

Houdini Nation

„Mr Fine Art Owner, it doesn't look like that in outer space!“

If you know Houdini Nation you might have noticed that a large part of the collection consists of titles that are long out of print. The reason is that those books are very easy to get in large quantities at a very reasonable price. An interesting side effect of buying whole collections is that you look at a lot of books side by side, cover beside cover. Usually you buy a book, read it, and then it ends up on the shelf, turning its spine in line.

Comparing the covers I noticed the series „Weltraumtaschenbücher“, published by Goldmann. Compared to those of other publishers, those were colourful and very abstract. As my collection grew and through the process of archiving the books I realised: those must have been made by the same person.

I decided to find that person, the illustrator Eyke Volkmer. At the end of 2006 I finally managed to track him down and he agreed to do an interview. On December 31st 2006 I drove to Munich to meet him. We talked about his work, his life and other things.

Mr Volkmer, the covers of the „Weltraumtaschenbücher“ look distinctively different than the publications of other publishing houses. I guess this is not only because you used a different technique. Was that coincidence or deliberately planned?

What was really nice in those times was that Mr Goldmann had said that he wanted to be different from the other publishing houses, the competitors. I can remember, when I was young there was Perry Rhodan and the covers of that series were - there were people on there with all sorts of space-paraphernalia. And he didn't want that.

He said: „We want to make abstract covers.“ So I tried to tune in on the subject by reading the blurb on the back of the books, to know how I could transform that graphically.

I know nothing of that process, I'm just a reader. Could you explain this a little?

Usually it went like this: The editorial office or the editor called me and said: „We need some covers.“ Most of the time they needed three. Those books were published monthly if I'm not mistaken. Then we met at the publishing house and he told me the title, for example Clifford Simak „Die unsichtbare Barriere“ and it's about this and that. So he basically told me everything he knew. But I never took any notes. Sometimes he gave me the blurb for the back of the book but that had to suffice.



This set-up led to the following incidence with the dear old Mr Wilhelm Goldmann: I came in with my covers, he saw them and said: „Well, Mr Fine Art Owner, it doesn't look like that in outer space! I really have to tell you.“ And so I said: „Well, Mr Goldmann, I do believe you. But since you know what it looks like in outer space, why don't you tell me and then I can make it look like that.“

He really had to laugh then and said: „No, it's all fine, I like what you're doing. We continue like that.“ He really didn't want the covers to be realistic. And I wouldn't have been able to do that as well as other illustrators. That was not my style.

So, we tried it out and I did a few covers. I always wanted people to be able to still use their own imagination.

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I have to finish two before the sports review!

How much time did you have for finishing a cover? The books were published in rather quick succession at Goldmann ...

That I remember very vividly. Usually I had like one or two weeks from being at the editors until I had to deliver. I did lots of things, not just book covers and so I always postponed working on the Goldmann things. For me it was very important that I did those on a Saturday.

After breakfast I sat down and said to myself: „I have to finish two before the sports review.“ And then I turned on the airbrushmachine, turned up the pressure and started working. I always finished one or two before the sports review at 6 p.m.

What was really nice was that the client, Mr Goldmann, showed up personally when I brought my work in. He always wanted to see what I brought before it was transferred to the producing divisions. And he said: „That's nice. I like it.“ Und ssst, he was gone again. Once he gave his ok, no editor would say anything different. If the boss said: „That's ok, Mr Fine Art Owner delivered to my satisfaction.“ then it was a done deal. Very convenient.

What scale did you work in?

I worked in the original size. I made a mount. I had to take into account up to three millimeters bleed. That bar at the bottom was standard, that was done at the printers, they coloured that according to some system I couldn't or didn't want to understand. Sometimes it was red, then blue - they used CMYK colours.

How did you put the titles onto the finished designs?

The titles - we didn't have computers back then, so we used Letraset. Letraset was a dry transferrable lettering system. There was a foil and on the underside there was the german alphabet, all the letters according to how often you needed them, like 10 times A, 25 times B and so on. Majuscles and Minuscles. And so I transferred that to a clear foil and put that on top of the design.

Later we used baryte transfers, those were Akzidenz letters. They only came in black and had to be copied and coloured at the litho.



Then there was another Letraset system that was even more complicated. One had to moisten the letters with a brush and some water and then transfer them to a really small silkscreen, just like in silkscreen printing. And you had to stick the letters onto that screen from below, getting them all in line. It was a mess, specially because sometimes they just didn't stick. But if I had transferred the wet letters directly onto the design, there would have been water stains. Compared to today, where I just switch on my Apple, then I just type it all down, put it on the design and I'm done. Then it goes to litho. So what we were using were mediaeval techniques.

Before the paperback series „Weltraumtaschenbücher“, Goldmann published the so called „Zukunftsromane“, which were hardcovers. You are listed as illustrator for the later issues, while the first ones are credited to „Atelier Lorenz“. However, the covers look like you have made them?

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Yes, I did those. When I finished studying I teamed up with a colleague. That was Herbert Lorenz. He had a classic studio here in Munich and I worked for him.



How old were you when you started working for Lorenz?

I was 24 or 25. I finished studying here in Munich in 1958. So I have met this colleague here, he was approximately three years older than me and had his own studio. During semester breaks he once asked me if I could help him out. He really did some nice work. He did a lot of work for Goldmann. He made all the covers for the yellow paperbacks. And so I joined him and worked for him.

How come you were credited for the illustrations later on and not the studio?

We split up in 1960 and Herbert Lorenz said to me: „You know what? You continue to do the stuff for Goldmann. I have no clue what you were doing and I couldn't do it anyway.“ He couldn't handle the airbrush. And so he called Goldmann, saying: „Volkmer is quitting at the studio, but assuming you are fine with it, he will continue doing the jobs for Goldmann.“

Thank God there are no people with weapons in their hands or with horns or little green men or something.

Some titles from the „Zukunftsromane“ series were later published as „Weltraumtaschenbuch“ paperback. You had to do the covers again then?

Yes, we only had two colours then, the blue and that standard orange. No other colour was allowed. And as paperbacks we had four colours and so the covers were made to fit that.

As it happened with „Radioaktiv“ by Isaac Asimov?

That is very similar. Naturally it's not exactly the same. We said, let's take the Asimov, it needs to be in four colours now and we do it just a little different. Maybe the hardcovers didn't sell that well anymore, weren't attractive enough. Maybe they sold more of those 4C ones. He discontinued the hardcover series altogether, I think.

When you're looking at those covers now, can you remember most of them after all this time?

Well, some of them ... this one I can remember, and this one with the paw. That was my own hand that I drew. But there are several that I don't remember at all. It's been such a long time. I remember this one, that's my hometown Istanbul. I thought I do one with minarets and mosques. And I know this one. I wanted to sell that to a geographics publisher, they wanted to do something with the moon. But they didn't take it. It's interesting to see what one has done in the past.



Have you actually read all the books you did the covers for?

Very seldom. That wasn't my world, to be honest. I once met Herbert W. Franke at the publishing house, that was interesting. It was at some Christmas party or something, and it was exciting to talk to someone who was older than me, who had more experience, to get to know how he sees it. How he feels when he sees his novel, as

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interpreted by me. He always liked, he said: „Thank God there's no people with weapons or horns or little green men or something.“ So he seemed to like it.



Is it something you think about as an illustrator? What the authors think about what you're doing?

It's a bit like rape, isn't it? You just force something onto the content or the author, right? You give the content a face and maybe Asimov says: „What a whole lot of crap, the illustrator must be out of his mind! There's something wrong here, what's he doing to my content? That's bullshit!“

Working as illustrator on book covers is not exactly a fame and fortune business. Do you think your work had any effect on the sales at all?

Where the originals ended up that the illustrators brought in? I guess they ended up in the bin.

The paperbacks were usually sold at book stores at the train station in those turning stands, where the title could be seen. It seems like a lot of people went by the cover. And after the „Zukunftsromane“ were discontinued, they went for the paperbacks. But which title sold particularly well, if it was the one with a mosque on it with a huge blue mouth hovering above, I don't know. The publishers never told me if certain authors sold best or if it depended on the design.

You said those plain covers you showed me were all you had left. Do you know what happened to the originals?

Where the originals ended up that the illustrators brought in? I guess they ended up in the bin. What's the publisher to do with them, especially when he sells his publishing house? They don't keep the old schmonzes.

Today a lot of graphic designers and illustrators are complaining about the bad payment. How much did you earn back then?

I can tell you exactly how much. In the beginning they paid 120 oder 125 German Marks for each cover. Compared to the amount of time it took me to make one I had a pretty good hourly rate, since I worked rather fast. On the other hand, it was only one cover a month, because they ordered three covers every three months.

And in that time they suddenly came up with VAT, we didn't have that in Germany until then. Naturally it all ended up in total chaos and disorder because nobody knew: What is VAT? What am I as a graphic designer to do with VAT? Then they explained that it is sort of a deposit in transit. When I charge my clients I have to indicate the VAT, put it on top of the sum and then hand it over to the tax office - for Pete's sake, I quit my job if such bullshit is going on and I have to be a secretary, too! Well, we were unhappy and did it. So I went to the editor and said, up to now the cover was 120 Marks and now 5% or 7% or something comes on top. But now they say, no, the VAT is included. So I earned less just over sudden! I think the last rate before I quit was 150 Marks a cover. He never went above that.

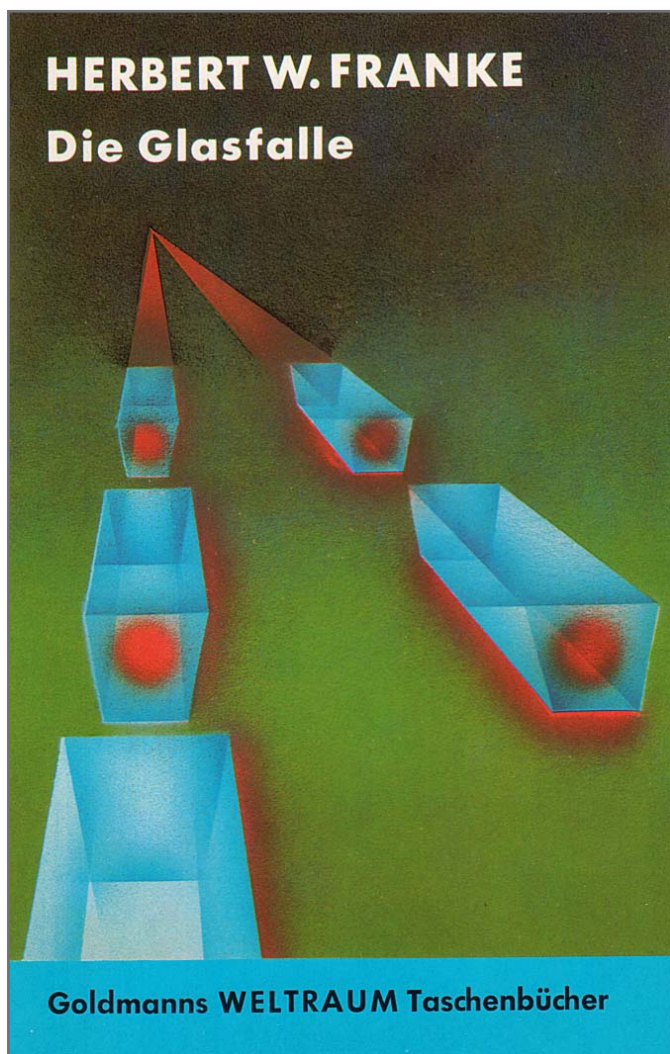
I guess you didn't only work for Goldmann but for other clients as well?

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List, Piper, Südwestverlag, Deutscher Bücherbund ... I worked for a couple of publishing houses. Once I worked together with three colleagues, that was in 1960. We even called us „Team 60“, very modern. But it didn't work out. With three or four people, there's always two who do the work and two who stand around, drink tea and discuss. And we didn't really look for new business, it all just happened. Someone from a publishing house saw something he liked and so we were recommended.

To be honest, I'm not sad that I'm not doing anything anymore.

Once I even got a recommendation from a paintshop. They sold paints, artists equipment, canvases and the like. He said to me: „Are you interested in working for such and such? There was someone here from that publishing house the other day and he asked me who had done this and that. And I told him, that the designer always gets his paints here.“ That way I got my jobs.



Now the business is really evil. I heard from young colleagues who work in agencies that they don't take part in pitches anymore. Nowadays you approach a potential client and tell them that you like what they are doing and that you would like to work for them. You kind of have to pay to take part in a pitch. To be honest, I'm not sad that I'm not doing anything anymore.

Were there jobs you would have refused or things you wouldn't have done?

What never worked out for me were fashion things. If they would have asked me to do something for a perfume brand, I would have declined. Or something for a political party. For some, maybe but there are parties I would have turned down categorically.

My wife once asked me: „What would you do if the CSU [Christian Party in Bavaria] comes along and wants you to design an election campaign?“ And I said: „I wouldn't raise a finger.“ If I can't stand for something, if I can't identify with them, then I can't do a poster for them. No, no, for God's sake! I would have starved. You don't have to agree to everything. You have to be able to say no. You have to stay true to yourself.

Are you looking at book covers today, to see what your colleagues today are doing?

No, I don't care anymore. Even back then I didn't look at the competitors' work to find orientation, never. Naturally, you see things in the book stores. So I have seen what they were doing at Moewig or Heyne. You look at it but you don't compare yourself with it: What are we doing, what are they doing? Maybe that can be seen in my work. [Looks at a few of his covers] Well, they kind of do look similar, when put next to each other.

And now when I order books I go by the title or the description. But I don't look at things in a professional way anymore. That time is over.

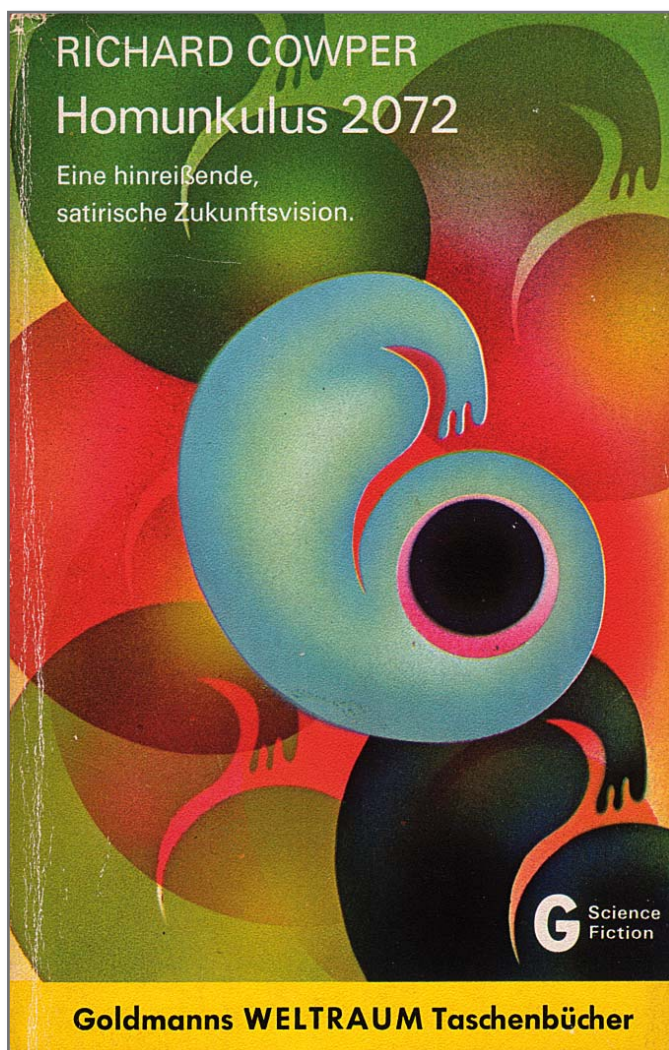
You have worked for Wilhelm Goldmann for a long time and what you're saying suggests that you knew him personally. What kind of a person was he?

He was a very stern fellow, he kept his publishing house well under control. He was feared. He was a small, wiry guy, swift as a weasel with thick, black, shell-rimmed glasses. The publishing house was two storeys high with a basement and no one could be sure, where he would suddenly appear. Suddenly he would shoot out of his of-

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fice like ball-lightning and rush through the corridors. He was very authoritarian. Once one of the manufacturers I think it was, wanted to set up a shop committee.

Goldmann had a lot of employees and they had a blackboard in the basement beside the cafeteria. The person who wanted to do that put up a note, saying: „We're setting up a shop committee.“ And the old man sussed it and went ragingly mad. „You can all go home right now, I won't have anything like that in my company, what a whole lot of crap.“



Weltraumtaschenbuch # 162, cover by Eyke Volkmer.

Somewhere around „Homunkulus 2072“, which is paperback number 162, you left Goldmann. How come?

I left Munich briefly in 1970 or 1970 and went to Salzburg, Austria to do something completely different. I ba-

sically told the dear, good old Wilhelm Goldmann goodbye, although I held him in high regards. I told him that I wasn't in Munich anymore and couldn't work for him, being in Salzburg. That would have been too complicated, we didn't even have faxmachines back then.

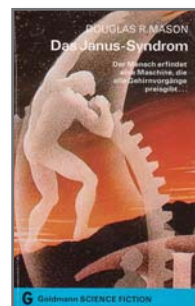
There was no way of e-mailing or sending text messages, nothing. So we just forgot that matter and I haven't done anything for them since then. I don't even know who came in after me to do the job.

So it seems that your relation with Wilhelm Goldmann has been a good one. Do you know what happened to him?

Well, Mr Goldmann stopped working as the boss of the publishing house here in Munich. Being a relatively old man, he got remarried to a young woman and then went to Zurich, as far as I know.

He left his publishing house here in Munich to his colleagues. He said goodbye to me, back then, that he is moving and thanks a lot for the good work. So it was really nice and friendly. What happened to the publishing house here in Munich, when they became part of Bertelsmann, I don't know.

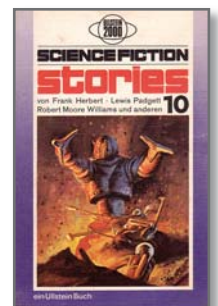
After Volkman had left Goldmann it took less than 10 months and the covers of the Weltraumtaschenbücher looked very much like those of the ompetitors.



Weltraumtaschenbuch # 166, cover by Morris Scott Dollens.



Weltraumtaschenbuch # 170, cover by Christopher Voss.



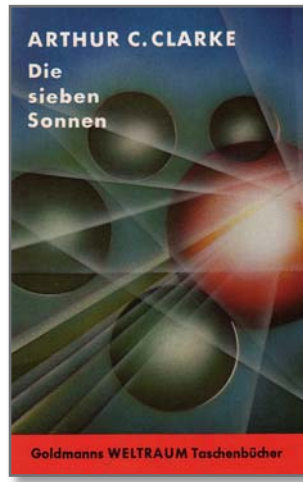
Cover illustration at the publisher Ullstein from the same year.

For later editions, all books were given entirely new covers, as the example on the following page shows. The era Volkmer, what the time from 1958 to 1972 could well be called, was over and also forgotten.

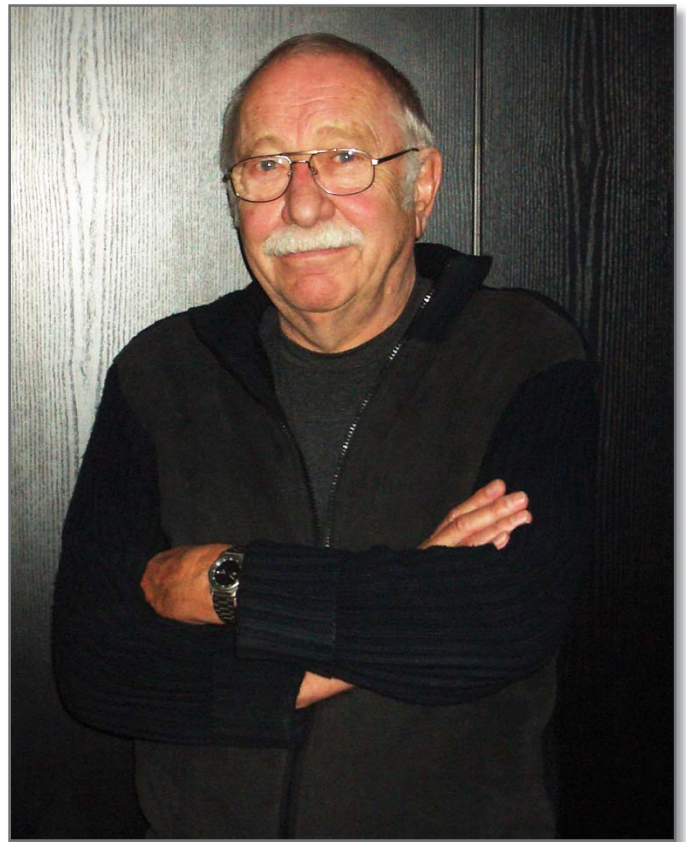
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Later edition with a cover designed by the Atelier Angelika und Adolf Bachmann.



First edition with a cover designed by Eyke Volkmer.



Science Fiction? That really wasn't my world, to be honest. The illustrator Eyke Volkmer. Foto: T. Brem

About Eyke Volkmer:

Eyke Volkmer was born in Istanbul, Turkey in the nineteenthirties. His mother is from Bavaria and his father from Berlin. In 1940 the whole family moved to Berlin because Turkey was on the side of the Allies and started to isolate german people in Anatolia.

Just three years later, in 1943, the father sent a message from Athens: „Get the hell out of Berlin, it's too dangerous.“ The family escaped the bombings of Berlin and moved in with Eyke's aunt in Bavaria. Volkmer: „That was the best! There's fish, creeks, you could catch fish with your hand, only nice stuff.“

In 1950 the family moved again, this time to Bremen. 1955 the parents finally decided to move back to Istanbul and Eyke's two sisters went with them.

Eyke stayed in Germany and started studying graphic design in Munich, where he finished his studies in 1958. Today he lives in a house in Munich, in his former studio and is enjoying life: Watching the sports review and drinking turkish tea.

Interview by Tommi Brem.

Sound recording: Stefan Werner.

About Tommi Brem:

Tommi Brem was born in 1977 in Neu-Ulm, Germany. Compared to Volkmer he led a quiet life up to now, staying three years in Liverpool/ UK to study Performance Design. At the time of writing he's working as conceptioner at Dorten in Stuttgart. Since 2004 he is running the online Science-Fiction Archive Houdini Nation.

More interviews and articles, as well as hundreds of Science-Fiction books can be found at www.houdination.com

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