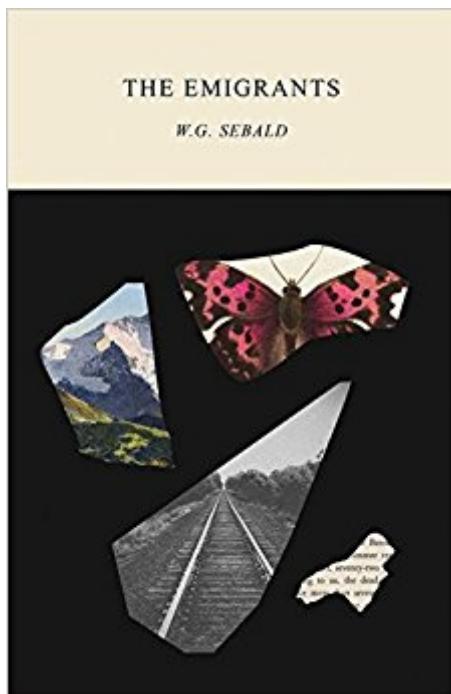


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# The Emigrants (New Directions Paperbook)



## **Synopsis**

A masterpiece of W. G. Sebald, now with a gorgeous new cover by the famed designer Peter Mendelsund. The four long narratives in *The Emigrants* appear at first to be the straightforward biographies of four Germans in exile. Sebald reconstructs the lives of a painter, a doctor, an elementary-school teacher, and Great Uncle Ambrose. Following (literally) in their footsteps, the narrator retraces routes of exile which lead from Lithuania to London, from Munich to Manchester, from the South German provinces to Switzerland, France, New York, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. Along with memories, documents, and diaries of the Holocaust, he collects photographs—the enigmatic snapshots which stud *The Emigrants* and bring to mind family photo albums. Sebald combines precise documentary with fictional motifs, and as he puts the question to realism, the four stories merge into one unfathomable requiem.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this remarkable work of fiction, W.G. Sebald explores the power of memory as he traces the lives of four people uprooted by war and prejudice. Each of the stories reflect the tragic impact of World War II on the survivors, who struggle with a loss of home, a loss of language, and a loss of self. Through memories, each person attempts to make sense of their histories and bridge the chasm the war ripped in their lives. Combined with each story are photographs that purport to show the subjects of the stories. The combination of photographs, biography, and autobiography combine to form a meditative, lyrical story that is at once powerful and introspective. --This text refers to an out

of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Composed of four compelling portraits of Jewish emigres whose lives have been scarred by exile, dislocation and persecution, this unusual work of fiction is pervaded by a sensibility and a degree of circumstantial detail so authentic that it could pass for historical documentation. That Sebald has invested his fictional creations with both dignity and pathos is a mark of his achievement here. A narrator provides perspective on the lives he relates. Retired surgeon Henry Selwyn was born Hersch Seweryn and changed his name after arrival in England; his disclosure of his true origins to his Swiss wife causes an irreparable rift in their marriage and an essential loss of identity in the now aimless man. Paul Bereyter, fired from his post as schoolteacher in Germany because he is one-quarter Jewish, serves six years in the Germany army and is haunted by the bestial violence he witnesses. Ambros Adelwarth escapes Germany, finally settling in the U.S. Concealing his traumas from family members, he commits himself to a sanitarium at age 67 and undergoes electroshock therapy, longing for extinction. German-born artist Max Ferber, a recluse in Manchester, England, suffers claustrophobia stemming from the deportation and murder of his parents by Nazis. Though none of the protagonists is thrown into a concentration camp, they are all haunted by the effects of the Holocaust. Two of them eventually commit suicide, all suffer shame and guilt, claustrophobia and depression. Photographs interwoven with the restrained text add to the cumulative effect, which is that of an eerie memento. Long after the Nazis have fallen, these exiled individuals endure existential agony and emotional breakdowns. German novelist and literary scholar Sebald, who has lived in England since 1970, won the Berlin Literature Prize for this remarkable work. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

First off, I strongly recommend you read Douglas Harper's review of this book -- it conveys the sense and spirit of Sebald work far better than I could do. Second, when you do read Sebald, prepare to journey through layer after layer of memory, history, identity, and to end with nothing concrete, but something profoundly evocative. Sebald recounts the stories of four men, all of whom emigrated from Germany at different points in the twentieth century, and all of whom had a marginal connection with the unnamed narrator who frames the stories. Each is at least partly Jewish, and each has been profoundly affected by the Holocaust. Still, the great catastrophe is never front and center, it is always alluded to in passing, and in terms very specific to each of Sebald's protagonists -- how a life was changed, a past destroyed. This book at first seems an easier read than

"Austerlitz", but Sebald's focus of piling memory on memory creates at least as strong an effect as in that book. In "The Emigrant", one person's story opens out into another's, until all the complexity of a past descends. It is not a cheerful book -- the protagonists die, either by their own hands or in distressing circumstances -- but it is a very beautiful and powerful one. The description of Manchester, for example, vividly recalled to me the experience of being a foreigner in 1960's Britain, and the section on Istanbul is perhaps the loveliest evocation of that city that I have ever read."The Emigrants" is about identity, and memory, and about the great mystery of the 20th century -- how could so many people have gone mad enough to allow the Holocaust? Sebald does not arrive at an answer, but he tells us a great deal about the question.

This book is not fun to read, as reader DR has already observed. Well, I'm not going to get all snooty and literary critic-y, but just as a human being who has read it, I did not enjoy it. Sebald, or Author Sebald Who Wrote This Book, lacks some human dimension that redeems such profoundly painful experience. I'll take Elie Wiesel over Sebald any day when it comes to the Jewish experience of WWII. Yes, Sebald conveys the experience of the four narrators very well when it comes to moving the reader, but I found the movement unredeemably downward, which is hard to take for the wrong reasons. In fact, if I see anybody at the beach reading The Emigrants, I shall snatch it from them and throw it in the water.

This is the second Sebald work I have read. So I obviously find the author's themes and style interesting. We Americans are for the most part immigrants. We descend from emigrants who left their homelands. The work is suffused with the story of a few emigrants and their history in the context of the larger history around them. It is a page turner and I read the book in two sittings. Sebald weaves history, places, people, problems in an inimitable style that is both sad, thought provoking and rich in imagery and allusion. Highly recommended if you are not into thrillers or romance.

I don't have the right words to describe the book. I enjoyed it from end to end. You can read better reviews at , and the NY Times review is on target. W. G. Sebald's use of language is something special. He writes with long sentences and wonderful prose. To me, it was a pleasure just reading the words formed into descriptions, ideas, and dialog. Most interesting to me was the lack of quotation marks when someone was speaking, but it was completely clear who was speaking. He never had to say in words that he was telling the reader about Jews in exile; he did it in ways that

you just knew. I loved the book! I love reading historical novels especially relating to WWII, but this wasn't so much of the physical destruction of war but of the psychological implications and how it uprooted people in body and soul.

Long short stories concerning exile, literally and phsychologically, each in the same obsessive, hypnotic style translated brilliantly from the German. As in 'Austerlitz' (in my opinion his masterpiece) he takes us via himself as narrator, observing, learning and retelling, the life stories of four emigrants from Europe. It's all in the intensity: long sentences, digressions and descriptions - especially of architecture - dug out of the memories and emotions of the speakers who flow with words. Sebald's reconstructing of places and eye - or ear - to detail, makes him a superb historical novelist, spilling into memoirs it's impossible to believe come out of the head of the writer and not actual people. Surely they really exist and Sebald is just recording them? I can never put down a book by Sebald. How tragic he is gone.

This strange novel at first frustrated and confounded me. It's cluttered with old photographs, furniture, clothing, European and American place-names, German and German Jewish surnames, holidays, defunct European institutions, sewing supplies, music, the names of plants, and more. All of this detritus is deceptive and fascinating and essential to the stories of the lives lived, and now gone. Similarly, but for different reasons, EL Doctorow's "Ragtime" did this, too. Allusions to Nabokov, butterflies, and Nabokov's amusement at American place-names shadow some of the action, and I did not fully understand why - other than perhaps as a sort of symbol of longing-for-place. One is gripped by all of these goods and stories: their once-upon-a-time existence, their owners, their disappearance, and - miraculously - their return. The material culture of the early twentieth century is used, fabulously and unapologetically, in order to summon memory, show God in the details, and to illustrate loss. There is no nostalgia here. An amazing and successful effort by a German born in 1944 to come to terms with the unthinkable: Germany's attempt to destroy European Jewry, and Europe, really, too. A wholly original and efficiently disturbing novel.

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