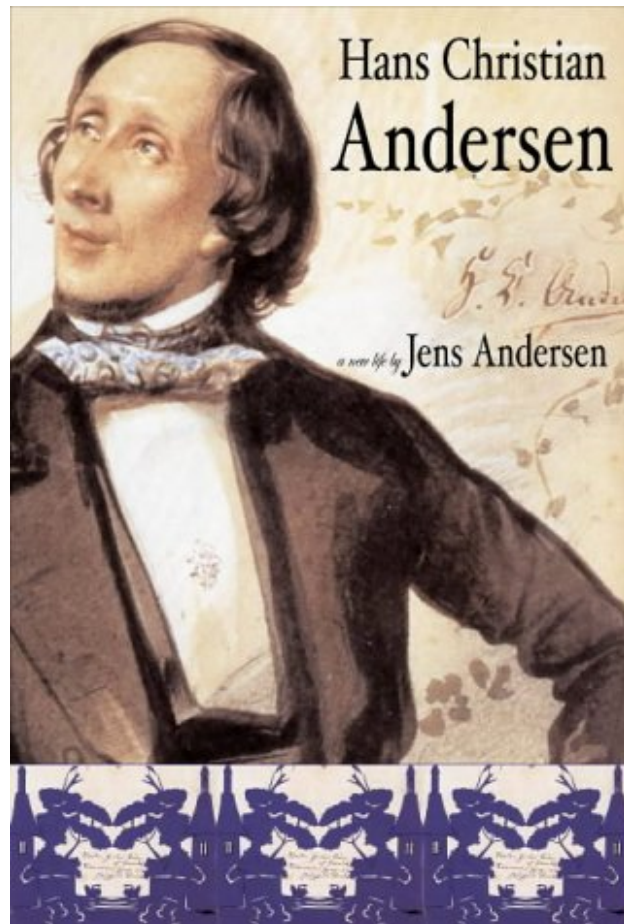


Hans Christian Andersen (& Sex)



“Hans Christian Andersen” starring Danny Kaye

***“The Original Ugly Duckling” (from the
Los Angeles Times Book Review)***



Hans Christian Andersen: A New Life. Jens Andersen, translated from the Danish by Tiina Nunnally. Overlook Duckworth: 608 pp., \$37.50

Born in Denmark on April 2, 1805, Hans Christian Andersen is being honored with festivals, exhibits, symphonies and theatricals in a yearlong worldwide celebration of his bicentenary. Timed to these events, ["Hans Christian Andersen: A New Life,"](#) by Jens Andersen (no relation to Hans Christian) lives up to its subtitle's promise. Those who know the writer only from Danny Kaye's cheery screen presentation may be shocked.

This new biography also provides a stark contrast with Andersen's autobiography, "The Fairy Tale of My Life," in which he presents a version of his childhood that is all sweetness and light. In fact, his hometown of Odense was a venal backwater. If there was sweetness in the air, it came

from the open sewers, and if there were lights, they were mostly red; both Andersen's mother and half-sister worked as prostitutes. It was also a town where this tall and homely geek was frequently taunted for his girlish voice.

Undaunted, young Andersen marched off to Copenhagen to make his way. The ungainly youth outdid today's Hollywood waiters who foist scripts on dining celebrities; he stalked the well-to-do, crashing their salons to recite his poetry and perform impromptu theatricals. The high and mighty of the Romantic period, inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings extolling the "noble savage," welcomed this intrusion, seeing the peasant not as a rube but as an innocent and natural genius, even if untutored and unlettered.

With the help of patrons, then, the 17-year-old Andersen was sent to school to learn his ABCs. Five years older than his classmates and more than a foot taller, he was mercilessly badgered by a headmaster bent on disabusing the boy of his conviction that he was a writer of unrecognized talent. Like the poor creature in "The Ugly Duckling," he was pecked at and ridiculed; like the duckling, he took refuge in the belief that he was only misunderstood, and actually a swan.

Leaving school, Andersen began his tortured and ambiguous love life. His great sorrow when neighbor Riborg Voigt married seems to have been contrived: She knew little of his romantic hopes; he preferred the role of disappointed lover. For decades his great love was Edvard Collin, on whom he had an unrequited homoerotic crush. Though willing to be his friend, Collin frequently criticized Andersen for "unmanly" behavior; for his part, Andersen vacillated between wanting kisses and agreeing to a "spiritual" relationship, often apologizing for his "semi-womanly" outbursts. Collin's later marriage sheds a new light on the tale "The Little Mermaid," where a semi-womanly sea creature watches the marriage of the prince to another and thinks, "He should have married me."



With growing fame, Andersen became the honored guest at homes and castles throughout Europe. If we were to believe his accounts, he was the favorite of the drawing room, where he entertained young and old with his stories. His five weeks with the family of Charles Dickens suggest otherwise; he was to visit only a few days, but, according to Dickens' daughter, "He was a bony bore, and stayed on and on."

In middle age, Andersen fell in love with the opera singer Jenny Lind, the most beautiful woman in Europe. It was another hopeless and unrequited affair. She preferred him as a "brother," and her homely swain retreated. His biographer suggests that Lind's icy treatment is pictured in "The Snow Queen," especially the fairy tale's surprisingly regressive conclusion in which the grown Kay and Gerda become, once more, asexual childhood comrades and Andersen trots out a passage from the Bible by way of baffling explanation: "Unless ye become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Andersen seems to have died a virgin, even though in his later years he visited brothels on four occasions, each time only talking with a naked prostitute and then fleeing in religious guilt. Coupled with sexual fear was his apparent conviction

that a loss of innocence would spell the end of his literary gifts. Describing Andersen's last days, his biographer concludes with a statement that is simultaneously an explanation of those remarkable gifts and the tragedy of his life: "He never grew up." Some 200 years later, readers can learn in this masterful and comprehensive biography that those beloved tales came at a considerable personal price.

Originally appeared in the [Los Angeles Times Book Review](#) (April 3, 2005).