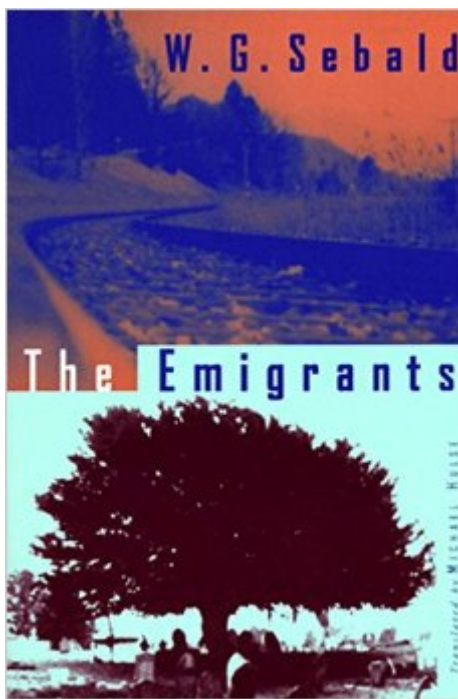


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# The Emigrants



## Synopsis

"A masterpiece."—Richard Eder, The New York Times. Published to enormous critical acclaim in the US, *The Emigrants* has been acclaimed as "one of the best novels to appear since World War II" (Review of Contemporary Fiction) and three times chosen as the 1996 International Book of the Year. The poignant and acclaimed novel about the beauty of lost things, while the protagonist traces the lives of four elderly German/Jewish exiles. *The Emigrants* is composed of four long narratives which at first appear to be the straightforward accounts of the lives of several Jewish exiles in England, Austria, and America. The narrator literally follows their footsteps, studding each story with photographs and creating the impression that the reader is poring over a family album. But gradually, Sebald's prose, which combines documentary description with almost hallucinatory fiction, exerts a new magic, and the four stories merge into one. Illustrated throughout with enigmatic photographs.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Sebald's book consists of four long narrative lives of Europeans, living in exile to some degree, before or after the Second World War. It seems the most straightforward thing imaginable, but it isn't. Each section is like a lingering film camera shot of an innocent family photo. The lens slowly pulls back to reveal slight discoloration of the edges, then the charred page of a photo album, then only at the very end of the view the ruins of the house that held it, the rubble of the city around it. Sebald blends fiction, memory and history. He weaves pictures and words. He researched his

novels by visiting war archives and sifting through piles of postcards, maps, photos and magazine pictures. Some of them end up in his books, but infused with his artist's imagination. This is what Truman Capote might have written, if he had been a brilliant and sublime novelist instead of a journalistic raconteur. I'm tempted to omit the fact that this is a book "about" the Holocaust, for fear that people who were assigned to read Eli Weisel in high school will politely click the page on me and think, "OK, well, I know what that's like." The Holocaust in this book is a negative space, a hole into which things go and never come out. If it is mentioned by name at all, it is only once or twice. It's like the silent, immense black hole that astronomers find in the middle of the Milky Way. The bright stars we watch at night pinwheel around it. The novel shows how people warp under the weight of their inherited identity, which is something modern Americans and Germans share. Critics compared Sebald to Ingmar Bergman, Kafka and Proust.

Having had my appetite for Sebald whetted by Austerlitz, I picked up the Emigrants with high expectations, and they were surpassed: on top of the expected modern masterpiece I got a recognition of one of the greatest writers on emigration that Europe produced in the 20th century. Nabokov shows up in all four pieces in small roles, a bit like Hitchcock did in his films. His appearances are as dispersed, geographically, as the stories told here. The Emigrants are four men whose life stories Sebald explores in his meandering multiple media way. All of them are people that played some kind of part in Sebald's life, if only tangentially, like his temporary landlord in England, who had come from Lithuania to England, married a rich Swiss woman, got estranged and poor and became an ornamental hermit, in his own words. One man is his granduncle who emigrated to the US and became an appendix of a rich Jewish banking family. One is a former teacher who had been banned from teaching during the Third Reich, being a 'quarter Jew', but was not banned from soldiering for six years; when the war was over he went back to his old profession, taught Sebald for a while, but could not stand this life for long and went abroad. One is a painter, an acquaintance of Sebald's from his student time in Manchester, who escaped from the holocaust trap to England just in time, but whose parent got left behind to perish. The men share a deep melancholia or depression, and all find an end either by their own hand or by diseases acquired by lifestyle choice. The state of being an exile is not explored analytically, but phenomenologically. The tales of 4 men dive deeply into European history and civilization.

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