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A global coordinate grid

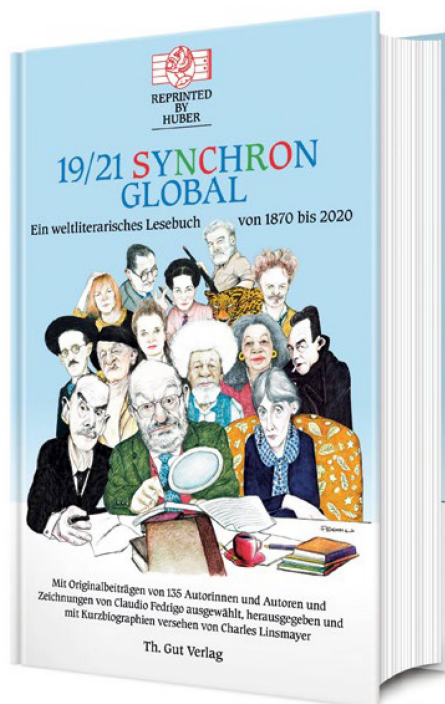
One-and-a-half years ago, Charles Linsmayer published the lavish reader “20/21 Synchron”, showcasing literary texts from Switzerland. Now he has brought out a global version: “19/21 Synchron global”.

BEAT MAZENAUER

Switzerland is not the world, as Charles Linsmayer may have thought to himself as he looked over his book collection and formed a plan to create a reading book of literature from all over the world. And now it's here: an attractive, thick volume containing (analogously to its Swiss counterpart) 135 texts all by different authors and written between 1870 and 2020.

Linsmayer starts off with a powerful piece attesting to the passionate immediacy of literature: “Discovering Books” by Richard Wright, an extract from “Black Boy”, written in 1945. Wright recounts his first visits to a library. He brings to life his experiences of having to resort to trickery to take out books on loan as a coloured boy and how he had to put up with suspicious looks as he sought to satisfy his thirst for literature. “It was so strange, as if I had discovered a new world! Once I had finished the book and closed it, I realised I had discovered something that I now couldn't do without,” and that he carried around with him “like a criminal”. Wright's later work shows that he overcame all the obstacles and ended up being a writer.

An anthology like “19/21 Synchron global” is not (necessarily) made to be read cover to cover. It is more suited to brief, funny, whimsical, random literary experiences. From Richard Wright's opener, the reader could, for example, go straight to Abdulrazak Gurnah's egregious debate among colonialists, who see the native Africans as wild animals at best. A suitable riposte to that could be Toni Morrison and her text on home and migration. Then there are a number of options for the next stop, such as the childish plot to kill Hitler by Carson McCullers, or Camus' fond memory of a youth in a Moorish café, or even Nelly Sachs' “Schwer zu sagen, wie man lebt im masslosen Leiden” [It's hard to say how to live through perpetual suffering]. Wright's bibliographical experience also contains a touch of Hesse as the guardian of the “intellectual world”, especially important during times of need.



Charles Linsmayer (publisher): “19/21 Synchron global. Ein weltliterarisches Lesebuch von 1870 bis 2020.” Th. Gut Verlag, Zurich, 2024, 656 pages, ca. CHF 40.

“19/21 Synchron global” offers the reader a whole host of options to chart their own course through the names, themes and stories in the book. The publisher has established a broad platform on which to base the journey: stretching from Akhmatova to Tsvetaeva (in German: Zwetajewa) alphabetically – there is a considerable time-span between the two contemporaries – from Victor Hugo (*1802) to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*1977). The stories start with Richard Wright and end with David Malouf, with a cultural world tour in between. Moreover, Linsmayer does not necessarily select the most prominent texts; instead, he prefers pieces that fit smoothly with his thematic structure. The 20 chapters cover all the basic topics from birth to death, from the seriousness of war to cheeky satire, with motifs including magic, nature and the animal world. Linsmayer's intent is neither to create a new canon nor to achieve completeness. The collection contains literary testimonies that he considers important. His own perspective is integral to that, as he writes in the epilogue, as a publisher faced with the wealth of “world literature” is “ultimately reliant on their own literary experiences and subjective perception”. The brief biographies of the authors in the appendix are as personal as they are pointed, each illustrated with a drawing by Claudio Fedrigo.

“19/21 Synchron global” would make a good small literary compendium. However, the essence of the book lies in its many literary “amuse-bouches” in the form of extracts from his favourite works. Richard Wright's “Black Boy” is definitely worth (re)reading to close the circle.

Find out more about literature in “Swiss Review” at: revue.link/books

Charles Linsmayer has been responsible for the literature section of “Swiss Review” for years. It is very popular among many of our readers (see page 24 of this edition). The editorial team is holding a draw for three copies of Linsmayer's latest work. To take part in the draw, send an email with the subject line “Synchron” to revue@swisscommunity.org. No correspondence will be entered into regarding the draw. (MUL)