

Just recently the Leipzig Book Fair created a huge whirlwind of readings and discussions hard to grasp all at once. Part of the fair’s program was U.S. writer Dave King presenting the German publication of his 2005 debut book *The Ha-Ha*. After pursuing a career as a painter and business man King discovered writing as another outlet for his creativity resulting in this bestselling novel. He is currently teaching English at Baruch College as well as cultural studies and poetry at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In an interview with Stine Eckert, a reporter from the local radio station at Leipzig University *mephisto 97.6* who is currently serving an internship at the U.S. Consulate General Leipzig, King reflects on his German experiences, differences and common ground of German and American audiences, and *The Ha-Ha*.

“Very proud to be here”

- U.S. Writer Dave King About the Leipzig Book Fair and his Debut Novel *The Ha-Ha*

An Interview by Stine Eckert

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You told me you’ve already been at the book fair. What does the Leipzig Book Fair mean to you?

DK: Ah, it was fantastic! I was so impressed. For one thing just acres and acres of books and all different kinds and there were so many people there, so much going on intellectually. And I have to say I was really impressed with how well it was attended. I thought the fact that there were such big crowds was really tremendous. I’m of course very, very proud to be here.

Is this your first time in Germany?

DK: No, my parents lived here when they were first married. They had very, very good friends here and they came back periodically during my childhood. Usually my mom and dad came alone but once or twice they brought my sister and me with them. And then I came back in I think it was 1980 or 81 with my father and we spent about a month travelling around. But this event that’s 25 years ago and I have not been back to Germany since then.

A lot has happened meanwhile e.g. the wall came down.

DK: Yes, yes. I am eager to see Berlin because when I was there the wall was there and I went through it, through Checkpoint Charlie and everything. And also at the time I was a painter and I did a little painting on the wall and everything as one does. So I am eager to see the city without the wall.

But is this your first time at the Leipzig Book Fair?

DK: It is, it is. And I’ve been to a number of book fairs in the US but I don’t think I’ve been to one that is this comprehensive. You know with international books from all over the world and visitors from all over the world. This is really the biggest one I’ve ever seen.

So you couldn’t name an equivalent of the Leipzig Book Fair in the U.S.?

DK: I would be surprised if we have an equivalent. I think we have small city book fairs in a number of places and several of them are good. I’ve done the book fairs in Austin, South Florida and when I go back next week I’m going to Virginia. But as far as this kind of participation with large publishers and small publishers and so many authors and so many visitors I suspect we don’t have an equivalent. I think that the Leipzig Fair must be unique or very particular to Germany.

This is kind of interesting. I didn’t know that. I heard that Bret Easton Ellis and John Griesemer are around here, too. In sum, there are about four or five American authors. And I was wondering in how far the Leipzig Book Fair is known among American authors at all.

DK: I don’t think it’s particularly well known. We all hear about Frankfurt because that’s the business fair. And so for an American author your book is sold to the foreign rights to Frankfurt. But the Leipzig Book Fair and also Lit Cologne, which I was at earlier this week, both seem to be for readers primarily and I think that’s the beautiful thing about them. In the US most of the fairs are also for readers. We have one big fair which is called Book Expo America that is for the publishing industry but most of the smaller book fairs, the city book fairs, are for readers and booksellers and librarians.

You probably have a tight schedule. But are you going to get a chance to walk around at the fair. And if so, what writer would you like to listen to?

DK: I had about an hour to walk around today and I really, really enjoyed it. I’m looking forward to having some more time tomorrow. But one thing is, I regret to say I don’t speak German, so my choices of who to listen to are somewhat limited. But there’s an old friend of mine, an old acquaintance from New York that I knew probably thirty years ago who’s appearing tomorrow. Her name is Gayle Tufts and she’s doing something with my same publisher. I am hoping to see Gayle again because it’s been maybe 25 years since we’ve seen each other. But when we were students we always used to go to the same parties and hang out together.

You have already worked with Jan Josef Liefers in Frankfurt and Nürnberg. So how have the performances with him worked out so far?

DK: Oh, it’s been great. It’s been great. He’s really smart; he’s a really good actor. And the first night that I came, my first night in Germany when we read at the Frankfurt library, and he started reading my book in German I felt like I was gonna burst into tears. It was so beautiful and I was so moved and in a way it was almost as if I didn’t really believe that it has been translated until that moment and so to have that experience of, you know, hearing a really, really fine actor read the words. It was very, very moving to me. And each night as he reads I follow along in my English edition and I can hear him bringing new life and invention to the performance. And personally, I also like him a lot. We had a good time travelling from city to city all week.

What has your impression been of the German audience so far?

Well, they’ve been wonderful. Readings in the US are much shorter than here. In general in the US you’re asked to read for about 20 minutes and then take questions from the audience for 35 or 40 minutes and then sign books. And that’s a much shorter program. And so I was

worried whether audiences would have a long enough attention span but they really pay attention and laugh at the jokes even when I’m reading in English. And then when the reading is over and Jan Josef and I start to talk we had a lot of people asking questions and really smart questions so I’ve been delighted by them. I’ve been really happy.

And I think, one thing that’s very nice is that we’ve had sell-out houses every night. The events have always been sold out and I think probably part of that is that people are eager to see Jan Josef who really is charismatic and charming but I think I’m also the beneficiary of that.

When I started reading the book it pretty quickly reminded me of another book and I was wondering if you would know that book. It’s Carson McCullers “The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter”. Because of the deaf-mute protagonist and the weird house community where he is living in. I was wondering if that had any influence on your book.

DK: You know that’s very, very perceptive. People have compared this book to all sorts of other books. But I haven’t heard that one yet. But of course, Carson McCullers is really one of our great American authors. She is someone I admire a lot. When I was in my twenties I had a period when I read all of her books at once in a short time, just devoured them. And you know, I have to admit, I wasn’t thinking of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* when I wrote the novel but I think that’s a pretty perceptive comparison and probably somewhere in the back of my mind some of that lodged. I am very interested in that idea of the makeshift family or the substitute family and that’s something which you’re absolutely right about occurs in the McCullers’ novel and in my book.

That was an idea that I liked a lot, that it was not a nuclear family but another sort of family that emerges in the development of the book and also serves its purpose or maybe better than the normal family.

DK: That may be one the differences between German and American readers. So there is only one nuclear family that Howard remembers from his past, his mother and father and himself. And everything else is a little unusual. There is a lesbian couple raising a child; there is a single father; there’s a single mother with a drug problem and then there’s a group of people who kind of become a family over the course of the novel. And I’ve been surprised that many American readers asked me if the book was a criticism of the state of the family in our country, in other words something negative. And I was quite shocked by that. Because I say no, it’s not a criticism. It’s more of a celebration of the fact that we’re connected and we can be generous and kind to each other and help each other out. And that might be something that my German readers have understood instantly. I mean, nobody has asked me if I’m criticising the institution of the family. That’s something that Americans have returned to a number of times.

Also I heard that autobiographical material made it into your book. And I was wondering how much of your biography went into the book.

DK: Not very much actually. The book is largely imagined and I really believe in the imagination, I celebrate the imagination; I love thinking of stories and characters. I love invention. People often asked me where the character of Howard Kapostash came from and there are two autobiographical elements there. One is that my brother was profoundly autistic and never spoke. So the experience of growing up with a disabled person in my family probably helped me render the experiences of the people of the household who also find it frustrating dealing with a disabled person. I’m interested in disability for that reason. I think

by examining disability we begin to learn what ability or normalcy is. The other element is the Vietnam element and I grew up as a young male child in Cleveland, Ohio imagining that I would go off to war. The war was going on. It was very, very frightening. The government was making it increasingly difficult to get out of service. So I expected to go. As it turned out the war ended rather suddenly, to my mind, and I didn't go to war, But that sense of having had a close call and know that people only a little bit older than I did go to Vietnam also was the second biographical factor that went into creating the character of Howard Kapostash. But I do like to insist that Howard is an invented character not a thinly disguised real character.

It's great that it is a narrator that does not speak and also the signs he invents to communicate. It was sort of sad but also sort of funny. I had to laugh a lot.

DK: Hopefully. Good, I'm glad you did. It is a sad book but there are supposed to be moments of humor also. And of course I am always delighted when readers recognize the humor. I think that's one of the nice things at the readings because Jan Josef brings out a great deal of humor, probably more than I do because he's such a skilled actor and so the German audiences laugh at some of the things just because he makes them funny.

I bet you've been asked about the title a lot of times. The German book has an English title, *Homecoming*, but Germans do understand the term. But why is this edge he's driving on called *The Ha-Ha*, which is the title of the English book?

DK: A ha-ha is a term that we have in English but is not commonly used in German or I think in any other language though ha-has exist in other countries; they just don't have a name. What it is is a cut in the land; a deep ditch, which is used to divide up fields without the visual impediment of a fence. So that the animals can't get across this kind of ditch that forms a boundary. And there is a ha-ha in the story. It is kind of a funky American one. But it is a real ha-ha. And Howard returns to it several times during the book so it plays an important role in the plot. The symbolic significance is as follows: When you look at a ha-ha the land seems to go on forever and you don't see these divisions and I think Howard is also like that. You look at him and you perceive him as whole or entire but in fact there's this severe fissure in the landscape of his life and this of course is his Vietnam War injury, his dramatic brain injury.

In the ending do you want to imply that Laurel and Howard are going to start a family?

DK: Well, I don't really want to give the ending away to readers who have not yet read the book. What I tried to do with the ending was leave every character a little better off than they were when they started. Whether certain people fall in love or have relationships or last forever and ever that's harder to say. I think being a little better off was as much as I was willing to grant to these character.

Oh, that's sometimes very much being a better off than about three months ago.

DK: Yeah, and we understand that Howard has come through something very frightening and is now better equipped to face the world. And for me that's the important point a little more than actually what he does with his life in the end. He's grown emotionally and intellectually, so that's what's really crucial for me.

I was struck by the excessive violence that comes up in the third part of the novel. And this reminded me of Southern literature, which is at times very violent and grotesque.

DK: Yes, that’s what we call American Gothic. I’m generally a pretty easy-going optimistic person and so those very violent and difficult passages were hard for me to write. They were interesting. I was often asked what was the most difficult thing in writing the book. And it was this very compressed section at the end of the book where Howard really has kind of a breakdown and he does some things are shameful and embarrassing and we worry that he may not survive. In fact, I think that if the book is at it’s best readers should suspect that he would not survive this breakdown. And that was for me an experience of making it as ugly and difficult and painful as it could be. I knew that it needed to be painful and difficult so I struggled to make it as fully that way as I could.