"My friend and blood-brother Winnetou, the great chief of the Apaches!"
The cowboy salutes him with a flow of the hand. Cavalry and Indians stop in their tracks, momentarily struck dumb, while I, along with eight thousand Germans rise to applaud the return of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, the two most famous Americans in all of Germany for the last hundred years. No, this isn't Arizona or the Black Hills of South Dakota. This is open-air theater under the stars in the north German town of Bad Segeberg. Every summer for the past forty years, 300,000 Germans come to renew acquaintance with their idols - Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

Never heard of them? Maybe that's because Winnetou and Old Shatterhand never really existed. They're purely imaginary, the creations of the fertile mind of Karl May, a nineteenth century Romantic writer who still arouses intense and contradictory emotions here in Germany. He's been called everything from Germany's greatest popular writer to a charlatan, trash artist and much worse:

"A thief, an impostor, a sexual pervert, a grotesque prophet of a sham Messiah!"..."The Third Reich is Karl May's ultimate triumph!" wrote Klaus Mann, son of the great novelist in 1940. To which no less a personage than one Albert Einstein replied: "...even today he has been dear to me in many a desperate hour." Herman Hesse called his books "indispensable and eternal" and the film director Carl Zuckmayer even christened his daughter Winnetou in honor of May's great Apache chief.

Yet, the English-speaking world is almost totally ignorant of May and his heroes Winnetou, Old Shatterhand or Kara Ben Nemsi, a German scholar, and his Arab friend Hadji Halef Omar who shared many an adventure in what is now called Kurdistan just over a hundred years ago. The reason is simple. Almost none of May's books have ever been translated into English.

But they've been translated into just about every other language, and at last count they had sold no less than one hundred million copies, second only to the Bible in German language sales!

But they're not just a pulp fiction publishing phenomenon. Karl May's books are one of the keys to opening a door into the German mind.

"If anybody is interested to study the German soul he must touch Karl May, Karl May's books and ideas," says Joachim Schmidt, owner of the Karl-May Publishing Company in the Bavarian city of Bamberg, probably the only successful example of a company that has prospered by publishing the works of just one author.

"This is like a fairy tale in the German mind...Karl May for them opened the world!"

As late as the 1960s, new arrivals at US military bases in Germany were given May's novels to read as part of their
basic introduction to Germany. I personally find May's books an indispensable key to understanding what makes Germans tick, to getting a handle on that elusive element of the German soul called Romanticism. But that's only one side of the coin. For Germans, even today, Karl May's Frontier novels remain perhaps the single most important source of images about America. When Germans think about America they don't think of Lincoln or skyscrapers or supermarkets or the Dallas Cowboys. They think of the Far West. When they first travel to the US as tourists, where do they invariably head? Not to New York or Disney World. They rent a Winnebago in Utah or Oakland and head for the Rockies because that's the image of America they've grown up with.

[...]

Now dissolve, as they say in the movies, in time and place to a grassy meadow in the little village of Hunsdorf, on the banks of the Rhine near Koblenz. The season: late Spring. The Time: the present. The Occasion: the annual meeting of the German Western Clubs. The Reason: my assumption that anybody who'd spend their free time dressing up as a Red Indian or a cowboy must also be deeply under the spell of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

Western clubs are something as uniquely German as Karl May, although you find them also in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. They're basically clubs where grown ups meet on weekends and vacation to live as Indians, Trappers, ordinary cowboys, cavalry officers or whatever. It's not play-acting, unlike the groups who reenact battles form the wars of the Roses on muddy English fields in armor and jerkins.

These people are in fact incredibly knowledgeable. One Lakota Sioux Medicine Man - Archie Lame Deer - once told me back on Pine Ridge Reservation that if you want to find authentic Indian dances, customs, artifacts, don't look to the reservations in South Dakota or Nebraska. Go spend a weekend at an Indian club in Belgium or Germany. Archie Lame Deer said if the Lakota wanted to rediscover their culture they'd probably have to come to Europe, where it was all being written down and preserved before it was too late.

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