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COMICS

Why Donald Duck Is the Jerry Lewis of Germany

The cartoon character turns philosophical in translation; quoting Goethe

By [SUSAN BERNOFSKY](#)

Germany, the land of Goethe, Thomas Mann and Beethoven, has an unlikely pop culture hero: Donald Duck. Just as the French are obsessed with Jerry Lewis, the Germans see a richness and complexity to the Disney comic that isn't always immediately evident to people in the cartoon duck's homeland.

Comics featuring Donald are available at most German newsstands and the national weekly "Micky Maus"—which features the titular mouse, Goofy and, most prominently, Donald Duck—sells an average of 250,000 copies each week, outselling even "Superman." A lavish 8,000-page German Donald Duck collector's edition has just come out, and despite the nearly \$1,900 price tag, the publisher, Egmont Horizont, says the edition of 3,333 copies is almost completely sold out. Last month the fan group D.O.N.A.L.D (the German acronym stands for "German Organization for Non-commercial Followers of Pure Donaldism"), hosted its 32nd annual congress at the Museum of Natural History in Stuttgart, with trivia and trinkets galore, along with lectures devoted to "nephew studies" and Duckburg's solar system.

"Donald is so popular because almost everyone can identify with him," says Christian Pfeiler, president of D.O.N.A.L.D. "He has strengths and weaknesses, he lacks polish but is also very cultured and well-read." But much of the appeal of the hapless, happy-go-lucky duck lies in the translations. Donald quotes from German literature, speaks in grammatically complex sentences and is prone to philosophical musings, while the stories often take a more political tone than their American counterparts.

Whereas in the U.S. fans of Donald Duck tend to gravitate to the animated films, duck fandom in Germany centers on the printed comics published in the kids' weekly "Micky Maus" and the monthly "Donald Duck Special" (with a print run of 40,000 copies), which sells mainly to adult readers.

Donald Duck didn't always find Germany so hospitable. In the years following World War II, American influence in the newly formed Federal Republic was strong, but German cultural institutions were hesitant to sanction one U.S. import: the comic book. A law banning comics was proposed, and some American comics were eventually burned by school officials worried about their effects on students' morals and ability to express themselves in complete sentences.

When the Ehapa publishing house was founded in 1951 to bring American comics to German kids, it was a risky endeavor. Ehapa's pilot project, a monthly comics magazine, bore the title "Micky Maus" to capitalize on that icon's popularity. From the beginning, though, most of the pages of "Micky Maus" were devoted to duck tales.

Donald Duck's popularity was helped along by Erika Fuchs, a free spirit in owl glasses who was tasked with translating the stories. A Ph.D. in art history, Dr. Fuchs had never laid eyes on a comic book before the day an editor handed her a Donald Duck story, but no matter. She had a knack for breathing life into the German version of Carl Barks's duck. Her talent was so great she continued to fill speech bubbles for the denizens of Duckburg (which she renamed Entenhausen, based on the German word for "duck") until shortly before her death in 2005 at the age of 98.

Ehapa directed Dr. Fuchs to crank up the erudition level of the comics she translated, a task she took seriously. Her interpretations of the comic books often quote (and misquote) from the great classics of German literature, sometimes even inserting political subtexts into the duck tales. Dr. Fuchs both thickens and deepens Mr. Barks's often sparse dialogues, and the hilariousness of the result may explain why Donald Duck remains the most popular children's comic in Germany to this day.

Dr. Fuchs's Donald was no ordinary comic creation. He was a bird of arts and letters, and many Germans credit him with having initiated them into the language of the literary classics. The German comics are peppered with fancy quotations. In one story Donald's nephews steal famous lines from Friedrich Schiller's play "William Tell"; Donald garbles a classic Schiller poem, "The Bell," in another. Other lines are straight out of Goethe, Hölderlin and even Wagner (whose words are put in the mouth of a singing cat). The great books later sounded like old friends when readers encountered them at school. As the German Donald points out, "Reading is educational! We learn so much from the works of our poets and thinkers."

Dr. Fuchs raised the diction level of Donald and his wealthy Uncle Scrooge (alias Dagobert Duck), who in German tend to speak in lofty tones using complex grammatical structures with a faintly archaic air, while Huey, Louie and Dewey (now called Tick, Trick and Track), sound slangier and much more youthful.

But even the "adult" ducks end up sounding more colorful than they do in English. Fuchs applied alliteration liberally, as, for example, in Donald's bored lament on the beach in "Lifeguard Daze." In the English comic, he says: "I'd do anything to break this monotony!" The über-gloomy German version: "How dull, dismal and deathly sad! I'd do anything to make something happen."

Dr. Fuchs had liberal social values from an early age and a circle of Jewish friends as a young woman. Disgusted by the hypocrisy and denial she saw in Germany during and after World War II, she sometimes imported her political sensibilities to Entenhausen.

Take, for example, the classic Duck tale "The Golden Helmet," a story about the search for a lost Viking helmet that entitles its wearer to claim ownership of America. In Dr. Fuchs's rendition, Donald, his nephews and a museum curator race against a sinister figure who claims the helmet as his birthright without any proof—but each person who comes into contact with the helmet gets a "cold glitter" in his eyes, infected by the "bacteria of power," and soon declares his intention to "seize power" and exert his "claim to rule." Dr. Fuchs uses language that in German ("die Macht ergreifen"; "Herrscheranspruch") strongly recalls standard phrases used to describe Hitler's ascent to power.

The original English says nothing about glittering eyes or power but merely notes, "As the minutes drag past, a change comes over the tired curator." Even the helmet itself, which in German Donald describes as a masterpiece of "Teutonic goldsmithery," is anything but nationalistic in English: "Boys, isn't this helmet a beauty?" is all he says. In an interview, Dr. Fuchs said she hoped that a child who "sees what power can do to people and how crazy it makes them" would be less susceptible to its siren song in later life.

Not all of Dr. Fuch's innovations went over well. In one translation that was censored, she filled the speech-bubbles of a man speaking broken English in the original with German dialect from Bohemia, a questionable choice given Germany's annexation of this region just before World War II. Another featured children dressed up in uniform, playing at World War I—obviously a taboo subject given the National Socialist militarization of German youth.

Donald Duck is still published in Germany by Ehapa and Egmont Horizont, subsidiaries of the Denmark-based media group Egmont, a longstanding licensee of Disney. Royalties are paid to Disney on each copy sold, but Ehapa retains artistic control over the translations. Jonathan Symington, vice president and general manager for global licensing at Disney Publishing, says that Disney "has an oversight role in making sure the content meets our brand equity guidelines but we do not approve every page of copy."

The initial response to the Donald Duck comics in Germany was mixed. German kids loved them; German parents worried that this "trash literature" would interfere with children's development. Of the 300,000 copies of the magazine Micky Maus printed in 1951, only 135,000 sold. But just six years later, the monthly journal had been replaced by a weekly, which by the late 1960s was appearing in an edition of 450,000 copies.

Not only young kids were reading it. Micky Maus became popular entertainment among a newly politicized generation who saw the comics as illustrations of the classic Marxist class struggle. A nationally distributed newsletter put out by left-leaning high school students in 1969 described Dagobert (Scrooge) as the “prototype of the monocapitalist,” Donald as a member of the proletariat, and Tick, Trick and Track as “socialist youth” well on their way to becoming “proper Communists.” Even Frankfurt School philosopher Max Horkheimer admitted to enjoying reading Donald Duck comics before bed.

Donald Duck has proved himself a classic, able to appeal both to German children as well as to older readers nostalgic for the comics of their youth. This duck may not be able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but when it comes to voicing the hidden and not-so-hidden truths and tastes of German society, the philosopher with a beak is hard to beat.

—Writer and literary translator Susan Bernofsky is at work on a critical biography of Robert Walser and a novel set in her hometown, New Orleans.

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