

Beyond U.S. Borders: A Look into the German Romance Market & Culture

With Kris Alice Hohls & Tina Dick

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As Romance book industry professionals it is our responsibility to be aware of what happens to books, in print and digital format, beyond U.S. borders. There are numerous factors affecting how they are being sold to consumers, where they're distributed, and the way they're priced. Each country mandates their own rules and regulations within the book market, and the impact, for better or worse, shapes the reader culture.

Before we dig into this topic, allow me to say, we have it pretty good here in America; as readers, authors, and publishers. I have a greater appreciation for the free market business model in place, and suspect you will, too.

We're going to take a jaunt across The Pond, and make our way into the stoic country of Germany, known for its dramatic castles and apple strudel. *LoveLetter* magazine's founder, Kris Alice Hohls, and her editor in chief, Tina Dick, give us a locals-only tour of the current book culture and readership, German Romance Market, and publishing landscape. Prepare yourself for a real eye-opener.

The German Book Culture

According to Wikipedia, culture encompasses the range of human phenomena that cannot be attributed to genetic inheritance; it's the distinct way that people living in different parts of the world classify and represent their experiences, and act creatively.

Ahhh. Act creatively. Let's hone in, investigate what this means relative to German romance readers.

When I asked Hohls to describe the mentality towards reading, she said, "We're a book loving and buying nation. Always have been. With a rich literary heritage. After all it was Johannes Gutenberg who invented printing in Germany around 1439."

Yes, it's fair to assume that reading is a favorite German pastime, and has been for centuries. Dick states, "We do like to present ourselves as an intellectual people, but as everywhere else the number of passionate readers is dwindling."

I wonder – is it the distractions of technology, the constant bombardment to our senses, or the demands of survival, that contributes to the number of passionate readers' decline?

Or maybe, just maybe, passionate readers remain as passionate as ever, yet, are so taxed by daily pressures, they don't indulge in the pleasure of reading, regardless of location.

Why don't we change this; agree that the more expended we are, the more we *need* to read, to escape and drift into the lives of the characters authors so richly bring to life. Reading is a meditation; a "creative act" that enhances the joy of every culture.

Culture's Influence on Genre Trends

A country's culture and the genres the readers desire go hand in hand. Germany is no exception. Hohls delves further: "Unlike in America, where maybe country music, or NASCAR racing have made their way into romance novels, in Germany, there is no similar phenomenon. Something that German publishers hope will make an impact is the just recently introduced subgenre of "regional chick lit" (stories set in various distinctive regions like the Bavarian Alps).

Germans are known to be one of the most well-travelled people in the world. That might be one of the reasons why exotic settings are very popular. Scotland and Italy are definitely settings German readers crave more than say the US or Germany, as they are less available in books.

Apart from some subgenres (western, patriotic books, etc.) editors tend to look to the U.S. market for new trends. Not all of them work in Germany."

Which makes complete sense. We're two distinct nations, with independent likes and dislikes. Some of the trends that didn't fare well include urban fantasy, science fiction romance titles, and cozy mysteries. Dick adds, "Once it would take years for trends to make it to Germany, and now in some instances, it can be done in months, like *50 Shades of Grey*."

The (Maddening?) German Romance Market

There is a disparate modus operani when comparing the German and U.S. Romance Marketplace, at the expense, literally, of German readers. They're feeling discouraged, and rightly so. Hohls and Dick explain.

"For German readers there is nothing more frustrating than not being able to buy the same books and digital book formats that are available to American readers (due to geographic restriction), or being excluded from contests only open to U.S. readers, or to be denied the special offers (free or lower priced books) on local platforms such as [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). When it comes to romance readers, we are already a global village and share our love for the genre openly and without borders."

Whoa. No discounts or specials on books? No contest eligibility? Geographic restriction? This doesn't seem fair nor right.

What is Geographic Restriction?

I'd not heard of this until Hohls and Dick mentioned it when we discussed what they're up against. Here's what I learned. "When a U.S. publisher only buys the North American English publishing rights, and not the World English publishing rights, the book will only be available to readers living in North America. Readers in the U.K. or elsewhere in the world wanting to purchase the eBook won't be allowed to do so due to where they are based (their address).

One recent example was Kristen Ashley's *Own the Wind*. When Grand Central published the digital format in the U.S. on April 2nd we couldn't buy it, as the author kept the right to self-publish the eBook outside North America and hadn't made it available at the same time. Sometime during the last four weeks she released her copy and now it's also available on German platforms. We were lucky. Very often though the World English rights don't sell (the author can't find a U.K. or Australian publisher) and we have to either wait for the print version or our next U.S. trip."

Thankfully, Amazon.com allows one to change their home address to their hotel address while on vacation in the US, giving someone the chance to buy eBooks otherwise denied to readers outside North America. *Danke, Amazon!*

Fixed Book Pricing in Germany

Back to the no discounts conversation. Germany has a fixed book price law (yes, an actual law!) for German language books. This means that each book is individually priced at a determined rate and may not be sold for any other amount -- it's illegal. Hohls continues, "This allows for all books to be treated equally, and of course, for small booksellers to be able to compete with the chains."

Can you imagine the uproar American readers would have if we didn't get our deals? We'd feel cheated, ripped-off, and reading would become a luxury. Retail prices can be steep, and "passionate readers" would be forced to think twice before loading their cart with books and paying full price. We certainly have many perks as American book buyers.

Dick said German readers are used to the prices. What people have problems understanding is, why eBooks are not (or only slightly) cheaper? I don't get this one either.

I'll do a cost analysis, based on actual data, to capture the reality of which I speak. In April, Nora Roberts' (also one of Germany's favorite authors) released *Whiskey Beach*. Using the present exchange rate of €1.00 Euro = approximately \$1.303 dollars, the below table illustrates how much it would cost Americans to purchase *this one item in dollars*, and German readers *in Euros*, in hardback and e-book formats and the percentage of savings those in the U.S. realize.

Book	Germany			United States – Amazon.com				United States - Barnes & Noble.com			
	Euros	Dollars	Conversion Rate	Euros	Dollars	Conversion Rate	Savings	Euros	Dollars	Conversion Rate	Savings
Whiskey Beach – Hardback	€19.40	\$25.28	1.303	€11.89	\$15.49	1.303	38.72%	€12.26	\$15.98	1.303	36.78%
Kindle / Nook	€11.99	\$15.62	1.303	€9.97	\$12.99	1.303	16.85%	€11.50	\$14.99	1.303	4.05%

Look at our percentage of savings. On average, U.S. consumers are paying 36% less on hardback books, and up to 17% less on e-books, depending on where we buy. How lovely that we have the option to support the booksellers who seek our dollar-spend with their “specials”, ...and how not so lovely for the German reader, who doesn't have the same benefit.

At present, the German VAT (value added tax) of 7% is included in the cost. Recent reports claim this standard tax could rise to a whopping 19% after the September 2013 elections. Not a pleasant thought.

But German readers are resourceful. On non-geographically restricted books, they can (and do!) purchase U.S. print editions inexpensively (due to a good exchange rate - but without sales promotions) through online book sellers.

For many, it's more affordable to read books in English than in German. For a U.S. paperback release they often only pay half of what the German translation of the same book would cost.

To make it even more complicated: A Nora Roberts book might be released in hardcover in the U.S., but as a paperback in Germany, making it then more cost effective to wait for the German translation.

Hohls educated me on the popularity of hardback vs. digital books. “We are still behind the US market, but it is a growing segment. With the fixed book price law and most eBooks only - if at all - minutely cheaper than the print equivalents, there is no big incentive in switching formats. The average reader still prefers print books especially mass market (not as pricey).”

Are we feeling the German reader's pain yet? I sure am.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm all for the success of the mom and pop stores, and online booksellers, and I'm not saying this fixed book law didn't originate from a source of good intention. I just have to think that maybe the expense of one book, with the possibility of a 19% VAT, multiplied by a handful of books purchased each year, without discounts, could be a (financial) deterrent for German readers, and another factor to what appears to be the decline of “passionate readers”.

Where do German Readers Buy Books?

Another trial German readers experience is that category romance titles are not available in bookstores and can only be purchased from newsagents, at train station bookshops, some supermarkets and directly from the publisher's website.

So how do the majority of readers get their paws on a book? Dick said that, "Although nearly 50% of books are still purchased in actual bookstores, most of them don't carry a lot of romance novels" and people have to search elsewhere.

Hence, readers seeking their fix must venture to newsagents, and bookstores in train stations and airports, that are more likely to have mass market paperbacks on their shelves. Approximately 15% of sales are done via online bookstores.

The Publishing Landscape in Germany

We've been focusing a lot on German readers. But they're not the only ones facing challenges in the market. Due to copyright law, German authors are prohibited to use titles of books that are still in print/are protected, and can't be used without an agreement with the original publisher.

We have a plethora of novels with the same title in the United States, as copyright law does not protect titles.

On the flip side, Hohls was pleased to share: "The big German publishers usually pay decent/good advances for translation rights and are reliable contractual partners, meaning they really pay the royalties – and in due time."

This is great news. We have the utmost respect for professionalism and dependability.

Book Releases and their Translation from English to German

Very rarely, and only if the manuscript is available for translation well in advance, will publishers release a new book on the same day in Germany, as it is released in the U.S. "Sometimes," Hohls said, "Publishers feel pressured to release the translations of highly anticipated books (new releases from bestselling authors) close to – or even before – the U.S. release, so that readers don't resort to the original English versions because they don't want to wait [for the German translation]."

How quickly do books get translated? Dick gives us some insight. "It depends on how urgent it is. With very popular authors and series, publishers try to have the books translated as quickly as possible (good examples are Lara Adrian, Nalini Singh, Diana Gabaldon, and recently EL James and Sylvia Day). It also depends on the length, and of course, the genre.

And not every book that German readers would like to read is translated, as the costs are high. Readers in Germany get irritated, or even angry, when publishers drop a series because the sales weren't strong enough. Or when publishers don't pick up certain books or series. Although Germans have mandatory English classes in school, not everybody feels confident enough to read their books in English, but for some this is a reason to switch from translations to the original versions."

Romance Learning Opportunities & Industry Publications in Germany

We're fortunate enough to have the RWA as a professional resource, rich with learning opportunities and networking platforms, here in The States. It's only recently that courses have started popping up in Germany. Hohls informed, "One publisher just founded an academy (Bastei Lübbe), the classes are very expensive though. We don't have an organization for aspiring authors. The organization of German language romance authors (DeLiA) only accepts members who are already published and is very small (approx. 100 members)."

There are romance conventions and conferences held in Germany, and one of those is Hohls' very own LoveLetter Convention in Berlin, Germany. www.loveletterconvention.com

Who attends? "We have visitors not only from German speaking countries but from all over Europe. European readers hardly ever get a chance to meet their favorite romance authors anywhere else. Listening to the authors attending last year's convention, they all say that our readers made them feel very special, welcome and loved.

With the Frankfurt Bookfair being the biggest fair for books and rights taking place in Germany, we are very well connected. However, bringing over authors from overseas for book tours is expensive."

Another way professionals may connect and communicate is through publications. Back in 2005, Hohls knew about romance magazines like *Romantic Times* and industry magazines like the *Romance Writers Report*. She looked for a similar publication in Germany, and couldn't find any. Knowing that there was a large romance readership in Germany she decided to start her own, and *LoveLetter* magazine was born.

Hohls didn't think it would last more than two issues, but then with the help of two volunteers, Dick being one of those (and later more), and the growing interest of readers and publishing professionals, it evolved from a small fanzine into a monthly full-color print magazine available in stores and through subscription.

LoveLetter is the first - and still only - print romance magazine in German offering interviews with authors (German and foreign, mostly from the U.S.) and sometimes industry professionals (mostly editors), news, articles by authors, reviews of new releases, previews of upcoming releases, etc. "Our goal is to comprehensively inform readers - and authors, editors, and

publishers - about the romance market and have them fall in love with the genre – just like we have.”