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After Nature (Modern Library Paperbacks)



Synopsis

After Nature, W. G. Sebald's first literary work, now translated into English by Michael Hamburger, explores the lives of three men connected by their restless questioning of humankind's place in the natural world. From the efforts of each, a new order arises, in places beautiful and comforting, though more cruel, too, than the previous state of ignorance. • The first figure is the great German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald. The second is the Enlightenment botanist-explorer Georg Steller, who accompanied Bering to the Arctic. The third is the author himself, who describes his wanderings among landscapes scarred by the wrecked certainties of previous ages. After Nature introduces many of the themes that W. G. Sebald explored in his subsequent books. A haunting vision of the waxing and waning tides of birth and devastation that lie behind and before us, it confirms the author's position as one of the most profound and original writers of our time. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The literary world still mourns the too early passing of W.G. Sebald, who died just as his fertile mind was being shared with us through his four novels. Few people who experienced the power of his talent in reading 'The Emigrants', 'Vertigo', 'The Rings of Saturn', and his final 'Austerlitz' have been able to reconcile the loss of a man so gifted having his career so shortened. Sebald is a writer's writer but his book, while dense in content and style, spoke so clearly to our generation

beseiged by media madness, global wars, terrorism, starvation, and mutilation of the environment that turning to his unique form of writing provided a great solace. He asked us to explore the mysteries of birth, of death, of aging, of remembering and honoring our personal and cultural past. Now, after his death, we are gifted by this amazingly beautiful volume of three poems he wrote at the inception of his writing career. Knowing that these elegant and brilliant poems have been available all these years - just not translated - brings the circle of life round in a way I feel certain Sebald would have enjoyed. The poems are in free verse and read easily; the content is typical of Sebald, in that he relates detailed histories of painter Matthias Gruenwald, botanist Georg Stellar, and himself - each man being described as one who explores life from his passion to understand his past and future and find meaning and peace at its core. Rarely has language appeared so fluid, elegant, informative and lovely as in Sebald's informed hands. This is a book to savour and to share.....a magnificent volume.

I really don't feel I can do this beautiful book justice but I loved it so much I feel compelled to try. "After Nature" is written even less conventionally than are Sebald's other books. "After Nature" is a rather longish prose poem that details the unique relationship between three very different men and nature, herself. The three men are Matthias Grunewald, the German Renaissance painter, Georg Steller, the scientist and Arctic explorer and Sebald, himself. Each one of the men named above begins life with a vision of Nature that is placid and benevolent but come to realize that Nature can often be cruel and can even destroy her own creations. Each man was changed by his experience with Nature; whether for better or worse is something each reader will have to judge for himself. Sebald was an enormously creative and original writer and he defined himself as a "writer" rather than a novelist. While "After Nature" certainly isn't conventionally plotted there are remnants of stories contained within the poetry. Sebald, however, makes the reader work a little in order to obtain a full understanding of "After Nature." The book may look "easy" but believe me, it's not. "After Nature" is a beautiful book and, like the ones that followed, its beauty is melancholic. If you need a conventionally plotted work or a page turning storyline, however, "After Nature" wouldn't be the right choice for you. This is a very introspective work and the more you read, the more inward looking the book becomes. I loved "After Nature." I think I loved it even more than Sebald's other books. "After Nature" made me think more and reflect more and it stayed with me far longer. If a very reflective, introspective and melancholic prose poem is something you think you'd enjoy, I don't think you could find anything lovelier than "After Nature."

This triptych prose poem actually was published before Sebald's prose books. The word 'poem' is a loose word here, as words like 'fiction' and 'novel' were in "Austerlitz", "Vertigo", "Rings of Saturn" and "The Emigrants". This poem is a progenitor of the later work, and has much of the same agenda as the books. "After Nature" follows three characters: Grunewald, a Renaissance painter, Steller, an 18th century botanist-explorer, and finally the author himself. The book is preoccupied and troubled by the slow devastation of nature and innocence by history and man, and the book's end, as Sebald himself imagines looking onto the virgin continent of Africa in the times of Alexander the Great, is eloquent and beautifully melancholy as only a Sebald work can be. This is as luminous and hypnotic as writing can be, and literature will sorely miss the genius of W.G. Sebald, who passed away far too early, at the height of his literary powers, in December of 2001.

This triptych of three long poems by W.G. Sebald is a jewel-like ornament to his four major prose works, "Vertigo," "The Emigrants," "The Rings of Saturn" and "Austerlitz." I found the first and third poems, dealing with the shadowy German Renaissance painter Matthias Grunewald and with Sebald himself, superior to the second section, on Arctic exploration, but I fully expect other readers to judge for themselves and judge differently. The burning power of what is best in all of Sebald's works is encapsulated in a few lines from the third poem here, describing Sebald's reaction after viewing a painting of the destruction of Sodom in the Kunsthistorisches Museum: When for the first time I saw this picture the year before last, I had the strange feeling of having seen all of it before, and a little later, crossing to Floridsdorf on the Bridge of Peace, I nearly went out of my mind.

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