The German academic and writer W.G. Sebald made an astounding ascent into the canon of world literature. In this volume, leading experts from the English- and German-speaking worlds explore his celebrated prose works published in the short span from 1996 to his premature death in 2001. Special attention is paid to Sebald’s unpublished texts and books awaiting translation into English. The volume – illustrated with many unpublished archive images – scrutinizes the dual nature of Sebald’s life and work, located between Germany and England, academic and literary writing, vilification and idolization. Through nearly forty essays on a broad range of topics, *W.G. Sebald in Context* achieves a revision of our understanding of Sebald, defying many clichés about him. Particular attention is paid to the manifold ways in which Sebald’s writings exert a legacy far beyond literature, especially in the areas of art, cinema and popular music.

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When you grow up promises are held up in front of you. Get your O levels done and your A levels and then everything will be fine. And then you do your BA and your PhD, but the more you are lured along this road, the more is taken away from you, the less the scope becomes. Day by day you leave things behind, ultimately your health, and so loss becomes the most common experience we have. I think somehow this has to be accounted for and as there are few other places where it is accounted for it has to be done by writing. It is quite clear to me that many people can identify with this view of life. It is not necessarily a pessimistic one; it is just a matter of fact that somehow this whole process is one in which you get done out of what you thought was your entitlement.

W.G. Sebald, 12 January 2001
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Preface

‘Ein Schriftsteller sollte zufrieden sein, wenn er in seinem Leben ein wirklich gutes Buch geschrieben hat’ (‘An author should think himself fortunate if he writes one really good book during his lifetime’), W.G. Sebald once said to me around 1993. At this point, he had written Die Ausgewanderten, which, translated into English as The Emigrants, was to bring him international acclaim as an author of prose fiction. Over the next five years, he made a vertiginous ascent into the canon of world literature, the mark of an extraordinary professional progression that was cut short by his premature death in December 2001.

Even over the span of a career curtailed, it is beyond dispute that Sebald wrote more than one good book, even that he may have written only good books. These quickly attracted academic interest, especially in the anglophone world, supported, no doubt, by his position in British academia and the curiosity he aroused in his colleagues there. After all, he was ‘one of us’. (Or at least seemed to be.)

To his Germanistik colleagues in German academia, by contrast, Sebald was a rebellious outsider who as a junior academic had already made a questionable name for himself through his savage attacks on sacred cows of German literature and leading representatives of his discipline. Even after he emerged as a literary author in the 1990s, German academia continued to treat Sebald’s work with a considerable level of suspicion, if not outright hostility. He was disparaged as an author of ‘Germanistenprosa’, intellectualized maulderings of a professor struggling to transcend the day job, while his style – a nod to nineteenth-century writers such as Adalbert Stifter – was dismissed as dated or twee by critics who were missing the point of his writing.

In 1993, Sebald’s highly polemical essay on Alfred Andersch, previously a sacrosanct idol of the political left, sparked outrage on the German literary scene. His public lectures at the University of Zürich on the failure of German post-war literature to engage with the Allied bombing
campaigns and their devastation of cities such as Dresden and Hamburg had a similar effect towards the end of the same decade. Journalists, literary critics and many academics baulked at his wholesale attacks, as did several leading German writers, prominent among them Günter Grass.

Without question, Sebald’s reception in Germany differed greatly from that in his adopted country, where he was overwhelmingly held in high esteem. Amongst the small German Studies community in the United Kingdom, Sebald was considered a respected, well-liked colleague, known under his adopted name of Max, and in British literary circles he soon gained the admiration of fellow distinguished writers such as Will Self, Iain Sinclair and Marina Warner.

This conflicting appraisal raises an important consideration that also fundamentally informs the approach of the present volume: there is no single Sebald. The aim of drawing together this collection of essays is to present Sebald’s biography, his critical writings and his literary œuvre under different aspects, from different perspectives and in different contexts. More than any homogeneous, monolithic analysis, it is hoped that such a composite, multi-vocal portrayal may be in a position to do justice to the complexity of the academic and author’s multi-faceted life and body of work.

There are many books on Sebald. Some might say too many. (I certainly have to accept some blame in this respect.) Though we may be observing a slowdown of the ‘Sebald-industrial complex’, the ‘Sebald-industry’ is far from exhausted. On the contrary, even two decades on from Sebald’s death, the effect of his writing endures, especially beyond academia, and draws ripples more intricate and extensive than almost any other author’s since Kafka.

What we are witnessing in the anglophone world, as his work has entered ‘into a process of recycling, reformulation, transformation and adaptation’, is nothing short of a Sebald cult. Sebald lives on in the works of other writers, of visual artists across a range of media, but also in pop music, internet blogs and through the audio, film and stage adaptations of his texts. *W.G. Sebald in Context* is, not least, a response to this ripple effect and proposes to take stock of the many shores, old and new, to which the author and his legacy have taken us.

To this end, and in keeping with its aspiration to complexity and multifacetedness, my aim with *W.G. Sebald in Context* is to challenge existing secondary literature in two main ways: first, as even a cursory overview
shows, current research, especially in an anglophone context, continues
almost without exception to focus on a narrow range of key themes, chief
among them trauma, the Holocaust, intermediality, memory and melan-
choly. As early as 2007, JJ Long was already forced to conclude that Sebald
scholarship was generally ‘repetitive and predictable’.\(^4\) Extensive omnibus
reviews of existing research by Richard Sheppard,\(^5\) a former colleague of
Sebald, support this claim. As a consequence of such a restricted focus,
these themes, usually investigated through the lens of the novel Austerlitz,
have long dominated Sebald research at the considerable expense of his
other publications.

Over the past decade, there has been some diversification in this regard,
as becomes apparent not least from the contributions to the present volume
on newer theoretical approaches from the fields of ecocriticism and media
theory. At the same time, it is probably fair to say that some recent
academic trends (such as digital humanities) may not be able to yield
many significant new insights into Sebald’s work.

However, there is a great deal of work to be done simply in the area of
textual and contextual analysis, and many of Sebald’s intertextual refer-
ences or allusions to the history of ideas, beyond the usual suspects, remain
unexplored. Additionally, Sebald’s estate in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv
(German Literature Archive, DLA) in Marbach promises fruitful new
impulses for future research. To give but one example: a thorough investi-
gation into the underlinings and marginalia in his personal library should
produce many surprising insights into where his literary as well as critical
writings take their material from.

A second notable weakness of much existing research on Sebald is that
‘too many essays about [him] are cast in the kind of rebarbative idiom’
which Richard Sheppard resoundingly if rightly condemns for its lack of
accessibility, ‘since the effect of such writing is to veil Sebald’s texts from
mortal gaze within a mystery accessible only to a priestly elite’.\(^6\) Sheppard
has in mind here the sort of jargon-heavy discourse that cares little about
Sebald’s texts themselves and more about parading a ‘prêt-à-porter theory’\(^7\)
around an echo chamber of academic self-adulation. As a literary critic,
Sebald himself always rejected this approach to literature, finding ‘smug
critical cleverness to be a special form of stupidity’.\(^8\)

Unlike offerings by ‘the general run of German critics, whose plodding
studies [on Kafka] regularly become a travesty of scholarship’,\(^9\) W.G.
Sebald in Context hopes to do justice to its subject by dispensing with
‘the frustratingly opaque mode that Sebald has excited in some critics’,\(^10\) as
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**Preface**

David Anderson put it, and by filling in gaps existing scholarship has insufficiently addressed or has failed to engage with entirely.

For instance, this volume will discuss the formative impact Sebald’s grandfather, Josef Egelhofer, had on him as a person and writer, it will highlight the significance of the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT) founded by Sebald, it will read his interviews as authorial self-staging and embed them in the context of his literary œuvre, and it will emphasize the importance of the polemical for Sebald’s life and work. The transnational and transmedial nature of Sebald’s work is reflected in several essays in this collection, but also in its broad range of contributors, comprising leading Sebald scholars, early career researchers and artistic practitioners from both Germany and the anglophone sphere.

The volume is expressly dedicated to the “German Sebald”. That is to say, in keeping with the many facets of Sebald, this volume is mindful of the significant difference between the “German Sebald” and the “English Sebald” in analyses of his writing. The sequence in which Sebald wrote his books in German differs markedly from the order in which they were published in translation, resulting in a significantly diverse author profile across German- and English-speaking countries. In German, Sebald made his literary debut in 1988 with *Nach der Natur*, the intricate lyrical prose style of which informs all his future prose writing. In English, this early work only came out posthumously as *After Nature* in 2002, whereas the instant success of his English-language debut *The Emigrants* in 1996 earnt Sebald the misleading label of a ‘Holocaust author’, which some still assign to him to this day.

Consequently, my editorial decision was to treat the German texts as the original version of Sebald’s work. Despite his being heavily involved in the translation process, the English-language editions are alternative versions that do not capture the same range of meaning and nuance as the originals. This is not so much purely a question of subtleties, overtones and allusions being ‘lost in translation’. Mark McCulloh rightly refers to Sebald’s ‘tandem literary œuvres’ and emphasizes the shift in literary ‘key’ or modulation between the two languages, in which, for instance, the English version’s preference for ‘severity over playfulness’ may lose some of the ‘graver mood of Sebald’s German originals’. As Sebald himself observed, his own active participation in the process notwithstanding: ‘Some of the finer grain vanishes in translation, inevitably. I mean you can make small gains in the process of translation also, but, on the whole, I think you tend to lose some of the finer grain, particularly as regards shadings of earlier forms of German.’

Conducting research exclusively on
the basis of Sebald’s works in translation, as is often the case in the area of English studies, is thus evidently problematic.

A related difficulty arises when scholars who do not have German are unable to access the extensive and important body of German-language research or archival materials. Significant texts from Sebald’s estate, including, especially, his critical writings, remain unpublished or untranslated, which is regrettable, to say the least, in view of the sustained anglophone interest in his work. Here, too, *W.G. Sebald in Context* is designed to act as a corrective in two regards. For one thing, it aims to reveal crucial cross-connections between Sebald’s fiction and his literary criticism. It is impossible to arrive at a differentiated understanding of Sebald as an author without an appreciation of how organic and close the relationship between his literary and his critical work is. One is inconceivable without the other, as his late essays from *Logis in einem Landhaus (A Place in the Country, 1998)* show very clearly: in these, the two components of his work merge into a new hybrid form of writing which was precluded from further development only because of his untimely death.

Secondly, *W.G. Sebald in Context* will serve as an introduction to those critical and literary writings still awaiting translation, with the intention of affording those who do not read German insight into the full extent of Sebald’s œuvre. In addition to his juvenilia and scripts for unrealized films on Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein, this untranslated archival material comprises his Corsica Project, which far exceeds in scope and comprehensiveness the partial piecemeal excerpts of it published in the *Campo Santo* collection.

This volume also explores what is known about the World War Project Sebald was working on when he died. Slated to appear after *Austerlitz*, the book seems to have had all the potential for literary greatness of the earlier novel and then some. ‘I am convinced that the book Max was writing when he died would have been his greatest yet’, stated his former colleague, the distinguished historian Richard J. Evans.

* A central problem with academia’s wholesale appropriation of Sebald is the risk this runs of perpetuating a distorted image of him. This is due not least to complex ways alluded to at the outset in which he straddled irreconcilably different contexts, Germany and England, academia and literature, adulation and ostracism.

Cliché-ridden German misconceptions of UK academia as a kind of Oxbridge idyll have a counterpart in the erroneous or ignorant
assumptions concerning German peculiarities that we encounter in English-language publications on Sebald. Two different countries, two different perceptions of the same author: from a British perspective, Sebald’s contentious standing in Germany, due to his polemics against revered figureheads of German literature, seems astonishing. Meanwhile, his German reception is bemused by his international acclaim and taken aback by his cultural pessimism.

He was indisputably a complex and many-layered individual who resisted any easy pigeonholing. One readily available myth that informed how he was perceived from the outside was the image of him as a pathologically morose melancholic. From my own experience of Sebald, nothing could be further from the truth. He had a bitingly sarcastic sense of humour and we laughed a great deal, even, or especially, in the face of the preposterously outrageous absurdities of the world.

From the outside, Sebald appeared as a man of contradictions. His intellectual biography, as Andrew Sutcliffe argues, ‘presents a strange case for the critic. Despite having lived and worked in England for the vast majority of his adult life, … Sebald appears to have had almost no scholarly interest in Anglophone literature’. Repeatedly, English-speaking interviewers were also puzzled by Sebald’s steadfast refusal to switch to English as his writing language.

He had a mind of his own, sometimes obstinately so. When external inspectors were due to conduct the first Teaching Quality Assessment in the mid-1990s, he simply showed them the door, despite the consequences this had for himself and his department. His long-standing friend, the artist Jan Peter Tripp, was similarly surprised when, just a few days before Sebald’s death, For Years Now was published. A collaboration between Sebald and the graphic artist Tess Jaray, the volume combined Sebald’s English-language ‘micro-poems’ with Jaray’s minimalist artwork. For years, Tripp had been planning precisely such a collaboration with Sebald, in which the German versions of the ‘micro-poems’ were to be juxtaposed with etchings by Tripp, and which finally came out after Sebald’s death under the title of Unerzählt (Unrecounted). But Sebald had never once mentioned his parallel project with Jaray to his close friend. He could be completely unpredictable like that or, as his Swiss colleague, the Germanist Peter von Matt, put it: ‘Sebald was someone you thought capable of anything, because you were never quite sure what to expect next.’

And yet, the non-conformist, order-averse, obstinate sides of Sebald’s character are often smoothed over in the interest of painting a more