

**Abstract.** This paper argues for the importance of studying the German popular fiction writer Karl May (1842-1912) from a postcolonial studies perspective, both within the context of the nineteenth century German imperial project and the Euro-American tradition of ethnic impersonation. May's ethnographic adventure stories were, and to some extent still are, a considerable cultural force in Germany and Poland, where they are regularly re-printed, televised, parodied, and read aloud to children. Focusing on the power-knowledge nexus in May's travel narratives, this paper explores the role May's fiction played in the formation of German national identity, May's ambivalent attitude towards the colonization of Africa, his strategies of building ethnographic authority, his contradictory attitudes towards the racial Other, and his own lifelong performances of Otherness.