

## What Makes Heinrich Hoffmann Stories Classic?

by Amy Koerner -

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- What Makes Heinrich Hoffmann Stories Classic?

*This article by Guest Blogger Amy Koerner is all about what we writers can learn from Heinrich Hoffmann, who wrote many successful classic tales, including **Struwwelpeter**.*

### **The publishing industry – a fickle beast**

The publishing industry is a fickle beast – a genre that tops the charts one season could be old news the next. A book or author surrounded by hype one year might be forgotten the next. Yet occasionally a book is published that is so successful, and appeals to such a wide audience, that it quickly earns its place on the ‘classics’ list.

As writers with dreams of one day ending up on that list ourselves, surely there must be some merit in taking a closer look at some of these highly successful, often very influential books, and considering what we could learn from them? What is it that makes them so successful, and is there anything in them that we can directly apply to our own writing?

### ***Struwwelpeter* – a German classic by Heinrich Hoffmann**

To prove that a true masterpiece can stand the test of time, I am going to take a closer look at what was

possibly the most influential German children's book of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – *Struwwelpeter*, or *Shockheaded Peter*, by Heinrich Hoffmann, a book that remains popular today.

Heinrich Hoffmann, born in Frankfurt in 1809, was first and foremost a psychiatrist. One Christmas, he wanted to give his three-year-old son a picture book. Disappointed at the choice of books available, he decided to write his own. Strongly of the opinion that small children learn largely through visuals, Hoffmann bought a notebook and set to work both illustrating and writing his book – a series of illustrated children's verses.

Hoffmann finished his book in time to give it to his son on the 24<sup>th</sup> December 1844. The book was first published under the title, **Merry Stories and Funny Pictures**, later changed to **Shockheaded Peter**, and was a huge success.

### **Dark Humor**

The verses that Hoffmann wrote and illustrated in this book are all about children who do things they shouldn't, and the very extreme and darkly comical repercussions of those actions. One such verse is entitled, *The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches*.

When Pauline's mother and nurse go out one day, she decides to play with a lighter. Her two cats warn her not to, but she goes ahead and strikes the match. But a few lines later, the reader learns that she has accidentally set her apron-string, and then herself, on fire. She burns to death and is mourned by her two cats, who cry so much they make a pond of tears.

As the title suggests, this is anything but a light-hearted story. In fact, by modern-day standards it would be considered by many to be quite inappropriate for such a young audience, so ghastly is the ending.

Yet the collection was highly successful when it was first published in 1844, and is well-known to this day, more so in Germany than abroad. That said, the 1998 musical adaptation debuted in England and there have since been productions all around the world. The stories have been translated into many languages, and numerous spin-offs have been written.

### **So why is it so successful and what can we learn?**

#### **Lesson 1: Write a book *you* want to read**

As I said, Hoffmann wrote the verses primarily because the book he wanted to give to his son didn't exist. He knew what he wanted from a picture book, and he knew what he wanted to read to his son – and that's what he wrote. This echoes some advice I heard at the London Book Fair this year – write a book that you want to read, because if *you* don't want to read it, nor will anybody else!

#### **Lesson 2: Don't get didactic**

The second thing we can learn from Hoffmann is to avoid making our stories didactic. It's tempting to fall into the trap of wanting to impart advice to our readers, but children want first and foremost to read an entertaining story. Although Hoffmann's verses are all basically lessons in good behaviour and

morals, he doesn't tell children what they should or shouldn't do, doesn't lecture them – instead he creates farcical, over-the-top stories that encase the lessons, without teaching them.

Let's look at another of the stories, *The Story of Augustus who would not have any Soup*. Plump and healthy Augustus is a good child – he eats and drinks as he is supposed to, and never lets his soup go cold. One day, though, he rebels, and doesn't eat. Over the next four days, Augustus continues to refuse to eat his soup and he slowly fades away. By day five, he's dead. Hoffmann doesn't lecture his audience about the risks of not eating.

Hoffmann creates a gruesome but funny story and allows children to formulate the conclusion – that you have to eat your dinner – themselves. So whilst by modern standards Hoffmann's verses do seem moralistic, as both author and illustrator, he was actively trying to avoid lecturing his young readers. He puts the story first and the lesson second, an approach that was quite unique at the time.

### Lesson 3: Use humour

This leads me on to the next thing worth noting about Hoffmann's writing – his use of humour. Let's look at another story, *The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb*. This is a story about a little boy whose mother tells him not to suck his thumb or the tailor will come with his big scissors and cut off his thumbs. When the mother goes out, the boy sucks his thumb and, sure enough, the tailor arrives and cuts off both his thumbs.

Whilst not laugh-out-loud funny by modern standards, when compared to other children's books of the day, which were largely filled with dry lines of informative text, it's positively hilarious. Hoffmann understood that children are engaged by humour, something modern children's authors such as [David Walliams](#) and [Jeff Kinney](#) are just as aware of, as we should be too.

### Lesson 4: Tell relevant, timeless stories

The stories that Hoffmann wrote all centred on topics relevant to children – not sucking your thumb, eating your dinner, not playing with matches or, in the story of the book's namesake, personal hygiene. Shockheaded Peter is a slovenly boy, who neither brushes his hair, washes his face nor allows his nails to be cut.

There's little to the actual story, other than that – but this character, with a crazy mop of hair and long, spindly fingernails, is probably terrifying enough to convince any child that it's not a bad idea to put a brush to their hair or have their nails trimmed every once in a while. Hoffmann tells stories of things that happen in a child's day-to-day life, with themes that are as relevant today as they were in 1844. Is the story you're currently working on timeless?

### Lesson 5: Consider the balance of word and picture

There is also a lesson to be learned from the organic interaction of picture and text that Hoffmann creates. Simple, rhyming language is accompanied by colourful, funny pictures, with one complementing the other. Without the text, the illustrations lack story and plot, and without the illustrations the text is

significantly less entertaining. Getting this balance right is just as important for the modern-day picture book author as it was for Hoffmann.

### **Lesson 6: Think outside the box**

Finally, Hoffmann teaches us not to be afraid of doing something new. Despite their continued popularity, Hoffmann's verses have also received their fair share of critique over the years – but since he is now considered one of the most influential German children's writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I'd say that the risk he took in creating an entirely new kind of children's book most certainly paid off.

### **Being Outside the Box**

So there you have it: six things we can learn from a book published in 1844. And whilst I'm sure that very few parents today would be willing to read their three-year-old a story about a child who has his thumbs chopped off, in an industry that changes faster than Struwwelpeter's nails grow, there's something very satisfying about being able to pick up a book published in 1844 and find that it can help you on your writing journey in 2017.

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