times, it is buildings and structures that are recalled (windmills, p. 30 & 237, the Port of Dunwich, p. 155, Boulge Hall, p. 196), other times, activities and events that happened there (the Dutch attacks on Southwold, p. 76, fires, p. 170, a hurricane, p. 265). How would you describe the narrator’s relationship to the land in terms of Lucy Lippard’s sense of place in *Lure of the Local*?

13. Each place the narrator visits connects to Britain’s past, from prehistoric, to medieval, through colonialization, trade, industrialization and into the present. How does the metaphor of silk and the silk trade act as a narrative thread (no pun intended), connecting the story told here with the story of Britain’s colonialism? Reread the stories of the history book (p. 94), the Congo (p. 118), Yuan Ming Yuan (p. 138), the bridal gown made from hundreds of silk scraps (p. 212) sewn like webs (another prominent image), and all of chapter 10.

14. Many of us learned history as a though it were a set of discrete stories, each with a beginning and an end. How is Sebald’s style of telling history a different approach? Are you able to make connections between your personal experience and history in the same way that Sebald’s narrator does (p.48, for example)?

15. Thomas Browne, who Sebald introduces in chapter 1, had a theory of the Eternal Present, a present in which one could move through space and time and interconnect with all things simultaneously. How is the concept of the eternal present reflected in the structure of the narrative in *Rings*? Does the story “move through space and time and connect with all things”? How does Se-

bald advance the narrative from one time and place to another--what techniques does he use? Do you notice the transitions, or do you suddenly find yourself in a new time and place as you read?

16. How are the ideas and work of Browne a fixed point of reference for many of the themes in the book? (Time and space, patterns and chaos, silk and weaving, memory and forgetting, art and reality, the living and the dead, the past and the present). Why do you think Sebald would connect the themes of the book --which are wide ranging, as their very purpose is to call into question what is real and what is not--so closely with the life and work of one person?

17. The putting together of unlike ideas and images in order to create something new is a process you tried when you designed your political posters. Did you see something new by putting two things together? Did one make you look at the other differently? Why do you think that is?

18. "...one had the illusion of complete harmony between the natural and the manufactured." (p.34) is just one of the many parallels between the made and natural world in *Rings*. The narrator draws comparisons between buildings and ravines (p. 84), the clutter on a desk and a landscape with mountains and glaciers(p. 8), and an actual landscape with a geometric pattern, to name a few. What would be the purpose of describing the natural world in terms of the man-made, and vice versa?

19. "I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe." (p.237) Over and over, the narrator marvels at how quickly everything around him has become overgrown, run down, decayed and ruined. How much of this is attributable to natural forces, and how much to man's intervention in natural processes? Where does nature begin and end, and where does man come in? What does Sebald seem to be saying about the future of the cycle of life? Read the story of the Fitzgeralds starting on page 195 as an example upon which to base your analysis.

20. Fire, ash, and charcoal are repeatedly used as images that describe the process of something becoming nothing. (114, 128, 140, 145, 160, 169,196, 202, 256) Compare and contrast the different fires that Sebald introduces

21. The pace of the book varies from progressing minute by minute to covering vast spans of history in a few sentences, and the action veers back and forth through time and space. How does this discontinuity affect the way you read? Have you found ways to notate the text that help organize your reading and consequently, your understanding of the text?

22. The rings of Saturn are described as ice crystals and meteorites making circular orbits around the planet's equator. Circularity also comes up in the cogwheels and face of the clock (p. 96) Where else in the book is this circular motif repeated? Think of the sense of déjà vu the narrator describes as "ghosts of repetition" (p. 187), the scene at the Ashbury house where work is done and undone in a never ending cycle (p. 212), the Rubiyat (p. 201), etc.

23. Sebald feels that writers have an obligation to write about what others cannot bear to remember. How does this make every writer an historian? Do you agree with Sebald? Do you think he's too preoccupied with the past? What is the point of trying to make connections among people, places, and times?