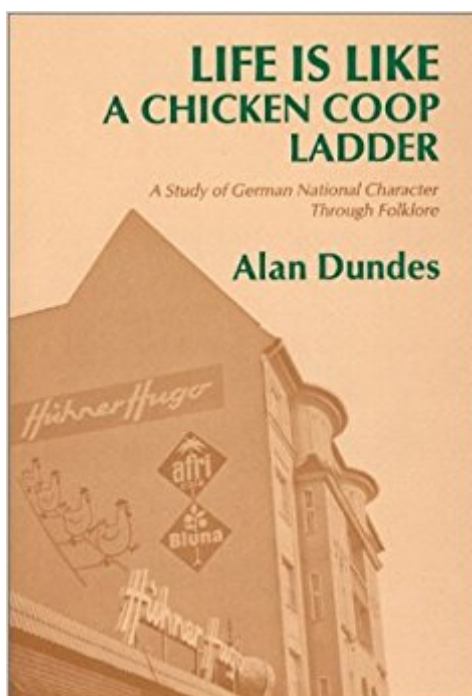


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Life Is Like A Chicken Coop Ladder: A Study Of German National Character Through Folklore



Synopsis

Life Is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder was first published in 1984 and from the outset inspired a wide variety of reactions ranging from high praise to utter disgust. Alan Dundes' theses identifies a strong anal erotic element in German national character, citing numerous examples of scatological data from authentic compilations of German folklore. The examination of this single trait of German character is used to demonstrate that national character exists and that its existence is unambiguously documented by the folklore of a nation. Dundes is of the opinion that the use of folkloristic data minimizes subjective bias in the study of national character, since unedited or uncensored, it constitutes a unique way of looking at a culture from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in, the more typical situation of an outside observer trying to understand a foreign culture.

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Customer Reviews

A work of major importance that demonstrates the value of folklore for understanding national character.

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good

The noted U.C. Berkeley folklorist Alan Dundes did a study of feces, defecation and anal imagery in German culture in an attempt to test the hypothesis that such themes can help to define something called "national character." He amassed an astonishing mountain of sayings, adages, proverbs, folk songs...alluding to his focal subject. The title is an example; it says life, like a chicken coop ladder, is short, slimy and covered with....The book met with very mixed responses. Some found it hilarious and "right on;" others were offended by either the subject matter or the implied typology, or both. There were Germans and German-Americans on all sides. As a quantitative type, I was left frustrated by the lack of any attempt to demonstrate that such themes were significantly more frequent in German folklore vs. other (say, European) folklores; we just have to take his word for it that they are. But folklorists have never been statisticians. I suspect he's correct: I am familiar with the classic German toilet bowl with a "viewing platform" for the excreta, which always struck me as very odd; it's disappearing now. "Und morgen auch in gleiche Weise/Beginnt genau derselbe Scheisse!"

My review would be 3.25 stars on average, but sadly, that's not possible. The thesis is in many respects highly questionable. Dundes posits first that there is a quality known as national character. Second, he posits that the German national character is highly scatological, which he bases on what another reviewer has more aptly termed an analysis of German colloquial speech and writing. (A folklorist may think of colloquial speech and writing as part of folklore, but the layman probably thinks more specifically of oral storytelling when he hears the word "folklore".) This second argument may be the best-supported in the book, though Dundes doesn't go far enough in comparative anthropology to demonstrate that this quality is unusually German. The most questionable part of the thesis is in his conclusions regarding what light this supposed anal-erotic character of the Germans and their language is supposed to shed on German history. If you accept

the Freudian thesis that anal-eroticism is the underlying cause of parsimoniousness, orderliness, etc., then this part of the thesis makes sense on its own terms. But what if anal-eroticism were merely a parallel aspect of German "national character" (accepting for the moment the notion that there is such a thing), along with parsimoniousness, orderliness, etc.? And there are other arguments to explain, for instance, the rise of Nazism--historical, philosophical, etc.--that do not require this Freudian analysis, which Dundes does not consider. The thesis may be fine for you if you are already a Freudian, but I am not so easily convinced. The content, on the other hand, is wide-ranging, well laid-out and entertaining. Ignoring the thesis, this makes excellent bathroom reading, actually. And who but the most squeamish of prudes doesn't like a poop joke? (If anything, this undermines Dundes' thesis more--we all find this stuff funny. Dundes admits that, but doesn't treat it as seriously as he should, which is somewhat disingenuous.) A last note: I was walking with a friend in Munich, when I happened to repeat to him a favorite expression from the book--"Wie der Fisch stets in dem Wasser lebt, so die Scheiße in dem Arschloch klebt." An old woman passing by gave a hearty guffaw. She was perhaps seventysomething. So the book could be very useful to anyone who wants simply a handle on (a certain class of) German colloquial expressions. The book gave me a small moment of humanity, in the form of a turd.

I first saw this book while living in southwest Germany five years ago. It's less about German folklore than it is about colloquial German. As a linguist, this is a fantastic volume. German language, when compared to English, is remarkably limited in its ability to throw out four-letter words. So the Germanic peoples developed some pretty entertaining idioms over time. If you speak any German, this is a must for understanding colloquial speech and command of the only original swear word in the language. It's insightful but certainly not 'folklore' in the American sense.

I got this book because I am interested in folklore and expected this to be a general book about German Folklore. If you expect this then you will be disappointed. What the book is about is German folklore in relationship to manure, defecating, toilet habits, etcetera, all along those lines. If that's what you are after then it is actually a good read. I gave it three stars because I was annoyed at its misleading subtitle but if faeces is your interest then it gets five stars as it is well written, well researched and given the subject matter surprisingly interesting.

Some humor like Larry the cable guy, but not the basics of Germanism. author with an agenda?
Naw, but this is not scholarship

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