

G-man Jerry Cotton German Pulp's Biggest Gun

For almost 50 years, he has been racing through the streets of Manhattan in his red Jaguar, perpetually locked in a desperate struggle with mobsters, murderers, robbers, kidnappers, drug dealers, terrorists and other criminal lowlifes, trying to thwart their latest schemes together with his faithful partner Phil Decker. He is G-man Jerry Cotton, the very best operative the FBI ever had.

Jerry Cotton is a man of superlatives in more ways than one. His exploits have been chronicled in Germany's longest running pulp series devoted to a single character (some romance mags have had longer runs, but these are anthologies without recurring characters). In 1954 Jerry Cotton made his debut in issue 68 of the anthology series *Bastei Kriminalroman* (Bastei Crime Novel), entitled *Ich suchte den Gangster-Chef* (I was searching the gangster boss). The heroic G-man proved to be popular and soon became a regular feature in *Bastei Kriminalroman*. In 1956, Jerry finally got his own weekly magazine *G-man Jerry Cotton*. Cotton's adventures have been translated into 19 languages and appeared in 52 countries. The total print run in Germany alone is estimated to be about 850 million magazines. And since according to a study from the 1970s, each 64-page mag is read by approximately 8 people, the total number of *Jerry Cotton* readers theoretically outnumbers the world population.

These numbers are staggering. And indeed Jerry Cotton is the most iconic character of the German pulps. Publisher Gustav Lübbe once called him "the only character of international importance in German post-war literature". Lübbe was of course exaggerating. Nevertheless, Jerry Cotton is the only German pulp character who has managed to become a household name. In a survey conducted among recruits of the German Army in 1970, eighty percent of those questioned knew not only the name of Jerry Cotton but that of his partner Phil Decker as well. In the same survey it was found that seventy percent of the recruits did not know the name of the then current German president.

But who is Jerry Cotton? According to the magazines, he was born in Harpersvillage, a small town in Connecticut. Early issues of the series gave his year of birth as 1933, though later stories ignored this, allowing the hero to enjoy eternal youth. His full name is Jeremias Cotton, but he hates his first name which was given to him by an overly religious aunt. Physical descriptions of Cotton are vague, all we know is that he is tall, broad-shouldered and has dark hair.

While in his early twenties, Cotton went to New York City to make his fortune there. He became innocently embroiled in a criminal operation and was rescued by John D. High, head of the local FBI office. Mr High, as he is generally known in the magazines, took young Jerry under his wing and convinced him to join the FBI. Over the years, Cotton and High (who lost his own family during a bank robbery gone wrong) have developed an almost father-son relationship.

Jerry Cotton used to smoke, when it was still politically correct. He likes a good whisky, but isn't a heavy drinker. Jerry also likes to admire the female form (there are many references to "full breasts", "shapely hips" and the like), though he generally keeps away from romantic entanglements of any kind. In the early years of the

series, the writers were explicitly forbidden to include romance and/or sex in the stories. In recent times, this rule has somewhat relaxed. Nevertheless, Jerry prefers to remain single. Which is just as well, for the only two serious relationships he ever had - with psychologist Pam and mobster's daughter Marcella Corona - both ended tragically with the death of the lady in question.

Jerry Cotton's partner and best friend is Phil Decker. Blonde and somewhat shorter than Cotton, Decker was born in Detroit and studied medicine in Harvard. During a trip to Chicago (what he was doing there is anybody's guess - the city seems to have been chosen by a geographically ignorant writer) he witnessed a robbery and decided to dedicate his life to fighting crime. Unlike the rather celibate Cotton, Decker is something of a ladies' man. Phil Decker plays the Watson to Jerry Cotton's Holmes, intelligent but not quite as intelligent, heroic but not quite as heroic as Cotton himself.

In their relentless battle against organised crime, Jerry, Phil and Mr High are joined by a large supporting cast of other FBI operatives. The supporting characters have changed with the times. The early issues features characters such as Neville, an aged G-man pressed into a desk job against his will, and Helen, Mr High's secretary. More recent issues have seen the introduction of female FBI agents such as Jerry's colleagues Annie Geraldo and June Clark. The most notable supporting character, however, is Zeerokah, a G-man of Native American origin. Zeerokah (or "Zeery" as his colleagues affectionately call him) has been around since the early days of the magazine, probably because German readers of the 1950s expected Indians to appear in any series set in America, regardless of the genre (and in fact some early *Jerry Cotton* issues had western type plots). What makes Zeerokah unusual is that the character managed to escape the blatant stereotyping that afflicted many other Native American characters of the period. Current *Jerry Cotton* issues have more references to Zeerokah's passion for elegant clothes ("our dressman" Jerry calls him) than to his Native American origin.

For more than 30 years, Phil and Jerry brought criminals to justice with the aid of their trusty .38 *Smith and Wesson* revolvers, finally switching to a *Sig Sauer P226* automatic in 1999. But Jerry Cotton's most famous accessory is his red Jaguar. The model has changed over the years (currently it's a Jaguar XKR convertible), but colour and brand remain the same, even though Jaguars are hardly common cars in the US. The red Jaguar is just one of the many anachronisms found in the series. But then many of the *Jerry Cotton* authors had never actually visited the USA and knew New York only from the streetmaps issued to them by *Cotton* publisher *Bastei-Lübbe*.

Over the years, Jerry Cotton has dealt with any type of violent crime, from blackmail to drug dealing, from robbery to kidnapping, from child pornography to terrorism, from rape to murder. One thing that has remained consistent is that the villains in *Jerry Cotton* stories are always unredeemably evil and generally turn up in gangs. The black-and-white morality of these tales leaves little room for analysing the causes and motives of crime - indeed, the writers were once explicitly forbidden to come up with "psychological excuses" for criminal behaviour. In Jerry Cotton's world, a criminal is a criminal and the stealing of oranges is always the first step on the road to the electric chair (which shows the cluelessness of many writers, for orange theft was hardly a prime problem of juvenile delinquency in 1950s and 60s New York).

Jerry Cotton has always presented a multicultural New York, something that the American pulps often managed to ignore. From the beginning on, the series has featured black, Asian, Hispanic and Native American characters. Unfortunately, many of these characters were heavily stereotyped. In the early years of the magazine, particularly Asian and Hispanic characters were often portrayed as villains. This has somewhat changed in recent years, e.g. Jerry Cotton and Phil Decker have now acquired a Hispanic colleague in Annie Geraldo. Another problem is that the early issues often used racist expressions such as "negro" and "chink". Offensive words or passages are usually edited out for reprints, nevertheless left-wing critics have occasionally accused the series of being racist. Though in my opinion the racism in *Jerry Cotton* is no worse than what can be found in many American and British pulps of the same period.

Considering the subject matter, the content of the *Jerry Cotton* pulps is rather tame. Especially in the early years, writers' guidelines were strict. Violence had to be toned down, depictions of sex were banned altogether and criminals must always be brought to justice and never be shown to enjoy the fruits of crime. In fact, the law and order focus of the early issues was so extreme that it caught some flak for allegedly promoting the death penalty. In recent years, the writers' guidelines have somewhat relaxed regarding sex and violence, though there are other concerns such as racism and sexism. But in general, *Jerry Cotton* was always less racy than his direct competitors *Mister Dynamit* and *Kommissar X* (both created by former Cotton writer C.H. Günther).

Even the German authority for protecting minors from harmful texts, whose preferred targets have always been pulps and comics, called the *Jerry Cotton* series "a positive example" of a pulp magazine. In spite of that, a few early issues were banned for violent content. The overwhelming popularity of *Jerry Cotton* also served to make the series a favourite target for all those attacking pulps in general. For example, Marxist critic Gerhard Bierwirth called the *Jerry Cotton* series "an act of violence against the reader" and claimed that it was as addictive as a drug.

The *Jerry Cotton* series reflects Germany's idea of America more than anything else. Even contemporary issues have the flair of old gangster movies about them. Jerry Cotton's New York seems permanently stuck in the prohibition era, even if G-men and gangsters are using computers now. Nevertheless, real world concerns did invade the *Jerry Cotton* series over the years. The Vietnam war was reflected in stories such as *Der Rächer aus dem Jenseits* (Avenger from beyond the grave) and *Der Gangsterjäger* (The gangster hunter) which saw Jerry dealing with psychotic war veterans. And in *Die Krematoriumsgang* (The crematory gang) a drug ring smuggles heroin in the bodies of American soldiers shipped home from Vietnam. The 1970s adventure *Sie hatten Dioxin* (They had dioxin), which pits Jerry against a group of eco-terrorists threatening to poison Manhattan with dioxin, was written at about the same time that the Seveso disaster dominated the headlines. Recent stories have dealt with subjects such as September 11th and international terrorism. Jerry Cotton has battled Al-Quaeda in such stories as *Die Geisel der Erbarmungslosen* (Hostage of the merciless) and *Wir jagten die Sprengstoff-Killer* (We were hunting the explosives killers), while the story *Wir kämpften um Phil Deckers Leben* (We fought for Phil Decker's life) deals with anthrax attacks.

As the *Jerry Cotton* stories were written as first person accounts of supposedly real FBI cases, the authorship remained unknown for a long time and the publisher was determined to keep it that way. In the 1990s, however, it was revealed that Jerry Cotton had been developed by washing powder salesman Delfried Kaufmann, who had originally intended the series to be a parody of the typical hard-boiled detective novel. Kaufmann himself wrote only a handful of stories and the series soon passed into the hands of other writers, most notably Heinz Werner Höber, the author who is still most associated with Jerry Cotton. For many years, the series was a training ground for young German crime authors and TV writers. To date over 60 writers have penned Jerry Cotton's adventures.

The first person perspective fooled many readers into believing that Jerry Cotton was in fact a real person. It is a persistent urban legend that the FBI office in New York received so many letters addressed to a G-Man Jerry Cotton that they actually printed a form letter stating that no agent of this name was working for the FBI. Unfortunately, the FBI office in New York declines to comment on this.

In 1965, Jerry Cotton finally acquired a face. And that face belonged to a genuine Hollywood actor, George Nader. Between 1965 and 1969, Nader played Jerry Cotton in eight movies, beginning with *Schüsse aus dem Geigenkasten* (Operation Hurricane). Phil Decker was played by veteran actor Heinz Weiss, who is probably best remembered for his role in the long running TV-series *Traumschiff* (Dreamboat).

In Hollywood, Nader had never been a well-known actor, appearing mostly in B-movies such as the 1953 trash classic *Robot Monster*. He left the USA, allegedly because of an affair with Rock Hudson. The *Jerry Cotton* films made him a star in Germany. When George Nader went on promotion tour through small town cinemas, fan hysteria reached levels comparable to the chaos accompanying the concerts of modern day boy bands. And even after the end of the film series, Nader remained more popular in Germany than in his native country. His death in 2002 was largely ignored in the USA, yet most German papers ran obituaries for him.

The films were entirely shot in Germany, using stock footage and "American looking" locations to produce the illusion of being set in the USA. Modern housing developments with multi-storey apartment buildings doubled for Manhattan and in one film a German sandpit doubles for the Arizona desert. The results range from the highly effective to the unintentionally hilarious. Bloopers such as German language signs and posters in the background occur frequently. Nevertheless, these films hold up surprisingly well today, nearly 40 years after they were made. The quirky and catchy theme music by Peter Thomas has become a jazz classic, original recordings of which are highly sought after by record collectors.

In recent years, Jerry Cotton's popularity seems to have floundered somewhat. The circulation of pulps in general is falling, but *Jerry Cotton* seems to suffer more than most. In the nineties, the weekly circulation of *Cotton* mags dropped from 250000 to 100000 and the publisher seriously considered cancelling the series. It is also telling that during the brief mid nineties boom for pulp-derived TV-shows, Jerry Cotton was completely ignored although the character would have been a natural choice for a TV series (though there has been a successful series of audio dramas featuring well-known German voice actors). But in an era, where public perception of the FBI is characterised by *X-Files* style paranoia on the one hand and cool professionalism a

la Patricia Cornwell on the other hand, the simple adventures of the two-fisted G-Man seem a little old-fashioned. And *Jerry Cotton* has never had the cult potential enjoyed by the other two mainstays of German pulp, *John Sinclair* and *Perry Rhodan*. Nevertheless, *Jerry Cotton* has endured for almost 50 years whereas his competitors were cancelled long ago. While there is crime, Jerry Cotton will be there to fight it.