

Some examples of Veterinarians in Belletrist Literature

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This essay intends to do exactly what the title says: to look at veterinarians in so-called belletrist, that is non-scientific literature. It excludes the examination of autobiographies written by veterinarians, and thus James Herriot and many others who should normally be mentioned are not. These authors have been discussed in other reviews.

"Phol ende Wodan vuorun zi holza
du uuart dem Balders volon sin vuoz birenkit..."

Translation:

"Fol and Wodan rode through the woods
when Balder's foal sprained its foot.
Whereupon Sintgunt, Sunna's sister,
and Frija, Volla's sister,
as well as Wodan himself chanted
as they knew how:
when the bone hurts
when the blood hurts
when the members hurt: bone to bone,
blood to blood,
member to member
as if glued together..."

This is how the second of the 'Merseburger Zaubersprüche' (Merseburg Incantations) begins. It was probably written in the 8th Century and might be the oldest German language reference to the medical treatment of an animal. It is tempting to conclude that not much has changed since this time, considering both the German Veterinary Society and veterinary teaching establishments have institutes and run courses with a non-scientific approach to the treatment of animals - escape from science, indulgence in mysticism.

In pre-medical times there is reference to veterinary related topics in the 14th Century manuscript 'Sachsenspiegel' (Saxons' Mirror) [6], and in French 12th Century epics that celebrate mounted men-at-arms; they describe horses in times of health and disease, and elsewhere in the literature horse injuries have been described [3].

Leaping forward into the 19th Century, Lorzing's opera 'Der Waffenschmied' (The Military Blacksmith), has Stadinger singing:

"...nun muss ich fort, denn in der Näh
hab ich Patienten liegen;
des Nachbarn Sattelperd ist krank
und seine beiden Ziegen.
Ich bin der einz'ge in der Stadt,
zu dem das Vieh Vertrauen hat..." [5].

Translation:

"...now I must go, because nearby
is where my patients lie;
the neighbour's mount is ill
and so are his two goats.
I am the only one in town,
in which the beasts confide..."

It is surprising that the literature does not reveal more references to veterinary surgeons at a time when the art of horseshoeing was evolving into veterinary medicine. I may have missed much, but my searches for veterinarians and veterinary related content in 19th and early 20th Century literature has yielded very little - with one notable exception, found in Scandinavia. In an article published in *Svensk Veterinär Tidning*, Margareta Aakeson lists 138 references to veterinarians made in Scandinavian literature alone [1], whereas no more than 56 are found elsewhere.

In the *Danish Annals of Veterinary History*, J.P.Nielsen quoted extensively from thirteen novels, short stories and even from a ballad [4]. In these 19th Century works, written in the Biedermeier period of literature and naturalism, the veterinarian is portrayed as a character well established in both rural and urban societies; he is part of the plot, together with the farmers and peasants, merchants, mayors and teachers. He is part, too, of the spiritual movements - such as the religious reforms of the Pietists, the Oxford movement and Grundtvig's patriotic ideas, all of which have been important in Denmark's history. None of these veterinarians is agin alcohol though, benevolently explained by the fact that they are offered a drink at each house they visit. The main character in Henrik Pontoppidan's novel, "Det forjaettede Land", is a veterinarian whose weakness and alcoholism leads him and his family to a life in the poorhouse, a situation narrated with tenderness and compassion by the author. Comfortingly, Pontoppidan was a pessimist, and even in his best-known novel an engineer wants to change the world but fails miserably. In these Danish accounts, the professional activities of veterinarians are not recounted, but instead taken for granted, like those of the wheelwright who makes wheels.

This is by no means the case in German literature, probably due to differences in the social structure of the two countries. Denmark's shallow social gradient in yesteryear's agricultural, rural and provincial societies meant that writers were also relatively close to rural life. German writers, on the other hand, viewed rural life and veterinarians with the eyes of city dwellers.

Having said this, my next example, a German poem, is not very characteristic. "Die Pirdkur" (Curing the Horse) is written in the Low German dialect by a mid-19th Century author, Fritz Reuter. The veterinarian Borchert, "... a doctor, though not a real one 'cause he treats only the insensates..." is called to a manor to examine a valuable stallion. While taking the medical history of the stallion he is offered a piece of bread and a gin, but declines - he is not hungry. When the lord volunteers that he, unfortunately, has no wine in the cellar, the vet concludes, after thorough examination, that the horse cannot be saved because the only effective medicine is not available. "...oh claret, is that all that's needed? I have a 'Schatoh (Chateau) la Rose..." The wine is duly brought out; our colleague takes a sip, then a gulp and eventually finishes the whole bottle, finally declaring: "Sir, your stallion is in perfect health..."

Apart from painting a charming picture of the local atmosphere, the story candidly reflects the veterinarian's struggle for recognition within society. However, this struggle is not always achieved, as Wilhelm Busch reveals through his character Suttit in "Julchen" (Figures 1-4). As one of the suitors of Tobias Knopp's beautiful daughter, Suttit is being considered - "...but he practices as a vet..."

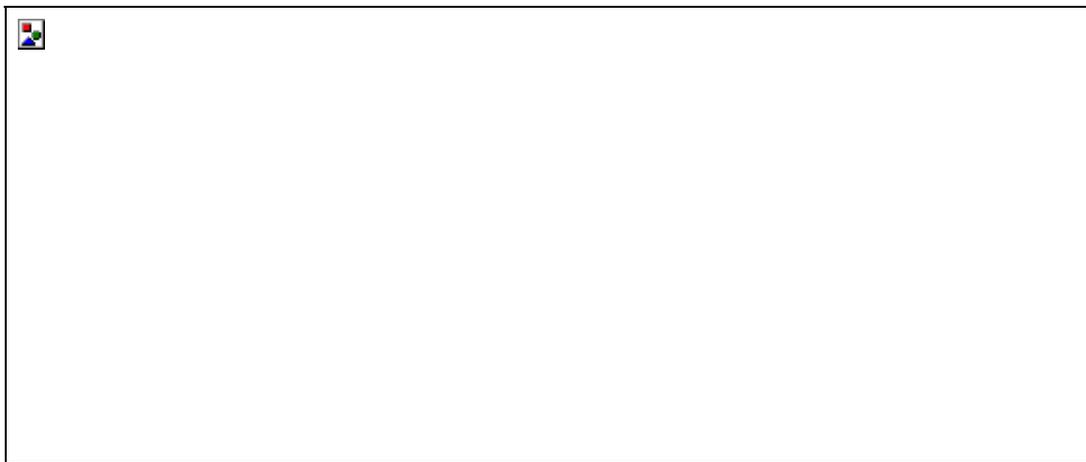


Figure 1. Suttit, the character from Wilhelm Busch's book "Julchen", is one of many suitors trying to win the attention and approval of Tobias Knopp's beautiful daughter. Despite his attempts to appear dapper and chivalrous (a and b), the veterinarian's inferior horsemanship soon reveals his true status in society (c and d).

In the novel "Unwiederbringlich" (Irrecoverable) by Theodor Fontane a veterinarian is only referred to, without ever entering the story. To the author, two factors make him worthy of mention: he continues to speak his Saxon dialect while practicing near Flensburg (now Schleswig-Holstein) and he has an inclination for homeopathy. The squire in the story considers this remarkable, since animals are insensitive to the powers of suggestion. But this passage appears as no more than a brief teatime conversation - for the rest, the novel is a sad story about a failing marriage.

A literary climax is Thomas Mann's story "Der Herr und sein Hund" (The Master and His Dog). In a lively and admirably apposite way, the author describes the relationship between the master and his dog and the dog's reactions, without ever having studied ethology. Those who have read the story will undoubtedly remember the scene when Bauschan (a common dog's name in the Mecklenburg region of Germany; there is also a Bauschan in Fritz Reuter's work) returns with blood in his nose and mouth, drops of blood are then found, and the dog's condition deteriorates. Bauschan is taken to the animal clinic at Munich University, where the professor examines him: "... the dog is a little nervous and anaemic, he offered, but otherwise in good health. The source of the bleeding is uncertain. It could be epistaxis or haematemesis. Also tracheal or pharyngeal bleeding cannot be ruled out. Perhaps one should preliminarily, and most appropriately, call it haemoptysis. The dog needs to be observed carefully. I was asked to leave him at the

clinic and to return in eight days ... In the meantime, I could not resist telephoning to inquire about the dog's condition. An assistant told me that it was as expected under the circumstances - a more precise definition was avoided for good or bad reasons..." A week later the author visits the clinic. He notices the ward's atmosphere and the haggard state of the anorectic dog. He queries the attending caretaker. "I came to inquire about my dog's condition. Yes, he said, the dog is suffering from occult bleeding, which always takes a long time to resolve, especially when the origin is unknown. - Is this still the case? - Yes. We still do not have a definite answer. But the dog is here for observation, and is being observed. - And the bleeding persists? - Yes, it still occurs once in a while. - And then it is observed? - Yes, of course."

A week later the dog is completely listless, the bleeding still returns occasionally, and the author is advised to take him home. There, his convalescence is very slow, but he finally recovers: "For several weeks Bauschan continued to bleed from his nose, but with decreasing frequency. Eventually the phenomenon disappeared, became a thing of the past, and soon it was irrelevant whether the condition had been epistaxis or haematemesis..."

All this speaks for itself. The discrepancy between medical pose and factual ignorance cannot be presented more tauntingly. As a clinician, I ask myself whether master and dog might not run into a similar situation today. Less subtly, Hans Fallada in his novel "Wir hatten mal ein Kind" (We Once Had a Child) commented that a vet had "of course messed up the case", which led to a furore in the *Deutsches Tierärzteblatt* (German Veterinary Newsletter) [2].

Veterinarians are mentioned incidentally, here and there in literature. In his novel set in the mountains, Max Mell describes a veterinarian in "provincial clothes" standing next to the elegantly dressed inhabitants of the manor. In a book from 1905, Eduard Plötzl (Vienna) makes fun of a veterinarian who has stuffed animals in his practice, and draws parallels to human medicine. In Eugène Labiche's comedy "Piggybank", a lazy veterinary student makes an appearance; in Emile Zola's, Hans Carossa's and Uwe Johnson's works there are also related references, and in James Joyce's "Ulysses" foot and mouth disease is mentioned. And of course everybody remembers Dr. Doolittle.

Many a city dweller has made their first acquaintance with the veterinary profession through the multi-volumed novel "Dokter Vlimmen", by Antonius Rootheart. It is the most detailed description of a veterinarian by a non-veterinarian, and vividly and accurately depicts the life of a country practitioner in the 1930s. Every older veterinarian in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands would know these books. The novel's main theme is social and religious conflict, which contributes to its suspense. I was surprised to hear from a Dutch colleague at a convention of the Veterinary History Society in Hannover (2000), that Nazi involvement of the real *dramatis personae* (Vlimmen's lawyer friend is the author) had quite an effect for a while, especially shortly after the war. Nevertheless the books enjoyed a lasting success.

Most of us are familiar only with the movie version of Truman Capote's "Breakfast at Tiffany's". But even a careful reader of the book may have overlooked the fact, as I did, that the vain attempts to bring the heroine back into the country were made by a veterinarian - her husband. He commutes by the cheapest means of transport, the Greyhound bus, and is a rather pitiful figure.

Whenever there is more than just a brief mention of a veterinarian in the literature of the 19th and 20th Centuries, we may assume it is a reflection (with some delay) on what was really happening in the world. The profession's ambition for societal recognition grew concomitant with scientific progress, though not without opposition.

Another peculiarity of these literary tales is that the reader never learns why a character has become a veterinarian, in stark contrast to the multitude of mostly autobiographical books written by veterinary surgeons. In addition, the non-veterinarian authors do not discuss topics such as professional ethics, the "gentle animal doctor" and views on animal

protection - nor the animal analogue of the "Demigod in White". Only veterinarians discuss these, and only when they have become authors.

Once again there is an exception, and once again it comes from Danish literature. In a ballad, J.V. Jensen writes:

"Ham mindes manges Himmerbo,
som den, der reddede hans Ko,
Var Manden arm og Pungen tom,
men Ög i Fölenod, han kom."

Translation:

"Many remember him in this poor region
as the one who saved his cow.
Though he was poor, and his pockets empty,
when a mare was about to foal, he would be there".

I have unearthed and discussed much about the veterinarian in past literature and society - but what about the present? In her novel "Zee-binnen", Margriet de Moor has made her protagonist a vet - which is only important only to explain his excursions into an extramarital bed, by using the pretext that they are night-time emergency calls. Which shows perfect integration of the veterinarian into contemporary society.

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