

# Heidi : behind the scenes of a Swiss myth

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## Heidi: behind the scenes of a Swiss myth



She is the most famous Swiss child. Heidi has enchanted generations of readers with her love of life, her independence and her thirst for freedom. The novel has been translated into 70 languages and has inspired over 15 film adaptations. We all know Heidi. But did you know that Japan was at the heart of Heidi's world fame? And that Heidi's fate mirrors the story of the 19th-century Swiss emigrants? Here are some other things we bet you didn't know...

Heidi is the moving story of a little orphaned Swiss girl who finds happiness in her Alpine paradise and touches those around her with her warm heart and high moral values. Published in 1880, the first volume of the novel was an immediate hit among readers in Switzerland and Germany. Author Johanna Spyri (1827–1901) published the second volume just a year later, and the novel was subsequently translated into French, English and many other languages. A 1920 translation into Japanese marked the beginning of the Japanese devotion to Heidi. Then in 1974 an anime series introduced her to children all over the world. The countless film adaptations and serialised novels published since 1880 have taken various degrees of

freedom with the plot. Heidi has nevertheless remained an iconic Swiss figure who is recognised the world over and whose story reflects life in Switzerland in the 19th century.

### A story of many Swiss migrants

The novel starts with a sad moment: Aunt Dete brings 5-year-old Heidi to her paternal grandfather who lives in seclusion on a mountain pasture above the village of Maienfeld in the canton of Graubünden. Dete leaves the orphan girl with the grumpy old man and hurries away to take up a job as a maid in Germany. Like many Swiss workers and peasants at the time, the aunt emigrated to make a living. Poverty, hunger and inhumane factory conditions were widespread in 19th-century Switzerland. To make matters worse, many Swiss farmers saw their potato harvest destroyed by the blight wreaking havoc in Europe. Some 330,000 Swiss emigrated between 1850 and 1888, most headed for the United States.

Heidi has been an orphan since the death of her father on a construction site and loss of her mother to grief shortly after. The paternal grandfather, called Alp-Öhi, a Swiss German expression meaning Uncle on the Alp, does not welcome his new charge at first. Heidi soon wins him over with her exuberance, warm character and interest in nature.

The contrast between the austere mountain life and the urban setting of an emigrant's daily routine abroad is brought to the reader's attention when Aunt Dete returns to the mountain pasture and takes Heidi to Frankfurt. There, shut up in the mansion of an upper-class German family, she falls ill. Unlike most 19th century emigrants, Heidi's exile comes to an end. Seeing that she is homesick, the family's

physician Dr Classen insists that she return to her Alpine home.

### An international career

Like Mark Twain's 'Tom Sawyer' and Lewis Carroll's 'Alice', Heidi was part of an emerging children's literature in the 19th century. Heidi's story has been progressively altered in various translations and adaptations. Some translators mistreated the original text to soften the story, observes Nicolas Ducimetière, deputy director of the Bodmer foundation in an interview with Swiss Radio and Television RTS. In English alone, there are about 13 different translations.

The original Heidi novel has inspired many a film producer. Heidi's first screen appearance was in a silent movie released in the US in 1920. The 1937 Hollywood movie by Allan Dwan, with child star Shirley Temple in the role of Heidi, was the first sound film of Spyri's novel. This loose adaptation was a box office hit and soon reached European cinemas. Although the movie was entirely shot in the US, it reinforced the American idea of Switzerland as an Alpine paradise.

In Japan, Heidi was highly popular long before the 1937 Hollywood movie. According to Swiss author Jean-Michel Wissmer, while the novel was first translated into Japanese in 1920, it was a literary adaptation 5 years later that marked the beginning of a "true passion" for Heidi. The book was an adaptation to suit a Japanese audience, with all of the characters given Japanese names. More than 30 editions of Heidi were subsequently published in Japan. The Japanese translation contributed to

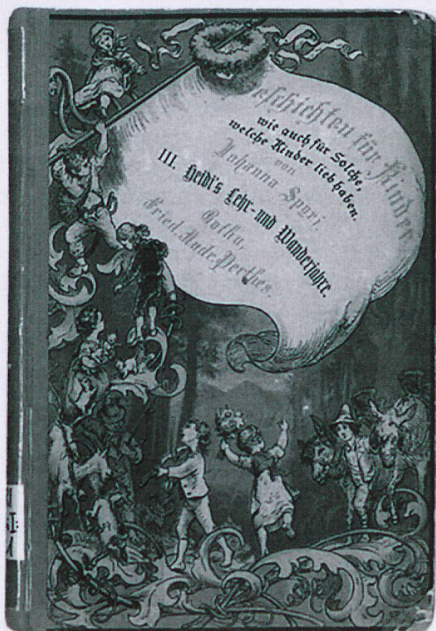






Heidi's international success and triggered a series of new translations in other languages. In the 1930s the French editor Flammarion and Henri Studer in Geneva published a serialised novel in addition to the French translation of the original. The stories of how Heidi grew up, started her own family and lived her life as a mother and grandmother were written by Charles Tritten, the French translator of the initial two volumes.

Heidi's popularity in Japan may be linked to the clash between tradition and modernity that is omnipresent in the novel, and to its representation of nature as a source of health and happiness and a manifestation of the sublime. Isao Takahata's 1974 animated cartoon series *Heidi the Girl of the Alps* not only marked the height of the Japanese adoration of Heidi, it also made her the heroine of an entire generation of children in Europe. Wissmer observes that Takahata's cartoon led to street protests



in Spain in 1976, with people demanding that the series be shown on prime time television and not just during the children's afternoon slot.

Takahata, who passed away in April 2018, had travelled to Switzerland to visit the original settings for Spyri's novel and got his inspiration from the Alpine landscape. "With a typical Japanese sense of perfection, Takahata created a delicate artwork that impresses with its care and attention to detail," notes Wissmer. Today, tourists can visit the Japanese Heidi village in Yamanashi Prefecture.

### A discreet prominence

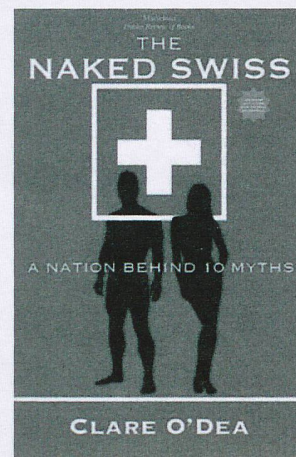
Spyri is the most widely read and translated Swiss author, yet little is known about her. She is said to have been uncomfortable publishing details about herself. Spyri even reclaimed some of the letters she had written to family and friends over the years and destroyed them along with other personal documents before her death. This may have been because it was frowned upon for women in high society to expose their lives to public scrutiny. Nevertheless, Spyri published some 50 literary works including 32 children's books – despite having only begun to write at the age of 44.

Spyri was the daughter of the acclaimed mystic poet Meta Heusser. When she wrote Heidi, she was leading a bourgeois life in Zurich, where she and her husband welcomed famous guests, such as Conrad Ferdinand Meyer and Richard Wagner. Johanna didn't come from the region in which Heidi is set. She grew up in Hirzel, a hillside village not far from Zurich, and moved to the city when she got married to the lawyer Johann Bernhard Spyri. But just as Heidi could not get used to living in Frankfurt, Johanna was unhappy in Zurich in her role of spouse and housewife, and uncomfortable in Zurich society.

After a bout of illness and depression, Johanna found her way back to a more joyful life in part through her son, who according to Wissmer had plenty of humour and was a talented musician. This was when she started to write her first novels. Johanna probably came up with the story of Heidi during one of her stays at a health resort in the region around Bad Ragaz. Her letters indicate that she must have written Heidi in Jenins, a village neighbouring Meienfeld, in summer 1879.

Swissinfo/Johanna Spyri. © Johanna Spyri-Archive, SIKJM, Zurich/Photos Shirley Temple in the role of Heidi 1937  
Source Die Welt

## Book Corner



In *The Naked Swiss: A Nation Behind 10 Myths*, journalist Clare O'Dea promises to change the way the world thinks about modern Switzerland – and give Swiss readers much to think about too. In 10 fact-based chapters O'Dea investigates positive myths of modern Switzerland (The Swiss are Rich/Brilliant/Have the Perfect Democracy) with the same sharp journalistic eye she uses to assess negative ones (The Swiss are Crooked Bankers/Xenophobic/Helped the Nazis). It is a view of Switzerland that will surprise even many Swiss readers.

O'Dea – a ten-year veteran at Swissinfo, and now Swiss herself – introduces readers to a cast of real Swiss, painting a lively country through many anecdotes. It is a Switzerland of the 21st century – a Switzerland of working mothers, banks gone bankrupt, and multicultural football teams. *The Naked Swiss* is a book that isn't afraid to address past shame and present national crises.

The author speaks five languages, has visited all 26 cantons, and is the mother of three Swiss children, and her deep knowledge of the country is on display page after page.

*The Naked Swiss* – which received praise from Switzerland's conservative weekly news magazine *Die Weltwoche* – promises to be the most important book about Switzerland for international readers for the next several years to come.

### Reviews:

"Switzerland is often too perfect to be true, as Clare O'Dea observes in this entertaining book on how the country ticks." Ralph Atkins, *Financial Times*

"Clare O'Dea's writing is informative without being too dry, and her clear, well-structured style means that this is a fascinating read, occasionally funny, but never boring. It is an excellent social and historical portrayal of the Swiss nation." Judith Griffith, [nudge-book.com](http://nudge-book.com)