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## psychiatry in literature

### Struwwelpeter by Heinrich Hoffmann

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The psychiatrist Heinrich Hoffmann received his medical training in Halle, Heidelberg and Paris. In 1851, he founded the Frankfurt mental hospital, where he lived and worked as superintendent until retiring in 1888. Hoffmann was an innovator, who improved conditions of patients, and introduced enlightened views on the nature of mental illness; he authored a text-book on mental illness and epilepsy, and has been referred to as 'the first representative of child and adolescent psychiatry'. His name is perpetuated in the form of the biennial Hoffmann Medal of the World Federation of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), awarded for distinguished work in the field of ADHD. History knows him better as the author of a children's book, '*Der Struwwelpeter oder Lustiger Geschichten und Drollinger Bilder für Kinder von 3–6 Jahren*' ('*Tousle-headed Peter: Cheerful Stories and Funny Pictures for Children from 3–6 Years*').



**Fig. 1** Heinrich Hoffmann: *Der Struwwelpeter*; Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1917.

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Hoffmann wrote *Struwwelpeter* in 1845 as a Christmas comic book for his three-year old son, with no intention of publication. Hoffmann later changed his mind, and *Struwwelpeter* has since been translated into most European languages, one English translation having been made by Mark Twain. Sales of the book continue today – by 1917, there were 400 editions and today this number is far in excess of that; its enduring success would perhaps have astonished Hoffmann. The book has inspired a host of music, film, TV and stage adaptations or literary mentions throughout the 20th century. Three examples include a poem '*The Witnesses*' by W.H. Auden, which refers to the scissor man, Agatha Christie in '*Curtain*' and a post-punk band, '*Shock Headed Peters*', named after the book's main character.

*Struwwelpeter* is considered to be the precursor of comic books. It contains ten cautionary illustrated tales written in verse, all intended to make children realize the dreadful consequences of misbehavior. From the viewpoint of psychiatry, it is noteworthy that many of the stories describe children with psychiatric conditions now recognized in contemporary diagnostic manuals. The tale of *Fidgety Phil* offers a classic description of attention-deficit hyperactivity – not only its symptoms but the family conflicts that it can arouse. *Johnny Head in Air* can be interpreted as a representation of ADHD or petit mal absence. Children with an eating disorder that proved to be fatal (*Augustus and the soup*), pyromania (*Harriet and the matches*) and cruel antisocial behavior (*The Story of Cruel Frederick*) are included, along with stories depicting dissocial racist behavior and thumb sucking.

Even though *Struwwelpeter* is no longer customary childhood reading, it continues to exert an influence in today's culture and represents a remarkably insightful early Victorian portrayal of childhood psychopathology, identifying syndromes that now appear in the diagnostic manuals.

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