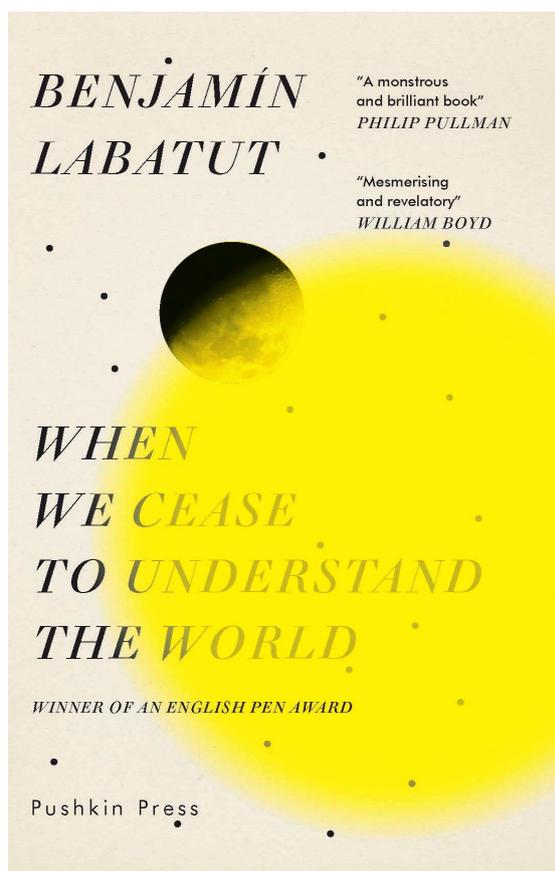




From Judging Room to Living Room A Discussion Guide for Readers



When We Cease to Understand the World

Benjamín Labatut

Translated from Spanish by Adrian Nathan West

Pushkin Press

thebookerprizes.com

What the judges decided

'A Sebaldian book of grippingly narrated stories on science and scientists that cumulatively become a meditation on the history of human destruction. "How did we get here?" it asks, and answers in utterly original and unexpected ways.'

What the judges discussed: ideas to explore

- The author has said this is a book 'that uses science as an excuse to speak about those aspects of the human experience that neither words nor equations can tame.' He pays special attention to the science, but he also uses it as a metaphor. For what?
- One judge described the book as 'the history of failure masquerading as progress'. What do you think she meant by that?
- Do you need to understand quantum mechanics to appreciate this book?
- The judges said that the author writes very beautifully about how language and mathematics both explain the world. How does he achieve that?

About the book

Using extraordinary, epoch-defining moments from the history of science, *When We Cease to Understand the World* exists in the territory between fact and fiction, progress and destruction, genius and madness.

Albert Einstein opens a letter sent to him from the Eastern Front during the first world war. Inside, he finds the first exact solution to the equations of general relativity, unaware that it contains a monster that could destroy his life's work. The great mathematician Alexander Grothendieck tunnels so deeply into abstraction that he tries to cut all ties with the world, terrified of the horror his discoveries might cause. Erwin Schrödinger and Werner Heisenberg battle over the soul of physics after creating two equivalent yet opposed versions of quantum mechanics. Their fight will tear the very fabric of reality, revealing a world stranger than they could have ever imagined.

About the author and translator

Benjamín Labatut was born in September 1980 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and grew up in The Hague, Buenos Aires and Lima. He published two award-winning works of fiction prior to *When We Cease to Understand the World*, which is his first book to be translated into English. Labatut lives with his family in Santiago, Chile. His books in Spanish include *La Antártica empieza aquí* and *Después de la luz*.

Adrian Nathan West was born in April 1977 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA. He is the author of *The Aesthetics of Degradation* and the forthcoming *Philosophy of a Visit* and translator of more than 20 books from Spanish, Catalan, and German. His essays have appeared in *The Baffler*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and many other journals in print and online. He lives in Spain.

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The author says...

'This is a book about the limits of science and the borders of thought, a strange book, neither a novel, nor a short story collection, nor an essay, that walks the thin line between fact and fiction, and that uses science as an excuse to speak about those aspects of the human experience that neither words nor equations can tame.'

'I was not merely interested in the outward development and impact of science, but on the personal cost of these strange epiphanies, and only fiction can delve into that particular void, the inside of the human mind. There is a lot of fiction in all the texts of the book, except the first, where there are only six lines. But it is a very specific type of fiction, one that tries to approach what non-fiction cannot achieve.'



The translator says...

'This book was an unusual one for me in that the translation was far more collaborative than any I had done before. I received the book in manuscript, long before it was published in Spanish, and once it was decided that the author and I were a good fit for each other, he and I went over many parts of the book in detail together before a final draft was produced. Benjamín in turn was deeply involved in the editing; his English is excellent, and he wanted the translation to have its own touch – to be, that is, its own book in English.'

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