

Things We Think We Know

First impressions are usually wrong. Unfortunately, they often turn into stereotypes, which then turn into the truth.



WE ALL HATE STEREOTYPES. Stereotypes are killing us, and they are killing our children, and they are putting LSD into the water supply. Stereotypes are like rogue elephants with AIDS that have been set on fire by terrorists, except worse. We all hate stereotypes. Seriously. Dude, we fucking *hate* them.

Except that we don't. We adore stereotypes, and we desperately need them to fabricate who we are (or who we are not). People need to be able to say things like, "All stereotypes are based on ignorance," because expressing such a sentiment makes them enlightened, open-minded, and incredibly unpleasant. Meanwhile, their ad-

versaries need the ability to say things such as, "Like it or not, all stereotypes are ultimately based in some sort of reality," because that kind of semilogic can justify their feelings about virtually anything. Nobody really cares what specific stereotype they happen to be debating; what matters more is how that label was spawned, because that defines its consequence. It raises a fundamental query about the nature of existence: Is our anecdotal understanding of the world founded on naivete, or is it built on dark, unpopular truths? That is the question. And here (I suspect) is the answer: neither. Stereotypes are not really based on fact, and they are not really based on fiction. They are based on arbitrary human qualities *no one* cares about *at all*. Whenever a given stereotype seems right (or wrong), it's inevitably a coincidence; the world is a prejudiced place, but it's prejudiced for the weirdest, least-meaningful reasons imaginable.

Last November, I toured six German cities over a span of nine days. In my limited exposure to this nation, I was primarily struck by two points: a) the citizens of Germany are friendly and nervous, and b) the citizens of Germany perceive Americans to be obese, puritanical, nonsmoking retardards. Their opinion of the United States is mind-blowingly low, even when compared with how the U.S. is viewed by France.¹

¹ I think this is because the French are keenly aware that everyone on earth assumes they are inherently anti-American; as such, they overcompensate.

Now, I concede that *my* reason for viewing Germans as “friendly” is completely unsophisticated; I believe Germans are nice because they were nice to me, which is kind of like trying to be a meteorologist by looking out a window. But—at least from what I could gather—the reason German citizens assume Americans are barbaric and vapid is almost as unreasonable, even though they’re usually half right.

During a weekend in Frankfurt, I went to an exhibit at the Schirn Kunsthalle art museum called “I Like America.” This title (as one might expect) was meant to be ironic; it’s taken from a 1974 conceptual-

art piece called *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which German artist Joseph Beuys flew to New York and spent three days in a room with a live coyote and fifty copies of *The Wall Street Journal*. (This piece was a European response to the destruction of Native American culture, which made about as much sense to me as it did to the coyote.) The bulk of “I Like America” focused on German interest in nineteenth-century American culture, specifically the depictions of Buffalo Bill, cowboys, and the artistic portrayal of Indians as noble savages. It was (kind of) brilliant. But it was curious to read the descriptions of what these paintings and photographs were supposed to signify; almost all of them were alleged to illustrate some tragic flaw with American ideology. And it slowly dawned on me that the creators of “I Like America” had made one critical error: While they had not necessarily misunderstood the historical relationship between Americans and cowboy iconography, they totally misinterpreted its magnitude. With the possible exception of Jon Bon Jovi,² I can’t think of any modern American who gives a shit about cowboys, even metaphorically. Dramatic op-ed writers are wont to criticize war-hawk politicians by comparing them to John Wayne, but no one really believes that *Hondo* affects policy; it’s just a shorthand way to describe something we already understand. But European intellectuals use cowboy culture to understand American sociology, and that’s a specious relationship (even during moments when it almost makes sense). As it turns out, Germans care about cowboys way more than we do.

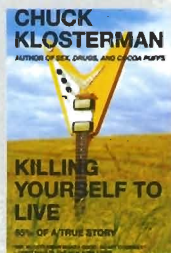
A sardonic German teenager told me what she thought the phrase “the American dream” meant: “I assume it means watching *Baywatch* twenty-four hours a day.” She was (sort of) joking, but I’ve heard similar sentiments in every foreign country I’ve visited. There is widespread belief that Americans spend most of their lives watching *Baywatch* and MTV. But what’s interesting about this girl’s insight was her reasoning: She thinks Americans

² Other possible exceptions: *Tesla* (who sang “*Modern Day Cowboy*”), *W.A.S.P.* (who sang “*Cocaine Cowboys*”), *Ratt* (who portrayed cowboys in the “*Wanted Man*” video), and *Mötley Crüe* (who recorded an unreleased track called “*Rodeo*” during the sessions for *Girls, Girls, Girls*). In 1985, cowboys used *Aqua Net*.

→ YOU CAN'T JUDGE A COUNTRY BY ITS BOOK COVERS. BUT LET'S TRY!

OUR COLUMNIST'S AVERSION to stereotypes is admirable, but sometimes we just can't help ourselves. We haven't read the translations of *Killing Yourself to Live: 85% of a True Story*, Klosterman's most recent book to be published in languages weird people speak, but we're happy to pass a little judgment on the covers.

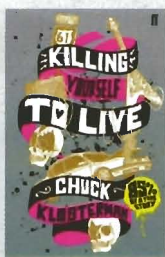
—DAVID WALTERS



AMERICAN The U.S. set the bar high. Guitar-as-grave-marker in an open field is gritty and intriguing. Add a reference to previous exemplary work from the author (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*) and a favorable quote from *The New York Times*, and it feels like a best-seller before the first word is read. U-S-A!



ITALIAN Kudos for sticking with the original art. The title translates to *The Day That Rock Died: Journey to the Places of the Great Tragedies of Music*. It's a little Don-McLean-meets-Lonely-Planet, but extra points for the Bret Easton Ellis blurb. Who knew he could write in Italian, too?



FRENCH Leave it to the French to screw everything up. Nothing says rock 'n' roll more than pink banners, splatter paint, and an overheating Ford Taurus. And what's up with the Kiss skulls? Paul Stanley is dead? Yeah, you wish. Learn how to read, Pierre.



GERMAN Stark, utilitarian. The dust-jacket equivalent of a square-jawed Prussian with a crew cut screaming at you. Art? Nein! Colors? *Nein und abermals nein!* The title, *An 85% True Story*, is a lot different from *85% of a True Story*, but we were too scared to bring it up—or to ask where the rest of the title went.

love *Baywatch* because Joey Tribbiani on *Friends* loved *Baywatch*. And this does not mean she viewed *Friends* as an accurate reflection of life, nor does it suggest that she saw Matt LeBlanc as a tragic spokesman for the American working class; this was just one random detail she remembered about an American TV show she barely watched. She didn't care about this detail, and neither do we.

As I rode the train from Munich to Dresden to Hamburg, I started jotting down anything I noticed that could prompt me to project larger truths about Germany. An abbreviated version is as follows:

1. The water here is less refreshing than American water.
2. Instead of laughing, people tend to say, "That is funny."
3. Most of the rural fields are plowed catanapus.

Stereotypes are not based on fact or on fiction. They are based on arbitrary human qualities *no one cares about at all.*

4. Late-night German TV broadcasts an inordinate amount of Caucasian boxing.
5. No matter how much they drink, nobody here acts drunk.
6. Germans remain fixated on the divide between "high culture" and "low culture," and the term "popular culture" is pejorative.
7. Heavy metal is still huge in this country. As proof, there's astonishingly high interest in the most recent Paul Stanley solo record.³
8. Prostitution is legal and prominent.⁴
9. When addressing customers, waiters and waitresses sometimes hold their hands behind their backs, military style.
10. It's normal to sit in the front seat of a taxi, even if you are the only passenger.

I SUPPOSE I COULD use these details to extrapolate various ideas about life in Germany. I suppose I could create alle-

³ However, the German accent makes the words Paul Stanley sound remarkably similar to the words Hold Steady, which prompted two wildly confusing conversations over the state of modern rock music.

⁴ This also caused confusion: Everybody who looked like a potential drug dealer was merely a hooker.

gorical value for many of these factoids, and some of my conclusions might prove true. But I am choosing not to do this. Because—now—I can't help but recognize all the things Americans do that a) have no real significance, yet b) define the perception of our nature. While I was in Frankfurt, Ohio State played Michigan in football. I managed to find one of the only bars in town where this game was televised, and I watched it with two superdrunk businessmen from Detroit I'd never met before (and I'll never see again). Every time Michigan scored, one of them would march outside and yell, "Go Blue!" into the dark Frankfurt night. I have no idea why he kept doing this. I don't think he did, either. (It might have been just to amuse his companion.) But I could tell that every German in the bar was viewing his aggressive, unbridled enthusi-

asm as normative American behavior. This man is all they will ever know about life in Michigan. The next day, I was in an Irish-themed pub, and I met an Australian who was working for the king of Bahrain.⁵ He had been drinking beer and watching rugby all afternoon, and he kept repeating the same phrase over and over again: "You can't buy class." He also told me that the king of Bahrain is forty-nine years old, but that the crown prince of Bahrain is forty-eight.⁶ This seemed mathematically impossible, so I asked how such a relationship could exist. "You can't buy class," he said in response. So this is all I know about life in Bahrain.

When I returned from my tour, many people asked me what Germany was like. I said I had no idea. "But weren't you just there?" they inevitably asked. "Yes," I told them. "I was just there. And I don't know what it's like at all." ■

⁵ Bahrain is one of the richest Arab countries in the world. They don't have taxes. I also find it amazing that I met an Australian from Bahrain in an Irish bar in Germany.

⁶ As it turns out, the king actually just turned fifty-seven and the crown prince is thirty-seven. You can't buy class.



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