

Obituary for writer W. G. Sebald

The Quiet German

By Terry Martin

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Susan Sontag called his work a rare example of "noble literary enterprise." He was considered for (but never awarded) the Nobel Prize for literature. W. G. Sebald, who died last December in a car crash, won a select but devoted readership in German and English. And that seemed to suit him just fine. Shunning the conventions of popular literature, Sebald turned out highly original books - *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, *Vertigo*, and most recently *Austerlitz* - that defy simple classification. Their style is often described as "diffuse" or oblique," crossing the boundaries between history writing, travelogue, and fiction. German readers have said that Sebald wrote "like a ghost."

The relationship between death and memory was W.G. Sebald's all-encompassing theme. (For the record, the initials "W.G." stand for Winfried Georg. Those who knew him personally called him "Max," his third name being Maximilian.)

Growing up in southern Germany in the aftermath of World War II, Sebald only slowly became aware of the unspeakable atrocities committed around the time of his birth in May 1944. His father who was a captain in the German army, returned home from a French prison camp in 1947. Like many other veterans, he never talked about the war. Sebald said that he learned "practically nothing" about Germany's wartime history until he was in his mid-teens.

Then, at the age of seventeen, Sebald was shown a documentary film about the freeing of the Belsen concentration camp. It was his first confrontation with evidence of the Holocaust. "There it was, and we somehow had to get our minds around it--which of course we didn't" This experience proved deeply influential for Sebald's emotional and literary development. He would later devote much of his life to reflections on the process of forgetting and remembering.

After studying in Freiburg, Sebald took up a post at the University of Manchester in 1966. Four years later, he moved to England permanently, joining the European studies department at the University of East Anglia. There he remained for the rest of his life. While carrying out his duties as a lecturer in German, he also founded the British Center for Literary Translation. He didn't begin writing literary works himself until he was in his mid-forties.

Although Sebald spent much more of his life in England than he did in Germany, he always wrote in the German language. "Unlike Conrad or Nabokov," he once said, "I didn't have circumstances that would have coerced me out of my native tongue altogether." Fortunately, Sebald's novels have been expertly translated into English. *Austerlitz* appeared in English just shortly before the author's death. Two more of his books are due out in translation this year: *After Nature*, his first literary work (published in German in 1988), is a one-hundred-page prose poem that introduces many of the themes explored in his later works. *Air, War, and Literature* (scheduled for publication in November) is a non-fiction work based on a series of lectures about the Allied bombing of German cities during the war.

What makes Sebald such a fascinating writer is not his choice of subject but rather his approach. He abhorred that genre of writing that treats existentially incomprehensible forms of experience (for instance, the Holocaust) with sentimentality. Instead, Sebald addresses his material in a subtle, unassertive way using intimation and suggestion. He often augments his writing with images, mostly anonymous, uncaptioned photographs that appear to both comment upon and act as subject for the narrative.

Reading a Sebald novel serves as an exercise in the process of remembering, with all its retrospective weight and fuzziness. Memory is what Sebald once called "the moral backbone" of literature. "Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you, and it will shape your life," he said. "Without memories, there wouldn't be any writing." W.G. Sebald will be remembered--and missed.

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