

On the Natural History of Destruction

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W.G. Sebald completed this extraordinary and important -- and already controversial -- book before his untimely death in December 2001.

On the Natural History of Destruction is W.G. Sebald's harrowing and precise investigation of one of the least examined "silences" of our time. In it, the acclaimed novelist examines the devastation of German cities by Allied bombardment, and the reasons for the astonishing absence of this unprecedented trauma from German history and culture.

This void in history is in part a repression of things -- such as the death by fire of the city of Hamburg at the hands of the RAF -- too terrible to bear. But rather than record the crises about them, writers sought to retrospectively justify their actions under the Nazis. For Sebald, this is an example of deliberate cultural amnesia; his analysis of its effects in and outside Germany has already provoked angry and painful debate.

Sebald's incomparable novels are rooted in meticulous observation; his essays are novelistic. They include his childhood recollections of the war that spurred his horror at the collective amnesia around him. There are moments of black humour and, throughout, the unmatched sensitivity of Sebald's intelligence. This book is a vital study of suffering and forgetting, of the morality hidden in artistic decisions, and of both compromised and genuine heroics.

"Most writers, even good ones, write of what can be written; and move by their own angles into the discourse of their day. The very greatest write of what cannot be written; gravitating not toward the discourse but toward the silence. They break it, like the crust on untrodden snow. I think of [Anna] Akhmatova and Primo Levi, for example, and of W. G. Sebald, who died in 2001."

-Richard Eder, The New York Times Book Review

"Sebald is the real thing. . . . Sublime."

-The Globe and Mail
W. G. Sebald was born in Wertach im Allgäu, Germany, in 1944. He studied German language and literature in Freiburg, Switzerland, and Manchester. He taught at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, for thirty years, becoming professor of European literature in 1987, and from 1989 to 1994 was the first director of the British Centre for Literary Translation. His previously translated books--The Rings of Saturn, The Emigrants, Vertigo, and Austerlitz--have won a number of international awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Award, the Berlin Literature Prize, and the Literatur Nord Prize. He died in December 2001.

Other Books

A Biblical Cyclopædia ; Or, Dictionary of Eastern Antiquities, Geography, Natural History, Sacred Annals and Biography, Theology, and Biblical Literature, Illustrative of the Old and New Testaments.

“ . . . Haman , intoxicated with pride , and maddened with rage , was plotting the destruction of the stubborn Jew ... she represented to the king the nature and extent of the threatened destruction , as well as the guilty author of it . ”