



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

OPINION

Why it’s okay to forget the books you read

While reading Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), I remember feeling that the Nigerian novelist had mastered the English language—the language of the colonialists. I was reminded of Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”, particularly the character Caliban, who tells his master Prospero, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is I know how to curse.”

NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR

What makes them my favourites, if I can’t remember the names of the engrossing characters or the details of the intricate plots in some of my “favourite” books? Is something wrong with me? Is that faculty of my brain which stores and retrieves information faulty? Am I showing early signs of Alzheimer’s or Dementia? Do I really even like reading? Am I not reading “properly” enough?

Sir Francis Bacon, an English philosopher, once wrote: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” Does this mean that I only “taste” books while reading and then spit them out soon after they go into my bookshelf? Am I simply a taster and not a digester?

I’ve come to realise that this is not a “problem” unique to myself and is in fact, quite common. I realise that in this digital era, with easy access to the internet and therefore, with information at my fingertips, I don’t really have to have total/perfect recall. For example, I knew Bacon wrote something about books, so I simply used the search words “Francis Bacon on books” on Google, and voila, I had the essay from which I took the aforementioned quote. Siegfried Sassoon, a World War I poet, stated that “it is humanly certain that most of us remember very little of what we have read” and so, I’ve learned to forgive myself for forgetting, for I’m just an ordinary human.

With this realisation, one may ask, what’s the point of reading, if I am going to forget most of it anyway? The answer is pretty simple. One shouldn’t read to remember; rather, one should read for the experience

of reading. We tend to prioritise recalling over experiencing. I can recall the different emotions I felt and the realisations I came to while reading the books I’ve read, with each experience different from the other.

While reading Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), I remember feeling that the Nigerian novelist had mastered the English language—the language of the colonialists. I was reminded of Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”, particularly the character Caliban, who tells his master Prospero, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is I know how to curse.” I remember feeling that Achebe had symbolically used the coloniser’s tools to dismantle the master’s house through his tale, which is aimed at the Western reader, and yet, at the same time, he was successful in portraying the African experience in English while preserving African authenticity, which by the way, is neither faultless nor idyllic.

Things Fall Apart is a masterpiece that allowed me to perceive the African people unlike the way white authors such as Joseph Conrad (through his *Heart of Darkness*) portrays them (in a racist, reductionist, stereotypical manner), thereby offering me the chance to see them through an alternate, non-colonial, authentic lens. I know the novel’s name came from WB Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming” and while the poem is about the anti-Christ and the anarchy that he brings with him, the book is about colonisation and the consequent collapse of the Igbo society. The disintegration of values, customs, traditions, relationships, etc. of the Igbo people is also a result of internal flaws within that society, which Achebe didn’t shy away from exposing. I remember feeling

that the author was just as critical of the colonisers as he was of his own people and I couldn’t help but marvel at his objectivity. I remember making a connection between Achebe’s novel and Shirley Jackson’s unsettling short story, “The Lottery” because both texts have characters who question rituals such as human sacrifice, and both texts also have characters who cannot accept change. Lastly, I remember understanding the concept of cultural hegemony, where the white man did not need to resort to brute force to colonise the Igbo people in Achebe’s novel; rather, colonisation came about through the latter’s consent.

The reader of this essay may think that I remember a lot from reading the novel, but I cannot write another word unless I re-read the book again. I don’t remember a single character’s name or the relationships between characters and tribes, and I don’t remember most of the flaws in the Igbo society that led to its demise when the British came into the picture. However, my experience of reading a book by an African author changed me in more ways than one. I got a glimpse of a culture and a people completely foreign to me, I made connections with other texts that I had read, and I understood theories that I had studied but could not apply until I read the novel.

I believe that even if you remember nothing but a certain intense, raw emotion that you felt while reading a book, you have a valid reason to pick up another book and continue to experience the joys of reading.

Noora Shamsi Bahar is a writer, translator, and Senior Lecturer at the Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University.

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC FICTION

Jokes, rhymes, and the depths of relationships

ISRAR HASAN

One of the most searing scenes in Lee Lai’s magnificent graphic novel, *Stone Fruit* (Fantagraphics, 2021) is when a young child, Nessie, springs into action, morphing into a feral-like creature alongside her aunt, Ray, and her girlfriend, Bron singing, jumping, and frolicking into a world of their own imagination. What begins as a rather sweet opening turns into a troubling and intensely passionate tale of what constitutes a relationship—romantic and familial—and the tension it generates between the self and one’s relation to the world.

Stone Fruit delves into the minutiae of formations, transitions, transformations, and deformations of relationships. The graphic novel revolves around an inter-racial queer couple, Bron and Ray, who struggle with their relationship and with fighting the demons generated by their respective families. The most heartwarming moment they share in the entire novel is when Nessie, Ray’s niece, shows up to brighten up Bron’s and Ray’s lukewarm existence into a vibrant

symphony of jokes, gags, and rhymes. Behind the scenes, Ray struggles with her sister, Amanda, a single mother who is unable to accept her sister’s relationship with Bron, and her own relationship with Nessie’s father, who abandoned them. Bron on the other hand—assumed to be trans—is looking for closure with her homophobic white Christian family. With Bron’s

sudden withdrawal on account of their depression, Ray feels pangs of rejection and gradual distancing, which further creates a rift between the couple.

With Bron’s absence, Ray feels drawn to the coldest comfort on her side, Amanda, with whom she has a strained relationship and whose communication is hinged on taking care of little Nessie while Amanda remains at work. A cycle of examination of each character’s ties with their own desires and expectations, alongside the deeply paradoxical nature of what it means to love and be loved, pulls one closer to the characters and their well-spring of emotional turmoil. In order to balance the rifts of the heart, the characters are forced not to confront each other, but with their inner voices lurking within.

Lee Lai’s artwork is finely drawn in a monochromatic fashion, with shades of blue and white. The artwork progresses gracefully, with alternately emotive and climactic scenes of intimate soliloquies. *Stone Fruit* is a painful, heartwarming, and deeply meditative read which makes a demand of you as a reader to reflect on the relationships that sustain us. Taking a close, hardened look at the relationships of the female characters without woolly-eyed idealism, it compels us to look into our own lives with an empathetic, self-reflective glance.

Israr Hasan is a Senior Research Assistant at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health.



PHOTO: FANTAGRAPHICS

INTERVIEW

Carole Angier on writing the biography of WG Sebald

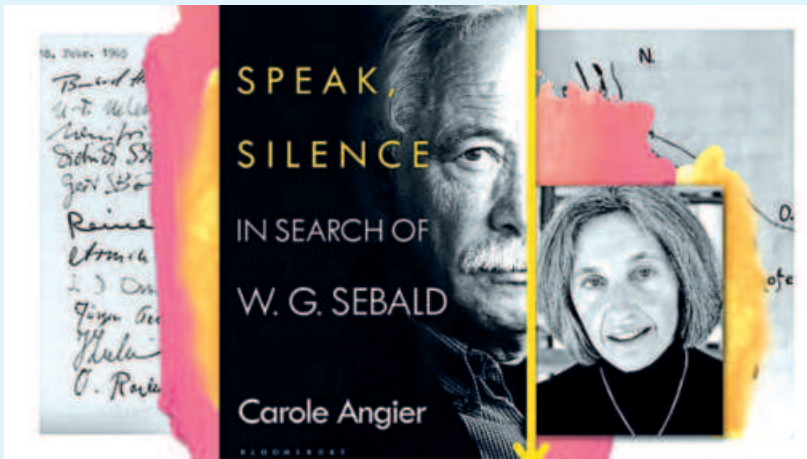
Diluting the distinction between documentation and fiction, WG Sebald has introduced a stylistic adjective in his prose fiction, which he refused to be called ‘novels’. They are known as being Sebaldian. Carole Angier, an English biographer who laid out the story of the man always in search of memories through fragments of reality and fantasy, spoke with journalist Ananta Yusuf and Shamsuddoza Sajen, Editor of Commercial Supplements at The Daily Star, about Sebald, his life, and his works.

ANANTA YUSUF AND SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

In *Speak, Silence: In Search of W.G. Sebald* (Bloomsbury, 2021), you write that the author’s British publisher, Christopher MacLehose, was in a dilemma to decide on Sebald’s genre of writing. After writing about his novel and his life for so long, how would you define Sebald’s genre?

Carol Angier (CA): [Sebald] said himself that he just wrote prose, or prose fiction. He rejected the term ‘novel’ because he disliked the creaking apparatus (as he’d say) of plot and dialogue, of getting people in and out of rooms. He was right to reject the term, and if you expect a normal novel when you open a Sebald book, you’ll be disappointed. None follows a normal narrative arc or standard scenes of social interaction. Rather, they take the form of musing and remembering, with long passages of (apparent) digression, all expressed in striking and very beautiful prose. So I would say that they were just prose. And also, certainly, fiction, though they often don’t seem to be that. But that’s an important question we can perhaps come back to.

How did he achieve this balance between fiction and nonfiction?



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

CA: The fact that his stories are based on real ones, often closely—is unexceptional; all writers use elements from their own experience and that of people they know. It’s the insertion of photographs and documents that makes his characters feel so real. We don’t just imagine them as we read, we see them, we look into their eyes.

It wasn’t wholly original. Stendhal had used maps and drawings in his *Vie de Henri Brulard*, for instance, as Sebald shows in the second part of *Vertigo*. Other French writers like Georges Rodenbach and André Breton had done it, and German ones like Alexander Kluge and Klaus

Thelewit, whose work Sebald knew well and admired. But he was the one who made it famous, who turned it into a known genre between fiction and nonfiction that we call, as you’ve said, Sebaldian, and that many new young writers have followed. Even not so new and young ones, like William Boyd, for instance, in his 2015 novel *Sweet Caress*.

Do you think the urge for freedom helped Max to develop his own style of writing? And how did he come up with this genre which is hard to define except calling it Sebaldian?

CA: That’s a good question! Yes,

I’m sure that his need for freedom inspired most things in his life, both good and bad. Most importantly, it led to his critical thinking, and his inability to accept silence and the cover-up about the war and the Holocaust that dominated his early years. That was, to put it mildly, good. But you can’t be a maverick in just one part of life; you’re either a maverick or not. So for instance, he refused to obey academic rules too—if you rely on some of his footnotes, you’ll be in trouble. And indeed he didn’t obey literary ‘rules’ either, though there aren’t really any rules in literature.

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He started his literary writing as the result of a mental crisis that began around the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. It led him to visit the schizophrenic poet Ernst Herbeck in Vienna, and from there to the journey across

northern Italy to the village of his birth in the Bavarian Alps, which he describes in his first prose book, *Vertigo*. It also led him to the poems he incorporated and developed in *After Nature*, his first published work, and to a screenplay he wrote even before that, in 1979. In all of them, and in the books he wrote later, culminating in *Austerlitz*, he explored his own traumas and mental suffering as well as those of his subjects.

In fact he’d been writing since his schooldays, and had determined to be a writer at the age of 20. But this he never admitted; instead he made it sound as though he turned to writing for the first time in his 40s, in order to escape his academic routine.

Despite what I’ve just said, I think he must have known, at least sometimes and on some level, that it wasn’t true. He said it to protect himself and his privacy, which I’ve invaded in my book. My excuse is that the roots of a great writer’s work are of great interest and even importance; and that once someone is dead, they can no longer mind.

Ananta Yusuf is a journalist at The Daily Star. Shamsuddoza Sajen is the Editor of Commercial Supplements at The Daily Star.