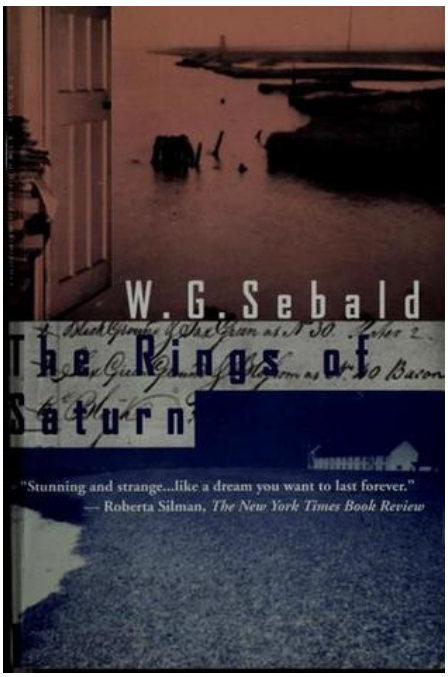

The Rings of Saturn

W.G. Sebald , Michael Hulse (Translator)

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The Rings of Saturn — with its curious archive of photographs — records a walking tour of the east coast of England. A few of the things which cross the path and mind of its narrator (who both is and is not Sebald) are lonely eccentrics, Sir Thomas Browne's skull, a matchstick model of the Temple of Jerusalem, recession-hit seaside towns, wooded hills, Joseph Conrad, Rembrandt's "Anatomy Lesson," the natural history of the herring, the massive bombings of WWII, the dowager empress Tzu Hsi, and the silk industry in Norwich.

The Rings of Saturn Details

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From Reader Review The Rings of Saturn for online ebook

Teresa Proença says

"A linha que separa o bem do mal cruza o coração de cada ser humano. E quem pode destruir um pedaço do seu coração?"
Alexander Soljenítsin

Como todo o leitor merece ler **Os Anéis De Saturno** e sei que palavras minhas não serão suficientes para vos fazer acreditar nele, transcrevo, do meu exemplar d'*A Herança Perdida*, alguns excertos (adaptados) do ensaio de James Wood, intitulado *A Incerteza de W. G. Sebald*, escrito dois anos antes da morte de Sebald:

> "ANGUSTIADA, ARROJADA, EXTREMA, SILENCIOSA - apenas uma soma zero de adjetivos contraditórios se pode aproximar da densidade perturbada da escrita de W. G. Sebald. Pois este alemão radicado na Inglaterra há mais de trinta anos é um dos mais misteriosamente sublimes escritores europeus contemporâneos.
> É o primeiro escritor contemporâneo desde Beckett a encontrar uma forma de contestar o primado do romance tradicional e a obrigar o realismo a refletir sobre si mesmo.
> A linguagem de Sebald é um edifício extraordinário, quase uma antiguidade, repleto dos mais refinados lustres. Transforma os factos em ficção entrelaçando-os tão profundamente nas suas formas narrativas que nos dá a impressão de nunca terem pertencido à vida real e de apenas na prosa de Sebald terem encontrado a sua verdadeira existência.
>
> Em *Os Anéis de Saturno* um homem que talvez seja Sebald percorre os condados ingleses de Norfolk e de Suffolk. A acção do livro decorre no presente, mas o protagonista tem algo de viajante à moda antiga, um romeiro do asfalto, como se saído de um conto do século XIX.
> A morte é o verdadeiro tema de Os Anéis de Saturno. Não é bem ficção nem livro de viagens, mas é sempre absolutamente artístico."

Os Anéis de Saturno é um livro (Sebald não gostava que chamassem romances aos seus livros) extraordinário sobre o Mal e o Bem. E com o qual se aprende muito sobre Literatura, Pintura, História e até sobre o arenque e os bichos da seda.
Tantas vezes olhei para "A Lição de Anatomia" de Rembrandt e, afinal, nunca o tinha visto...
Thomas Browne, Joseph Conrad, Roger Casement, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Edward FitzGerald, François-René de Chateaubriand, Imperatriz Cixi, são algumas das histórias de vidas, com que Sebald me emocionou. Também fala dos horrores das guerras e das abominações de que os homens são capazes.

Após reler o texto acima, concluo que não consegui transmitir como este livro é maravilhoso. É muito difícil transformar sentimentos em palavras...

"*hoje os nossos corpos estão adornados, amanhã serão alimento dos vermes."*

(Rene Magritte, *The musings of the solitary walker* 1926)

Orsodimondo says

LA GRAMMATICA DEL SILENZIO
C’è un viandante che negli anni Novanta del secolo scorso se ne va a piedi attraverso la contea di Suffolk, in East Anglia, che non è proprio il primo posto che viene voglia di visitare nel Regno Unito di Gran Bretagna (è però il primo posto da dove partiva gli aerei alleati che andavano a bombardare a tappeto la Germania nazista, come racconta lo stesso Sebald in *Storia naturale della distruzione*).
Come si vede nella magnifica foto riproposta in copertina, calza stivali di cuoio, invece di scarpe da trekking - racchiude le sue cose in uno zaino informe invece di quelli anatomici. Niente abbigliamento e oggetti tecnici che possano agevolare il cammino e l’andare, l’aspetto che domina rimanda a un tempo che fu.

L’immagine di copertina dell’edizione Adelphi.

Se ne va in giro sapendo un sacco di cose, piacevolmente erudito e in grado di collegare un’aringa a una stella e all’invenzione della luce elettrica passando per Bioy Casares.
Fa venire in mente un appassionato rigattiere che si muove nel suo negozio pieno di carabattole, ma per lui gioielli preziosi, cose di altri, e di tutto conosce la storia, il percorso, la vita.
E fa anche venire in mente quelle torte sfornate da certe nonne, ancora calde, che si comincia ad assaggiare con cautela per evitare ustioni, e boccone dopo pezzetto, il gusto conquista e spinge a tagliare fette sempre più grandi.
L’appetito vien mangiando, e di questo viandante e dei suoi racconti e divagazioni non si riesce più a fare a meno, se ne vorrebbero sempre altri.

Lo scrittore vagabondo trova sulla riva del mare un recinto che rinchiude un centinaio di maiali addormentati: scavalca la recinzione elettrificata (bella prova di determinazione e di spregio della proprietà privata), si china vicino a uno dei cento animali e si mette a fargli grattini dietro l’orecchio, proprio come si fa al gatto di casa; nel frattempo, si accoccola sulla spiaggia e pensa a due pseudo scienziati che si sforzarono di ricavare luce naturale dal corpo delle aringhe morte, e si chiamavano Herrington (in inglese aringa si dice herring) e Lightbown (light=luce); ma anche a quell’articolo del noto quotidiano ‘Eastern Daily Press’, di cui ci fornisce testimonianza fotografica nel caso fossimo scettici, intitolato ‘Housekeeper Rewarded for Silent Dinners’, cioè la vicenda della cuoca di un eccentrico ricco signore a nome, non a caso, di George Wyndham Le Strange, cuoca che ricevette un’eredità di milioni di sterline perché lo strano signor Le Strange voleva godere della sua silenziosa compagnia durante i pasti.

Qualche anno prima che DF Wallace esprimesse la stessa preoccupazione raccontandoci del festival che nel Maine viene dedicato al noto crostaceo, anche il nostro viandante si interrogava sulla sofferenza dei pesci, sul lungo processo che li porta alla morte (nel caso del nostro trattasi di aringhe, e non aragoste).
Non so perché, ma sospetto che il nostro (e anche DFW) siano giunti a queste domande e considerazioni riflettendo sulle tante persone che si dichiarano contrarie all’uccisione a scopo di nutrimento di animali che abitano la crosta terrestre o il cielo, ma di fronte a quelli che vivono nell’acqua dimostrano la più totale indifferenza e la massima libidine.

”Lezione di anatomia del dottor Tulp”, 1632, conservato al Mauritshuis di L’Aia. Il dipinto fu commissionato al pittore dalla Gilda dei Medici di Amsterdam. Rappresenta il professor Nicolaes

Tulp, titolare della locale cattedra di anatomia, mentre esegue la dissezione del corpo di un giustiziato del quale, grazie ai documenti, conosciamo l'identità: Adrian Adrianeszoon detto "Het Kindt", famigerato criminale impiccato ad Amsterdam nel gennaio del 1632. In un'epoca in cui non esisteva ancora la refrigerazione elettrica per conservare i cadaveri, le anatomie si potevano tenere solo nei mesi più freddi: conseguenzialmente, possiamo dedurre che l'intervento su Het Kindt sia stato tenuto da Tulp poco dopo la sua impiccagione. Il dipinto, quindi, è databile alla prima metà dell'anno.

Lungo il cammino gli capita di pensare a *La lezione di anatomia del dottor Tulp* che Rembrandt dipinse nel 1632: ci porta dentro lo stupendo quadro, ci aiuta a 'leggerlo', a guardarlo – anche se poi a me sembra che prenda una cantonata, erudita, ma sempre di cantonata si tratta, non c'è nessuna confusione tra destra e sinistra nella tela, e se proprio di 'errori' si vuol parlare, è altrove che bisogna cercare.

Il conte di Sandwich, dal peso di trecento libbre (136 chili, nomen omen) doveva essere un bizzarro spettacolo, mentre gesticolava freneticamente avvolto dalle fiamme sul ponte di poppa della Royal James bombardata dalla flotta olandese il 28 maggio del 1672.

Sulla spiaggia guardata dall'alto gli sembra di vedere un grosso mollusco che gli suscita un panico improvviso: ma la minuziosa descrizione lascia intendere che si tratta di una coppia intenta a fare l'amore fino al raggiungimento dell'orgasmo - e qui forse il voyerismo del nostro riceve il suo giusto premio (o punizione, se si preferisce).

André Kertész: New York, 9 luglio 1978.

Si addormenta davanti alla tivvu nel salotto di un albergo mentre inizia ad andare in onda un documentario su Roger Casement (il celta di Vargas Llosa): ci racconta non solo il poco che si ricorda dell'ascolto nel dormiveglia, ma anche quanto appreso dopo, fra ricerche e studi. Solo che comincia da tutt'altra parte, molto lontano, dalla storia di Joseph Conrad e la triste fine dei suoi genitori; ma anche Conrad a un certo punto approdò in Congo (dove avrebbe tratto fonti e ispirazione per 'Cuore di tenebra' altrimenti?), conobbe Casement, come lui fu scandalizzato dai metodi dei colonialisti belgi, probabilmente senza confronto al mondo. E leggendo queste pagine ho pensato che re Leopoldo sarebbe stato fiero e felice di avere come sudditi i protagonisti di altre pagine di questo strepitoso libro, gli ustascia croati, allegri e fantasiosi massacratori di serbi, bosniaci (ed ebrei, ça va sans dire) durante l'invasione nazista, gente che anche alle SS sapeva insegnare qualcosa di nuovo nel campo della mattanza.

C'è un trenino a scartamento ridotto che collega due 'celebri' località inglesi, Southwould a Halesworth: il nostro non se lo perde di certo e qui inizia uno dei capitoli forse più eccentrici e divertenti. Le carrozze ferroviarie pare fossero state ordinate dall'imperatore cinese e poi invece la commessa non fu mai ritirata. WGS ne approfitta per fare un po' di ricerche sull'argomento, che evidentemente ancora non padroneggia pienamente: ci regala un breve saggio di storia cinese, concentrandosi sui conflitti anglo-cinesi, a partire dalla Guerra dell'Oppio, con una predilezione per battaglie e assedi e numero di morti (cifre da capogiro) che stride pensando al pacifico viandante della copertina. E stride anche rispetto allo stile e al tono della narrazione: impossibile credere che il nostro abbia mai alzato o imbracciato un'arma qualsiasi.
E intanto abbiamo fatto conoscenza con Cixi, l'Imperatrice Vedova, ex concubina del defunto Imperatore, che condannava i principi disubbidienti *a morte per vivisezione mediante taglio a fette dell'intero corpo*: solo che poi, in un gesto di *graziosa indulgenza*, commutò la sentenza nell'autorizzazione a impiccarsi da soli inviando ai colpevoli un cappio di seta.
Prendendo spunto da Cixi, che di *mattina presto assumeva per prima cosa, quale elisir destinato a mantenerla invulnerabile, una perla ridotta in polvere*, viene automatico raccontare la decadenza di

Dunwich, fiorente porto del medioevo, adesso ridotto a poche case, e di qui ragionare su come l'umanità in cerca di nuove prospettive scelga sempre l'Ovest, per finire al poeta Swinburne, ai suoi attacchi di simil epilessia, e alla sua testa così grande che era difficile trovasse il capello della misura giusta.

Dunwich è un piccolo villaggio costiero nella contea di Suffolk in Inghilterra. La cittadina vive prevalentemente del turismo che ruota attorno al museo e alle rovine. Nel Medioevo, la città era molto più estesa dell'attuale, era un importante porto per il commercio della lana, grazie alla sua posizione favorevole in corrispondenza di un'insenatura naturale riparata dal mare tra le foci dei fiumi Blyth e Dunwich.

In tutto questo solitario incedere, che *non sapevo allora né so oggi se fosse per me benefico o tormentoso,* assistiamo a degli incontri memorabili.
Come quello con Alec Garrard che ha smesso di occuparsi delle sue terre e ridotto al minimo i capi da allevare, si dimentica persino di riscuotere dagli affittuari, e dedica tutto il suo tempo e la sua energia a costruire, all'interno di una stalla senza riscaldamento, un modello in scala (dieci metri quadri) del tempio di Gerusalemme, che rimase in piedi circa cento anni, mentre la sua riproduzione si augura il bricoleur possa reggere più a lungo: migliaia di persone, centinaia di colonne, pannelli di un centimetro quadro per rivestire il soffitto, fregi, tutto modellato e dipinto a mano, in scala rigorosa.
E siccome nel frattempo studia ricerca allarga le sue cognizioni sulla materia, la costruzione rallenta retrocede devia, perché deve smantellare distruggere modificare il lavoro appena compiuto (più torre di Babele che Tempio di Gerusalemme, viene da pensare).
Naturale che i vicini e la famiglia lo prendano per matto: ma arriva Lord Rothschild con la sua limousine per chiedergli di poter esporre il plastico una volta ultimato all'interno della sua proprietà, e la reputazione di Alec Garrard subisce un'impennata. Il lettore si chiede se Sebald si stia specchiando in Garrard, e se abbia già incontrato il suo personale Lord Rothschild che viaggia in limousine.

Alec Garrard accanto al suo plastico.

Fra gli incontri virtuali, trovo notevole quello con lo scrittore Edward Fitzgerald, vissuto nell'Ottocento, che *nel suo romitaggio passava la maggior parte del tempo a leggere sregolatamente nelle più diverse lingue, a scrivere lettere su lettere, a prendere appunti per un lessico dei luoghi comuni* [il Dictionnaire des idées reçues?], *a raccogliere parole e locuzioni per un glossario esaustivo di nautica e di vita marinara, nonché a realizzare scrapbooks di ogni genere possibile e immaginabile. Amava in particolare sprofondarsi nella lettura degli epistolari dei tempi passati, ad esempio in quello di Madame de Sévigné, una persona per lui molto più reale dei suoi amici ancora in vita*.
Quanto è forte la sensazione che WGS si stia guardando allo specchio, stia descrivendo se stesso!

Gli anelli di Saturno è un libro sulla malinconia (da secoli l'umorismo malinconico viene ricondotto a Saturno). Ricco di dettagli complessi, di oggetti strani, di allusioni e simboli come Melencolia I, il quadro di Dürer citato all'inizio, questo narratore è triste o immerso nelle sue fantasie proprio come la figura alata del quadro, che non si capisce (e le interpretazioni sono diverse) se si stia sottraendo al lavoro o stia invece contemplando una nuova grandiosa realizzazione.

Eccentrico, dotto e, appunto, malinconico, il narratore di queste pagine, man mano che si avvicina alla fine dell'opera, svela il suo vero scopo: lo scopo del suo narrare non sono le divagazioni letterarie storiche artistiche scientifiche geografiche stimolate dal vagabondaggio, che potrebbero andare avanti per sempre e scomporsi negli stessi illimitati dettagli e oggetti dell'incisione di Dürer (o come nell'ultimo capitolo, nella

quantità di reperti contenuti nel museo immaginario di Thomas Browne) - ma la tela di WGS a ben guardare rappresenta un progetto più vasto, una storia naturale della distruzione (The Natural History of Destruction, titolo di un'altra sua opera).
Ad assorbire i miei pensieri nel periodo successivo fu, in ogni caso, il ricordo non solo della splendida libertà di movimento goduta allora, ma anche dell'orrore paralizzante da cui ero stato più volte assalito davanti alle tracce della distruzione che, persino in quella località sperduta, risalivano al lontano passato.

Melencolia I o Melacholia I è un'incisione a bulino (23,9 x 28,9 cm) di Albrecht Dürer, siglata e datata al 1514, e conservata, tra le migliori copie esistenti, nella Staatliche Kunsthalle di Karlsruhe. L'opera, densa di riferimenti esoterici, tra cui il quadrato magico, è una delle incisioni più famose in assoluto, oggetto anche di omaggi come quello di Dan Brown nel romanzo Il simbolo perduto.

Eric says

Can't wait:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pftG3s...

It was difficult to imagine the holidaymakers and commercial travelers who would want to stay there, nor was it easy…to recognize the Albion as the "hotel on the promenade of a superior description" recommended in my guidebook, which had been published shortly after the turn of the century.

Of course this connoisseur of desuetude, this dreamer on oblivion, tramps about with a lapsed guide book. The better to savor what's disappeared from the landscape. I know now to apply "Sebaldian" to a jaunt I made last month. One Sunday, thinking we had little else to do, my girlfriend and I drove two hours to a town we saw profiled in a boosting local glossy. The magazine had the usual montage of professionally flattering, almost stock, images of the charming diversions awaiting us (a bike path, a tea room; no local brewery though - a bearded hipster in Red Wings, thrusting a growler at the camera, would have completed the montage), but I was really excited by mentions of the town's dead and preserved stuff, its ideas of the vestigial and the relinquished. The article noted that Litchfield, Minnesota, had been dubbed "the Queen of the Prairies—No Drone in Her Hive, and Every Inhabitant Full of Work and Public Spirit" — a nice sample of the grandiloquence lavished on those little farming and commercial hubs nineteenth century Americans were so proud to have raised, quickly and in a seeming desert, and then linked together with the iron rails on which Progress was grooved to run. The article also mentioned an opera house dating from Litchfield's flush heyday, now being halfheartedly restored, and the meeting hall, now a museum, built by the local post of the Grand Army of the Republic, that once-vast fraternity of Union veterans. The post was probably an essential civic bond for the area's early, rootless residents, all of them homesteaders from somewhere else.

The post building was stout, turreted, chessman-like structure. Inside there was rack after rack of old rifles, a bust of Grant a local grocer awarded to a woman who had collected fifty ABC soap wrappers in 1890, and a dinner service embellished with the faces of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, the three assassinated Republican presidents. Covering one wall were large portraits of the post members. It was a prosperous, padded, stolid-looking set of farmers and merchants, though stuck into the corners of a few of the frames

were small spotty ambrotypes, taken during the war, of the beardless rawboned teenagers, scowling and clutching rifles, that some of the men had been. The biographies were short and perfunctory, but here and there afforded glimpses of eventful lives. One man was born during an Atlantic crossing, to German immigrant parents. The ship foundered off Long Island, the parents drowned but their infant was miraculously saved, and ostentatiously adopted by a wealthy New Yorker. When just a boy he ran away, to Ohio as a hired farmhand, then to the Union army, and then further west to this homestead. One of the post members was black. Most G.A.R. posts were segregated, but the founder of Litchfield's was a radical editor who had commanded a black regiment at the Battle of Nashville, and he welcomed a black veteran by the name of Van Spence, born a slave in Kentucky. Spence was the town's lamplighter. He would regale the post meetings with spirituals, accompanied by his daughter on an upright piano that still sat up on the stage. He also oversaw the town's July 4th barbeque, and in preparation would travel back to Kentucky and to West Virginia for possum, which he seems to have made popular. The museum had a picture of Spence's son with the high school football team. He wasn't allowed to play, but served as mascot. Looking at the picture I was unable to make out just what animal, if any, the boy's costume was supposed to represent. He wore a colorful motley. I hoped he wasn't simply "our darkie."

The photographer of the veterans, a post member himself, enjoyed a local renown, and captured the town in the twilight of the nineteenth century. The museum attached to the hall displayed albums of his work. Richly-ringleted, lace-collared little Lord Fauntleroys, cradling spaniel puppies. Family portraits in which the ornately carved chairs and Corinthian pedestals and busy arboreal backdrops seem a kind of forgetful buffer against the windy plains and spectral Sioux. Two of the albums were all that remained of a lakeside resort that flourished a few summers beside a nearby lake, and then went bankrupt in the depression of 1893. Sebald's spooky inset photo of fishermen posed knee-deep in one of Lowestoft's fabled herring catches reminded me of these contemporaneous albums, in which a party of young men, grinning under rakishly tilted bowlers, lounge in one of the hired gigs that circuited the grounds; and two girls, already in massive bustled skirts, stroll a lakeside path, heads tilted toward the other, arms around cinched waists.

The museum was hardly to be distinguished from the antique shop down the street — from the antique shops in so many Midwestern towns. It was the same slightly chaotic, slightly morbid display of only recently defunct households. And it presented all the things I usually adore, when I visit my grandmother in rural Iowa and rummage the shops with her: the old uniforms, and the various trophies yanked from German corpses in the two world wars; also and especially, reminders of middle class cultural aspiration like cheap copper busts of Beethoven and Shakespeare, and sheet music, especially four-hand reductions of famous symphonies and operas, to play beside your mother on the parlor upright, when distant neighbors visit (Sviatoslav Richter emerged from rural Ukraine after a youth of parlor piano Wagner and free peasant concerts -- what a combination of the bourgeois and the revolutionary orders! -- and the professors at the Moscow Conservatory sighed that they had nothing to teach him) ; oh, and the books! those anonymously translated encyclopedic sets of the *World Classics of Literature*…Turgenev and Maupassant and Hugo and everybody else in cheap-looking but self-evidently durable editions ordered from the Sears-Roebuck catalog or bought on subscription from that traveling salesman who smiled so patiently while you wiped your hands on your apron before signing and who was also offering a deluxe edition of President Grant's *Personal Memoirs* illustrated with back number engravings from *Harper's Weekly*.

So, *The Rings of Saturn*. I loved this novel (anatomy? travelogue? memoir? dream? nightmare?). I loved it so much that at times I thought it a drug designed for just for me. I loved it so much that I'm content to bask in the memory of it—am in no special haste to get copies of *The Emigrants* or *On the Natural History of*

Destruction. This book is unusually fortunate to have a cover blurb that perfectly describes the narrative's eerie and unpredictable apparition of specters. "Stunning and strange…like a dream you want to last forever." Yep.

Kelly says

This is the third travel memoir I've read* where an author spends time walking around the British Isles and yet, during their journey, seems to spend the majority of their time thinking about somethings, any-things, that are quite different.

When this thought first occurred to me, it made me laugh and think that perhaps Albion should be offended. But, given the books in question and what these literary rambles inspired, I think there really is no choice but to be flattered.

In the early 1990s, Sebald took his walk around the county of Suffolk. Suffolk, just to give you a rough idea, is located in the area of East Anglia. East Anglia is traditionally a somewhat lowly area of the United Kingdom, sometimes used as a byword to indicate backwardness or dreariness, full of flatlands, fens and swamps. Suffolk itself is in the southern half of the region, with a fairly sizable coastal area. It is under constant threat of coastal erosion, with some towns having actually been lost to the sea, many times over. To give you some idea of orientation and general tone:

It is also a rather ancient area of human habitation. It was colonized by the Angles in the reasonably recent Christian era (about the fifth century) but it is also full of archeological finds from the Stone Age, Bronze Age and other eras up to the present. (This is where that famous Anglo-Saxon burial ship with full regal regalia was found, for instance.)

This is, in a way, also what Sebald is up to. His remembrance of his walk through Suffolk is essentially a series of mini-essays, digging up archeological memories from his own mind and the landscape he sees around him, fading in and out of the present sometimes as often as he turns his head for a better view. The subjects of these digressions range from a straightforward history of a formerly glorious manor home he comes across on his first walk, a discussion of Joseph Conrad of *Heart of Darkness* fame, inspired by the tragic case of Roger Casement, the sad tale of formerly bustling, repeatedly washed out Dunwich, an isolated craftsman working on a famous, minute replica of the Temple at Jerusalem, a sketched portrait of Swinburne and tales of the last days of the Chinese empire. The essay are sometimes analytical in tone, sometimes they take the form of a New Yorker-like story with commentary interspersed, and occasionally we are even offered scenes of drama or fanciful feeling.

Yet despite these different tacks, Sebald's sensibility throughout is that of someone giving a eulogy for things long forgotten. Without ever directly saying so, he shows how the land he walks through is saturated with history, with present and past memory layered loosely on top of each other. Perhaps the best example of this is his exploration of Dunwich. Dunwich, in about the 12th century, was a bustling port with fifty or more churches and a large fleet of fishing and merchant vessels almost perpetually at anchor. Windmills dotted the horizon and shipyards saw to the needs of the ships at anchor. (Sebald notes that a quarter of a large fleet heading to the Crusades, with hundreds of knights and thousands of soldiers, sailed from Dunwich in 1230.) However, the town was built, for some reason best known to the locals, on a cliff. Erosion gradually ate away at the town, taking first some of the churches and then the town in a series of vicious flash floods that began in 1285 and recurred over the course of the next few centuries every few decades or so. The locals first tried to rebuild and then gradually moved their houses farther and farther away from the sea until the port town gradually faded away. Sebald's wandering mind slides from the scenes of repeated, utter disaster to a wide-angle mention of an ongoing trend in human behavior that mirrors that of Dunwich, if for different reasons.

"Little by little the people of Dunwich.. abandoned their hopeless struggle and turned their backs on the sea. Whenever their declining means allowed it, they built to the westward in a protracted flight that went on for generations; the slowly dying town thus followed- by reflex, one might say- one of the fundamental patterns of human behavior. A strikingly large number of our settlements are oriented to the west, and, where circumstances permit, relocate in a westward direction. The east stands for lost causes. Especially at the time when the continent of America was being colonized, it was noticeable that the townships spread to the west even as their eastern districts were falling apart. In Brazil, to this day, whole provinces die down like fires when the land is exhausted by overcropping and new areas to the west are opened up. In North America, too, countless settlements of various kinds, complete with gas stations, motels and shopping malls, move west along the turnpikes, and along that axis, affluence and squalor are unfailingly polarized."

This is indicative of the sort of stream of consciousness-like musings that are typical of Sebald's writing in this volume. Yet the stream, as is often the case with the best writers, is not one way. There are tides that flow in and out, as he returns to the particulars of Dunwich again, taking the time to point out that he is not the first to arrive at the shores of Dunwich and sit down to dream houses and boats and history into being:

"Dunwich, with its towers and many thousand souls, has dissolved into water, sand and thin air. If you look out from the cliff-top across the sea towards where the town must one have been, you can sense the immense power of emptiness. Perhaps it was for this reason that Dunwich became a place of pilgrimage for melancholy poets in the Victorian age."

This becomes both a jumping off point for a descriptive essay on Swinburne, one of these poets, and, I think, perhaps a way for Sebald to analyze his own motives in undertaking a journey similar to men of a very different age, with quite different priorities and sensibilities. What is it that attracted them? stands in for "Why am I here?"

Another, more odd and, in its way, even more haunting version of this, which was personally the most evocative for me, is his encounter with the Ashbury family. In contrast to Dunwich, a place irrevocably battered and forced to change by time, the Ashburys are an example of what happens with the "leftovers" of that change. They are the remnants that somehow slipped through time's loopholes, living a surreal existence that ought, by rights, to have ceased to be possible half a century or more beforehand. The Ashburys live near a chain of mountains in Ireland in a cottage-like, neglected and fading house that has seen better days. The Ashburys took up the legacy of their current house just after the Second World War, an "unsaleable" house formerly belonging to Ireland's ruling classes. The family arrived after the initial Troubles period, but

the land was bathed in it, and so were their prospects. Much like the stagnant place itself, the life of the Ashburys, to Sebald's view, *"had about it something aimless and meaningless and seemed not so much part of a daily routine as an expression of a deeply engrained distress."* Each member of the household has a tale to tell of some enterprise or skill that they have or once had, some idea they once came up with in the era of life when you're supposed to be thinking about what you want to do with yourself, but it seems to always end in "... but then nothing ever came of it." They are like figures who have been captured out of time, unable to move forward, or due to financial means, get out. So they move in a kind of enchanted stasis, repeating traditional motions for no reason at all:

"I do not think that Mrs. Ashbury had any idea what distant fields the seeds she collected might one day fall on, any more than Catherine and her two sisters Clarissa and Christina knew why they spent several hours every day in one of the north-facing rooms, where they had stored great quantities of remnant fabrics, sewing multi-colored pillowcases, counterpanes and similar items. Like giant children under an evil spell, the three unmarried daughters, much of an age, sat on the floor amidst these mountains of material, working away and only rarely breathing a word to each other. The movement they made as they drew the thread sideways and upwards with every stitch reminded me of things that were so far back in the past that I felt my heart sink at the thought of how little time remained."

In Dunwich, Sebald saw some remains of buildings, rocks that may have indicated where settlements once were. But in this case the remains were people. And I think it is most poignant that this family's origins were not in this enchanted world. Mrs. Ashbury married into it long after the first battles were over, her husband would tell her nothing about it, so the little she and her children knew was picked up from legend, rumor, scraps. Then, while trying to work out how to live there and get by, the family slowly turned into one of those scraps themselves. How do we bathe ourselves in the past and not get caught by the spiderweb, the way the Ashburys did?

A few other essays follow these themes- looking out into bare flatlands and seeing the ghosts of what has been, exploring why it is no more. Yet he is careful not to let his sense of elegy and need to bear witness to a past that is still to some degree present slide fully into sentimentality for 'the past' as such. He balances his visions of Dunwich port and decaying Victorian homes with fiery tales of figures like Roger Casement, a shamefully disregarded civil servant of the imperial era who famously stood up for various "native" groups in areas the empire was occupying, from Africa to Ireland. His later description of the violence that accompanied the shift to Home Rule for Ireland is scarcely less fierce-eyed, and it doesn't once give any indication of being distracted by the mysticism that seems to often afflict writers approaching Irish history.

But he is not simply a storyteller or a detached analytic looking at people and locations under the microscope and connecting threads. Sometimes Sebald is overwhelmed by what he is seeing as well, and that is where the fanciful feeling I mentioned earlier comes out. There are plenty of moments of stillness where Sebald weaves his imagination through what he sees, embroidering what he experiences so it is lifted it out of quotidian worries like flies in the marshlands and cold in your feet and into the realm of dreams:

"Time and again, vast dust clouds drifted through Flaubert's dreams by day and by night, raised over the arid plains of Africa and moving north across the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula till they settled like ash from a fire on the Tuileries gardens, a suburb of Rouen or a country town in Normandy... In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara."

"I watched the shadow of our plan hastening below us across hedges and fences, rows of poplars and canals. Along a line that seemed to have been drawn with a ruler a tractor crawled through a field of stubble, dividing it into one lighter and one darker half. Nowhere, however, was a single human being to be seen. No

matter whether one is flying over Newfoundland or the sea of lights that stretches from Boston to Philadelphia after nightfall, over the Arabian deserts which gleam like mother-of-pearl, over the Ruhr or the city of Frankfurt, it is as though there were no people, only the things they have made and in which they are hiding."

Sebald, I think, possesses many of the qualities which I have come to think are essential for anyone writing a travel essay/memoir of this sort. He has the capability to be a critic of what he sees, the interest and determination to pursue further research of anything that seems worth it, the sort of active minds that allows him to keep thinking and associating and being present even after walking a dozen or more miles, and the passion to convey the why of what he is doing. His clearly extensive education, international experience and perspective, and his little circle of equally passionate, interesting acquaintances add additional richness to the book and give its wandering nature clear purpose.

The only faults I can really find with this book is that occasionally Sebald's prose can cross the line from beautiful and reflective into territory that was too schmaltzy and sentimental for me (but that is really very occasionally), and, as would be the case with any set of essays that cover such widely disparate topics, some stories struck my fancy much more strongly than others. I will always be ready to read fifty more pages about melancholic Victorian poets than I will about exploring leftover Cold War paranoias at former bomb testing sites. But I cannot emphasize enough that these were minor problems in what was otherwise one of the most pleasantly competent reflections on the inevitable nature of time and change and human idiosyncrasies in the face of that I can remember reading.

I've read that a number of the men and women considered the great minds of the last few centuries were famous walkers, who were notorious for being unable to work out knotty problems while sitting down. Count Sebald's work as another variation that proves the theme.

(*The other two memoirs were Fermor's *Time of Gifts* and MacFarlane's *The Old Ways*. I will grant you that Fermor spends little time in the British Isles itself, but it is where he starts and in part inspires him to travel so I feel entitled to claim it. In any case, I highly recommend both.)

Peter Boyle says

Hmmm, how to describe The Rings of Saturn... Is it a travelogue? Is it a work of fiction, or is it part-memoir? Is it an exploration of history? Well, it is all of these things and more. To be perfectly honest, I've never read anything quite like it.

The book consists of a walk along the Suffolk coast of England, and the many observations that the unnamed narrator makes on his journey. These digressions are quite amazing in their erudition and detail. For example, on the narrator's stay in Southwold, he watches a BBC documentary on the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement. This leads to an account of the life of Joseph Conrad (a close friend of Casement's) who it turns out, spent many years in Lowestoft, which is also a stopping point on this walking trail. No matter what road Sebald takes us down, he is able to tie it in to his trek, and it is always connected so seamlessly.

A melancholy mood pervades throughout the book. The narrator encounters several ruins on his expedition,

including disused windmills and deserted seaside resorts. He imagines what it was like to live in the area when it was a thriving centre of business and leisure, and mourns for its declined state. He also makes oblique references to some personal health problems and mentions old friends who have since departed. The passing of time is a force that is laying waste to this countryside, to his loved ones and even to his own body, but there is nothing he can do about it.

First published in 1995, the reputation of The Rings of Saturn has flourished by the year and earned its author comparisons to the likes of James Joyce. Some of its observations fascinated me, like the strange, sad life of the the poet Edward Fitzgerald, and the history of the once-great Somerleyton house. Others, such as a lengthy examination of the silk trade, did not, and I felt like skipping over them. I suppose it is all down to personal taste. The lasting impression this book leaves with me is one of awe - for its ambition and scope, and the sheer brilliance of the mind that created it.

Cosimo says

Il coraggio che non ho

“Ho camminato per quasi quattro ore e non ho visto altro, sino alla linea dell'orizzonte, che campi di grano tutti già mietuti, ho visto il cielo, carico di nuvole basse, e le fattorie, a due o tre miglia di distanza l'una dall'altra, per lo più circondate da un'aureola di alberi. Non ho incontrato un solo veicolo mentre avanzavo su quel rettilineo apparentemente infinito, e non sapevo né allora né so oggi se quel mio solitario incedere fosse per me benefico o tormentoso. A tratti, durante quella giornata – nel mio ricordo ora pesante come il piombo ora d'una leggerezza quasi impalpabile – si apriva un piccolo squarcio attraverso la coltre di nuvole”.

Sotto il segno della malinconia si svolge il viaggio solitario, estivo e nomade, per le terre del Suffolk, East Anglia, dove Sebald trascorse gran parte della sua esistenza, prima della tragica e casuale fine. Quello spazio è disegnato entro confini di brughiere, colline, città costiere e mare ventoso, proprietà terriere decadenti con edifici romantici, campi dove si alzarono aerei per bombardare la Germania, onde tra le quali si svolsero grandi e cruente battaglie navali. Fugge Sebald e di ogni attimo e stazione tiene traccia, nel realismo estetico e erudito e nel pathos tragico, incontrando letterati e amici e interpreti antichi e luoghi labirintici, scrittori e traduttori borgesiani e esuli, e oggetti residuali di distruzioni e emigrazioni. Joseph Conrad, Thomas Browne, Michael Hamburger, Chateaubriand, Edward Fitzgerald. Tutto sta per frantumarsi o è già rovina, ogni cosa è sterilmente disseminata nell'oblio naturale, nel desolato detrito. Gli alberi si piegano come spighe e muoiono di sete, si ammirano solo stelle silenziose come la natura tra i rami. Tra pieno e vuoto, la carta geografica è attraversata solo da punti, linee e fantasmi, esseri immaginari e fantastici che rivelano le sventure, le sofferenze e le paure, la nebbia come un tessuto e il desiderio di un rifugio. Questo libro è una testimonianza opposta alla rimozione, innestata nel trauma della guerra; contiene immagini in bianco e nero di noi stessi, iscrizioni e conversazioni che viaggiano nel tempo, la bellezza che anticipa ogni meccanismo. Cose che accrescono la conoscenza metafisica e forse anche la follia psichica, l'incertezza del reale, l'ambivalente digressione della verità; come in una ininterrotta rifrazione ipnotica, la scrittura penetra oltre la ragione accedendo a stati di emozione estatica e dialoga con l'ignoto tramite fitte esperienze simboliche.

“È anche vero però che non conosco altro modo se non la scrittura per difendermi dai ricordi, che così spesso e così all'improvviso mi sopraffanno. Se restassero chiusi nella mia memoria, con il passar del tempo diventerebbero sempre più gravosi, al punto che finirei per crollare sotto il loro peso via via crescente. Per mesi, per anni, i ricordi dormono dentro di noi e vanno in silenzio lussureggiando, finché un evento irrilevante li ridesta ed essi ci rendono singolarmente ciechi per la vita. […] Eppure, che cosa saremmo mai

senza il ricordo? ”.

Geoff says

2nd read. One of my sacred texts. Maybe Sebald's masterpiece. One of those "if you don't like this book well that's on you, not the book, buddy" deals. Everything he does done damn near perfect pitch. As capitalist consumerist ethics and technology-dulled sensory blight inexorably infect all regions and human terrains, and even the way we map those terrains, and even more so how we *think about and conceive of* mapping those terrains, I will retreat happily away into realms of pure words and sounds - where vestiges of humanity and imagination still thrive, like a hidden rainforest under the city, full of weird animal and vegetative life (memory, intimate experience, organic elision that also produces meaning ...) Rings of Saturn is a knee-high abyssal-emotional archive of everything we're losing, since we're tainted with annihilation the day we are born, cast out to glide in a forgetful stream, dreamwalking our way through thick, ancient time. Wade in, don't be scared, it's only knee-high.

John says

The epigraph informs us that the "rings" of the 6th planet are in fact nothing but rubble. Worse, I can't think of any recent work of imagination -- Sebald published during the 1990s -- that so exposes the wreckage that inevitably results from our strutting & fretting hour on the stage. RINGS is all about wreckage, w/ one quiet, unsettling meditation on destroyed worlds after another, linked by nothing more than a vacation walkabout one August in the Sussex countryside. It's an odyssey w/out an Ithaca, & our lonesome guide is no warrior. He's deep into middle age & no drama hangs over his meandering. Yet his reflections prove compelling, & not just because of its brilliance at the level of sentence & scene; while never a novel in an ordinary sense, the experience as a whole proves richly satisfying & paradoxically affirming. RINGS stands as the peak of Sebald's inspired sequence of anti-narratives (a sustained late-in-life aria that ended w/ a car crash on the cusp of the new millennium) out-doing even his earlier theme-&-variations on the Holocaust, THE EMIGRANTS. On the one hand it's forever probing into timeless questions, taking us back to eternal values, even celebrating what used to be called "masterpieces of Western literature," like Dante & Conrad & KING LEAR. The glide of a water-bug across the surface-tension of a rain-barrel will shiver us w/ its reminder of our own tightly-circumscribed voyage, our own fragile suspension in this element. On the other hand, the book's a crystalline & spectacular model of that thing so many folks still find off-putting & hard to know, namely, postmodern art. Blithely these RINGS loop through episodes of efflorescence & decay, from once-exotic resort towns to the boom & bust of the herring industry -- & much more, much -- & yet Sebald's framework locates this serendipity cheek by jowl, the wildly diverse forever physically close. Such a wittily disruptive construction strips away the usual reassurances of story while delivering, nonetheless, the ancient & essential narrative pleasure of surprise & wonderment. The genius of Sebald is to expose all our vanity & failure, w/ a level voice & a cold eye, while at the same time restoring us, dizzied & bareheaded in open country, to awe.

Paul Bryant says

In the autumn of 1993 I undertook a walking tour of Sherwood high street in the folorn hope of throwing off

a sense of crepuscular ennui which enfolds me whenever I complete one of my walking tours. As I made my way up drab Haydn Road, an epitome of suburban English squalidness, I observed a man walking a dog which could only be a Labrador. The Portuguese explorer-merchants Joao Fernandes and Pero de Bercelos named the land and the canine variety unknowingly in 1500 in a cartographical inexactitude whereby the Portuguese word for slaves or workers was appended to an area of coast : lavradores. The indigenous peoples of Labrador were later ministered to by the Moravian brethren, whose founder, Jan Hus, was burned for heresy in 1415. It is said the brushwood and straw was piled around him up to the neck but the Papal executioners could not prevent the John Hus Moravian Church being established in Brooklyn in 1966 which I discovered and visited on my walking tour of the outer boroughs of New York City in 1981. Unfortunately it was closed at that time. As I passed the Golden Hill take-away on Haydn Road

its uninspiring shopfront nevertheless brought to mind the cruel life of the Dowager Empress T'zu-Hsi, who personally strangled eight of her own sons, including the schizophrenic Emperor T'ung-chih and whose influence in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century in China was ahistorically described by Edwin Featherstonehaugh of Bedevere College, Oxford as that of *a human boll weevil.* Adult weevils overwinter in well-drained areas in or near cotton fields after diapause and emerge in late spring to feed on immature cotton bolls. I was now completely lost. I had thought that Haydn Road abutted Sherwood High Street and that the Chinese Tang dynasty was at right angles (seen from seaward) to the music of George Handel, especially the Oboe Concertos Nos 1 and 2, but I could now see that this was untrue. I cut through some back gardens, avoiding outgrowths of the literary quarrels of eighteenth century London, but I was not deft enough to avoid the replica of Sharaf al-Din al-Tusi's 12th century astrolabe which some Sherwoodian child had left casually lying upon the ground. The planet Neptune caught me a severe blow upon the shin. Stesso sangue, stessa sorte, I muttered under my breath. The commotion attracted the attention of another dog, not a Labrador, more a kind of bull terrier crossbreed, which inspired me to discover a previously unknown twitchell, ginny, or back passage, which led into Sherwood High Street. It was by now eleven in the morning but the sky was leaden, bilious and no sun was shining.

A pall hung over Sherwood High Street, making Boots, the Italian Tile and Bathroom Centre and Bargain Booze and Cigs seem spectral presences. A succession of images passed through my mind – I remembered Algernon Swinburne, my own uncle Heinfried, a small potato I once had failed to eat, a bus ride between Rhyll and Westphalia, the faked autopsy photographs of Pope Pius XII, a Christmas cake with the face of the Christ inside it, as revealed by Consuela Marisa Ramirez in 1977, a particular kind of cross-stitching used only by the Tuskarora, and only, apparently, in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, and that all these things were connected. I knew this with a clarity which was almost but not quite beyond my powers of expression. The snipe has a life cycle which is nearly identical to that of Stephen Hawking. I have found some things to be true in eastern Bavaria but nowhere else, and should you express these Bavarian truths elsewhere, you will be taken for a fool. The part of Sherwood I was now in had almost crumbled into the sea. Some of the shops – the Co-Operative, and a branch of Barclays Bank, were hanging over the edge of the cliff, visibly eroding. The employees were all equipped with harnesses affixed to the ceilings in case of a sudden slippage. In 1225 an outbreak of very small turtles in the eastern Andean region of Titihoptacetlpopl caused the mass emigration we now refer to as Uruguay. I felt that I needed a cup of tea. I sat on the cliff edge, sipping weak tea, under a looming livid sky, and contemplated the rusted cars 100 feet below, the surging waves, and the retreating certainties.

Miriam says

This is a strange and melancholy journey, not really through Suffolk but through Sebald's mind. With poetry and pathos he narrates a wandering, but not random, series of extended meditations inspired by history and memory, local geography and phenomena, people he meets or sees on television, books he's read. We begin and end with Thomas Browne, moving in between from translation to experimentation, from Roger Casement to Dutch Elm Disease to the Troubles. We also return at times to the hospital room in which the narrator lies suffering from a vaguely described inertia, medical or mental.

St Sebald, from whom the author's family name comes

There is a documentary called "Patience" based on or inspired by this book, I'll have to track it down. I'll also definitely be reading more Sebald. Perhaps After Nature as a paired reading with Against Nature? I'd also be interested in After Nature because it was translated by Hamburger, who was a personal friend with whom Sebald seems to have felt he had much in common (he visits him in The Rings of Saturn and discusses this). I'm also interested in reading his poetry, as I very much liked Kay Ryan's poem inspired by this book.

·Karen· says

My second outing with Sebald turns out to be a fairly similar experience to the first. His writing is hallucinatory, meditative, ruminative, pondering; it is hard to read without your own mind wandering off into fields of its own, and then returning to the page to find that you're in a new place, new time, and not quite sure how you got there. It feels like those days of fever when you listen to the radio and drift off in between times, re-awakening to find that the documentary you were listening to has turned into a play, the biography is now a news programme, Start the Week has segued into satire. In Austerlitz, there was a slightly more traditional type of narrative in the story of Jacques Austerlitz, but the Rings of Saturn is a journey, a physical journey along the coast of Suffolk, yes, but more a mental journey, the vagaries of the mind. And as the mind can leap from the state of one's body to the history of Roger Casement, from the weather to memories of a sojourn in Ireland, from thoughts on the architecture of Lowestoft to the cultural significance of the herring, so the narrative leaps and falls. Structure is an artifice: we, as human beings try to impose structure in order to make sense of the world, but the world as it pours in and floods us with sensory perceptions that trigger associations and memories defies all attempts to sift and order, resists the dictatorship of "and then and then and then" that would constitute a story. One connecting theme does seem to be the question of the painstaking work of living, the passing of the hours and days.

Ted says

In the end I was overcome by a feeling of panic. The low, leaden sky; the sickly violet hue of the heath clouding the eye; the silence, which rushed in the ears like the sound of the sea in a shell; the flies buzzing about me – all this became oppressive and unnerving.

… the signpost left by the author says Dunwich heath

A travelogue? Perhaps. We read of the narrator's perambulations around, through, along – but also simply ruminating on – places to be found mostly in Suffolk, the English county in that bumpy part sticking out on the east coast, up north of the Thames outlet. Finally terminating in Norfolk, of all places – just north of Suffolk, still on that bumpy part but with coast running both S/N and E/W. Places like Lowestoft, Dunwich, Middleton, Bredfield, then Ditchingham, Norwich. Sounds exciting. Not.

Something of a travelogue then. And so in some sense a memoir of the narrator. But is it simply fact? Is there fiction too? Said to be a novel. Surely a novel must have some fiction in it? So a partly fictional memoir, partly fictional travelogue. *I have no shelf for the book.*

And what about the rings of Saturn. Were they visited too? No, only mentioned, once, prior to the Contents. Said to consist of ice crystals and meteorite particles orbiting around the planet's equator. (view spoiler)

Huge chunks (much more than particles) of narrative about stuff certainly *not encountered in that bumpy part of England*. More likely encountered in the traveler's mind/memory. Sometimes we know why that would be, mostly not.

The strange journey begins

> In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast (view spoiler). I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied mot only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages. I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on the eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window.

The first (of scores) of the bleak, grainy, black and white photos which accompany the narrative. We might expect a travelogue to employ illustrative images of course. But of this sort? Depicting neither place nor architectural wonder, but a mere patch of sky?

On the next page our narrator is found comparing himself to "poor Gregor Samsa", that Gregor Samsa of a Kafka narrative (I know not which, perhaps you do?), viewing through the strange black netting covering the

window "an utterly alien place", as if "I were looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble". And from here, we jump forward again, by more than a year, to recollection of one "Michael Parkinson" [not the so-named English broadcaster, we can easily ascertain, but another personage] who "without warning last May, … not seen for some days, was found dead in his bed, lying on his side and already quite rigid, his face curiously mottled with red blotches."

Last May? When exactly was that? I've lost track of the thread of time here. And before I can figure that out, carried on by the narrative, charging ahead [almost as if we were riding with Sterne] we hear next of one "Janine Dakyns", who judged Flaubert "by far the finest of writers", and who wrote that, "In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown … Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara."

Then Durer's *Melancholia*, Thomas Browne's skull, once kept in the museum of the Norfolk & Norwich Hospital, and Browne's famous "part-archeological and part-metaphysical treatise *Urn Burial* [which I could read, but have not yet, in my Penguin Classics edition of Browne's Major Works, where it is introduced under the title **Hydriotaphia** and helpfully explicated with further brackets:

> *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, or, A Disocurse of the Sepulchrall Urnes lately found in Norfolk* was first published jointly witth *The Garden of Cyrus* in 1658. See also the discussion above, pp. 38 ff.; and for further bibliographical details: below, p. 554.

]

Is that enough? Need I go on? What more could I say? More images? a longer list of the subjects, none really profound most would judge, which our narrator, presumably pictured below, with one of his own grainy photos [p. 264],

on the next page explaining, "The Lebanese cedar which I am leaning against, unaware still of the woeful events that were to come …", leaving us [rather you, who cannot reason based on the words left out by the enigmatic *me*] to wonder whether the *unaware* entity *the tree* or *the person pictured* … or perhaps both? or neither??

. . . . . .

Previous review: 2017 on Goodreads
Random review: The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade *I think*
Next review: The Vanity Fair Diaries *a P*review

Previous library review: 33 Moments of Happiness
Next library review: Perfume *the story of a murderer*

Jimmy says

Update February 22, 2011:

I just re-read this book a few days ago and reading back on my initial impression of Sebald is both humbling and embarrassing. I kind of missed the point, didn't I?

I still see what I was saying back then, and think you have to either be in a certain mood or be willing to be enchanted into that mood in order to fall in love with this work. Nevertheless, I am glad I didn't give up on him and moved on to read his entire works. This book, on second read, is the least memoir-like of his books, I think. Even though that element is still in there, it is weaved in with so many other elements from his research and ideas.

And perhaps that makes it even more fragmented and hard to follow than his other books... though I've learned that part of the joy of reading Sebald is to lose yourself, to let go, to feel slightly out of control of what you are reading, but to be enjoying it anyway, to be on the receiving end of a magical act... or to be the object in which magic has already taken place. To be the rabbit who is just now emerging from the hat.

Original review (3 stars) from August 1, 2008:

It's one of those books that sound better on paper as an idea than when you're actually reading it. I feel like it gets more credit than it deserves simply because people consider it "innovative", but taken passage by passage, there is nothing very innovative about it. It's simply a blend of memoir and historical essay. If it were categorized as either, nobody would raise an eyebrow, but the simple fact that it has the "Novel" label attached to it has everybody in a frenzy.

But I don't judge a book by how innovative it is, so even if it's not innovative, that's not the main problem. The main problem is that it never rises above a level of good or merely interesting, never feels completely spontaneous, never totally alive (though it tries so hard to be free form... "like jazz"). Everything feels so well "considered" (not that it shouldn't actually be, but it shouldn't feel labored when read) that at times I would say it's even lifeless. Thankfully, Sebald is good at avoiding the jargon of an academic, but at heart he IS an academic. Only in novelist's clothing and with a taste for occasionally delving into the personal.

Above all, the book never changes course, it is steady as can be. It's like listening to an album all the way through and then realizing that all the songs (though different in melody) have the same level of intensity, the same register of emotion, never building up to anything or calming down from something, just one flat line of consistently being merely "good".

The one exception is the very beginning. The first chapter of the book is the most interesting and cohesive and I was actually beginning to expect great things from the book. Despite my complaints, I did enjoy the book, and am interested in reading more of Sebald to see if his other novels have anything different to offer.

At times, the book achieves what I call "so boring it's bold", which is a characteristic I really like in some of my favorite films... like in those Kiarostami films where he intentionally repeats some visual motif to the point where it's at the risk of losing the viewer's interest. But at the same time, there is something intriguing about it and you keep watching, and it has something to do with the pacing or something else interesting in

the frame that is not the main object of concern but that forces it out of merely "boring-boring" into the "so boring it's bold" category. The very nature of the category (in my mind) is that it rides that fine line between "boring" and "interesting" so dangerously.

I think the boring-ness makes your mind wander which is exactly the point: so that you're paying less attention to the "main thing" and more on the visceral level of the word (or image if you're talking about film). I've rarely encountered this effect in literature, except in VS Naipaul's novels, though I can't even get through one of his novels because they eventually become just "boring-boring" to me. But there is a point early on in Naipaul's novels that I admire the same quality, where I feel viscerally connected to something lying right beyond an obstinate rhythm.

Carmo says

"...que seria de nós sem recordações? Não seríamos capazes de ordenar sequer os mais simples pensamentos, o coração mais sensível perderia a capacidade de se cativar por outro coração, a nossa existência nao passaria de uma interminável sucessão de momentos sem sentido, o passado não deixaria rasto."

Não sendo um livro de viagens, é uma viagem pelas memórias melancólicas do narrador, um périplo através de histórias que se sucedem harmoniosamente, ora emocionantes, ora terrificas, ora simplesmente curiosas, mas todas contadas com rara habilidade. Histórias de gente comum e de gente que ficou na história, entrelaçadas com histórias de um mundo onde a criação e a beleza rivalizam com a destruição, e o Homem, Ser forte e desafiante, se revela impotente frente à Natureza indomável.

Nota menos positiva para a Editora Quetzal, que achando que todos os seus leitores seriam poliglotas, não viu necessidade de traduzir as inúmeras citações em Inglês, Francês, Alemão, Italiano.

Cody says

I'm attempting something new: a real-time review, folks! I'm recording my thoughts as I move along this gorgeous book. Only 20-pages in, I'm captivated by the clarity of the labyrinthine sentences. They're mesmeric. This is lovely.

Page 42: Still flawlessly written, if gyratory.

Page 117: These chapters are concentric circles.

Page 210: I'm hard-pressed to find many analogues thatZZ

Page 210.5: Sorry, I feel asleep mid-sentence. Just woke up with my head on the laptop.

Page 296: Finished. Have to clean up the drool from my many nodding-outs.

* * *
Listen, whatever deficiencies I found within this book are my own. It’s flawless; a diamond encased in amber. But I gave Sebald an impossible task by reading this after two consecutive Ballard’s and an Ishmael Fucking Reed. My synapses were all fired on sperm and Death to Whitey (re which, yeah!) This meditative and gorgeous reflection on the manifold forms of passing deserves better than my half-attention, something I will correct very shortly.

There’s not a lot of kinetic wham-ba-lam going on, sure, but it is written *so frighteningly well* that whatever bullshit I brought to the table is short-shrift. My albatross baggage (albaggage?) undermined my reading, plain and simple. I know this is better than I give it credit for, it's just that I find Saturn and I to be on different wavelengths at the moment; the literary equivalent of that interpersonal-relationship chestnut, 'it's not you, it's me.' I’m riding the crest of Latin American fabulists, revolutionary African-American comic subversives, and still squeegeeing all the cum outta my ears that Ballard hosed me with from his prodigiously-engorged pen. I want cheap thrills, fast women, loose cars. I’ll be back, W.G.—that’s a promise. If it is still a bit boring the second time ‘round, we both know who’s really at fault: England. Fucking miserable damn country with nary a single notable painter to call her own. Hail Britannia!

Kaggelo says

?να βιβλ?ο που δ?σκολα μπορε? να καταταχθε? σε κ?ποια συγκεκριμ?νη κατηγορ?α. ?να οδοιπορικ? στην σ?γχρονη νοτιοανατολικ? Αγγλ?α ?που η κ?θε περιοχ?, το κ?θε ακρωτ?ριο, η κ?θε π?λη και η κ?θε ?παυλη κρ?βει μια ιστορ?α απ? το παρελθ?ν την οπο?α ο Sebald ξετυλ?γει αριστοτεχνικ? με μια γ?ινη, απαλ? και ζεστ? γραφ? που μαλακ?νει την ψυχ?.
Ο χρ?νος ε?ναι ο βασικ?ς πρωταγωνιστ?ς που στο π?ρασμ? του μεταμορφ?νει τα π?ντα, ?λλοτε εξυψ?νοντ?ς τα και ?λλοτε βυθ?ζοντ?ς τα στην παρακμ?, στην εγκατ?λειψη και στον θ?νατο. Η κ?θε ιστορ?α ε?ναι ?να ταξ?δι στον χρ?νο αλλ? και στον χ?ρο ?που μεταφερ?μαστε απ? την Αγγλ?α σε ?λλες ευρωπα?κ?ς χ?ρες και μ?χρι την μακριν? Κ?να και το Κονγκ? του 19ου αι?να. Μελαγχολ?α, νοσταλγ?α, ματα?ωση προσδοκι?ν, το εφ?μερο και προσωριν? στοιχε?ο της ζω?ς, οι αντιφ?σεις της ανθρ?πινης φ?σης ?που η δημιουργ?α και ο εξευγενισμ?ς συμβαδ?ζουν με την καταστροφ? και αγρι?τητα, ?λα διαπερνο?ν ολ?κληρο το ?ργο μαζ? με τις ολοζ?ντανες και εκπληκτικ?ς ομορφι?ς περιγραφ?ς της φ?σης και των φυσικ?ν φαινομ?νων. Υπ?ρχουν κι αρκετ?ς ?μεσες και ?μμεσες αναφορ?ς σε ?ργα ?λλων μεγ?λων συγγραφ?ων απ' ?που φα?νεται ?τι ?χει επηρεαστε? ο Sebald, στους οπο?ους μ?λιστα δ?νει και πρωταγωνιστικ? ρ?λο σε κ?ποιες απ? τις ιστορ?ες του.
Ε?ναι το τρ?το βιβλ?ο του Sebald που διαβ?ζω και συνειδητοποι? ?τι πρ?κειται για ?ναν πολ? μεγ?λο και μ?λλον παραγνωρισμ?νο συγγραφ?α μ' ?να μοναδικ? και απ?λυτα δικ? του στιλ γραφ?ς, ο οπο?ος θα μπορο?σε να μας δ?σει πολλ? ακ?μα αν δεν ?φευγε τ?σο πρ?ωρα και ?δικα απ? αυτοκινητιστικ? δυστ?χημα.

Antonomasia says

So it turned out that I was going to get round to reading more Sebald (after *Austerlitz*, over three years ago), and it was going to be this one. And, unlike *Austerlitz*, which is incontrovertibly a novel, to read this was to experience the ur-text of what's meant by Sebaldian: vast, controlled digression, the lists, the descriptions, melancholic polymathic butterfly flitting from global to local history; travel writing, memoir, nature, biography (especially of fellow eccentrics with diverse interests: he begins and ends with Sir Thomas Browne). Not long ago I watched the film Patience (After Sebald) and in it, I think it was Christopher Maclehose recounting a conversation with Sebald, during which they discussed which topic categories his book would be given in publishing databases, and WGS said "I want all the categories!"

At first it seemed like it would be impossible to say anything about Sebald other than to link to the long, nineteenth-century-scholarly strings of topics that makes each chapter title on the contents page, and some quotes to show facets of his style, how these subjects are handled. But soon I realised how remarkably he has been integrated into literary culture over the last twenty years. It first and most strongly struck me in reading his numinous, heightened descriptions of natural phenomena: they reminded me of similar lightning flashes in a friend's writing - a friend who hasn't even read Sebald, albeit plenty of authors probably influenced by him. And Sebald, like DFW, is one of the foundations of the contemporary okaying of digression. Never mind the beginning of "creative non-fiction". There didn't seem anything so very unusual in writing this way, reading it in 2017; permission to go on like that is already assumed. But it would have been revolutionary to encounter twenty years ago. His influence is widely acknowledged in certain literary quarters, but I think it goes wider than supposed; he's almost a transitional figure between the esoteric and highbrow and the literary-mainstream, especially seen as such by those who haven't read him, but he's also present in thousands of essays and reviews and articles online and in newspapers and magazines, by people who may never even have thought of picking up one of his books.

And an appropriately-titled, saturnine creature this one is. There is ample death and melancholy here, alongside the ethereal and intellectual; it is elegantly gothic, but no room for trailing velvet garments on a trek across the countryside; *with my hat in my hand and my rucksack over my shoulder, I felt like a journeyman in a century gone by, so out of place that I should not have been surprised if a band of street urchins had come skipping after me or one of Middleton's householders had stepped out upon his threshold to tell me to be on my way.*

I don't actually have to mention every major topic in the book, or give it proportionate space. Obviously - because this isn't an eve-of-publication press review - but failure to realise I could ignore bits of it was one of the reasons I've been sitting at this window looking at two paragraphs, typing almost nothing else in it for a week. I'm going to end up concentrating on what I liked best, so overall the post might sound like five stars, when there were distinct reasons for that missing star. A few of those overly-fanciful old-fashioned judgements and effect-cause connections that work great when you're reading and writing outright fantasy, but I do tend to cringe at the silliness when it's couched inside more-or-less realism. (And yes, that includes the bits about what Belgians look like, and rural people and visitors.) And the history: it's part of what people read Sebald for, but there are big chunks of stuff here - about the last days of Imperial China, or the Second World War - which are quite well known already, and by which I'm not sufficiently fascinated to revel in another classic narrative-style rehash. Nor did it increase my interest in Joseph Conrad, though it is rather fascinating that he started teaching himself English using the local newspapers of Lowestoft. It's all quite beautiful, the [silk] web by which these interlock with the other topics - just could have done with fewer pages on them. (It often felt as if he included every possible tangent, but near the end he missed a trick by mentioning Rendlesham Forest's strangeness without going near the whole "British Roswell" business, which would have also connected perfectly with the abandoned defence works at Orfordness.)

Though one feature of the war is retold inventively by a gardener, in that feature of Sebaldian style I'd

shorthanded in my head as "said Austerlitz", and which a couple of days before writing this paragraph, I read Christopher Hitchens, in his introduction to an old edition of Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* - found in *Arguably* - delineate as *long and quite grammatical addresses that would be unthinkable in real life*...however, in a book *the solilioquy is not to be despised as a means of elucidation*. (I'm fascinated by the construction of these soliloquies. Did Sebald take notes? Can't imagine him with a dictaphone. Did he later show the subjects and ask them if the rewrite reflected their meaning? I couldn't not.)

There are many more obscure subjects on which I did learn something from *The Rings of Saturn*. Roger Casement, merely a name mentioned occasionally in the news when I was growing up, and now I can't understand why he isn't a great hero to so many of those who criticise colonialism: someone - a gay man - who had a modicum of power in the Imperial civil service who really did try to do something about the abuses in the Congo, Peru, Colombia and Brazil, and would not be mollified by flattering "promotions" to other locations or appeased by a knighthood, whose story shows how large a system it was and how difficult it was really to help. As with the story of the Miners' Strike, where I've only realised in adulthood how biased the 1980s BBC take was, a version I'd once absorbed as definitive truth, the saga of Casement's embroilment in the Irish independence movement and downfall reads now like one who had a just cause and laudable motives, even if some of the means might have gone too far at times. Such is the way causes can be portrayed differently by history once they are no longer dangerous hot buttons.

Similiarly, some of the most memorable characters were people who were only marginally familiar. Such as Edward FitzGerald, nineteenth century translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, born to a local gentry family, an early vegetarian, who despised his peers' enclosing of the countryside and lived modestly as an eccentric recluse for the rest of his life after the death of the male friend whom, it seemed, he had loved unrequitedly for many years. I last read *The Rubaiyat* - in FitzGerald's version - in my teens, and after the following, I half long to re-read it, half fear that it couldn't possibly live up to Sebald's paean: *a colloquy with the dead man* [the author of the poem, not the friend] *and an attempt to bring to us tidings of him. The English verses he devised for the purpose, which radiate with a pure, seemingly unselfconscious beauty, feign an anonymity that disdains even the least claim to authorship, and draw us, word by word, to an invisible point where the mediaeval orient and the fading occident can come together in a way never allowed them by the calamitous course of history.*
Another small tragedy of nineteenth-century lost love features Chateaubriand and Charlotte Ives, who could have been together if only French Catholics were able to divorce in the late 18th century. Both examples returned me to the suspicion that people harboured these old loves for so long (and not being against the idea as many modern people are, I've tried it and found it doesn't naturally sustain for more than about three or four years) partly because it was culturally acceptable and normal - one would not be discouraged from it so much or told to get over it - also because there was much less distracting stimulation in the world (in general, but also no films featuring actors and actresses one might crush on as a transitional recovery), and as the population was so much smaller, and with less social moblity, there was a far lower chance of ever again happening on someone else who felt so right.

Other "characters" I'd never heard of before. There were Ashburys, a family of impoverished Anglo-Irish aristocrats stuck in their unsaleable, crumbling home (like the real-life, no-happy-ending version of *I Capture the Castle*) where Sebald once stayed as a paying guest; I shivered in recognition of how they *lived under their roof like refugees who have come through dreadful ordeals and do not now dare to settle in the place where they have ended up.* And, like another writer of psychogeographic melange who emerged in the south eastern quadrant of England in the 1990s, Iain Sinclair, Sebald peppers his works with casual mentions of other writers of his acquaintance - spoken of with as much reverence as one might an aged Bloomsbury emeritus - whom I'd never heard of before, feeling as if I was reading a work from some parallel universe. (Or possibly they're the same esoteric crew, shared, and I'd forgotten the names in the years between.) As

ever, I wondered if these people were actually famous in corners I didn't know, or whether it was closer to my own esteem for the writing of certain friends who don't put their work forward overmuch, which no-one will convince me isn't vastly better than screeds of stuff that's widely praised, whether by newspaper reviewers or by hundreds or thousands of online Likes and followers.

Perhaps it's inevitable that among the grab-bag of topics infused in Sebald's work, one settles on favourites with which one already has an affinity. Many of mine are about landscape and loss or the passing of time.

Occasionally, the narrative is simply in the present time, with such descriptions of walks as to make one almost gasp in envy. I think you have to have spent hours walking alone in countryside to know what he means; one feels and notices far more intently then, than when distracted by the presence of companions, focused more on maintaining a semblance of symbiosis with them than on the place itself and its effects. No coincidence that most contemporary nature writers walk alone – yet until these became popular I felt it was an unusual thing to do. Some of those writings can feel redundant at times when one can wander on foot and in head oneself - but certain paragraphs of Sebald are so beautiful as to be necessary regardless and in addition; he adds so much:

Beyond the maze, shadows were drifting across the brume of the heath, and then, one by one, the stars came out from the depths of space. Night, the astonishing, the stranger to all that is human, over the mountain-tops mournful and gleaming draws on. It was as though I stood at the topmost point of the earth, where the glittering winter sky is forever unchanging; as though the heath were rigid with frost, and adders, vipers and lizards of transparent ice lay slumbering in their hollows in the sand. From my resting place in the pavilion I gazed out across the heath into the night. And I saw that, to the south, entire headlands had broken off the coast and sunk beneath the waves.

There's so much hidden in this following little paragraph about windmills - even knowing intellectually that Norwich was once England's second biggest city and the region abustle with commerce, the idea seems otherdimensional. *It's hard to imagine now, I was once told by someone who could remember the turning sails in his childhood, that the white flecks of the windmills lit up the landscape just as a tiny highlight brings life to a painted eye. And when those bright little points faded, the whole region, so to speak, faded with them.*

Dunwich is the central emblem of this awareness of nature and impermanence - as it was a *memento mori* to the Romantic poets who visited the ruins - and more relevant than ever as the world gradually wakes up to the probable flooding of metropolises as large as New York, never mind Hull, as sea levels gradually rise; it illustrates the pattern by which such things are expected to take place, in fits and starts of storms. The long quote is in comment 1; when Sebald hits his stride, you want to marvel and include everything.

In Dunwich, humans, Canute-like, tried to defy the sea. Another marvellous set-piece of writing (also below) tells of how active destruction, in the form of fire, is indivisible from human civilisation.

And for what terrible triviality they destroy. I very much enjoyed, though never, ever, envied, the author's account of staying in the awful sort of old British three star (?) hotel that proved why *Fawlty Towers* was closer to documentary than anyone would wish. Certainly these places abounded in the 80s and 90s, but now have perhaps been displaced by Travelodges and the like, whose supermarket homogeneity is simply, sadly, more comfortable than enduring the following:
after hunting pointlessly through the register on the reception desk, handed me a huge room key attached to a wooden pear...
shortly afterwards brought me a fish that had doubtless lain entombed in the deep-freeze for years. The

breadcrumb armour-plating of the fish had been partly singed by the grill, and the prongs of my fork bent on it... [actually, this, sans chips, sounds like some of the microwaved suppers I was served at home in my teens] *Indeed it was so difficult to penetrate what eventually proved to be nothing but an empty shell that my plate was a hideous mess once the operation was over. The tartare sauce that I had had to squeeze out of a plastic sachet was turned grey by the sooty breadcrumbs, and the fish itself, or what feigned to be fish, lay a sorry wreck among the grass-green peas and the remains of soggy chips that gleamed with fat. I no longer recall how long I sat in that dining room with its gaudy wallpaper*

Sebald can occasionally be funny, and food en route is one of the topics that brings out this humour (of the smile rather than LOL variety). *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.* He's so right about the searchlight quality of the brightness of those places... and he, who knows whether deliberately or unwittingly, brings out the absurdity of the guilt every middle-class intellectual must be duty-bound to experience on walking into such a place.

In the film, and I am still searching for this moment, as it's basically impossible to put delicately in any other words apart from those used, without sounding like a petulant teenage vegan, one of the commentators feels that - although, as I discovered, these photos are not beside one another in the book, and nothing is said to this effect in print - Sebald wants us to consider some similiarity between the vast hundred-year old catches of herring and images of slaughter in the Second World War. His accounts of the seemingly limitless abundance of herring plundered to scarcity by earlier twentieth-century fishermen, succeeded by polluted seas and deformed fish, took me back to last year's Booker longlist, with *The North Water* on early Victorian whaling, and *The Many*'s eerie representation of near-dead Cornish seas; if the latter's author hasn't read *Rings of Saturn*, I'd be very surprised - though given what I said about how Sebald has permeated the culture...
Humans are destructive fuckers, basically, is what a lot of *The Rings of Saturn* boils down to, although some individuals also create great beauty. The book's alpha and omega, Thomas Browne, has a melancholy view of human life which might be considered unseemly in a contemporary doctor, but at a time when one more often than not couldn't cure people, merely a bumbling witness to decline and suffering, how could it be anything other than the perceptive realism of experience. *As a doctor, who saw disease growing and raging in bodies, he understood mortality better than the flowering of life. To him it seems a miracle that we should last so much as a single day.... The huntsmen are up in America, writes Thomas Browne in The Garden of Cyrus, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia. The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since almost all creatures, from one meridian to the next, lie down after the sun has set, so, he continues, one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if levelled by the scythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness.*

Returning to the destructiveness of nature itself, one of the most revelatory accounts for me was of the 1987 hurricane. I was a kid living further north at the time and didn't see the extent of destruction in the Home Counties. I was quite disappointed it was nothing more than a big gale, no fun - but Sebald makes it sound heartbreaking in a way I'd never conceived of, and transmits a vivid fear that I'd long since stopped associating with an old worn-out news story. Long quote, again, in comment 1. (Props to Sebald for never once mentioning Michael Fish, ignoring the unwritten law that the blasé weatherman must appear in any account of that night.)

[I've struggled ridiculously to finish this post beyond the first two paragraphs, barely read anything for a week because I felt I ought to ~~stare at the screen for untold hours~~ get this written first, and it became a goal beyond reason to manage it; I know there's no real necessity for anyone in the world that this piece of writing

exists on a GR server. I still can't think of a conclusion because the procrastination imp in my head isn't having it, and you probably know by now whether you're interested in this book, if you didn't already, so I'll just leave it here for now.]

Justin Evans says

Nobody can accuse me of not trying to understand the appeal of WGS to so many trustworthy readers, but for the life of me, I can't come up with a good reason for his popularity. This review is a really a group review of 'Rings,' 'Emigrants,' 'Campo Santo,' and and Lynn Sharon Schwartz's 'The Emergence of Memory.' I'm putting it under 'Rings,' because this is certainly the best book of Sebald's that I read.

I've asked people why they think Sebald is popular. One fairly broad response was: his work was translated at the perfect moment. He wrote 'interstitial' or genre-blurring books just when everyone was getting into blurring genres, and so he gave a kind of imprimatur to that form. I can accept this on the level of "how did Sebald get his start in English," since it's a nice hook.

I'm not sure how well it explains individual readers' experiences, though. Yes, a few David Shields types might really enjoy the 'reality' of the books, the way they use novelistic techniques but lack novelistic tropes. If you're the kind of person who wants to read, but doesn't like novels or essays, Sebald might just hit a sweet spot.

Although I don't like the idea, I fear that a lot of people like these books because of their content. In Sebald's work, all roads lead towards the Shoah, but asymptotically. We're forever just missing the event, getting traces of it, seeing its effects. In one particularly silly instance, Sebald describes the history of silk-worm farming in Germany, and links that directly to Nazism. The same thing, we're given to understand, is true of herring fishing.

The point of all this, he tells us in Campo Santo and Emergence of Memory, is to show up the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the holocaust in small-town Germany. Sebald finds it appalling that ordinary people can go about their lives as if Nazism and genocide never happened, that they prefer not to talk about it, and so it is. However, he doesn't think one can just discuss the events openly. Instead, one must get there through indirection.

This is a fairly standard modernist strategy, but Sebald literalises it in (what I find to be) a particularly dull way. Beckett, for instance, can be read as indirectly pointing to any number of 20th century horrors, but he does it by abstraction and humor. Sebald tries to be indirect in a far simpler way: he just doesn't talk about what he obviously wants to talk about. And given the omnipresence of the holocaust in late twentieth century cultural life, that's the right choice.

But it also points to a problem with the project as a whole: Sebald's books appeal mostly to the cultured, who, if anything, over-discuss the holocaust, which has the effect of distracting attention from all the other injustices that are *currently* taking place. And, I suspect, Sebald knew this very well, which explains his thinking in "Natural History of Destruction." His method is to write in the teeth of a conspiracy of silence, but there simply *is no* conspiracy of silence around the Shoah. So he moves on to a different, far less offensive conspiracy--this time, the German literati's unwillingness to deal with the destruction of German cities in the second world war.

Again, though, an English speaking audience is unlikely to believe in this conspiracy: Slaughterhouse 5, to take only one example, has dealt with the theme in a suitably indirect but also direct manner. 'Natural History' has been criticized for insensitivity--how could WGS deal with these matters, knowing that the destruction was the direct result of Nazi actions? It's almost as if he's been accused of a conspiracy of silence over the holocaust. And so the cycle continues.

Some readers might value oblique reminders that the holocaust and Luftkrieg took place, but I suspect that anyone who gets something from the content of Sebald's work has something else in mind: its comfortable pessimism.

"It is a characteristic of our species," he says, "in evolutionary terms, that we are a species in despair." This is arrant nonsense, at almost every turn: 'evolutionarily,' it is obviously false; that we are a species in despair is obviously false, and so on. But late-Victorian pessimism has always attracted the comfortably off intellectual. With no God to demand that we act well towards each other, and no poverty forcing us to act well for ourselves, we're left in an extremely boring spot. But we can think about that spot at great length, at least, and thus face up to the abyss that we have created twice over--once in that the cost of our comfort is actual suffering for the poor, and second in that the 'despair' Sebald writes of is just self-aggrandizing melancholy masquerading as deep insight, the kind of insight that greatly appeals to readers of literature. We know very little about history, or even the present, and we prefer not to learn about it. What we want is the experience of being ourselves.

As for the sentences, lavishly beloved, I see nothing special:

"After I had taken my leave of William Hazel I walked for a good hour along the country road from Somerleyton to Lowestoft, passing Blundeston prison, which rises out of the flatland like a fortified town and keeps within its walls twelve-hundred inmates at any one time."

Reviewers often praise Sebald as bringing back the nineteenth century, and this sentence (chosen as random, which is unfair, but I can't go through them all) confirms that claim: it is bloated and falsely colloquial ("taken my leave", "good hour"); it is cliched ("rises out of") and it is bombastic ("keeps within its walls"). His (or his translators') vocabulary is deeply impoverished; everything is "in decline," everything is "ruined." The syntax of the translations is often Germanic for no very good reason (in the 'we for twenty minutes walked along the black but also reflecting light with small flakes of bright material road' way), and that, I suspect is just bad translation.

All of which is to say that if Sebald's books have any worth, it is in their formal features rather than their almost vapid content. And his meandering, coincidence, essayistic prose is unusual for its time period, and unusual in a way worth preserving. Unfortunately, readers of 17th or even 18th century writers won't find his work anywhere near as 'innovative,' 'strange' or 'original,' as so many reviewers do. Sebald himself, I think, wouldn't make such claims: why else describe Browne at such length? In any case, Sebald's books are all, essentially, extended essays of the Montaignian type, wandering from one topic to the other, but modernist in their self-consciousness. The wandering is always around one point, the moments each reflect that point. Like Montaigne, the essays don't develop; like Burton, the essays are all about one thing (the abyss, though, rather than melancholy); like, say, Adorno, the essays are tightly constructed despite the appearance of randomness.

So my long winding decline-filled journey through the ruins ends in puzzlement and anger and acceptance: puzzlement because I honestly do not understand why so many people find Sebald worthy of so much praise; anger because I suspect his popularity rests on a dull but attractive pessimism that should really be dealt with

in a church, temple, or mosque rather than indulged by art; and acceptance because, if nothing else, Sebald's form could be used by others in the future to better effect.

But for now his influence seems to be the most malignant part of his work, throwing up the puerilities of Ben Lerner, Teju Cole, David Shields, Rachel Cusk's 'Outline,' and so on. Just reciting this family tree makes me think better of WG, who at least took an interest in something other than himself.

Tony says

a feeling of repetition ... a peculiar numbness like a grammophone repeatedly playing the same sequence of notes ... Repeatedly I felt as if I were lying in a traumatic fever in some kind of field hospital ...

Sebald's words, not mine. But apt.

Perhaps it's Summer. The tomatoes are ripening but stinkbugs and a chipmunk are fighting me for the harvest. The local nine have teased me after 18 losing seasons but they can not beat the Brewers ever and sometimes not even the Cubs. A new iphone beckons with Words with Friends, but it refuses to give me 'airshow' as a word and nevertheless allows 'haha' for my cross-country opponent.

So maybe it was the wrong time to take a walking tour of England in W.G. Sebald's "mind's eye." A peculiar numbness? I know the non-feeling. The towns all look the same, don't they? From here to there with meditations of landscapes and seascapes and burned out buildings and unrequited love.

Which is to say that my mind constantly wandered in the pages-long paragraphs, despite gems like "Not even Coleridge, in an opium dream..." and a stuffed polar bear who was "a ghost bowed by sorrows." Yet Sebald could write, "I do not see a single human being...." in this ethereal walk. A novel? Really? I missed the humans.

Jonfaith says

I read this twice, seperated by a most important decade. The second reading was in the early days of our new house. Terms like haunted are often misused, but there is a sense that Sebald elevates the ghosts of maladaption and legacy to a momentary viewing, however stilted.

New homes and a safely surveyed life often prove to be mixed wagers. Sebald grounds one in the quotidian. Even as he unnerves with a passing query, a nagging thorn of dissociation. Commerce and legacy are tainted. The inheritors bear the mark. As readers we remain cursed. So be it.
