

Reviews

Campo Santo

By W.G. Sebald.

Random House, \$24.95.

Four essays in this collection of prose works by W.G. Sebald are fragments of a planned book about Corsica, unfinished when the writer died in a road accident in 2001. They make it obvious that, if nothing else, the island is a perfect subject for this author's signature meditations on memory, loss and death. Part of a once-great nation (and home to its most celebrated ruler), it now seems as separate in time as it is in space, as its ancient culture fades with the withering of its rural roots. In the best of these essays, Sebald relates what he learned about the disappearance of Corsica's monumental forests, foretold by a 19th-century "traveler and to-



SANTO

pographer" who, in his eerie prophecy of destruction, comes off as an earlier incarnation of the gloomy Sebald himself. Another essay on Corsican superstitions about death is of factual interest but strays into observations that would hardly have required a sojourn to the island: "the way we now take leave of the dead is marked by ill-concealed and paltry haste."

The writings collected in the second part of *Campo Santo*, presented chronologically, illustrate the gradual convergence of Sebald's literary criticism and his novelistic work into a unified, idiosyncratic kind of prose. The earlier articles include his investigations of postwar German writers' puzzling reluctance to address the physical annihilation caused by Allied bombing. The later pieces increasingly manifest the preoccupations that have made Sebald's novels *Vertigo* and *Austerlitz* popular but also constitute their weaknesses—notably, his pursuit of uncanny "connections" that illustrate the ghostly persistence of that which is dead or lost. As in other Sebald books, the tracing of such connections can be revelatory. It can also, in its dependence on coincidences, seem forced, a clumsy attempt to embroider a vague meaningfulness out of the disintegration that he so feelingly documented.

—Jonathan Taylor