



König, Ralf (b. 1960)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Ralf König is by far Germany's most successful comic strip artist. He has won renown both at home and abroad for the humorous appeal of his work. He is also one of the most recognized voices of his country's queer culture, having made gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes the most important component of his work.

In several series of strips and illustrated novels that have been widely translated and adapted into films, König humorously chronicles everyday gay experience in terms that a broad, largely heterosexual audience can easily understand and appreciate. He has become one of the best-selling authors in Germany.

Born in 1960 in a small town in Germany's northern Rhine region, König originally planned to become a carpenter as his father had demanded. Once awakened to his sexual identity, however, the adolescent Ralf abandoned his first year of carpentry school in favor of art school.

He relocated to Düsseldorf, a big city where he felt he could more easily be openly gay. There he entered the local art academy as a drawing student and soon began publishing the "Gay Comix" (*SchwulComix*), both individual comic strips and cartoons and comic stories, that made him famous. He also developed his signature style, the "potato noses" (*Knollenasen*) with which he endows his characters.

In 1987, one year after he finished his course of study, König published his first comic novel, *Der bewegte Mann* (*The Changed Man*), based on his strip of the same name. Rather surprisingly, the book became a best seller. *Der bewegte Mann* and its sequel, *Pretty Baby* (1988), tell the story of Norbert Brommert and his heterosexual friend Axel.

Perhaps because straight readers recognized themselves in these characters, the movie made from the *Changed Man* strip and novel, *Der bewegte Mann* (*Maybe . . . Maybe Not*, 1994), became one of the highest grossing comedies in the history of German film. A later film, *Kondom des Grauens* (*Killer Condoms*, 1996), based on two other comic novels, also became a successful film.

At a time when Germany's media either ignored gay men or depicted them as sexual predators, König's early work offered an unselfconscious voice for the country's disenfranchised gay men. But even at this early point in his career, König refused to sanitize gay life to appease homophobic German attitudes.

Instead, König's portrait of everyday gay life is remarkably sexual with frank, yet comic, stories about muscle boys, back rooms, leather men, outdoor sex, and the other tropes with which gay men had often been vilified. Although König's mass-market works feature less explicitly sexual scenes than those targeted to a primarily gay audience (and published by gay publishing houses), he never denies the sexuality of his characters.

Indeed, the artist exaggerates the distinguishing features of these men and their activities, representing them as participants in an unselfconscious theater purposefully drawn for comic effect. In König's humane

and humanizing narratives, anything can be shown or said, yet no one is condemned.

König's success has come not only from his representation of diverse gay lives but also from his depiction of the intersection of gay and straight worlds. In König's series, gay and straight men interact in interesting and often mutually beneficial ways, as in the relationship between Norbert and Axel in the *Changed Man* series. In this series, for example, Norbert teaches Axel to treat his girlfriend with greater respect even as the two men play a gentle sexual game with each other.

Throughout the 1980s, König capitalized on his increasing popularity to disseminate the message of safer sex. The frankness of his work combined with its humorous appeal to make his comics an ideal vehicle for conveying information about HIV to gay men, particularly at a time when prudish Germany otherwise ignored the AIDS epidemic.

The same sexual frankness that enabled this success, however, also created a widely publicized scandal when in 1992 the Bavarian government banned König's *Bullenklöten* (*Bull's Balls*) as pornography. The alliance of comics, normally associated with children, and gay culture had become too much for conservative Bavaria to tolerate.

Germany's supreme court eventually dismissed the charges against the artist and today König continues drawing "my characters with those big noses" that have made him so famous.

Bibliography

Bartholomae, Joachim, ed. *Mal mir mal nen Schwulen* [Paint Me Then One of Those Gays]. Hamburg: MännerschwarmSkript Verlag, 1996.

König, Ralf. *Der bewegte Mann*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1987.

_____. *Dicke Dödel 1: Bullenklöten!* Hamburg: MännerschwarmSkript Verlag, 1992.

_____. *Kondom des Grauens*. Berlin: Vogel Verlag, 1987.

_____. *SchwulComix I*. Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1981.

About the Author

Andres Mario Zervigon earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and now teaches at Rutgers University. He specializes in the art and design of Germany's Weimar period and in the painting of Britain's post-World War II era.