

# My, oh, May

## The tall tales of Germany's legendary 'Westerner'

By Kirk Ellis

You've read or seen it a hundred times, but never like this:

A buckskinned adventurer and his brave companions have trespassed onto Apache land and are now imprisoned in the tribe's pueblo. To win their freedom, our hero must contend to the death with an implacable Apache chief. The contest: a canoe race to a totem pole planted on a Pecos River outcropping, with tomahawks flying all around.

Wait. An Apache pueblo? Tomahawks? Totem poles on the Pecos River?

Welcome to the world of Karl May.

Perhaps the most famous author unknown to American readers, May (pronounced "my") defined the West for generations of German-speaking readers. A century after his death in 1912, his idiosyncratic take on frontier America continues to exert a profound fascination. May's books have sold more than 200 million copies, spawned a successful series of 1960s action films and been translated into more than 40 languages, including Esperanto.

Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour and Larry McMurtry appear mere pikers by comparison.

A yearly festival in Bad Segeberg, Germany, dedicated to staged performances of May's stories, draws more than 300,000 devotees annually, and his family villa in Radebeul ranks as a pilgrimage site on par with Graceland. In Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein, thousands of May-inspired Germans gather at pow-wows dressed as Comanches and Apaches; in former Iron Curtain days, Trabants parked

next to teepees were a familiar site.

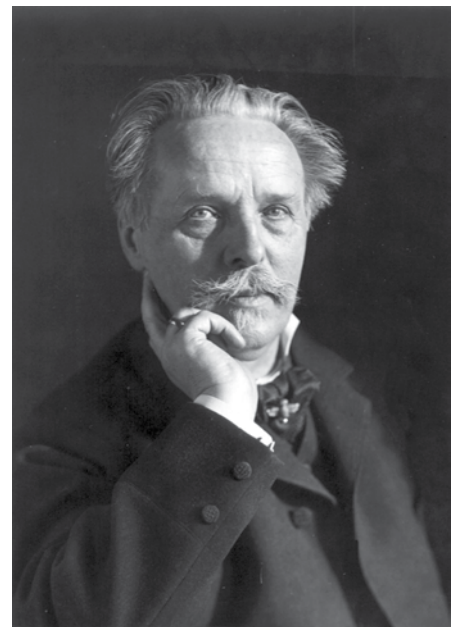
May's books are still mandatory reading for State Department personnel in Germany and have launched countless Europeans on their own American odyssey.

"Karl May wrote my favorite stories," Austrian-born Arnold Schwarzenegger recently told the *New York Times Book Review*. "They opened up my world and gave me a window to see America." No less a fan than Albert Einstein wrote of May, "My whole adolescence stood under his sign. Indeed, even today, he has been dear to me in many a desperate hour."



Karl May as Old Shatterhand, circa 1880.  
Courtesy of Karl May Museum, Radebeul, Germany.

Though he authored more than 100 books set in every corner of the globe, May is best remembered for a series of stories involving the Apache chief Winnetou and his German "blood brother,"



Karl May in 1906. Courtesy of Karl May Museum, Radebeul, Germany.

Old Shatterhand (so named for his lethal fists). Fanciful adventure stories infused with a strong dose of Victorian Teutonic morality, they combine vivid action with a heartfelt plea for tolerance and racial understanding.

In later years, May would claim that his Western stories were in fact autobiographical – that he was, in effect, Old Shatterhand. May would also claim that he sat out the Franco-Prussian War in America on research; that he spoke several Native American dialects; that he had defended Winnetou's grave against marauding Sioux and brought back the warrior's prized rifle, *Silberbüchse*. He even commissioned a studio portrait of himself clad in the best Buffalo Bill finery and leaning on the long-barreled, mother-of-pearl-studded weapon.

There was only one problem with such claims: None was true. May did venture to America, but only four years before his death – and he never made it past Buffalo, New York. He spoke no English, let alone Apache. And as to the rifle, well, *Silberbüchse* turned out to be nothing more than a manufactured prop lacking even a firing bolt.

*Silberbüchse*, Winnetou's name for his rifle, appears at the New Mexico History Museum for the exhibit Tall Tales of the Wild West: The Stories of Karl May, marking the first time it had been seen in the land where it was purportedly made. It was actually a nonfunctioning prop manufactured in Germany.





A sampling of Karl May's novels. New Mexico History Museum

The real Karl May (details of his early life differ) was born on February 25, 1842, the fifth of seven (some sources say 14) children. His father was a weaver, his mother a midwife. Trained as a teacher, his career took an unexpected detour after a series of petty larcenies – theft, insurance fraud, impersonation of various public figures – landed him with multiple prison stretches. Left with plenty of time to read and contemplate, May did what so many liars and con men before and since have done.

He became a writer.

Over time, May would amass a considerable research library, encompassing texts by Alexander von Humboldt, George Catlin and other early chroniclers of the American West. Undoubtedly, he was familiar with the works of James Fenimore Cooper, whose “Leatherstocking Tales” had been translated (badly) into German. May’s own writing bears a more than glancing resemblance to Cooper’s, with a shared taste for long-winded description, tortuous plots and bizarre inventions. (Recall Uncas’s escape from a hostile Huron village disguised as a bear in *Last of the Mohicans*.)

Old Shatterhand, May’s alter-ego, explodes onto the scene in the first *Winnetou* novel, written in 1893, as a wide-eyed, enthusiastic young *Übermensch*, well-versed in the lore and liveliness of the West before he takes ship on his epic adventure. He even comes equipped with a Code of Conduct that Gene Autry might recognize:

*“Fear God, but fear no man. Never lie, sneak or truckle for favor. Never betray a trust. Never be cruel to man or beast. Never*

*inflict pain deliberately, but never be afraid to mete it out if you must. Be kind, be honest, be daring. Be a man, and you will be a gentleman.”*

In the span of a few chapters, Old Shatterhand – whose actual age one guesses to be around 20 – has demonstrated his proficiency in buffalo hunting, bear fighting and bareback riding. If anything, this “Siegfried of the Sagebrush” (to use Western film scholar Christopher Frayling’s evocative phrase) proves to be more adept than the grizzled frontiersmen he encounters on his sojourn.

And then he meets the Indians.

“He immediately impressed me as being endowed with an exceptional mind, and an exceptional character,” reflects Old Shatterhand on his first encounter with *Winnetou*. “His eyes shone with a dull fire, and I thought I could detect in them the faint light of sympathy.” Subjected to a series of trials (including that fateful canoe race), Old Shatterhand earns the respect of *Winnetou* and his father, *Intschutschuna*, and the love of *Winnetou*’s sister, *Nscho-tschi*.

May brings his own eccentric imagination to the strain of Cooper-esque “noble savagery” that runs through his Indian idylls. In the original German text, both *Winnetou* and *Intschutschuna* speak in High German; their speeches often end in the phrase “*Howgh! Ich habe gesprochen.*” (“Howgh,” May helpfully informs his readers, “is an Indian expression which reinforces the sense of a phrase, more or less the equivalent of ‘amen.’”)

There’s also the matter of location. While May found himself drawn to the

Mescalero Apache, he knew German readers would not cotton to the notion of a noble nomadic tribe, nomads in the German imagination being associated with gypsies and thieves. Instead, he placed the tribe in a sedentary pueblo, which he then positioned on the Pecos River just south of what is modern-day Roswell – a landscape that defies geographic logic, let alone ethnographic reality.

None of this is to detract from the underlying humanism of the *Winnetou* novels. The bond that develops between Old Shatterhand and his Apache blood brother speaks to the author’s advocacy for friendship across racial barriers and peaceful conflict resolution. Throughout the series, Old Shatterhand and *Winnetou* ally themselves against encroachment by white settlers; Mormons and Yankee speculators are favorite villains.

“Did not all the land belong to the red man?” *Intschutschuna* asks a railroad boss in the first *Winnetou* novel. “It has been taken from us, and what have we instead? Misery, misery, misery ... Have we not the same rights you have over your house and garden? We wish your laws be fulfilled toward us.” At another point, the elder reminds Old Shatterhand, “No nation should think itself better than another because it is not of the same color.”

That such sentiments could be voiced by a German author writing in his rarefied library less than three years after the massacre of encamped Lakota families by U.S. cavalry at Wounded Knee is little short of extraordinary, and explains the lasting appeal of May’s work. Said Schwarzenegger: “The stories taught me a powerful lesson about getting along despite differences.”

(Another Austrian reader took away a very different lesson. Adolf Hitler so admired Old Shatterhand’s Aryan purity that he is alleged to have dispatched copies of the *Winnetou* novels to members of his general staff in the wake of the Stalingrad disaster to boost morale; the Führer cited *Winnetou* as an example of “tactical finesse and circumspection.”)

So why haven't more Americans heard of Karl May?

"A German or European audience had to live the exotic, adventurous West vicariously," explains archivist and librarian Tomas Jaehn of the New Mexico History Museum, curator of the exhibit *Tall Tales of the West: The Stories of Karl May*.

"An American audience had the opportunity to visit the West in person. Authors like Zane Grey and Owen Wister knew the region first-hand and lived through some of the real history."

Until recently, only one of May's books was readily available in English. *Winnetou: The Apache Knight* is a bowdlerized version of the first *Winnetou* novel, edited to emphasize action over philosophy. A new company, Nems Publishing, has lately released full translations of the entire four-volume series. Managing director Michael Michalak describes the company's mission "to create an awareness of this great author and his deeper message – a message that has so often been ignored by past translators."

May did manage to become something of a posthumous international sensation with the 1962 release of *The Treasure of Silver Lake*, the first in a long-running series of films based on his Western adventures. Starring Lex Barker as Old Shatterhand (later Stewart Granger and Rod Cameron as his counterparts), and French actor Pierre Brice as *Winnetou*, the movies form an uneasy bridge between the romantic Westerns of Golden Era Hollywood and the cynical Italian Spaghetti Westerns to follow.

The *Winnetou* films bear the same relation to May's original stories as the stories themselves do to history. Still, much of May's sensibility survives in the gorgeous widescreen cinematography, elaborate (if less than authentic) production design and costumes, and frequent James Bond-like action. Croatia doubles for the American Southwest – a touch May himself might have appreciated. The series doesn't make for great cinema, but at their best the pictures possess a loopy charm that can be quite infectious.



*Winnetou* (Pierre Brice) leads his Apaches in canoes – yes, canoes – in the European film version of *Winnetou*, released in America as *Apache Gold* in 1965.



Stewart Granger took over the role as Old Shatterhand in the *Winnetou* series in films such as *Rampage at Apache Wells* (1966).

Thanks in part to a resurgence of interest in the films, all of which are available for viewing on YouTube, May's legacy continues to resonate among a younger generation, even if they haven't read the books. "When I was in Germany last November," Jaehn recalls, "I picked up three different newspapers/magazines, and all of them had a reference to *Winnetou*. The West is as popular as ever in Europe – even if Harleys have replaced horses."

All credit, then, to a man few Americans have ever heard of who might

have done more than any other author to keep the Spirit of the West alive worldwide – for more than a century now and counting. May's "stories immediately captured my attention and made me interested to learn everything I could about America," enthused Schwarzenegger. "I still don't understand how Karl May was able to paint such an incredible picture of something he had never seen."

It's called using your imagination. And Karl May had imagination to spare.

### If you're in Santa Fe ...

*Tall Tales of the Wild West: The Stories of Karl May* continues at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe through February 9, 2014.

Upcoming events include "Karl May in America – Enthusiasm or Disappointment?" by Peter Karl Pabisch, professor emeritus of German studies at the University of New Mexico, at 6 p.m. April 12; and "Karl May's *Winnetou*: Imagining the Noble Savage in 19th- and 20th-Century Germany," by Michael Wala, professor of North American history at University of Bochum, Germany, at 6 p.m. June 14.

For more information, log on to [www.nmhistorymuseum.org](http://www.nmhistorymuseum.org).

### Writers on May

"The problem is that Karl May is known by every German, but I personally never liked his books. Too much romantic heroes, too much historical mistakes – just nothing that I would consider as a good historical or classic Western. Nothing else but fairy tales."

– Alfred Wallon  
WWA member, Germany

"... Karl May probably did more to promote the splendor and excitement of the West to non-Americans than anyone except Buffalo Bill Cody .... May had a fair grasp of Western geography, except in one respect. In addition to familiar settings of mountains and deserts, he repeatedly used 'an impenetrable cactus forest' – exact location unspecified."

– John Jakes

2007 Owen Wister Award recipient, who dedicated his Wrangler Award-winning short story "Manitow and Ironhand" "to the memory of Karl May"

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