

Bending Gender's Rules, in Life and in German Grammar

The victory of Kim de l'Horizon, a nonbinary writer, in a top literary prize stirred a debate about how the German language can accommodate people who don't identify as male or female.

By Thomas Rogers

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BERLIN — Most years, the winner's ceremony for the German Book Prize is a staid affair. But when the jury announced in October that the highest-profile literary honor in the German-speaking world, equivalent to Britain's Booker Prize, had gone to the 30-year-old Swiss writer Kim de l'Horizon for the novel "Blutbuch," things took an unexpected turn.

De l'Horizon, whose artist name is a pseudonym and who uses they/them pronouns in English, was the first nonbinary writer to win the award, and while standing onstage in a fuzzy green dress, they put on an impromptu performance. Using an electric shaver to tonsure their hair as a gesture of support for women in Iran, de l'Horizon then argued that the jury had selected the book to "send a signal" in support of those who are "oppressed for their bodies."

Some critics chafed at the writer's apparent comparison between the experience of being nonbinary and the oppression of Iranian women; others saw the speech as a sign that the prize had been awarded on the basis of identity politics rather than literary merit. The publicity around the award has also turned de l'Horizon into a symbol for a broader discussion about the status of nonbinary people in the German-speaking world.

Much of that conversation has centered on language: Unlike English, German has no equivalent to "they/them" for a personal pronoun, and most nouns referring to people are gendered as male or female. Although the author largely uses "Kim" in lieu of a pronoun, some commentators have insisted on using gendered pronouns in reviews and news media discussions.

"Growing up there was no such thing as nonbinary, or anything more than binary," de l'Horizon said in an interview in Berlin, where the author is living temporarily on a literature fellowship. In writing the book, de l'Horizon said, they aimed to explore the boundaries of how gender can be described in German. "I was looking for a language, or forms of language, that would enable the perception of a body that is nonbinary," they said.



Growing up in Switzerland, de l'Horizon said, "there was no such thing as nonbinary, or anything more than binary." Gordon Welters for The New York Times

This search for self-expression is central to "Blutbuch" ("Blood Book," in English), a formally adventurous work centering on a nonbinary character, also named "Kim," grappling with gender identity while exploring the traumatic histories of women in their Swiss family. The book uses a fluid structure and numerous invented pronouns and other words (such as "daddy*mommy") to convey the gender experience of its narrator.

In October, "Blutbuch" reached spot four on the German best-seller list, and earlier this month, the novel also won the Swiss Book Prize. It has been resold for translation into 13 languages, with the American publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux snapping up English-language rights. The company plans to publish it in 2025.

De l'Horizon said that they were dismayed that the conversation around their identity has often overshadowed discussion of the book, adding that they regretted stating at the ceremony that their selection had been meant by the jury as a political statement. "My people tell me that they also decided in favor of this text for its literary quality," de l'Horizon said, adding that they see themselves primarily as "a writer and artist, not an activist."

Paul Jandl, a book critic and frequent contributor to the Neue Zürcher Zeitung, a Swiss newspaper, argued that "Blutbuch" is a "very important book" and that the author had set off a

furor in the German-speaking world because questions of gender identity “are a subject at the middle of society.”

The reaction has at times turned ugly: After the award ceremony, de l’Horizon was the subject of numerous hateful comments on social media and the book’s Amazon page was flooded with one-star reviews. Reports circulated in the press that de l’Horizon’s publisher had engaged a security detail for the author at the Frankfurt Book Fair . (A spokeswoman for the publisher, Dumont, said in an email that this was untrue.)

“I’ve given over 40 interviews and all of them want to talk about the hate, but not once have I been asked, ‘What is love?’” de l’Horizon said. “The media focuses on the hate, and that creates more tension.”



De l’Horizon said they see themselves as “a writer and artist, not an activist.” Gordon Welters for The New York Times

As in other countries, a debate has emerged in Germany in recent years about what accommodations should be made to people who do not identify as male or female. Running in parallel is a broader discussion about how to remove what critics see as vestiges of sexism from the German language, which modifies nouns referring to people according to gender: Male teachers, for instance, are referred to as “Lehrer” while female teachers are “Lehrerinnen.” Until fairly recently, the male noun was always the default choice.

Some attempts to find an inclusive solution — such as inserting an asterisk in the middle of words to form, for example, “Lehrer*innen” — have been criticized as an overreach. In the state of Thuringia, the center-right Christian Democrats and far-right Alternative for Germany parties recently passed a law banning the use of gender-neutral language in government communications. One lawmaker supporting the legislation described such language as “an elite project of a tiny minority,” noting that most Germans do not speak or write this way.

Attempts to find a gender-inclusive pronoun equivalent to “they/them” are also complicated by the fact that the German equivalent to “they” (“sie”) sounds identical to the formal form of “you” (“Sie”) and the word for “she” (“sie”). Carolin Müller-Spitzer, a professor of linguistics at the Leibniz Institute for the German Language, in Mannheim, said that adapting existing pronouns “doesn’t work in German, so we need to create something new. And creating a new pronoun is difficult.”

Müller-Spitzer added that since the end of the Third Reich, debates about inclusive language in Germany often become a forum for people to express views about gender or race. “Language has become a stage for things people would like to say about society, but don’t trust themselves to say,” she said, adding that she felt it was a shame that media coverage of de l’Horizon’s identity had eclipsed the discussion of their book.



“Life is messy, it’s sweaty, it’s dirty, it’s playful and fun,” de l’Horizon said. Gordon Walters for The New York Times

In the interview, de l'Horizon said they were wary of talking about their personal history and explained that they preferred to use a "science fiction biography" that claims they were born "in the future, on a planet much freer than this one." Although de l'Horizon ultimately confirmed that they were born near Switzerland's capital, Bern, they declined to discuss any details of their family or upbringing.

The author did, however, explain that they began writing "Blutbuch" at age 18, after several years of dabbling in poetry, during a period when they were "in constant latent dissociation with trauma, and not feeling my body at all." De l'Horizon said that they were partly inspired by the works of the French writers Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis, who blend autofiction with sociological analysis.

The author has described some of their personal struggles elsewhere. In a searing essay in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, de l'Horizon recently drew parallels between being assaulted in a Berlin subway station and the experience of hearing a Swiss lawmaker derisively describe a nonbinary person as "it." Both experiences, de l'Horizon argued, felt like a physical attack. "You are not the first men to have hit me, and you will not be the last," de l'Horizon wrote.

Nevertheless, the author said in the interview that they were enjoying their contribution to redrawing the German language's gender rules, despite the backlash and confusion. "Life is messy, it's sweaty, it's dirty, it's playful and fun," de l'Horizon said. "And that's what this whole process should be."